Reclaiming Embodiment: An Existential-Phenomenological Exploration of Women’s Tattoos

Ashley Gill

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Part of the Multicultural Psychology Commons, and the Social Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation


This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.
RECLAIMING EMBODIMENT: AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF WOMEN’S TATTOOS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Ashley Gill, M.A.

August 2019
RECLAIMING EMBODIMENT: AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL
EXPLORATION OF WOMEN’S TATTOOS

By
Ashley Gill

Approved May 6, 2019

Eva Simms, Ph.D.  Lori Koelsch, Ph.D.
(Committee Chair)  (Committee Member)

Susan Goldberg, Ph.D., J.D.  Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.
(Committee Member)  Chair, Psychology Department

James Swindal, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty School of Liberal Arts
RECLAIMING EMBODIMENT: AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF WOMEN’S TATTOOS

By
Ashley Gill, M.A.
August 2019

Dissertation supervised by Eva Simms, Ph.D.

This dissertation is a phenomenological research study about the lived experiences of women who elected to get tattoos in the last five years. Due to historical and present discourses on female embodiment and persistent stigmas and pathologies often associated with tattoos, I sought to generate meaningful knowledge about the lived experiences of women who have voluntarily chosen this form of body modification. I conducted phenomenological research interviews with nine participants about personal meanings, decision making processes, and lived experiences of embodiment (capturing existential themes of lived body, spatiality, relationality, and time) before and after tattooing. I applied thematic interpretation of participants’ data using Van Manen’s approach to hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation. Through this analysis, four global themes emerged: Identity and Selfhood Captured in Tattoos, Power and Control Asserted through Tattoos, Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational, and Meaning vs. Aesthetics in
Tattoos. These themes were then situated and discussed within the field of body politics. My research findings predominantly indicated that tattoos serve as a nexus for personal, interpersonal, and cultural spheres of experience, and personal meanings and impacts can be understood from this broader perspective. Specifically, tattoos represent varying degrees of tension between self/others/world, and individual processes related to this act identify ways in which women respond and adapt to oppression as it relates to female embodiment in the socio-cultural world.
DEDICATION

To the nine inspiring women who shared their stories and their truths in this project, and to the incredible women in all of our lives.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First and foremost, thanks to my thoughtful and evocative participants without whom this project would be impossible. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my dissertation committee who saw me through so many stages of this process not once, but twice. Your reflections, commitment to scholarship, and flexibility have been invaluable, and I deeply appreciate your efforts and generosity.

Thank you, always and endlessly, to my family: Mom, Dad, Amanda, and Matthew. You encouraged, you supported, you loved without fail. You provided me with wisdom, rationality, optimism, humor, and just the right amount of quirkiness. You showed me what hard work and dedication look like, and also how to enjoy and be grateful for achievements. There isn’t enough room here to list all of the gifts you’ve given me. Know that you each are a gift.

Thanks to my friends, both old and new, who saw me through this process with humor, grace, tequila, and empathy. A very special thanks to Kendra for your years of unwavering friendship and support. You are dependable and fierce and inspiring. You give so much of yourself to the people you love, and I count myself lucky every day to be one of them.

My deepest gratitude and love to Winston. You stayed by my side during every page written here and reminded me that there’s so much more to life than school and work.

Finally, thanks to JD. I don’t know how to begin to express my gratitude for you, who so often believe in me more than I believe in myself. You give me constant love and encouragement, endless supplies of coffee, haikus, Harry, buckets, seafood wontons, and music. Words fail to capture what you have meant to me over the years. Suffice it to say that you are the heart in all of this.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. 4
Dedication ........................................................................................................................................... 5
Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................................. 6
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 9
Literature Review ............................................................................................................................ 12
  Existing Research on Tattooing Behaviors ................................................................................... 13
  Women, Tattoos, and Culture ........................................................................................................ 18
Methods ........................................................................................................................................... 23
  Introduction: Research Questions and Method of Inquiry ......................................................... 23
  Overview of the Inquiry Process .................................................................................................... 26
  Foundations ..................................................................................................................................... 27
  Procedures ....................................................................................................................................... 29
Data Analysis/Findings ..................................................................................................................... 39
Participant Vignettes ........................................................................................................................ 40
  Abigail ............................................................................................................................................... 40
  Silvia ................................................................................................................................................ 49
  Alice ............................................................................................................................................... 58
  Rosa ................................................................................................................................................ 65
  Beverly .......................................................................................................................................... 71
  Cynthia .......................................................................................................................................... 78
  Gabrielle ........................................................................................................................................ 85
  Hallie ............................................................................................................................................... 92
  Eleanor .......................................................................................................................................... 99
Global Themes .................................................................................................................................. 105
  Identity and Selfhood Captured in Tattoos .............................................................................. 105
  Power & Control Asserted Through Tattoos ......................................................................... 107
  Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational ......................................................................................... 109
  Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos ............................................................................................. 111
Reflexive Analysis ............................................................................................................................ 113
Discussion ......................................................................................................................................... 122
  Global Themes Located within Body Politics ........................................................................... 122
  Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research .............................................. 135
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 136
References ........................................................................................................................................ 142
Appendix A: Participant Demographics ......................................................................................... 147
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Consent Form</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Social Media Recruitment Flyer</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: General Recruitment Flyer</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Individual Themes (Tables 1-9)</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Global Themes</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Participant Transcripts</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Body modification practices have been globally present for thousands of years. Ear and nostril piercing is mentioned in the Bible, scarification has existed for generations among Aboriginal tribes in Australia, and implanting has been practiced among seamen in the South Pacific for hundreds of years (Leone, 2011). The term “body modification” represents various forms of both socially acceptable and nonconforming practices, including piercing, tattooing, scarification, branding, implanting, cosmetic surgery, fashion practices (e.g., corsets), and even bodybuilding. The degree of social acceptance of particular body modification practices depends upon its alignment with or violation of current appearance standards (Sanders, 1988).

In recent history in the West, the body modification practice of tattooing has undergone interesting and significant transformations. Tattooing has historically been societally branded as a practice carried out by social outcasts or deviants due to its relatively radical and unique place in society, and the perception of individuals with whom such practices were associated (Atkinson, 2014; Sanders, 1988). This cultural perception influenced bodies of research on tattooing and other body modification practices, many of which continued to pathologize these acts as adverse or risky behaviors. However, increasing numbers of people across a diverse array of backgrounds have begun getting ink; a 2012 poll indicates that at least 1 in 5 Americans (21%) have some form of tattoo; a 2008 poll revealed a prevalence rate of only 14% (Leader, 2015). The mainstreaming of tattoos and steadily increasing prevalence has prompted a shift in both public perception and research. Among the new demographics of those interested in this practice, women represent a rapidly growing percentage (Laumann & Derick, 2006). While historical understandings, perceptions, and recent statistics are fascinating phenomena in and of themselves, they also beg the questions: What is a tattoo? What is its meaning, its lived experience among those who choose to (re-)brand their bodies in such permanent ways? And
what is the sociopolitical narrative which gives rise to, and is given rise through, this act of body modification along gender-bifurcated lines? These questions are at the heart of this study.

Tattooing is more than a signifier of correlated risk and protective factors, associated patterns of behavior, and one-dimensional communication; I argue that it is a signifier of the complex lived world as the tattooed individual experiences and expresses it. It is a bridge between self, other, and world. It is rooted in the subjective arena, inextricably linked with the current sociopolitical landscape. This project identified more precisely what is signified through tattoos on individual and sociopolitical levels and found that tattoos serve as a nexus between and among individual, interpersonal, and cultural domains.

Scholarship in the area of tattooing behaviors has taken place across a plethora of diverse fields, including history, philosophy, feminism, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. However, surprisingly little research on female embodiment and tattoos has been conducted or theoretically explored, and no literature discusses the sociopolitical implications of women’s tattooing behaviors and decisions. Therefore, this research project takes up the following questions: What are the lived experiences of embodiment of tattooed women, and how do these experiences fit into the current sociopolitical landscape?

Most relevant to this gap in the literature is scholarship in the areas of sociology and psychology, though neither area takes up women’s experiences as the subject of study. Furthermore, these fields focus heavily on pathologies related to tattooing behaviors. While sociology has produced mixed results in terms of the adaptive or maladaptive nature of this practice, quantitative psychology appears to be largely rooted in the ascribed maladaptive nature of such ‘deviant’ behaviors, thus furthering existing stigmas and prejudices. The pathologizing of
“subversive” cultural practices is nothing new; this particular brand of pathologizing serves to bind and assert control once more over others’ bodies.

This is particularly impactful when considered in relation to women and in historical context. Consider the historical and present objectification of women: The psychological, physical, occupational, and social risks and detriments to women resulting from their continued objectification are well documented (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hüttges & Fay, 2015; Voyer & Voyer, 2014; Wichstrom, 1999); decades of scholarship outline these very correlations. Particularly troubling in light of this historical oppression and exertion of control over female bodies is the common rhetoric used when describing tattooing practices among women. As will be described more fully below, such practices are rejected as pathological, culturally subversive, indicative of being at-risk for adverse behaviors, or existing on the fringes of society. In fairness, tattooing in general has historically been perceived in these ways among both men and women. However, there are studies which indicate that tattoos among male veteran and incarcerated populations often demonstrate resilience, self-affirmation, and belonging (Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Lande et al., 2013). It is significant that tattooed male-dominated populations are beginning to be or have been viewed in a more positive light. In contrast, women have historically reaped the detriments of objectification, and then found themselves further pathologized upon seeking body modification practices which speak to varying degrees to the subject’s agency and decision-making about the very body whose objectification, as indicated in this study, may have motivated these reclamation practices in the first place.

In addition to increasing acceptance of tattoos among military and incarcerated individuals, there has also been a growing acceptance and affirmation of tattooing behaviors among college students (Dickson et al., 2015; Leader, 2015). As several researchers note, this
seems to be indicative of attitudes in more liberal and youth-oriented co-ed settings. While more inclusive, these studies tend to neglect women as their own entities, within the context of their own histories of being gendered and bodied, and as a unique group to be studied both within and outside of these pockets of inclusion and understanding. This study aims to not only identify the adaptive, expressive, and meaningful aspects of tattooing practices in general, as the college studies have done, but to specifically understand more broadly how and why women incorporate body modification and reclamation practices into their lives and social environments. The ultimate goal of this study was to understand women’s stories, intentions, and meanings, and thus begin undoing the practice of prejudice and stigma which serve to surveil, monitor, inhibit, and control our own and others’ bodies.

**Literature Review**

Several bodies of literature exist which define, outline, and analyze tattooing behaviors. While works can be found across the array of social science, philosophy, history, medicine, and the arts, most relevant to this project are the existing bodies of research within sociology, philosophy, and, of course, psychology. Sociology and philosophy in particular have contributed to, reflected on, and criticized historical and present discourses on tattoos which view them as pathological risk-taking behaviors, or “deviance” from society made aesthetic. Psychology, on the other hand, has largely focused on correlations between risk-taking behaviors, personality disorders, or social disinhibition in relation to tattooed individuals. There have been developments, however; some recent qualitative studies have focused instead on the subjective meaning, increasing social acceptance, self-expressive, and identity formative elements of tattooing behaviors. Historical academic understandings of tattoos align with popular cultural perceptions of them. Despite shifts toward a more complex and optimistic view of tattooing
behavior, the general public remains convinced, at least in part, of “deviance” on the part of the tattooed individual. It is interesting to note both the academic shift and the public stagnation. It is also worth noting that the act of tattooing itself and subsequent research on this topic is strongly culturally determined. It is possible that though the content of research and understanding changes over time, this trend structurally indicates tattooing as a response to society. This response varies according to both individual and to social/historical/cultural shifts. It is with this structure in mind that I hope to first elucidate lived experiences of the tattooed female body, and to subsequently draw on current sociopolitical spheres to help understand and make sense of these experiences on a macro scale. In short, my project assumed multivalent, complex, and shifting reasons why individuals obtain tattoos, as indicated by research in this area and which aligns well with human science understandings of behaviors. This foundational understanding lends itself to a phenomenological investigation. However, this project also exists within cultural and political contexts; this lends itself to a sociopolitical analysis of the structures of experience which were elucidated from the data and captured in the area of body politics.

Existing Research on Tattooing Behaviors

Perception ‘matters’: Colloquial and academic understandings. Atkinson (2004), a leading sociological researcher in the field of body modification, describes the Western “revolution” in the obtainment of tattoos. He contrasts utility, function, and meaning with academic perceptions of this trend. He writes, “[A]cademic understandings of tattooing remain grounded in conceptions of ‘tattoo enthusiasts’ as social misfits” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 125). Atkinson (2004) challenges traditional psychological, and to a lesser extent sociological, notions of tattooing as irrational and/or risk-taking behavior, and views the practice instead through the lens of figurational sociology, or via a network of social interdependence. Through ethnographic
inquiry, he discovers that tattooing is a vehicle for asserting control over one’s body, which falls into the scope of civilized, in contrast to deviant, behaviors. He states, “[T]attooing…is…a social paradox and strange amalgam of cultural values about the body and its display. The tattooed body marks both long-term ‘civilized’ cultural preferences to alter the flesh as part of ‘doing’ social identity, and signifies more recent social influences on body modification practices” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 142). Atkinson (2004) goes on to say that future research in the social sciences should continue to challenge overly-simplistic notions of tattooing behaviors and focus instead on concrete, lived experiences of individuals who have engaged in these practices.

Sanders (1988) likewise grapples with deviant versus adaptive sociological perceptions of tattooing behaviors. In his (1988) article, tellingly titled “Marks of Mischief”, he states: “Because of the historical discourse on tattooing in the West the tattoo is conventionally defined as an indication of the bearer’s alienation from mainstream norms and social networks. It is a voluntary stigma that symbolically isolates the bearer from ‘normals’” (p. 397). However, Sanders (1988) goes on to discuss the positive attributes associated with tattooing behaviors, the greatest of which is that it provides an identifier of in-group or affiliative element for the individual. He ultimately defines the acquisition of tattoos as a “highly social act” (1988, p. 404), and during the course of detailing an individual’s decision-making trajectory, he asserts that one can elucidate features of tattooing behaviors which are either positive or negative responses to society.

Setter and Hatch (2005) attended to public perception and specifically studied perceptions of attractiveness and credibility among tattooed and non-tattooed individuals. They found that attractiveness remained consistent, while credibility was greatly diminished among individuals with tattoos. This again speaks to the cultural narrative regarding tattooing behaviors,
in particular that tattooed individuals are personally and professionally deficient or deviant in some way, which contrasts with shifting academic discourse on the subject.

Forbes (2001) conducted a psychological study which looked at college students with tattoos and piercings, specifically addressing motives, family experiences, and personality characteristics among students with piercings and tattoos. Forbes (2001) found one significant difference: Tattooed students engaged in more high-risk behaviors, as measured by number of traffic tickets, frequency of heavy drinking, and marijuana use. This aligns with historical psychological research of tattooing behaviors. However, he also included perception of tattooed students by non-tattooed students. This yielded very interesting results. Forbes (2001) notes that the most significant outcome of his study was the difference in perception versus reality: non-tattooed students perceived tattooed students to be deficient in all categories studied, despite revelations that tattooed individuals were not deviant in any category except risk-taking. Forbes (2001) indicates that this supports other recent scholarship in this area, in which societal perceptions of extreme deviance cannot presently be found within the actual population of tattooed individuals. All of these works speak to academic and colloquial understandings of tattoos and tattooing behaviors. Even today, these acts are still often perceived as “deviant” and associated with particular subgroups and countercultures. Some positive trends do exist, which opens the door for more open, understanding, and comprehensive research questions to be asked, which is precisely what Leader (2015) did in her research on tattooing among college students.

Leader (2015) conducted an extensive interdisciplinary project on Southern Florida University’s campus. Leader and an interdisciplinary group of researchers and creative thinkers co-constructed a project on what she dubs “tattoo culture” (p. 428) at the university during which subjective meanings of tattoos were outlined, discussed, and performed for students and faculty.
Her underlying understanding of tattoos is that they are stories inscribed into the flesh which can be read, interpreted, and appreciated (Leader, 2015).

Leader (2015) complicated existing notions of tattooing behaviors, including positive-oriented understandings, by discussing the multivalent reasons individuals get tattoos, the initial narratives that are told, the re-shaping of narratives over time, and the ability to transform body art into other forms of artistic expression. Leader (2015) calls tattooing behaviors “complex cultural intervention[s]” (p. 441), which beautifully summarizes the complicated and nuanced relationships between individual, culture, and tattoo to which previous researchers have likewise alluded. She invites future researchers to consider the adaptive function of tattooing behaviors, rather than maladaptive ones, in an effort to consider identity and agency over cultural pathology, when she states:

So again, rather than ask ‘‘what is this symptomatic of?’’ the better question might be:

‘what can this do?’ And at least one answer, as we have seen, is that it can anchor identity on the body, locate that physical self that acts, and is acted upon, not an avatar but an estheticized corporeal envelope. (Leader, 2015, p. 442)

These assumptions were considered in this study’s data collection and analysis, and Leader’s question of “what can this do?” was closely held during the interpretation of the data and subsequent discussion. The integration of data into body politics indicated the complicated and multivalent relationship between self and world which Leader (2015) has identified. This type of sociopolitical analysis of tattoos is further called for in the work of another leading scholar on body modification practices, Victoria Pits. Pits’ (2003) work asserts that bodies are always marked by both power relations and symbolic meanings. Furthermore, Leader (2015) noted that the more we shift our academic questioning in this way, the more public perceptions will follow.
Leader specifically found that, on the university campus, public perceptions were transformed by the end of the performative elements of the project (2015).

In another publication, Atkinson (2004) invokes Pits’ discoveries and asserts their significance for society generally (i.e., answering the questions regarding the need for or function of this kind of research) by stating:

Radical body modifiers play a central role in the figuration by encouraging generational paradigm shifts regarding the body and its manipulation. By promoting body modification as a form of self-directed health management, for example, they have instructed the past two generations… to vent feelings of fear, doubt and recovery through publicly displayed bodywork. The[y]… highlight how body modification processes are socio-political gestures and centrally relevant to one’s personal health and well-being. The pervasive use of the radically modified body as a political billboard of protest, dissent and dialogue also underscores how corporeality is tactically manipulated to symbolize a threatened personal identity or cultural position. (p. 378)

Presently, we, too, are noticing a generational paradigm shift regarding female bodies and their levels of agency. Body modification practices such as tattooing behaviors are indicative of personal and cultural decisions about one’s body in a political, ‘figurational’ world. It follows that to study this phenomenon among women is to consider the larger psychological and societal implications.

In light of these shifts, it becomes especially interesting to consider Butler’s (1993) work on gender construction and performance. Butler (1993) asserts that power differentials found in modern discourse about bodies lead, more or less, to the social construction of gender, which subsequently takes on a variety of meanings, and, especially, performances, in alignment with
societal norms and expectations. These norms and expectations provide, to some extent, the foundation upon which my study is set. It is often thought throughout existent literature to be precisely a reaction to these norms and standards which produces tattooing behaviors. It has then historically been the task of the researcher across these fields to determine the benefits or detriments of tattooing behaviors to the individual and society in question.

This opens the door to specifically address women in relation to tattooing behaviors. As mentioned, surprisingly little research has been conducted in this area, with this population, and within the broader context of body politics. Braunberger (2000), Maccormack (2006), and Leader (2016) provide a foundation of scholarship in this area, which will be addressed more fully below. They, too, situate their works within discourses of the long history of the objectification of women and subsequent body reclamation practices.

**Women, Tattoos, and Culture**

Braunberger (2000) studies motivations of tattooed women to get their tattoos, and cultural responses to their tattooed bodies. She describes misperceptions and confusion with regard to perception of tattooed female bodies when she writes:

> As symbols demanding to be read, tattoos on women produce anxieties of misrecognition… 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. It would seem that whatever manifold meanings women attach to their tattoos are culturally written over to simply and only punctuate meanings already attached to their bodies within a larger cultural domain. (Braunberger, 2000, pp. 1-2)

Braunberger (2000) both critiques and invokes Judith Butler and Andrea Dworkin’s views of female embodiment and gender construction when she calls into being “monster beauty,” or that aesthetic which fits neither Butler’s social construction of gender and subsequent failure to authentically feel culturally “womanly,” nor Dworkin’s call for women to distance themselves from patriarchy-instituted female norms (e.g. makeup, certain clothing, etc.). Rather, monster beauty is “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” (p. 2), thus re-opening the door for the study of female aesthetics without culturally or individually pathologizing them. Braunberger (2000) studies a variety of women across a variety of contexts, and discovers broadly that the act of tattooing is ultimately a self-affirming and –confirming act which reclaims bodies trapped in patriarchal discourse. However, Braunberger (2000) ends with a note of caution: tattooing itself does not lift a woman out of the discourse. In fact, this visible performance of defiance inevitably risks pulling that woman further into policing dynamics. Braunberger (2000) notes that non- or discretely-tattooed women in particular are hard on other tattooed women due to their own internalized perceptions of good girl/bad girl images, and their subsequent desires to distance themselves from the latter category (2000). Nonetheless, Braunberger (2000) argues that bodies have significantly more to communicate than whether the female is “good” or “bad”, as is culturally popular to assume, even beyond consideration of tattoos. She argues that, despite questions around performativity
and evaluation, women who get tattoos continue to subvert traditional body standards and “broaden our sense of body aesthetics with monster beauty” (Braunberger, 2000, p. 23).

Maccormack (2006) offers more data in favor of viewing the tattooed female body as a “frontier between self and culture” (p. 57), specifically as a “contested site” (p. 60) in relation to power and resistance dynamics. She introduces Deleuzean and Guattarian ideologies in her conceptualizations of the tattooed female body, its agency, and its place in the world. She situates skin as the locus of identity and identifiers, including both those we control (e.g., voluntary body modifications), those we do not control (e.g., race, gender), and those things in between (e.g., involuntary body modification, cultural norms and standards that produce performance, etc.). She argues that tattoos are not decorative, but rather actions: they do things. Specifically, Maccormack notes that women’s bodies in academia are more often “spoken about than heard speaking for themselves” (2006, p. 65), before questioning how researchers can let female bodies speak (more) freely for themselves without reducing the phenomenon to essentialism. She seeks to keep the complexity and nuance of the dialectic of mobility regarding bodies, as Deleuze and Guattari indicate, while acknowledging women’s agency and relative freedom. This tension evident in the literature was critical to this project; the act of getting or having tattoos does not necessarily equate to the agent’s ability, desire, or need to speak about them. That is, the act of inquiry through research elicits responses which may or may not uphold participants’ autonomy and freedom to speak for themselves in the ways they choose. This is a consideration which has often been neglected in academic works concerning women, and a tension that is notably, if inevitably, present in this work as well.

Finally, Leader (2016) discusses the interplay between culture and women’s tattoos in an article which takes up her broad work on Southern Florida University’s campus in a specifically
feminist tradition, noting the particulars of the project as they relate to female embodiment. She
discusses current discourse and critiques of female tattoos and how to interpret them (or not).
Leader (2016) ultimately agrees with other leading scholars in their discussion of what bodies
do, rather than what bodies are, a difference which serves to unravel the long history of
objectification of the female body. Leader argues:

“Tattoo culture” is proposed as an agent of embodiment, a zone through which we might
suture the dualistic split between mind and body, using the animating power of artistic
interpretation. The value of this is not in individual self-storying, but in collective
affirmation of embodied subjectivity, of an empowered, occupied body. (2016, p. 192)

This concept of an “occupied body” expertly captures what all scholars in this field are
discussing and debating: What is the extent to which women’s decisions to modify their bodies
serves as a reclamation practice in a world of dynamic interplay between self, other, and culture?
To what extent do historical and modern social climates aid or inhibit agency in embodiment?
And how do tattoos operate at these intersections between self, other, and world? This
scholarship and these questions can be situated within the field of body politics.

Body Politics and Reclamation

Body politics. “Politics of the body” refer to tensions and nontraditional views
surrounding and situating bodies in the world: Bordo (2002) refers to this shifting “paradigm” as
one which “reconceptualised the body from a purely biological form to an historical construction
and medium of social control” (Bordo, 2002, p. 181). Feminism as an industry, and Foucault as a
critical philosopher, are both credited in their own ways for explicitly bringing out this dialogue
(Bordo, 2002). However, each source speaks to the need to recognize power differentials as they
are embedded in and acted out in the human body. While body politics traditionally engender
those markings of the body which exist existentially (i.e., our demographic makeup and subsequent cultural integration), discussing tattooed bodies speaks to the interesting notion of choice and agency within the context of body politics. Specifically, how does one negotiate being a bodied individual? If the answer is via body modification, then this yields fascinating questions regarding the reclamation of bodies that exist in political worlds.

Some researchers have begun taking up these very questions. Renowned tattoo researcher, Atkinson (2004), stated, “Each type of modified body bears marks of concern and anxiety over living in a ‘threatened’ body” (p. 378). This indicates concern for the politics and subsequent negotiation of vulnerable or marginalized bodies, and the individuals who decide to modify them. Similarly, Leader (2015) said, “If the body is indeed marked, inscribed, continually colonized by power, then the only countervailing force, demonstrated continually through history, is taking ownership of the body, and hence, the body politic, physically embodying it” (p. 442). By this, she means that her tattooed research participants have taken up, often deliberately, ownership of their bodies by physically marking them as they choose. The element of choice calls into question the area of body reclamation.

**Body Reclamation.** In her groundbreaking text on radical body modification practices and their various meanings, one of Victoria Pits’ participants describes body modification as “tak[ing] control of what you otherwise could not” (2003, p. 1). This sentiment provides the foundation for body reclamation theory and practices generally. Pits (1998/2003) went on to study various cultural and subcultural practices of body modification, ranging from what she calls the “grotesque” (1998, p. 67), to what she discovers are challenges to gender and sexual cultural norms and standards, to what she has identified as more mainstream approaches to body
alterations. Pits describes body modification as any practice of piercing, branding, scarring, stretching, slicing, inking, or intentionally changing one’s natural body in any way. 

This study used the foundation Pits provided regarding the meaning and impact of body modification practices with a specific focus on tattooing behaviors among women. Pits’ discussion of body reclamation is relevant to my project in that contemporary women, historically and presently objectified for their bodies, are both witnessing a cultural shift with regard to body ownership and agency, and increasingly engaging in tattooing behaviors (Heywood et al., 2012; Laumann & Derick, 2006). It is widely accepted that women have long faced scrutiny regarding their bodies, comportment, and enactment of norms and expectations. We intentionally and unintentionally socialize our young to know they are gendered (Butler 1988/1993), and in the U.S. this has culturally indicated a hyperawareness of our embodied experiences (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). For women, the concept of permanently inscribing words and images on their bodies is fascinating to unravel. With the onset and momentum of the well-known and well-documented #MeToo and #TimesUp movements (Langone, 2018), among numerous others, we are culturally on the brink of and living through a paradigm shift. As cultural awareness continues to grow and take shape, a unique opening has been brought into existence to identify and re-identify the meaning and impact of women’s choices to modify their bodies via tattooing.

Methods

Introduction: Research Questions and Method of Inquiry

This project integrated existential-phenomenological principles to investigate women’s experiences of embodiment in the context of body politics. I followed in Leader’s (2016) footsteps with regard to the historical underpinnings of the stories on the skin and subscribe to
similar feminist critiques and empowerment goals. However, this study differs in that it began with descriptive data from which structures of experience were identified and analyzed. By beginning with a phenomenological analysis and applying a feminist sociopolitical critique after, this study honored women’s experiences of embodiment and body modification and/or reclamation practices.

As will be discussed in more detail below, the aim in this project was to identify themes of embodiment among women with tattoos, and phenomenological investigation ideally functions in this capacity. Given the literature review and social observations highlighted in the previous section, existential philosophical underpinnings informed my hypotheses and research questions. Existentialism brings in important thematic content of its own related to the “givens of experience” and lends itself to discussions of power differentials and politics related to self, world, and others.

In the U.S., we are in the midst of visible cultural and attitudinal shifts, and women’s bodies are central to portions of these debates. As media, lawmakers, and civilians alike continue generations of dialogue regarding body control, freedom, and autonomy (among other significant topics and critical intersecting phenomena which are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this project), women across the nation are increasingly, aided by technology in their communications, taking up the conversation with relish and demonstrating commitment to change in the forms of personal autonomy, equality, and body agency. Regardless of individual personal, spiritual, or political beliefs, a system of change is arguably in effect, and this permeating systemic shift is bound to influence women’s current perceptions of and relationships with their bodies. Changes to the fabric of the society in which we live are ubiquitous and inevitably affect both society at large and its civilians.
Per existential-phenomenological theory, we are inseparable from and deeply entwined with our world and our social surroundings. We cannot choose to extricate ourselves from them. The same holds true with bodies; from this perspective, we are not humans in or with bodies, but rather *embodied humans*. We experience the world as embodied, and the world reciprocally experiences us as such. We are embodied in time, in space, and in relation. Existentialism’s broad categories of space, time, body, and relations capture precisely those domains in which, experientially, women may find themselves reacting for, against, or with social change. Phenomenological investigation provides the mechanism through which these experiences, without overlaying values, judgments, or determinations, can be elucidated. It is these perspectives and theoretical strengths which give rise to the project and research questions I have devised in this study. In light of existing literature, modern sociopolitical observations, and existential-phenomenological theory, I set forth the following research questions for inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of embodiment of tattooed women?
2. What, if any, is the significance of particular tattoos? How does this significance integrate into the individual’s lived experience of embodiment?
3. How do these experiences relate to fundamental existential principles and anxieties?
4. Is there a current sociopolitical narrative which gives rise to, and is given rise through, this act of body modification?

In this project, I used Van Manen’s (1990) method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to collect and analyze data. This involved the practical application of Van Manen’s inquiry, including phenomenological investigation via individual semi-structured interviews. I integrated existential thought into the research questions and subsequent language of the semi-structured interview questions. During the interviews, I implemented a strategy of predominantly
attuning to the described lived experiences while bearing in mind the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this project to gently guide and inquire as appropriate. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed according to interpretive phenomenological analyses, a process which will be described in fuller detail below. The findings were then situated within discourses on body politics as defined by Pits (1998/2003), Braunberger (2000), Foucault (1977), and Butler (1993).

**Overview of the Inquiry Process**

This study utilized a two-step method strategy. The first step consisted of data collection and analysis, using interpretive phenomenology to identify structures of experience related to tattooed women’s experiences of embodiment by inquiring about their stories, intentions, meanings, and lived experiences. This involved using an interpretive phenomenological investigation according to Van Manen’s (1990) method of phenomenological inquiry with existentially-driven semi-structured interviews aimed at highlighting women’s intentions and lived experiences of embodiment with regard to tattooing behaviors in the last five years. The second step in this two-step methods strategy is best represented in the discussion section of this study. This step consists of an analysis of how those structures exist within the field of body politics by reflecting on them through an existential lens and situating them within discourses on female embodiment, body modification practices, and body politics. Structures of experience which emerged through the thematic analysis in the first step of this method were analyzed and discussed within their sociopolitical context in an effort to better understand both local and global levels of experiential data related to tattooed bodies among women. As will be discussed in full below, drawing on existential concepts helped to contextualize emergent themes within body politics because of the ways in which existential categories affect social and political
worlds. By integrating these approaches into a two-step process, I attempted to both reveal and honor current individual experiences of tattooing while meaningfully incorporating collective structures of experience into discussions of body politics.

**Foundations**

Given historical and ongoing misperceptions of tattooing behaviors and the trend of identifying pathologies associated with tattooing rather than investing in meaning and intention, this research began with the most essential data: lived experiences. This project primarily consisted of qualitative existential-phenomenological interviews and analysis grounded in the notion that words and imagery on living bodies are complex and multivalent “stories” to be told and interpreted which shape and re-shape themselves over time and with each telling (Leader, 2015), and which are inextricably linked to the co-constituted person and world (Osborne, 1990; Donath, 2015). Data and analysis was oriented toward subjective meaning-making, and situated within the larger dialogue concerning women’s embodiment in the sociopolitical world through an existential lens.

Methods and theoretical foundations for this project were partially modeled after Leader’s (2015) project. Leader (2015) grounds her methods in the assertion that “tattooed bodies are walking books, which can be read and interpreted… If artist’s books are estheticized ideas, then tattoos as we have … are estheticized lives” (p. 427). This sentiment likewise provided the framework for my project. I invited participants to tell me the “stories on their skin,” and through an interpretive existential phenomenological investigation, we began identifying themes linking women to their tattoos in the context of being bodied in the modern world.
As mentioned previously, this qualitative project consisted of two steps with some overlap. The first step, existential-phenomenological investigation via semi-structured interviews, identified structures of experience on the topic of tattooed women’s embodiment. This step was achieved primarily through data collection and analysis. As will be described more fully, individual interviews served the purpose of providing concrete data points from which collective structures of experience were extrapolated. I used these methods to both produce original data and analyses, and also to give unique voice to every participant. Feminist theories helpfully remind us that the personal is political (Hanisch, 2000), and that research itself dwells in both personal and political realms (Parker, 2011). I take seriously the notion that empowerment is a key component of research involving historically or presently marginalized individuals, and explicitly linking women to their bodies recalls the entire history of marginalization, control, and oppression this population has faced. As such, it felt critical to not only give voice to the full range of experiences presented, but to additionally provide and use the clinical tools and skills available to me during all interviews as needed.

The second step of this project, likewise described more fully below, was primarily achieved in the discussion. This step integrated the emergent structures of experience related to the relationship between tattooing and female embodiment into the field of body politics. That is, this step analyzed and discussed what the identified structures of experience do, or how they function and fit into the sociopolitical world. This involved integrating and discussing global themes which emerged from the data in the current interpersonal and cultural spheres of the world in which we live, and is framed by existential understandings of the relationship between self, others, and world. The existentially-informed interviews were designed to aid in this larger discussion, even as they identified subjective data points and themes generated by participants.
The intention was to offer a sincere and modern depiction, as represented by the participants of this project, of themes related to female embodiment and modification, nestled within, producing, and produced by the (social/political/cultural/historical/relational) world.

**Procedures**

**Participants.** I recruited a group of 9 female participants who currently have at least one tattoo. Participants ranged in age from 22-57. There was a range of educational and occupational backgrounds, though all participants held at least a high school degree. Socioeconomic backgrounds ranged from working to upper middle class. Seven participants identified as heterosexual, and two identified as bisexual. There was a variety of relationship statuses and spiritual backgrounds. All participants identified as Caucasian. Eight participants were residing in Pennsylvania at the time of recruitment and interviews, and one participant resided in Colorado. All participants recruited had obtained a tattoo within the last five years, though many participants had multiple tattoos obtained over a longer period of time.

I initially recruited participants from my local community, which was the Southside neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. Pittsburgh is home to more than 150,000 women, according to recent consensus bureau reporting (“Pittsburgh Population and Demographics”). More than 2,000 women call the Southside neighborhood of Pittsburgh their home, and though the majority of the population identifies as Caucasian, this area also enjoys ethnically diverse backgrounds including African American, Pacific Islander, Asian American, Hispanic, and individuals who identify as mixed ethnic or racial origin. This area also includes a particularly wide variety of socioeconomic status, with annual incomes ranging from less than $10,000 to more than $200,000 (“Southside Flats neighborhood”). Because of its proximity to businesses downtown, local college campuses, and its blue-collar roots, Southsiders are comprised of renters and
homeowners of varying educational, occupational, class, and age demographics. Additionally, the Southside itself is a popular destination for non-residents, given its vibrant restaurant, bar, service, and shopping scene. Part of this scene includes 11 operating tattoo parlors within a 1-mile span. I initially planned to recruit participants by contacting tattoo shop owners and employees in order to first gauge interest, and then obtain permission to hang flyers advertising this study in these well-traveled areas. I intended to ask tattoo shops to distribute my electronic flyer through email lists typically used to advertise services and products. However, many facilities were reluctant to display and distribute my flyers, and many had policies in place to remove flyers after a short period of time. I distributed flyers where possible in tattoo shops and posted flyers where permissible on the streets and in local businesses around the Southside neighborhood. Due to the restrictions I encountered, I posted my flyer on Facebook for additional recruitment. This generated significantly more interest and expanded my recruitment beyond the bounds of the Southside neighborhood.

As is always the case when investigating phenomenologically lived experiences, a necessary component of the work is an appreciation for nuance and diversity which exists within a category of individuals grouped into a singular community. This was especially true here, given that the only demographic criterion was gender, and that participants were still largely recruited from the same geographic area. Though my hope for this study was always to produce generalizable themes to add to the greater canon on tattooing behaviors and body politics, each participant was approached and valued as a unique individual living within the larger social context. Simms (2008) holds this tension between that which is generalizable and that which is individual in her discussion of the historical and political aspects of lived spaces; she discusses
overarching themes in a given place and across groups of people (namely, in stratifying data by generation) and simultaneously appreciates that which is unique about each participant.

These are essential pieces of information to consider in qualitative work such as this. It takes great effort and balance to appreciate and understand the political and social history of the phenomenon under investigation, the present context in which these phenomena exist, and the individual meaning and nuance constructed around the phenomenon in question. I endeavored to strike this balance beginning in the recruitment phase in order to meaningfully and accurately engage with my participants on both individual and collective levels.

During recruitment, I invited prospective participants to email a Gmail account I created for this purpose. From this account, I responded to interest, inquiries, and concerns. Because of my Facebook campaign, a few of these correspondences took place on that platform instead. A total of 23 women expressed interest in participating in this project. Ultimately, 9 participated in full. Participant attrition occurred during intermediary steps between expressing interest and setting up an interview. Most non-completing participants expressed initial interest but did not follow up on my subsequent emails in which I outlined eligibility criteria, requested additional information, reviewed informed consent, set up meeting times, and/or confirmed that participants would not be financially compensated.

**Data Collection.** As mentioned above, this project utilized a two-step approach. Though overlap was inevitable among these segments, the first step consisted of existential-phenomenological interviews and thematic analysis, and is best represented as my method for data collection and analysis. The second step involved situating the themes in the context of body politics. This is best represented as interpretation and discussion of the analysis, and is subsequently taken up in the discussion section.
Once participant recruitment was completed, I sent informed consents to each participant via mail with a stamped return envelope and set up individual interview dates and times. Interviews were initially to take place in person. However, the timing of the interviews occurred after I moved out of state, and therefore interviews took place via videoconferencing instead. There were no major technological difficulties that impacted the content of the interviews, but pragmatic and experiential considerations were marginally different. For example, informed consent forms needed to be mailed out in advance, videoconferencing technologies became an eligibility requirement, and interpersonal processes took place on this platform rather than the anticipated face-to-face interactions.

Prior to interviews, I asked that each participant select one of their own tattoos (obtained within the last five years) about which they would be interviewed. I requested that each participant take a photograph of her selected tattoo and submit this photograph as a password-protected document to me via email (all participants elected to skip the password protection security step). However, many participants sent their picture(s) after their interview was complete. Participants with multiple tattoos tended to discuss many or all of their tattoos during interviews, and frequently sent pictures of multiple tattoos before and afterward. As a result, some participants sent pictures of one recent tattoo, while others sent pictures of some or all of their work, all of which are included in this document. I additionally asked participants for permission to use these photographs in the presentation of data during my defense and in the written dissertation. All participants consented to future use of their photographs.

Once the photographs were collected, I set up semi-structured individual interviews with each participant via Skype, Facebook Messenger, or Google Hangout (according to participant preference). At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed informed consent forms with
participants and asked that they sign and return them via prepaid envelope. I printed out pictures of tattoos when participants sent them prior to the interview and displayed the photograph of that participant’s tattoo intermittently during relevant segments of the interview. Photographs were meant to serve as focus points for dialogue and enable us both to visualize more concretely the content being discussed. It was also meant to provide an interesting and potentially unusual vantage point for the participants, who were potentially unable to regularly view their own tattoos given their placements. However, this step was not fully completed with every participant because some pictures were not sent until after interviews and videoconferencing made it challenging to consistently display photographs.

The interviews themselves were structured around the following concepts: participants’ meaning- or sense-making of words and/or images inscribed on selected parts of their bodies, and participants’ relationships with their tattoos/bodies before and after ink. My goal was to facilitate the retelling and dialogue about participants’ “stories” which are inscribed on the skin, with a specific eye toward participants’ relationships with their bodies and with their ink. The stories (Leader, 2015/2016) behind and within the ink were important and relevant to this study and provided the foundation for the rest of the project. However, the more specific focus and trajectory was on female embodiment, reclamation, and meaning-making; addressed participants’ relationships with their bodies before and after modification; and involved in-depth discussion of the meaning of the modification itself. Specific prompts to elicit these themes included, but were not limited to, the following:

1. Tell me about this image/these words. What does it mean to you?
2. Tell me what it is like to have a tattoo.
3. Tell me about your tattoo. What is it? What is it about?
4. What led up to you getting this tattoo and what has happened since?

5. Where is it? Why there?

6. If visible: What does this mean? Has this changed anything in your life?

7. If hidden: What does this mean? Why is it hidden? Who sees your tattoo? When?

8. How do you experience your body? Has that changed since getting a tattoo?

9. Are there situations where you have had positive or negative experiences with the tattoo?


After all of the interviews had been conducted, I compiled participant demographic data and transcribed the interviews. Additionally, because tattoos are often deeply personal and meaningful signifiers (Leader, 2015), during emotionally salient interviews I offered to schedule a brief check-in with the participant shortly after the interview in order to offer support as necessary. Participants to which this was offered expressed gratitude but declined the need for this step.

Throughout the process, I additionally kept a written record of my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. I chronicled my starting position and experiential shifts throughout data collection and analysis. This self-reflexive component served to both aid in the rigor of the phenomenological investigation and provided additional data points for consideration, especially in light of my own gender status and relationship with tattoos.

**Data Analysis.** The primary method for this project was phenomenological analysis. The goal of this research was to better understand women’s “stories on the skin” (Leader, 2015) as they relate to experiences of tattooed embodiment. Phenomenological research is most conducive to producing these descriptions and understandings as it provides “fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (Finlay, 2009, p. 6). In collecting these
lived descriptions, phenomenological research seeks to “grasp the essential meaning of something” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77), though “the meaning” is assumed to be multidimensional and complex. In the multivalent and complicated world of female embodiment and body modification practices, I believe this method adequately embraced and emphasized these critical elements.

After transcribing all interviews, I completed the phenomenological investigation via thematic analysis of the material. Van Manen (1990) writes that themes can be understood as “structures of experience… [That is,] the experiential structures that make up that experience” (p. 79). He understands thematic analysis to be a complex and challenging engagement with the material. Van Manen describes themes as the “little knots” (1990, p. 90) in a web around which larger narratives and systems of belief are spun, in contrast to objects of experience or generalizations. My task was to identify and pull the knots of experience out of the larger descriptions, and then to analyze comprehensively similar and/or divergent emergent themes from the data.

Van Manen (1990) asserts the following in relation to conducting thematic analysis: “Making meaning of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process, but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). Thus, the initial stages of my analysis first required reading and re-reading the transcriptions until I had both a thoughtful understanding and felt sense of each participant’s narrative. Once I had this preliminary familiarity with the data, I proceeded with Van Manen’s (1990) “wholistic or sententious approach” (p. 93). I selected quotations from transcribed interviews which captured sentiments related to my research questions and coded these segments in phrases which
captured their fundamental meanings. This process of coding was made possible by my familiarity with the data – quotes were contextualized within my understanding of the comprehensive whole in addition to valuing each quotation’s sentiment independent from the other parts of the interview. Next, I went through my comprehensive list of interpretive descriptions and in each one extrapolated a preliminary code using more abstraction and succinct phrasing than the initial description. The goal of this step was to begin allowing for theoretical connections to be made across participant interviews while staying close enough to the text to honor the individual participant’s experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These codes were then compiled and grouped according to broader and more comprehensive themes of experience. This step took time, rumination, re-consideration, and re-construction; a group of themes were organized, and as I sat with this construct of knowledge, considered them in light of my familiarity with the data and re-structured as seemed appropriate. This process of settling into the data is outlined in qualitative research texts (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Silverman, 2005, Parker, 2011) and determines, in part, data validity. After determining a final thematic construction that seemed fitting of all participant interviews, I revisited each transcript and set of codes equipped with these themes in order to test their validity against the data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Van Manen asserts these themes ought to shed light on the fundamental nature of the experience: “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (1990, p. 107). Therefore, part of my consideration and reconsideration of global themes involved analyzing ways in which they did or did not contribute to the fundamental nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, the writing process itself expanded the analysis further (Smith, 2004). As Van Manen (1990) states, “Writing fixes thought on paper. It
externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world… writing creates the reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences” (p. 125). The primary data for interpretation in this project was transcribed material from individual interviews and personal reflections. In interpretive phenomenological analysis, it is often useful to bring themes and interpreted data back to participants, who operate as co-researchers, for discussion and further elaboration. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was not able to bring these themes back to participants for consideration. I therefore relied heavily on my familiarity with the data set to determine analytic validity.

After conducting the thematic analysis, emergent themes in this study were considered within two broad frameworks which can be generalized as women’s experiences and body politics. These frameworks are best exemplified by the works of Karen Leader (2015/2016), and Victoria Pits (1998/2003). Leader (2015) conducted a series of interdisciplinary projects studying “tattoo culture” on a university campus. In her studies, she identifies this particular phenomenon as a “blending of ink and story… which is intervening at this moment in the human relationship between body, mind, and culture” (pp. 428-438). Leader (2015) describes her participants’ tattoos as “Stories on the Skin” to be read and told. Pits (1998) studies much more radical body modification practices, and uses her data to further complicate the notion that body modification is text to be read. Pits situates her work within body politics, asserting that bodies are always marked by both power relations and symbolic meanings. In light of the dual, dovetailing, and contrasting understandings, she wonders:

What are the roles of the body in social, political, and economic relations, and how do individuals negotiate these? . . . To what extent are the meanings of bodies shaped by
individual bodies and selves, and to what extent do collective histories, cultural values, and patterns of inequality and social stratification shape them? (Pits, 2003, p. 14)

My task in this project was to hold both of these frameworks during collection and interpretation of data. I held the assumption that my participants’ tattoos are indeed expressions of narratives which others read and which they will tell. However, I also held Pits’ tension regarding individual agency versus cultural dominance and influence. I assumed that, while my participants’ tell their stories as the agent of this experience, this experience is simultaneously marked by existing power dynamics, and the relationships between individuals negotiating their status within larger social, political, and economic realms.

These conceptual frameworks brought this project into the second step of this methodological approach: integration into and discussion of body politics. The specific line of questioning in the interviews sought to evoke existential themes which highlight relationships between and among self, others, and world and the co-constituted nature of each. Attention to these relationships organically situated this project in the sociopolitical arena. Delving into both women’s experiences and body politics allowed for specific points of access related to social, cultural, and personal dimensions which are elaborated upon in the discussion section. Interpretive phenomenological investigation is conducive to this endeavor. Van Manen points to the significance of phenomenology as a method of revolution in a sense:

Whereas hermeneutic phenomenology has often been discussed as a "mere" descriptive or interpretive methodology, it is also a critical philosophy of action. First, human science is concerned with action in that hermeneutic phenomenological reflection deepens thought and therefore radicalizes thinking and the acting that flows from it. All serious and original thinking is ultimately revolutionary – revolutionary in a broader than
political sense. And so to become more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glossed over or taken-for-granted will more likely bring us to the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that ask for such action. And while phenomenology as form of inquiry does not prescribe any particular political agenda suited for the social historical circumstances of a particular group or social class, the thoughtfulness phenomenology sponsors is more likely to lead to an indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to turn to such political agenda. It is on the basis of understanding what serves the human good… that one may engage in collective political action: action against political, bureaucratic, or ideological structures (1990, p. 154).

This method of data collection and analysis in particular, according to Van Manen, naturally transitions into this second step: Situating the data in the discussion of body politics, a revolutionary area in itself rooted in social justice concerns and observations of the social world.

Data Analysis and Findings

Each participant described unique narratives of their tattoos with differing, though related, sets of individual themes. After extrapolating these individual themes, four global themes were identified: *Identity & Selfhood Captured in Tattoos, Power and Control Asserted through Tattoos, Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational, and Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos*. Each participant’s demographics and overarching narrative with corresponding individual themes are briefly described below, and individual themes are additionally listed in subsequent tables. Notably, many individual themes speak to more than one global theme, which is representative of the complex and interwoven areas of human experience which cannot be completely isolated or extracted from other components of experience. All themes are italicized.
in participant vignettes, and tables outlining all individual themes can be found at the end of each participant’s section.

**Participant Vignettes**

**Abigail.** Abigail is a 27-year-old, single, heterosexual Caucasian woman. She has a bachelor’s degree and was employed full time at the time of the interview. Abigail described herself as spiritual with a catholic background. She resides near Philadelphia, PA and defined her socioeconomic background as middle class. Abigail has 2 tattoos.

**Narrative.** Abigail described both of her tattoos in the context of bigger life events. She received her first tattoo in 2011 and her second tattoo in 2014. Around 2014, Abigail moved away from her family for work and found herself feeling isolated, alone, and depressed. She described close relationships with her family members, especially her grandparents, who helped her mother raise her and remained close well into adulthood. Abigail lost her grandmother in 2005, a loss she felt acutely and continued to grieve. She found herself struggling financially to make ends meet and could not find meaningful connections in her new city. Complicating this picture was Abigail’s medical diagnosis of epilepsy. She described this period of time as full of unpredictable and highly disruptive seizures. She and her doctors struggled to manage them, and Abigail described making the decision to get her 2014 tattoo in the face of her exhaustion, missed work, loneliness, and increased financial distress:

> I would wake up where I just knew that I had a seizure in the middle of the night. And it usually takes about a day or two. You literally need to sleep off the seizure out of exhaustion… you need to sleep it off. That's how it works. And I was having so many of them. I was probably having one every other week. So, I was constantly having to go,
having to take off work. I was reeling for my job. I was poor as hell. Well, kept having to ask my dad for a loan, or my student loan money, the rent money. I was lonely. I didn't have any friends. Actually, one girl had started with me at this particular job. She actually bullied me in front of the entire office. I didn't have anyone, [which] led to my depression that followed later on in that year. And I was trying to grasp at anything I could at that moment.2

Abigail felt elated after getting this tattoo. She had long known she wanted a tattoo to commemorate her grandmother, and in the midst of this dark place, Abigail sorted through handwritten greeting cards until she found one her grandmother had written. She went to a tattoo shop on the morning of her grandmother’s birthday and had the word “gioia,” Italian for “joy” (a term of endearment that her grandmother used to call her), inscribed on her left wrist – the wrist closer to the heart. Abigail described her decision to place this tattoo where she could see it and face the word inward for her to read rather than others. She admitted that the elation and happiness she felt after getting this tattoo was not that which brought her out of her depression, as she had hoped, but it did bring her solace and meaning in time of need.

Abigail also described the significance of her first tattoo, which she got in 2011. She was at a conference out of state during college, and she and several others made the spontaneous decision to go out and get tattoos one evening:

I went to a conference senior year. It was in the fall. There was four of us, so two guys, two girls, including myself. And the guys ... one night we were just in our hotel room.

We were exhausted, but we were bored. And we were like, "What are we going to do?"

2 Quotations in the body of this document may have been edited or condensed for flow, organization, and ease of reading. I have attempted to preserve the meanings and intentions of participants’ words. Full transcriptions of interviews can be found in Appendix G.
And that point, we didn't know the city enough to go roaming, and the baseball playoffs were going on, that's what the guys were doing at the bar downstairs. And then, all of the sudden… we pop up and, or I popped up, actually. I was like, "Let's go get tattoos! YOLO" (laughter).

Abigail described this moment of impulsivity, of spontaneity, as one of the few times in her life in which she could do something involving her body at a moment’s notice. She described a regimented, structured life made necessary by her epilepsy, and this quick decision to get a tattoo as a way of being free, young, social, and uninhibited as she so often saw in other young people around her. In this instance, the process of getting a tattoo was more significant than the tattoo itself. It represented spontaneity and body control that Abigail had not known before.

**Key themes that stood out in Abigail’s narrative.** Abigail described her sense of control in her process of getting tattoos. In both instances, she chose to get tattoos when other aspects of her life felt less manageable or within her power. In getting her first tattoo spontaneously, she demonstrated to herself and others that she has body control and body agency in a way that her epilepsy prevented her from having in other areas. Abigail stated:

Part of the reason why I'm so intrigued with tattoos and getting tattoos is… I'm figuring out meaning for me. With having epilepsy, I can't drink. Not that I think I would have, but everything is so structured for me that never in college or high school had I experimented with anything, like any type of drug or marijuana or even just smoking a cigarette or anything like that, because of what the ramifications could be. To say I can't drink, and especially with the epilepsy, you feel like you don't have control of your body because you never know when you might just drop and have a seizure. And getting these tattoos was some control over my body.
In not only getting a tattoo spontaneously, but suggesting the action itself for the group, Abigail created a space in which she could use her body to socially engage, which required a degree of body control she had historically not been able to take for granted.

Abigail described both of her tattooing experiences as empowering: her first tattoo empowered her to make decisions with her body, when typically her body limits her ability to make certain decisions. However, Abigail described her second tattoo as truly empowering, relinquishing her from concerns about perceptions of others. She discussed whether and when to display the tattoo on her wrist, and described this process as highly personal. She chose a place which was visible to her because of its meaning to her, and its visibility to others was merely a byproduct. She stated:

So, from a body empowerment standpoint, both have a different effect and I think that's part of their placement. I remember when I first started working, my general manager was like, "Oh, I didn't know you had a tattoo. You're not required to hide it." And I go, "I don't think I need to hide it. I made the choice because it's for me."

In this example, the personal significance superseded the concern for interpersonal or societal concerns. Furthermore, Abigail described feeling empowered by this personal significance in that she gets to choose for herself whether it gets displayed, and whether she cares that it is displayed. The source of her empowerment comes from the preservation of love
and happy memories that is represented in this tattoo, and this preservation likewise afforded Abigail a degree of control over her emotional life and responses by allowing her to overcome hardship and process difficult experiences via inscribing this happiness onto her body.

I was going through a pretty deep depression, and I needed something… I was trying to grasp at anything I could at that moment. Just something to think of happy moments and I just wanted to focus on getting the tattoo. I mean it's something, something to be happy about, something new… It still holds a really special place in my heart because I knew that this is one of the things that I would never regret getting because it meant so much to me.

Though Abigail reported that no tattoo is impactful enough to pull a person out of a bad situation or deep depression, getting her second tattoo afforded her peace and happiness in moments of darkness. She expressed that her appreciation of this tattoo has grown and developed over time and with additional experiences and stressors, and has contributed to her overall wellbeing. That is, she is free to be her own person, and her tattoo serves a reminder of important memories, which gives her some control over thoughts and emotions by intentionally triggering them.

Abigail’s tattoos additionally give her a greater control of perception than might otherwise be had. Though this is related to her sense of control, this also introduces the concept of identity and selfhood. Abigail described interactions with others in which she is consistently misunderstood. Because of medical concerns, she described exhibiting particular behaviors about which others then make assumptions and stereotype, and the ways in which disclosing that she has tattoos serves to counter these stereotypes and demonstrate her true identity:
A lot of people say that my personality doesn't align with someone who has multiple
tattoos. Ugh, no. But whatever. A lot of people I guess ... I've come to realize that I think
I come off as a goody two shoes… I think it stems from me not drinking, me not
smoking… until I tell someone why it is. And even after I tell someone why it is, whether
I just say, "Well, for medical reasons," or "Because I have epilepsy," I'm still put in that
category where, "She doesn't do these things so she must not be a badass”… Yeah, and
those are people that, like I said, they don't know me. They don't know the things I've
been through. They don't know the true me at least.

In this way, the “true me” is that person who chooses to have multiple tattoos, which
represent a degree of rebellion that Abigail’s body does not always permit her to have. Abigail’s
felt connection with her tattoos, therefore, are reflective of her sense of self, rather than that
persona stemming from overt behaviors which get taken up by others and unfairly stereotyped.
Tattoos not only preserve memories and important people, but they also provide self-branding
and preserve an identity that may not otherwise be visible to others.

Abigail’s first tattoo additionally represents related themes of body image and tattoo/body
integration. In describing how she selected its location, she stated, “I want to the hip region, I
thought it was sensual. It was one place where I knew in the summer I'd be able to show it off,
but I could still have it for myself. I did think that it was nice place, but it was also private, for
me.” In this way, Abigail’s selection of location positively contributed to her body image. She
described her increased sense of physical attractiveness resulting from getting and having this
tattoo. Abigail also noted the ways in which her body affects her perception of her tattoo, and the
meaning that supersedes all physical body image in favor of felt experiences:
I have put on a decent amount of weight, so my hip one doesn't feel as sensual anymore. I don't know. I shy away from it now because now I'm not wearing bikinis anymore in the summer to show it off. I do still have my days where I love that particular tattoo and it makes me feel good… If I am getting dressed up and whatnot, it makes me feel that much more sexy… I still see it and that was my first tattoo and that was my first just impulsive moment that I've ever been able to have… I love the tattoo on my hip.

In describing both of her tattoos, Abigail discussed the role of *tattoos as art* and *uniqueness* by saying that a tattoo is “a permanent piece of art that's unique to the person that you are.” She indicated that the importance of her first tattoo was the process through which she got it rather than the unique or artistic content, but likewise observed that she would only get another tattoo if it felt unique and highly meaningful to her. Abigail’s narrative implies that both aesthetics and meaning are valuable when considering a tattoo, and that in order to *self-brand* effectively, both must be thoughtfully considered. Furthermore, “meaning” for Abigail often includes the concept of *preservation*; that is, the meaningful tattoo examples Abigail gave all involved commemorating important individuals or events. This was also demonstrated in the process of getting her grandmother’s writing on her wrist; during this event, she described the process of needing to assert herself with the tattoo artist, who suggested she orient the tattoo to face outward for others to read. Abigail adamantly rejected this and insisted that it face inward as it is meant for her to read. Meaning is evident, too, in her first, more impulsive tattoo: Though she selected a drawing from the wall of pre-made tattoo art, she asked the artist to include a purple ribbon on it which represents epilepsy awareness, elegantly tying the entire process of getting the tattoo and its significance into the image itself.
Finally, Abigail’s narrative speaks to interpersonal and relational aspects of tattoos. Just as both tattoos preserve meaning in some form, this *preservation* also serves a relational function. Abigail described the process of being reminded not only of her grandmother when she looks at her commemorative tattoo, but of a variety of other important relationships as well. She specifically noted the increased importance this tattoo had for her after her grandfather passed, signifying a fluid pattern of meanings all related to the interpersonal.

Abigail noted that her tattoos, while for her, also *invite observation/comments* at times. She noted ways in which her tattoos invite conversation about identity and personas, and how her tattoos counter these narratives and communicate to others an additional personal dimension. Abigail also stated that it can be gratifying to have others emotionally compelled by the story of the tattoo commemorating her grandmother:

> It was never to get that reaction, but that's what I've experienced. It makes me feel really good that it has that impact on other people too, because it has just as much of an impact on me. Every time I get [that reaction], it's just even more powerful to me that I made a great decision of what I got and where I put it.

Interpersonal and relational domains are not the primary reasons Abigail elected to get tattoos, but reciprocal encounters with others about this tattoo continue to reinforce her decisions to do so.
Table 1: Abigail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Codes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection with Tattoo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to Overall Wellbeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sylvia. Sylvia is a 22-year-old, heterosexual Caucasian woman in a committed monogamous relationship. She holds a bachelor’s degree and is employed full time. She does not prescribe to any particular religion and she resides near Pittsburgh, PA. Sylvia describes her socioeconomic background as upper middle class. She has 3 tattoos.

Narrative. Sylvia told stories of the personal significance of each of her tattoos. The story of her first tattoo, obtained in 2014, is that of her father passing when she was young, and memories of him captured through the words inscribed on her body:

I got it in memory of my father who passed away when I was 11, and “only time” to me signifies the song “Only Time” by Enya of all things. The vivid memory for me is driving around in my dad's truck as a child and that song would always be playing, or at least that's the memory I have of it. So I wanted to get something to sort of preserve those moments for myself.

The story of her second tattoo, obtained in 2016, involves meaningful trips to the Teton Mountains. Sylvia first visited with her mother and brother when she was younger, and then traveled there again as an adult:

The mountain one is actually one of the peaks in the Grand Teton range out in Wyoming. I first visited that area when I was 12 or 13 with my mom and younger brother. And then two years ago, summer of 2016, I
spent several weeks in Wyoming doing field research. We spent a portion of time in the Teton mountain range as well. And I really like the outdoors and hiking, and I felt the area was beautiful, and I had one of the best times of my life while I was there.

In 2016, in addition to getting a new tattoo to represent her experiences in Wyoming, she additionally added flowers native to Wyoming to her existing “Only Time” tattoo, integrating multiple experiences into one piece of art. She narrated various elements of experience which can be commemorated in tattoos, including people, events, locations, and personal values/mantras. Sylvia’s most recent tattoo, obtained in 2018, represents the latter. She described her dislike of this tattoo and her desire to be rid of it partially due to the aesthetics of it, and partially due to its meaning, which no longer fits into her sense of self. At the time of interview, Sylvia was in the process of getting this tattoo removed, and she described with a mixture of mild frustration and good humor the time-consuming, painful, and expensive process of undoing tattoos and her reasons for undergoing it anyway.

Sylvia also discussed the personal nature of selecting her tattoos, which includes both subjective and objective considerations. She brought in the realm of aesthetics, art, and social dimensions when discussing all of her tattoos, expressing her experiences, desires, and concerns having others view what she termed “artwork” on her body in the following:

We get them to sort of show them off in some ways, and you don't want them to look bad to the viewers that have the privilege of seeing them… Socially, it's a talking point with other people. If I see others with artwork on their bodies that I find beautiful and appealing, it's nice to talk with them about that.

Sylvia additionally discussed processes of maturation and increasing independence and autonomy and reflected through the process of getting tattoos. Though she described her own
rationale for wanting tattoos and what they symbolize, she also highlighted apprehension and conflict with her mother regarding decisions about her body. Furthering this element, Sylvia discussed the process of getting the tattoo which she was in the process of having removed, and described important lessons about assertiveness and body agency that she wished she had known before making this decision.

**Key themes that stood out in Sylvia’s narrative.** Sylvia’s narrative exemplified concepts of meaning and aesthetics in her discussion of the content and placement of each of her tattoos. She described all three of her tattoos as *preserving* some element of her life, whether it is an important person who has passed, significant life experiences, or an ideology once held and represented by an image. Though these meanings are *personally significant* for her, they are also, as pieces of art, placed strategically for viewership by others. Sylvia stated:

The tattoos were discretely placed, but they’re in places that can be visible to certain people. For example, like when you wear certain clothes or whenever you have a sexual partner. But it's not always for other people. In fact, it's not just the meaning that's for you. It's also the way that it makes your body look.

She expanded on this concept by discussing tattoos as *accessorizing* and the importance of *cohesion* when getting multiple tattoos in the following:
I think of tattoos the same way that I think of wardrobe. You want all of your pieces to work together and kind of make sense together, and I want all art that’s on my body to do the same thing… It’s really self-branding.

In contrast to this, Sylvia described the disruptive feel of her regretted tattoo. Sylvia expressed her regret related to both meaning and aesthetics. Related to aesthetics, Sylvia described the tattoo as “larger and darker than [she] ever wanted,” and her mixed feelings about it from the moment it was initiated. She also described this tattoo as less cohesive with both her current sense of self and the look or branding of her other tattoos. Concerning meaning, Sylvia asserted that personal meanings and identities are fluid over time, which is something she underestimated when making the decision to get this particular tattoo. She described the meaning and regret behind the lotus flower tattoo in the following:

I saw more images online [of lotus flowers] and really liked them and was reading about the symbolism behind lotus flowers. Long story short, beautiful things like lotuses can grow in like murky waters. So a “good things can come from bad things” sort of deal. And at the time that I got this one done, I was going through something personal, fighting with all of that. So in the moment it felt more powerful to get. And sometimes I speculate that maybe the reason I dislike that tattoo so much is because I associate it with this negative time in my life. I'm no longer in that place, so I want to kind of erase that memory and feeling.

In this way, Sylvia described not only the importance of meaning to her tattoos, but the importance of meaning that fits over time, and the process of fluid meanings and identities. This links her narrative to the concept of identity or selfhood. She spoke to personal significance,
preservation, overcoming hardship, and changing meanings over time. Notably, Sylvia brought attention to ways in which preserving hardship can lead to regret and self-criticism:

I do an eye roll at myself for getting it in the first place, like, “Oh, you should have been more assertive or proactive or thought about this more before you got it”… Sometimes, when I catch a glimpse of my back in the mirror, I kind of cringe a little bit inside. Not really outwardly, but I can imagine what my back would look like without that there. I kind of fantasize about the day that I won't have that on my back again.

Although she appreciated the ideology represented by the lotus flower at the time, deciding to inscribe a reminder of that particular period of hardship filled her with regret rather than significance or meaning. As her experiences and sense of self shifted, her perspective on her tattoo shifted as well and no longer accommodated this particular piece of art. In the quotation above, Sylvia alluded to body image and ways in which her regretted tattoo detracts from positively viewing that part of her body. In contrast to this, Sylvia described ways in which her positively-regarded tattoos contribute to her sense of uniqueness and positive body image in the following:

I think personally it's positively impacted me. I particularly think the ones on my sides make me feel more sexy. I like the way they look on my body in that way, and I feel more suave because of it… I think the tattoos add more character to my body and give me
and others something different to look at than what normally people would see on your rib cage or your back or something.

Sylvia’s sense of identity is related to the meanings she inscribes, the aesthetics and artistic cohesion of the inscriptions, and the individualized character they add to her body. In discussing identity and uniqueness, Sylvia also touches on the relational and interpersonal aspects of tattoos. Sylvia was able to demonstrate both positive and negative forms of social components of tattoos. She never experienced criticism from others regarding the content or aesthetics of any of her tattoos, but she did express reluctance and embarrassment in social spheres when her regretted tattoo was noticed or on display. Sylvia described selecting and buying clothes to hide her back, and described the tattoo as “a literal target on [her] back” for others to notice.

In contrast to this, Sylvia described the invitation for others to observe and comment on her tattoos. She described “joy” in having others notice and appreciate these works of which she is proud and feels more accurately demonstrate her identity and uniqueness. She described feeling sexier as the result of having tattoos, but noted that when her tattoos have been noticed by others, it has been in a respectful, platonic manner, rather than an objectifying or overly-sexualized one. In this way, getting tattoos has afforded Sylvia a degree of control over how and what parts of her body are viewed by others in social atmospheres while also inviting commentary about her identity as represented by chosen body additions, rather than her objectified body over which she was simply given. In addition to this, Sylvia’s tattoos are relational in that they preserve an important person and related memories in her life, and signify that remembering hardship that has been overcome does not always lead to regret:
It is part of me that's integral to me. It represents my first hardship in life and has carried me from that point to where I am today in some ways. It's literally like a memory box for me. When I see it, I'm reminded of those experience with my dad, driving around in his truck, having that be on the radio. So that tattoo, and the other two ones, they stay with me day to day. They still mean things, even if my perspective about them shifts, they still remain static. They’re static and don’t really change even when I do.

Though she has received exclusively positive feedback from others regarding her tattoos, Sylvia did contend with family conflict related to her decision to get her first tattoo, and she admitted that apprehension in this regard partially determined the semi-hidden location. She discussed *control of perception* in deciding on the location of her first tattoo by saying, “It was very intentional to get it somewhere semi-private, not totally just for myself. The “Only Time” one, I got when I was 18 and there was definitely a factor of putting it somewhere where my mother wouldn't see it.” When asked about her mother’s reaction to finding out about the tattoo, she replied:

She was pissed, to say the least. She was definitely really upset initially, and it didn’t last that long, just the shock, I guess. Once I explained what it was for, she kind of was more understanding, but I remember her comment was, “That's – that’s huge!”… So I think she's come around a little bit. I know when she saw the one on my back, she saw it when it was really dark and large, and she cried when she saw that one. Her comment was “Just don't get any face tattoos.”

This demonstrates the process of transition from child to adult and the social impact tattoos can have on family units, especially for parents who, for so long, have made decisions for and about their children’s bodies. Sylvia was aware of her increasing autonomy and
independence and the ways in which her tattooing served to communicate this to her mother. She stated:

I never really had an epiphany, like, “Oh yes, this is symbolic of me growing up or coming of age and being able to do what I want with my body.” But it definitely served as a tool for arguing my case to have more freedom when it comes to parents.

This speaks to the larger concepts of power, control, and body ownership, and Sylvia’s growing sense of autonomy, maturity, and body agency as she went through this process. Though Sylvia was a legal adult at the time and her mother could not tell her not to get tattoos, there was a process of determining body ownership among this parent-child dyad. Getting and displaying the tattoo without her mother’s consent served the implicit purpose of identifying Sylvia as an adult capable of making choices about her own body without reliance on the opinions of others.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platonic Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alice. Alice is a 57-year-old, married, heterosexual Caucasian woman. She holds a high school degree and is employed full time. Alice describes herself as Catholic and comes from a middle class socioeconomic background. She resides near Pittsburgh, PA. Alice has 5 tattoos.

Narrative. Alice told the emotional story of recently losing her mother, who was also her best friend and confidante, and the tattoo that commemorates this relationship. Alice’s mother’s passing was sudden, and they had little warning that anything was wrong. Prior to this event, Alice and her niece had made appointments with their regular tattoo artist to get tattoos of coloring pages that Alice’s mother had completed specifically for this purpose. Their tattoo appointments were scheduled for two weeks after Alice’s mother passed. Alice described the timing of the pre-planned appointments as particularly meaningful in light of that event, saying, “It's sort of fate that it just happened we had these appointments.”

In addition to the significance of the timing of the appointment and the commemorative meaning of this tattoo, Alice described the process of getting tattoos broadly as subjectively meaningful, rebellious, and conducive to social bonding. She described the bond created between herself and her daughter when they got tattoos together, and, having helped raise her niece, she wanted a similar bond with her through ink. She stated:

When I saw the one that my niece was getting, I asked her if it was okay with her if I got the same tattoo. Now, background to that is that my daughter and I both have the same tattoo, very similar, color differences, but almost identical tattoos, and I thought it would be really neat to have that sort of connection with my niece also… So when I saw this picture that my niece was doing and I just started thinking about it. My daughter shows people hers; when people ask about particular tattoos, she'll tell them, "Yeah, my mom and I have that same tattoo." And now that's what my niece is doing, too, when people
are questioning her. She's saying, "My aunt and I have the same tattoo." And I say the same thing if somebody questions me… I wanted that connection with her too.

Alice further described other relational aspects of tattooing, including reactions from other family members, such as her parents, friends, and colleagues, and strangers. She also described the relationship built over time with her tattoo artist.

Alice described the importance of personal meaning in tattoos and described them as largely for herself, something that she can do to represent important areas of her life, and a small act of rebellion in the context of a life lived abiding by all rules. Alice located particular aspects of her identity in the images she has inscribed on her body and demonstrated throughout the importance of attending to what a person wants and likes, viewing one’s self positively, and engaging in tattooing because it is what is personally wanted. Alice noted one caveat to this in her own life: She expressed love and respect for husband, and demonstrated these feelings by discussing body modifications with him prior to tattooing, not out of needing permission or apprehension that he may disagree, but out of respect for his thoughts and feelings in the context of marriage. She described a process of reciprocal respect, implying that her husband would likely never inhibit her, and that she would still demonstrate respect for his opinions by discussing body modifications first, stating:

At this point in my life, I don't let someone else influence [me]... The only person that would influence where or what I would do would be my husband. And that would be just out of respect. We've been together 38 years. You don't make it that long without having a certain [mutual] respect for what they do and what they want.
Key themes that stood out in Alice’s narrative. Alice described several personal experiences related to identity or selfhood, including related individual themes of personal significance and felt connection. Alice highlighted the importance of personal meaning in her tattoos. She voiced the rationale for each: one tattoo is the one she obtained with her daughter, which created a special bond. Another tattoo symbolizes her family members in connected hearts, and another tattoo blends her love of gardening with what she aesthetically wanted at the time. Another tattoo represents her family members, including beloved pets, with more specific symbols. Finally, her most recent tattoo represents her mother. With regard to this recent tattoo, she added a dimension of felt connection to her mother when she said, “I look at it every day and think of her and feel her.” Each of these tattoos depicts something Alice cherishes and identified as an important part of her sense of self. She described the decision to get tattoos as autonomous and for personal reasons, saying, “It's just something that you do for you more than anyone else.” Part of Alice’s autonomy comes from her narrated history of adhering to rules, listening to her parents and others, and always engaging in socially appropriate behaviors. She described her decision as an adult to begin acting of her own volition in ways she had not previously. Getting tattoos became an act of rebellion and body agency that showed another side of her not previously demonstrated to others. She stated:
I was always the good girl… I was the person that didn't even like to go to the bar. So I always lived sort of being the good girl and stuff. I just got to a point in my life where I was just like, "You know, I want to start doing things and not care what anybody else thinks. I'm going to dress the way I want to dress, I'm going to put my hair the way I want to do my hair and I'm going to do to my body what I want to do to my body and not let it matter to anybody."

Alice followed this by describing her awareness of her own aging process. After watching her parents’ decline, she described a heightened sense of the body’s fragility over time and discussed what it means to modify and tattoo in that context:

I’m thinking, you know, I'm 57 years old. I've probably got a good 20 years before my body's going to crap out like my parents’ did and I'm going to be the one with either the Alzheimer's or the dementia or a new diagnosis, so I'm going to do whatever I want to do right now for the time that I can… I think that it just became, "I'm just going to do this because I'm going to do it."

Alice’s acts of rebellion and body agency, situated within the existential realization of human mortality, indicate a degree of autonomy and control over her body, and her narrative is one of empowerment; Alice demonstrated her intact sense of self, challenging life experiences, and the social freedom which empowered her to get tattoos. Her tattoos indicate a side of her that complements her socially-traditional side, even as it contrasts with others’ expectations of her. This points to the interpersonal and relational components of tattoos, which emerged for Alice in a variety of ways. One way tattoos are relational is precisely this contrast in others’ expectations of her personhood versus that which is represented in her ink:
I think some people that know me, especially people that knew me when I was younger are a little bit surprised that I have tattoos... I was a very quiet, shy, geeky kid and teenager... I was always the good girl. I got married very young, had my kids right away, I was a very hands-on mom. I was, you know, homeroom mom and PTG president, and I did everything for my kids growing up. My husband and I, we've been together a long time, we've lived in the same house, like the normal American family. I think when people see that I deviate from that image in their head of me, it surprises them.

In this way, Alice spoke to control of perception, or her ability to present this alternative view of herself to others through tattoos. She also touched on the effect mainstreaming of tattoos has had on her decision to get them. Though she noted she would likely have gotten tattoos regardless, she similarly recalled how radical and unusual they were when she was younger, which was a further deterrent as it contradicted the “good girl” persona she lived.

As mentioned previously, Alice noted the relational bonding that happens in getting a matching tattoo or getting a tattoo with another person, represented by the theme connection with others. Alice likewise described the long-term relationship she built with her tattoo artist, which is demonstrative of another theme, trust in tattoo artist. The relational nature of tattoos, and embedded questions of body agency, are apparent, too, in Alice’s decisions to reveal or hide her tattoos to certain family members. Though she described her satisfaction with her ink, she also described an awareness of potential conflict among family members should they learn that she has tattoos, even as a well-established and respected adult. Alice expressed that she “didn’t want to disappoint [her] parents” and recognized when it “wasn’t worth the aggravation” to tell her father about her tattoos. Alice recalled getting her ears pierced as a teenager, and her father’s upset reaction:
My dad, when I got my ears pierced when I was probably 15, he didn't talk to my mom for about two weeks because I got my ears pierced… So my dad, he never saw my tattoos in the beginning. I would wear sleeves around him. Then, he started with dementia so he really never noticed it... I didn’t want to have the battle that I knew would come.

In a moving turn of events, however, Alice narrated a recent and rare moment of connection with her dad in the midst of his progressing cognitive decline:

We happened to be sitting outside and I had my [tattooed] arm up on the table. He looked at me and he all of a sudden recognized who I was. He was like, "Hey, Alice." I'm like, "Yeah, Dad. It's me." And he said, "What possessed you to get those things?" And I was like, "What things? What are you talking about?" And he said, "You know, the ... " he couldn't put the word to it, but he just pointed to them. And I said, "You mean the tattoos?" And he was like, "Yeah, yeah. What possessed you? What would possess you to do something like that?" And I said, "You know what, Dad? I've been a good girl all my life. It's time I went a little crazy." He just looked at me and nodded his head. And he said, "Yeah, you've been a real good girl."

Finally, Alice introduced the relationship between meaning and aesthetics in tattoos in her dual appreciation for both the deeply personal and significant meanings of her tattoos, especially her recent one, and the artistry involved in getting tattoos. She described knowing what wanted aesthetically, and then ways of integrating meaning that made her tattoos special and unique. Out of appreciation to the art of tattoos, Alice noted her collaboration with her tattoo artist and her trust in his advice.
Table 3: Alice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rosa. Rosa is a 27-year-old, single, heterosexual Caucasian woman. She attended some college and was a member of the Marine Corps for approximately 8 years. She is currently employed full time and describes her background as lower middle class. Rosa describes herself as Christian and resides near Pittsburgh, PA. She has 1 tattoo.

Narrative. Rosa described a longtime desire to get a tattoo, but never knowing what was meaningful or significant enough to place on her body permanently. In middle school, her younger sister wrote a poem, which Rosa always liked. Rosa described her father’s passing as a catalyst for moving forward with her tattoo. She stated:

My sister wrote this poem in middle school, and it was this really awesome poem. And I actually took a piece of it [for my tattoo], and everything incorporated in my tattoo has to do with her poem. It's about an oriole, and he's like the overseer, I guess, of the woodland, this little ... It's this place that's in a glass bubble… It's really kind of sad, but the oriole dies and everyone has to move on. They can't stay stuck on this great overseer passing away… I always just thought it was really beautiful, and then my dad passed away in 2013, and it just kind of hit something. And I thought it'd be really cool to have something on me that my sister wrote herself, and it also has some feeling for me relating to my dad.

Rosa was able to put her plan for a tattoo into action after achieving independence and financial stability and discharging from the military. At this point, she contacted a known tattoo artist with whom she collaborated to construct the images around the words. Rosa described this as a highly collaborative process involving back and forth and significant trust in her artist. Rosa was ultimately thrilled with the outcome. She indicated that it was more important that her sister love the tattoo, and her sister was equally happy with it.
Rosa pointed to one striking unpredicted outcome of getting a tattoo: improved mental and physical health. Rosa described life before getting her tattoo as relatively unhealthy. She described being in the military and going through training, but otherwise striving for the “bare minimum” when it came to nutrition and exercise. Rosa’s tattoo, located on her upper arm, motivated her to “get in shape.” She began exercising and eating well, and noticed improvement in her overall daily experience, which further motivated her to be healthy. This began as a desire to tone a body part for the viewership of others and evolved into a healthy lifestyle motivated by feeling good every day. Rosa described her new lifestyle and the positive impact it has also had on her mental wellbeing.

**Key themes that stood out in Rosa’s narrative.** Rosa introduced concepts related to identity and sense of self through individual themes including *felt connection* and *personal significance*. She described the personal significance of the poem written by her sister and the timing of her father’s passing. She added other elements to her tattoo that felt meaningful to her background and sense of self, such as integrating flowers native to Pennsylvania. Rosa depicted the experiential connection she felt upon seeing her finished tattoo; this kind of connection with her body speaks to *tattoo/body integration*. 
Rosa’s sense of self, and specifically *self-criticism*, was likewise depicted in her comments regarding her body before getting her tattoo. She described a pattern of not taking care of herself as well as she currently does, and her feelings toward her body were as follows:

When I was in my younger twenties, I wasn't unhealthy, but I didn't necessarily take care of myself, I guess. I just ate whatever I wanted and didn't really work out or anything. I mean I did, but I did the bare minimum. Being in the Marines and stuff, I should've done a lot more, but I just stuck to the bare minimum. Around when I got this tattoo, I guess I kind of was starting a healthier, better me, I guess...When I got the tattoo, I wanted to show it off and I was kind of embarrassed about how my arms were just gross to me. So it just pushed me to start doing stuff that I've been wanting to do and that I felt like I needed to do.

This led to deeper reflection on how Rosa’s overall lifestyle was impacting her:

Yeah, I just felt like crap basically every day. I just never felt good, I just felt slow. I don't know, did you ever feel like you were dragging something around? That's what I would feel like all the time, and I was tired all the time, and it's amazing that just by changing what you eat a little bit and working out a little bit every day, it can make you feel so different. I get so much more done, I'm in a better mood all the time, and just so many good changes have come from it.

In this way, Rosa discussed individual themes of *control of body*, *control of perception*, and *body agency*. Rosa’s initial motivation related to how she and others’ perceive her body, and her tattoo served as the motivation to be healthier in an effort to control and shape her body. While Rosa described improved *body image* as the result of getting healthier, she noted that the greater, and unexpected, impact was the experience of improved physical and mental health. Rosa did
achieve greater control over her body, and in more ways than she had anticipated. Rosa reflected on her body image over time, and what currently motivates her to stay in shape:

I wouldn't say I feel bad, or I felt bad, but I've never been super confident with myself. Whenever I was younger, I don't even know how to explain it, I've just always wanted to be skinnier I guess, because I never have been. Even when I was in the Marines and I got out of boot camp. I was skinny, but I never had a completely flat stomach or anything, so I guess that was something that I would like to get, but I'm more motivated by just being healthy… I don't really fully care how I look I guess, now it's more about how it makes me feel.

Another aspect of control over her body more directly related to her tattoo exists in the theme of planning. Rosa noted that she had long cherished the idea of getting a tattoo, and she described the process of planning for her tattoo in a manner which gave her control via thoughtful engagement and collaboration with a trusted tattoo artist. For Rosa, this interpersonal component including building trust with her tattoo artist. Rosa stated:

I've kind of been waiting to get a tattoo because I was afraid to go somewhere and have somebody mess up. But I'd seen so many things that [this tattoo artist] had done and I was really confident in him. So I sent him a bigger piece of the poem, just so that he could read it and get a feel for it. I told him what I wanted in the tattoo, and then I told him I wanted an oriole, I wanted the two roses up top. And then I wanted more flowers around… The flowers in the back are flowers from around Pennsylvania. It's weird, because of how the drawing is, it's obviously not as detailed as the actual tattoo. I was kind of skeptical about it, but thought, "You know what, he knows what he's doing so we'll go with it." And it came out beautiful.
Rosa thoughtfully and intentionally selected her tattoo artist and put trust in him despite skepticism. This trust served her well and she was satisfied with the result. Rosa discussed interpersonal dimensions beyond those with her artist, including the importance of her sister’s positive reaction to it and her own relationship with it in the form of body image. The personal significance of her tattoo likewise speaks to the interpersonal as it commemorates two other individuals. Additionally, Rosa’s later emphasis on shaping her body through food and exercise to comfortably display her tattoo speak to the interpersonal nature of bodies generally; they exist in public domains and are seen by others, and in inviting observations by others with her tattoo, Rosa simultaneously sought to control the perception by making her body what she wanted it to be.

In relation to this invitation to others to observe and comment, Rosa asserted that she often gets feedback on both her tattoo and changes she has made to her body. She finds both validating and reinforcing of her new habits. However, Rosa asserted that while she appreciates when people like her tattoo, the only opinion she really values is that of her sister.

Finally, Rosa introduced the relationship between meaning and aesthetics in tattoos in her discussion of both the personal significance and artistic process of getting her tattoo. She described the high degree of collaboration with her tattoo artist as that which produced a unique and meaningful tattoo which improves her body image independent of any other factors.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Beverly.** Beverly is a 22-year-old, bisexual Caucasian woman in a committed monogamous relationship. She holds a bachelor’s degree. Beverly is currently employed part time and describes her socioeconomic background as working class. She resides near Pittsburgh, PA. Beverly was raised Christian and is in the process of converting to Judaism. She has 3 tattoos.

**Narrative.** Beverly described getting her first tattoo at age 16. At the time, she needed her mother’s consent to do this, and her mother agreed with one rule: the tattoo must be religious in nature. Beverly agreed, thinking that it might soothe some of her anxieties related to religion, in addition to allowing her to be the first person she knew of her age group to get a tattoo. She stated:

I've always been in part of my mind very scared about being a Christian, and as a person who grew up in a Christian family and a Christian town, it scared me. So part of my rationale was, well, if I get a tattoo of it, I can never leave it. I'll be trapped and that was my reasoning, so I thought that'll be good. So I really wanted it for that reason. I also really wanted to ... I was the first person that I knew my age that had a tattoo. I liked that idea.

Beverly described her current ambivalence towards this particular tattoo. She asserted that she likes having gotten a tattoo so young and reflecting on the courage it took, but regrets the content and location of the tattoo as her belief system has evolved over the years and she is currently in the process of converting to a different religion.

When she was 18, Beverly got a tattoo of Saturn. She described this process as happening quickly, without significant forethought, and asserted that this tattoo is “fun and cute” and she harbors no regrets. Beverly’s most recent tattoo, obtained in 2015, is her most premeditated one.
She described working with a tattoo artist and going through several drawings before landing on the right one. This recent tattoo differed slightly from other participant narratives in that it commemorates a living person. Beverly described growing up in a single parent household and wanting to get something to honor her mother, which she feels she achieved in getting this tattoo. Beverly expressed her satisfaction with this work. In addition to this narrative, Beverly discussed ways in which her tattoos make her appear approachable or unapproachable, ways in which her tattoos fit into her religious background, and the positive impact that participating in the LGBT community has had on her sense of self and perception of tattoos generally.

**Key themes that stood out in Beverly’s narrative.**

Beverly described identity and selfhood in her narratives of the *personal significance* of each of her tattoos and ways in which each tattoo is *reflective of her sense of self*, saying, “I felt like tattoos were a part of staking my identity as my own person.” In her description of the tattoo she obtained when she was 16, Beverly described feeling a strong desire to overcome her fear and identify with her religious background. That she now *regrets* the content of that tattoo speaks to *changing meanings over time*, and the ways in which static tattoos capture identities in isolated moments. For example, Beverly stated:

I regret the whole tattoo. That's not the case with my other ones. I love my other ones. I've never had any second thoughts about them. I don't regret getting the tattoo when I was 16, I just regret what I got… I think if I knew who I was now and I could go back, I would still get a tattoo. I just think it would be different because I just feel like that's kind of who I am.
Beverly similarly pointed to her other tattoos as *self-branding* of sorts. She discussed all of her tattoos as *unique* relative to her very conservative hometown and the *relational* negative impact these differences have had. She described her nontraditional approach to her body and physical appearance in relation to this community, and described the reaction of community members:

I think in general, especially with people from my hometown, the less I looked the way they think women should look like, the less I think they think I'm ... The more they assume that I'm gay, or they assume that I'm not typical to them, they think that I'm a heretic... That's how it makes me feel, that's how comments have made me feel. When I look less like what people expect for them to look like, they get upset. Sometimes it makes me feel like scared, threatened, but the majority of the time it does not bother me. I think these people I don't really want anything to do with me anyway. When I'm not scared, I don't care.

In this relational narrative, Beverly spoke to unfair *objectification* of her body and standards with which she is expected to meet by virtue of her gender. This likewise points to a *lack of control of perception*; when Beverly makes non-traditional decisions for her body, others perceive and interpret this in a specific way and interact accordingly with Beverly, which sometimes includes threatening and hostile behavior. Despite this, Beverly continues to exert *body agency*, which she has negotiated with others since she was 16. This negotiation occurred with her mother in mutually deciding what tattoo was permissible for an underage person, and it occurred repeatedly in more aggressive ways in her hometown community. Beverly described a
pattern of others touching her tattoo without her consent. She inferred that this was likely due to her young age and the placement/content of her tattoo; people would often grab her arm and wrist and engage her in conversation about religion without her initiation. Beverly described the process of moving to a less Christian area as naturally resolving this issue in that she is around others who feel less entitled to her Christian tattoo.

In contrast to this historical nonconsensual entitlement to her tattoo, Beverly described her tattoos serving as shields or deterrents against others at times. She stated:

I think sometimes [tattoos] make me look or seem a little bit more unapproachable… In some instances it feels good and it feels fun to look different… Sometimes it's fun to look unapproachable. I don't want to talk to anybody. I like putting on that sort of persona, the shield sometimes.

In this way, Beverly manages to assert control over her body and environment when historically her environment has asserted control over her. Related to this, Beverly also spoke to the community and belonging in relation to her tattoos. Beverly described feeling comfortable in her own skin and with her tattoos for the first time after finding the LGBT community on her college campus. She described this community and the impact of acceptance on body image in the following:

Realizing my sexuality and coming to that community made me feel a lot more comfortable with tattoos. I think that they're much more widely accepted and prevalent in
In this description, Beverly asserted the positive impact that normalizing and appreciating tattoos had on her sense of self and body image. Beverly described the dual process of realizing her sexuality and finding acceptance in a community. Within this community, Beverly equally found acceptance for both aesthetics and meaning in tattoos. That is, she found a community in which it was equally acceptable to love a tattoo for its aesthetic appeal as for its meaning. She stated:

I felt in the LGBT community I could have them and people could say they were pretty. And they didn't ask about anything else. I was so used to [people] saying, "What does that mean?" And it wasn't really an issue anymore. It was, "Oh, I like it." And that was it. That made me feel a lot more comfortable. It made me feel like I can have these things as decorations, but not have to be integral and meaningful about them.

Here, Beverly is asserting the validity and inherent meaning in the aesthetics of a tattoo, or tattoo as art. Similarly, she pointed to tattoos as accessories to the body, which is significant...
in and of itself. Though Beverly does have meaning behind some of her tattoos, she noted that she feels most comfortable when this is not a requirement. Furthermore, Beverly held the tension between feeling acceptance for her tattoos within a community, and feeling satisfied that she likes her tattoos while others do not. She expressed this in the following:

It's sort of two-sided. On the one hand, I said it makes me feel sort of separated. But then on the other hand, it's a way to reclaim my body, now I like that sometimes. I like the idea of a man of not liking them sometimes. I'm like, "It's not for you anyway." I enjoy that. It's part of the reason I've modified my body; this is for me. And if people don't like them, it's like, "Good! They're not for you." I sort of find enjoyment in that, the reclaiming is like... [the body is] always on display. It's still on display; in a way, it's more on display [with tattoos].

Beverly is speaking to the tension that exists between body reclamation in public domains, and the inescapability of public domains. She contrasted the need for belonging with the need for body agency and protection. In her own way, Beverly has used tattoos to achieve both of these needs.
Table 5: Beverly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo as Shield</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching Without Consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Belonging</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cynthia. Cynthia is a 34-year-old, heterosexual, single, Caucasian woman. She holds a bachelor’s degree and is currently unemployed. Cynthia describes herself as Catholic and comes from a middle class socioeconomic background. She resides near Pittsburgh, PA. Cynthia has 9 tattoos.

Narrative. Cynthia described a general love of tattoos since she was a child in the following:

I knew since I was little [that I loved tattoos]. I always used to go to the grocery store and get those stick on ones and I would just put them all over me and show them off at the playground or at school, and I was like, "Look at all this! Look at all this."

Cynthia began getting tattoos in her early 20s as a marker of growing independence, and has consistently gotten them ever since. She described financial burden as the primary inhibitor of getting tattoos, and indicated her tattoos were spread out over time as a result. However, she has increasingly become immersed in tattoo culture and has made friendships with an artist over the years, and now finds that she has greater access than before. With this barrier minimized, Cynthia felt free to get tattoos more frequently.

Cynthia described a negative first experience with tattoos in the following:

Well my first tattoo, it's a band symbol tattoo. So it was the current music I was listening to that led me to get that one. I still have it, but it's pretty faded. That one did not set well. That one didn't heal correctly at all. It swelled up and I had so many problems with it. I had to get it colored in three or four times after that. It was an experience, but I recovered from it.

However, this negative first impression did not deter Cynthia from future tattooing. She described this as a learning process through which she came to understand that not all tattoo
shops and artists are created equally. Since better informing her tattooing practice, it has become an integral component of her life. Cynthia described tattooing in existing friendships as creating social bonds, and the establishment of new friendships within the tattoo community. She stated:

A lot of my friends have tattoos and they've taken me to different tattoo shops and I've met different tattoo artists. Now that I know this [tattoo artist] that lives close I think I'll be getting a lot more in the future than I probably would have… I've made a lot of friends getting tattoos and I've made a lot of friends with artists over the years. They've kind of become my friend group now.

Cynthia also described multiple reasons and processes involved in the decision-making process around tattoos. She described some instances of spontaneity, other instances of tattooing as social behavior, and other instances, especially most recently, of wanting to get a tattoo for its meaning and aid in overcoming hardship. Cynthia introduced themes of increasing visibility of tattoos and tattoos in and out of the work place. She described growing confidence in her visible tattoos since becoming better acquainted with shop owners and since being unemployed, which removes her from anxiety about work culture and professional perceptions of tattoos. Cynthia likewise discussed the mainstreaming of tattoos over the years and the impact this has had on her in the 13 years she has been getting tattoos, as well as the “plainness” of un-tattooed bodies she encounters.

**Key themes that stood out in Cynthia’s narrative.** Cynthia described significant interpersonal and relational domains in her discussion of tattoos. Specifically, she described individual themes of community/belonging and invitation to observe/comment. Cynthia depicted a growing integration into the tattoo community which began with friends who have tattoos and
has culminated in the establishment of friendships on the basis of tattoos and tattoo culture. In supplement to this, Cynthia noted her own social responses to others’ tattoos in the following:

I think that I've always been interested in them. I love to see people with them. I love to hear their stories about them. I guess I've just reinforced over the years that I feel like people look plain or something if they don't have them. So I've always been interested. I'm so nosy. I'll go up to people when I'm out. I'll go, "That's really cool. Where did you get that? Tell me about it."

I'm very inquisitive as to their artwork and if they designed it or if the artist designed it. Here, Cynthia pointed to the invitation to comment and question that she feels is presented by tattoos. She likewise referred to the community she built over time, including a closer friendship with a local tattoo artist and making new friends within the tattoo community. Cynthia described older friendships revolving in part around tattoos as well in the following narrative:

I'd say it's more of a positive thing because I get to see my friends more and we're more connected [as the result of getting tattoos together]. We have more outings. We make more friends through the artists we meet. It impacts my life in a good way.

In describing the experience of getting and having a shared tattoo with a friend, Cynthia reported having said to her friend, "Well you're stuck with me now. We have this tattoo." This speaks to the theme of preservation of relationships, both ongoing and historical. For example,
Cynthia’s most recent tattoo commemorates her mother. In relation to this tattoo, Cynthia stated “It’s a nice reminder. I feel like she's always with me. I get to take her places with me.” Other relational components include trust in tattoo artist, as was demonstrated in Cynthia’s learning experience with her first tattoo artist. She described her current process of research and planning prior to going to a new place in order to place faith in the artist and shop. Given her relationship with a local tattoo artist, trust in her artist has become easier over time.

Another relational theme was described in the concept of body image. Cynthia described her personal experiences of body image related to tattooing in the following:

I needed that extra pizazz… I feel like even though a lot of my tattoos, I mean, they're not anything crazy different. But I feel like it's almost like a birthmark that I picked for myself, if that makes sense. Everybody has a birthmark or something that makes them different, and I'm just like, this is a birthmark I picked for myself.

This concept of uniqueness in relation to body image of self and others emerged throughout the interview in various forms. In discussing non-tattooed bodies, Cynthia stated, “Sometimes I think people look very plain. And I'm like, 'Oh, you have all this skin. You need it colored up. Something needs to go there.'”

When Cynthia expressed that tattoos are comparable to voluntarily selected birthmarks, she simultaneously introduced the theme of body agency. She pointed out how very little control we often have over our bodies and how they are perceived by others. Tattooing can serve as a mechanism to control our own and others’ perceptions of our bodies, and can be an exercise in body agency in the context of little overall control. Cynthia explained this statement when she said:
I feel more in control of my own body [with tattoos]. It's a thing I choose to do on my own and pick for myself and design for myself and where I want to put it. I mean, I feel like, I don't know how to quite put it. But I feel like you're born a certain way. Your hair's a certain way, your eyes are a certain way. You look a certain way and that's not really left up to you.

In expanding upon her sense of tattoos as adding uniqueness to bodies, Cynthia introduced elements of identity and selfhood including increased autonomy through both the act of getting tattooed generally, and the developmental elements at play in making the first decision in her early 20s. Though Cynthia had long loved and planned for tattoos, it took independence and financial stability to achieve this, and she obtained her first tattoo after finishing college and achieving the required stability. Other elements of identity emerge in the related themes of preservation and personal significance. Cynthia’s meanings behind her tattoos vary; she expressed that some of her tattoos are deeply meaningful. For example, her most recent tattoo is one which commemorates her mother, who recently passed away. In this sense, Cynthia’s tattoo represents a personally significant relationship which is part of her sense of self. It preserves a piece of who she is and a person important to her. Similarly, tattoos she obtained with others preserve other relationships which contribute to her sense of self. Some of Cynthia’s other tattoos, however, were more aesthetically chosen. Cynthia stated that she “likes having fancy feet” and the overall aesthetics of tattooed bodies. Both meaning and appearance importantly contribute to Cynthia’s sense of personal identity. Even while integrating these two aspects of tattooing, Cynthia holds this tension between tattoos as art and tattoos as meaningful in the following statement:
I don't want [others] to think I'm just going out spur of the moment or there wasn't thought put into it or something… I don't usually stick anything random on me. I want [others] to think my tattoos have meaning and they mean something to me. I've seen a lot of weird impulsive ones where I was like, "That was like a bad decision," and I don't want people talking around being like, "Yours looks stupid."

This pressure to find significant meaning in tattoos contrasts somewhat with tattoos as art in Cynthia’s narrative, even as both are determined to be important elements of tattooing. Furthering this discussion is the question of visibility: Cynthia stated that, in light of shifting culture and the mainstreaming of tattoos, she increasingly considers more visible tattoos. However, this increases the pressure she feels to display something both beautiful and deeply meaningful. Cynthia exemplified this theme in the following:

I think I would get one on my arm or somewhere more visible, but I think I would need to really think it out more. That would have to be something major. If I ever got married or had a child or something, that is something I'd put on my arm. As of right now, I don't think I have anything worth putting on display on the upper half… It needs to be really meaningful and I have to find someone to give me exactly what I wanted.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Gabrielle.** Gabrielle is a 40-year-old, separated, heterosexual, Caucasian woman. She holds both bachelor’s and associate’s degrees, and is currently employed full time. Gabrielle comes from a lower middle class socioeconomic background and describes herself as atheist. She resides near Pittsburgh, PA. Gabrielle has 4 tattoos.

**Narrative.** Gabrielle began her process of getting tattoos in the early 1990s when she was 15. She described friends using the “stick and poke” method and participated, reportedly thinking “it’s not a big deal.” Gabrielle spoke to changing societal attitudes toward tattoos over the years and the ways in which tattoos and other nontraditional behaviors went from radical practice to relatively mainstream. She stated:

> Nowadays, little kids and grandmothers have purple hair. So at that time it definitely was, for me it was much more of a big deal. Even in the last one I got on my wrist, it wasn't last minute at all, but I didn't put as much thought into it as the ones I got in the 90s.

Though Gabrielle appreciated the more radical nature of the decisions she made in her youth, she spoke of current younger friends who get tattoos and keep her feeling “young and hip.” After recently acquiring another tattoo, Gabrielle stated, despite the mainstreaming of tattoos, “It makes me feel cool – I’m going into my 40s cooler than I was in my 30s.” Related to the “coolness” of tattoos, Gabrielle articulated her admiration of people with radical tattooing by today’s standards.

Gabrielle’s most recent tattoo did not turn out as she hoped, however, and she described her decisions around getting it fixed versus appreciating it as it is for the experience. Gabrielle additionally introduced concepts of identity as represented by tattoos, and ways in which tattoos represent pieces of our selves which change and evolve over time. Gabrielle grappled with
appreciation for her decisions and identity represented at the time of the tattoo and regret as she views certain tattoos through a new lens. Gabrielle captured this tension in the following:

Well I've never regretted my tattoos. Until recently, I've started to be like, "Ah, man, these are stupid. Why didn't I get something better?" Or they're fading, or I want something different now that represents who I am now…The one on my back I regret a little. It seems childish to me now, naïve.

Given the period of time over which Gabrielle has gotten tattoos, she was equipped to comment on meanings and identities that do or do not hold up over time in her experience. Finally, Gabrielle discussed the experiential process of getting a tattoo. She described this as highly painful, highly social, and sometimes sexual. Gabrielle described getting a tattoo as a “production” with strong interpersonal components. Finally, Gabrielle demonstrated an awareness of potentially problematic cultural appropriation of tattoos and provided thoughtful cautions against this.

**Key themes that stood out in Gabrielle’s narrative.** Gabrielle described her own long tradition of getting meaningful tattoos which represent various life stages. She expressed some ambivalence with regard to the longevity of tattoos in that they fade over time, both physically and in personal significance. Gabrielle captured shifting and changing meaning over time in the following statement:

So what I thought was permanent [at the time] was myself and love. And so the sun represents me, because I'm a Leo, which is ruled by the sun. Which, I don't believe in astrology anymore, so that's kind of funny. And then there's an ankh, which is a symbol of eternal life. So that's permanent. For me that meant permanence, and then the heart is love… it seems childish to me [now], naïve. The meaning of it is naïve.
Yet as her identity has changed, Gabrielle continues to appreciate tattoos for the demarcations of experience they offer, saying, “I even feel that way about the one that's on my wrist that I'm not happy with because it was an experience and it is what it is… It represents an experience.”

Even the nature of getting tattoos has changed over time. Gabrielle spoke to the *mainstreaming of tattoos* in then following description:

> A lot of people that I knew [when I was younger] had them, but I was also part of a more of a punk scene. I was living in DC and I was part of this young, subversive ... It's back when subversive was subversive. Nowadays I feel like subversive is mainstream and back then subversive wasn't mainstream. You were looked at as being strange if you had purple hair.

In some ways, Gabrielle’s tattoos *preserve* this subversive part of her identity, even in the context of tattoos as currently mainstream, because of the social norms attached to the timeframe in which she got them. Gabrielle’s tattoos have also contributed to her sense of being *unique*, a characteristic that is important to her, despite its fluctuating meanings. When she was younger, Gabrielle described this uniqueness as being subversive. Now in her 40s, she described an element of being unique as staying “cool, young, and edgy.” Similarly, her tattoos preserve other pieces of her historical sense of self which no longer fit, resulting in some *regret* even as she continues to appreciate the *personal significance* of the tattoos at the time.

In holding this tension between the preservation of old identities and celebration of new ones, Gabrielle asserted the sense of *empowerment* and *body agency* she felt in getting tattoos

79
that feels consistent even when particular meanings do not stand the test of time. She described a similar form of body agency and *positive body image* generally:

I don't really care what people think of my body. So over the years I think I have developed, almost as a defense mechanism maybe, I've developed an attitude of just like resistance against this whole idea that you have to be thin to be beautiful and thin to be sexy… I mean it's probably just another way of saying, "This is mine and I must do with it what I want.”

This positive body image and empowered body agency was an important part of Gabrielle’s narrative and reported sense of self. Similar sentiment was also reflected in her experience of getting a tattoo. She described feeling good about herself as she interacts with the tattoo artists and other patrons during the process of getting a tattoo. However, this positive body experience was disrupted during one tattoo session by the presence of a full-length mirror. Gabrielle described this event in the following:

I tend to be pretty confident about my body even though I'm a very big girl. I tend to be pretty confident and pretty outward and pretty sexual. And I don't, it doesn't really stop me much. But sometimes it does. Sometimes I feel really shitty about my body and am just cringing. And I noticed that the last time that I was getting this tattoo repaired, I was sitting in a spot where I could see myself in a full-length mirror. And it was a really shitty feeling. I felt really horrendous. I felt awful. Because I was sitting down and that's the worst position for my big belly. And I was just like, it sort of took something away from the experience… Normally the experience is very intense and very sexy and I feel cool. And that made me feel not. That made me feel the opposite.
This body-awareness led to self-criticism and detracted from the interpersonal nature of getting tattooed. Typically, this relational component is apparent with the tattoo artist. Gabrielle described connections with others, including friends and the artist, in depicting what she usually likes about the process of getting a tattoo:

I feel like my connections with the tattoo artists is important to me too. It's almost sexual being tattooed, because it's so intense… And then when the artist comes out I always make them laugh and I'm always making some crazy joke or telling them what my story is and what I want done and why I want it done. And just getting, connecting with them as much as possible… If I were to just go to somebody's house and have them tattoo me that I didn't know and not talk to them hardly at all, I wouldn't like it.

These interpersonal components were echoed in relationships with friends. Gabrielle discussed the “wonderful bonding moment” that occurred when she got a tattoo at the beach with her best friend and the lasting positive implications of that act. Gabrielle also described her sense of belonging with others who differ from her in age by stating, “My friends that are millennials, I spend a lot of time feeling like I'm not cool enough for them… Having tattoos makes me feel like I belong a little bit more.”

Finally, Gabrielle brought in themes related to meaning and aesthetics. On the topic of art and aesthetics, Gabrielle discussed the importance of body location selection in the context of body/tattoo integration. She expressed her desire for her meaningful tattoos to be placed thoughtfully on the body when she said, “I'm a plus-sized person so I have to think about it a little bit more than thinner people do, because, you know, if it's not going to cover the whole space, it's just going to look swallowed in a sea of fat.”
She described, with surprise, the aesthetics of her own tattoos. She reported her general
dislike of hearts, and appeared surprised to find that, lost in the meaning and personal
significance of her tattoos, she had inscribed several hearts onto her body:

So there's a little heart in the middle for love. Which, it's weird, because I've got, so
strange that I haven't thought about it until just now, but I have two hearts tattooed on me,
and I fucking hate hearts. I don't like heart jewelry. I wouldn't want a heart tattoo. It never
even dawned on me until just now. I hate hearts, but I've got two of them permanently
inked on me. Isn't that strange?

This demonstrated the value Gabrielle places on the meaning, potentially over the
aesthetics. She discussed the importance of subjective value, and expanded on this in discussing
the potential for tattoos to have a negative impact on others if they are offensive or thoughtless.
Though she did describe tattoos as art, the meaning or purpose holds more value for her, and in
this lies the risk of negative impact on others. Gabrielle specifically noted the potential for
cultural appropriation in tattooing and cautioned against this by stating, “Make a conscious
decision about whether tattooing is part of an appropriation of a culture's symbols. Be wary of
that.” Here, she expressed concern over the potential harm of cultural appropriation and
advocated for an awareness of potentially offensive or culturally insensitive meanings
demonstrated to others via tattoos. This further highlights Gabrielle’s sense of the relationality of
tattoos.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Awareness and Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Supersedes Aesthetics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hallie. Hallie is a 26-year-old, bisexual, Caucasian woman in a committed monogamous relationship. She holds her bachelor’s degree and has been accepted to a doctoral program as a full-time student. She describes her socioeconomic background as working class and her belief system as nature-based spirituality. Hallie resides near Pittsburgh, PA. She has 12 tattoos.

Narrative. Hallie discussed the meaningful role tattoos have played in her life. She described casual, formal, thoughtfully planned, and “spur of the moment” ways that she has approached getting tattoos in the past. The ethos of tattoos she described was, “If it’s something I love, I want it on my body.” In this discussion, she focused on her favorite tattoo, a constellation and mountains inside a bear outline, and described the importance of astronomy in her life:

It's kind of my closest connection with nature. It's kind of what my life revolves around being an ecology student. Most of my hobbies tend to be hiking, star gazing, being outdoors, and the stars are the most constant aspect of that. Even living in the city, there's not a whole lot of nature down here other than what we can put in our tiny little paved yards. I can still see the stars here.

Hallie described her plans to get a “constellation sleeve” by adding to this bear tattoo. She discussed the importance of cohesion among her tattoos in this sleeve and noted that they would integrate with one another in topic, meaning, and color scheme. When describing how she selected this particular tattoo, Hallie described a friendship with a tattoo artist who posted a watercolor picture. She felt a connection to this picture and reached out to him requesting it for her next tattoo.

Hallie also spoke to changing meanings and fluid identities over time. She used her first tattoo as an example of something which represented an important ideology or message at the time, but no longer feels as relevant. Still, Hallie described her attachment to this first tattoo,
which evoked powerful feelings during the interview even though it is no longer as topical in her daily life.

Though Hallie appreciated the experience and meanings of getting tattoos, she described some adverse experiences as well. She had one negative tattoo experience in which a large, dark crescent moon was placed crookedly on her neck and which required a cover-up. Hallie also described significant conflict with her mother related to getting her first tattoo. Though difficult to navigate in the moment, this conflict was resolved over time, and Hallie described a process of growing self-acceptance leading to bolder tattoos and more confidence in her tattooing choices.

**Key themes that stood out in Hallie’s narrative.** Hallie introduced the concept of meaning in tattoos in her discussion of connecting with nature. All of Hallie’s tattoos were *personally significant* which was captured in her statement, “If I love it, I want it on my body.” This held particularly true with regard to the tattoo she selected for this discussion which connected her with nature, an important aspect of her identity and life. This personal significance was *preserved* in her tattoo, just as she described other tattoos preserving other meaningful moments, experiences, and connections in life. With regard to her bear tattoo, Hallie noted her immediate *felt connection* to the watercolor painting and described positive *body image* since obtaining this tattoo. This body image was in large part related to Hallie’s personal shift toward physical wellness. She described her improved physical health as the catalyst for getting a tattoo:

I don't feel like I ever really had a good image or relationship with my body until as an adult. It was really around the same time that I started getting tattoos and that I became more active and used my body for something that made me feel good, rather than just not paying attention to it and taking it for granted, I guess, and really only thinking about my body whenever other people felt the need to comment on it… When I came back [from a
month-long outdoor job], I felt and looked completely different. I had little baby muscles, and I felt good. I've always had stomach issues and IBS and that led to a lot of babying myself and lethargy and not ever wanting to move around for fear of upsetting my stomach, but it was really kind of ... I needed the opposite. When I came back, it was only a four week job and when I came back, I felt amazing. I felt strong.

Hallie described more fully this tendency for others to comment on her body when she was younger and the impact these comments had. This, in conjunction with IBS concerns and a sedentary lifestyle, contributed to her sense of needing to hide parts of herself and her body. Though she was growing autonomous and confident enough to get tattoos, Hallie described initially wanting to hide them:

When I first started getting tattoos, I felt like I had to hide them. It was less a part of me and more a secret, I guess, and not necessarily in a bad way: I felt if they were visible, I wouldn't be accepted in society, and I was at an age where feeling accepted was really important to me. I was a young adult. I was 19, 20, 21 years old and just starting to explore the world and make my own friendships, not being supervised by my parents constantly and everything. I feel like as I got older, I've not only cared less if people have opinions about my tattoos, but also I've met so many people who had really positive reactions to my tattoos and that helped me gain confidence.
Hallie’s fear of not being accepted and subsequent realization that she did belong is related to her growing body agency. The confidence she described empowered her to be more authentic with herself, which was demonstrated at times through tattoos, and body modifications more generally. Hallie described body ownership and the importance of making decisions about her own body in the following:

There was a time when I really wanted to get my nipples pierced and I mentioned it really offhand to an ex-partner, and he was like “I don't want you to do that. Don't do that. That's something that is also my territory.” And that made me really angry so I just went and did it anyway.

In a similar point and more specific to tattooing, Hallie described conflict with her mother after her mother discovered her first tattoo. This conflict ultimately resolved, but the bitterness in the moment related to questions around body ownership between parent and child, and indicated Hallie’s increasing autonomy and body agency as she entered adulthood. Hallie and her mother needed to learn how to negotiate both of their sets of opinions and intentions within the context of Hallie’s independence and right to her make decisions about her body.

When asked about her current thoughts on those negotiations, Hallie asserted:

I think I did it the right way. I think it should be for me. I don't think that my family would agree with me because whatever I do, they would probably say reflects on them. Right? But I don't really agree with that. I think that my decisions regarding my body are my own.

Hallie described other interpersonal experiences in which tattoos served as a shield or protective layer against the scrutiny and harassment in the form of unwanted comments about her body:
I've noticed in the same vein, in the last few years people don't comment on my body. Even when I was a young adult, or younger adult, I feel like I would always have strange men coming up to me and making lewd comments, and that doesn't happen anymore. I don't know if I've just gained more confidence and that exudes, like I'm not somebody that you want to make comments to, but it also came around the same time as the tattoos, and I feel like for some people, at least, tattoos can be a bit of a shield… I don't know if it was the confidence or the tattoos, but people don't make comments like that to me anymore, even though I feel like I look and feel better.

Finally, interpersonal dynamics and tattoo meanings were discussed in the context of aesthetics. Hallie has had a variety of tattooing experiences; for some, the value is in the meaningful content, for others the value is in the process, and still for others the value is in the aesthetics. Overlap exists among these categories. For example, Hallie described her intention to have a cohesive constellation sleeve in which disparate tattoos are united by color, style, and theme. She commented on tattoos as art in the following:

I just think it's like a really beautiful art form and form of self-expression. I've been really into art ever since I was … I mean I can't remember a time where I wasn't drawing and creating things. I just think tattoos are a really beautiful extension of that. I've just always really loved art and I saw no reason why I shouldn't put art on my body.

As an art, Hallie described her trust in the tattoo artist:

He did a T-Rex skull on my hip, on the front, and I had wanted it on one side, and he actually insisted on doing it on the other side because he said it would look better with the curve of my body… I really didn’t agree with him at first because I had it in my mind that I wanted tattoos of a certain type on one side of my body and tattoos of another type
on the other side... I felt like I had too many tattoos on my right side already and that's why I wanted it on my left side. So what he ended up doing was he put the mockup of the tattoo on both sides to show me how it would look in comparison with the way my body looks and also the way my other tattoos looked. And I was like, okay, I do see what you're talking about, so I deferred to him on that.

This process of collaboration indicated building trust in the tattoo artist. In light of this positive experience, Hallie described her future willingness to defer to his judgment. This description also introduced the theme of body/tattoo integration. Hallie and her tattoo artist were both attuned to the contour of her body and other tattoos already placed. This led to thoughtful decisions regarding where to place a tattoo so that it meaningfully integrated with the body, rather than being viewed as a separate piece to be considered independently.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo as Shield</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Eleanor.** Eleanor is a 25-year-old, heterosexual, Caucasian woman in a committed monogamous relationship. She is currently a doctoral candidate and full-time student. Eleanor described her socioeconomic background and middle class and does not prescribe to any particular religion. Eleanor resides in Colorado. She has 1 tattoo.

**Narrative.** Eleanor narrated a long decision-making process concerning whether to get a tattoo. She knew that she wanted a tattoo and had considered what she would get and where. Eleanor described going to brunch with friends and discussing tattoos over mimosas, which culminated in going to get tattoos that same day. Eleanor described the social push and alcohol that enabled her to act on this in the end. She described a process of coming to terms with and processing this decision in the days that followed, but described a continuous positive perception of her tattoo.

Eleanor’s tattoo signified a collection of books and movies which were an important part of her childhood. She recalled reading them with her mom and brother after her parents divorced, and re-reading them as an adult for comfort. She additionally nostalgically recalled lining up with her family for movie premiers:

> It was really a point of connection with my mom and my brother and I. We're still very close. I think kind of on the one side it's this broad idea of Harry Potter and it really reminding me of family. I think that [the tattooed word] “always,” like I'll always have my family and they're very important to me.

These positive memories are preserved in her tattoo. Eleanor also described the more specific meanings of the tattoo itself and the ways in which they relate to her relationships with both her family and herself. She described a process of identity formation reflected in finding a role model in the books and movies:
I see myself in [one of the main characters], so I think it was more internally as a child this point of seeing in her this strength that I also could kind of feel myself, and that permission that it's okay to be like her. It's okay to be smart. It's okay to have that be one of your main attributes. That kind of identity exploration with myself, and being more comfortable, and that I don't need to be a popular kid or anything like that, and that it's okay to be who I am.

Eleanor expressed multiple interpersonal components of her tattoo. These included her apprehension with regard to showing her parents, her specific selection of a socially-relatable tattoo, and the positive impact her tattoo has had on body image and intimacy. Eleanor also commented on the tattoo community and tattoos as a rite of passage for entrance.

**Key themes that stood out in Eleanor’s narrative.** Eleanor described the *preservation* of important memories and *personally significant* life events through tattoos. Recalling positive memories in the midst of challenging circumstances, such as her parents’ divorce, serves to identify and relate to those positive and formative moments. Part of this personal significance in relation to identity involve the books, movies, and characters represented in the tattoo. As indicated in the quotation above, Eleanor found a personal role model in this book series which gave her permission to be comfortable in her own skin and accept the person she is.

Eleanor also described the process of *empowerment* and *body agency* represented in the act of getting a tattoo. She described her apprehension, for example, of telling her parents that she had gotten a tattoo. She explained this sentiment in the following:

I was really nervous, because, again, my mom is a very open minded person. We can have great discussions about social justice and tattoos. She's very open minded. She just doesn't make those choices for herself. My dad is definitely ... Part of the reason they got
divorced, he's way more closed minded, very, very, very religious... If I had to call one of
them straight-laced, it'd be him. I debated; am I going to tell them, and how are they
going to react? I think one of the more empowering moments of my life, making the
decision and feeling very confident in that I'm proud of this, this has meaning to me, and
I want to share this with them. If they don't like it, fine. It's not their body.

Eleanor’s tattoo served to further differentiate her as her own being with her own
decisions, something which historically had not been true. Eleanor told her mother when she was
18 that she had gotten her cartilage pierced. In that disclosure, Eleanor’s mother cried. Recalling
this reaction to something arguably more minor and less permanent than a tattoo, Eleanor felt
tension between her own sense of body ownership and her mother’s reactions.

Eleanor found support from her mother, however. Eleanor described a pattern of acceptance
and belonging that extended beyond her immediate
friends and family and into the tattoo community. She
described her sense of having something to talk about
with other members of the tattoo community and the
gratification that came with this recognition. Another
interpersonal theme which emerged the invitation to
see and discuss Eleanor’s tattoo. Eleanor indicated that
she intentionally chose something relatable and
recognizable, and she positioned it on her body to be shown to others in certain clothing.
Recognition of her tattoo, and sometimes encountering others who have inked something very
similar or the same, extends Eleanor’s sense of connection and community. She stated:
I'm really proud of it, and there are a million Potterheads on this planet anywhere I go. Let's say I'm wearing a tank top but I'm at the grocery store and you can see it, right? I mean really any time I have anything that doesn't have sleeves on it at all, like any tank top or dress that doesn't have sleeves, you can see it, or at least part of it, which so many people recognize. I'll be at the grocery store in a tank top, and somebody will be like, "Oh my gosh. I love your tattoo." They're like, "I am such a Potterhead," or, "I have one too. It's on my foot," or whatever… It's that identification that there's some point of connection that people can make with you.

In further discussing others’ viewership of her tattoo, Eleanor described control of perception in that she was able to select and draw others’ attention to an area of her body that she likes and feels secure in. Importantly, this attention was described as platonic and appreciative, rather than other forms of objectification. Reciprocally, Eleanor described more satisfaction with this part of her body since getting her tattoo, or more positive body image. She stated:

I think there's a lot of confidence that comes from feeling like people are noticing a part of me that I really love too. Not in a creepy way, right? Not in a “I'm trying to hit on you, or pick you up,” or anything like that, but just kind of an appreciation of like, "That's a really nice tattoo, and the line work's really nice." Kind of complimenting the tattoo, but in my mind whoever sees this is having to, by default, pay attention to this part of me that I'm very proud of, and I find very attractive and sexy, and that I really like about myself, and they're not focusing on those parts of me that I don't like.

Eleanor spoke predominantly to the meaning and personal significance of her tattoo, but she also explained her “appreciation for the artwork that goes into [a tattoo].” Eleanor referred to her tattoo as a piece of art which further contributes to her positive sense of self and self-image.
Though she emphasized the meaning of her tattoo, its strategic placement and aesthetic appeal likewise contribute to her positive perception and her value of tattoos generally.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Global Themes

Individual themes were considered, clustered, and organized into four primary conceptual frameworks, or global themes. These global themes are abstractions from individual themes and serve to capture generalized concepts that exist across all participant data. Global themes in this project include: *Identity and Selfhood Captured in Tattoos*, *Power and Control Asserted through Tattoos*, *Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational*, and *Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos*. This terminology was not explicitly expressed to participants. Rather, participants were asked a variety of questions and follow-up questions related to their decision-making and lived experiences of tattooed bodies, and these themes were produced through an inductive approach. Each of these themes shows up in some form in every participant narrative. General descriptions based on individual participant data ensues.

**Identity and Selfhood Captured in Tattoos.** All participants discussed identity and selfhood in the context of tattoos. Tattoos represented and contributed to identities and selfhood via behaviors, signifying uniqueness, contributing to overall wellness, and identifying/preserving significant people, places, events, experiences, ideologies, and/or values.

Abigail, Alice, and Gabrielle emphasized that tattoos are reflective of a behavior that captures their sense of self. For example, Abigail used tattoos to liberate an often restricted body and demonstrate that she, too, is spontaneous and daring. Alice described the behavior of getting tattoos as that which differentiated her from the “good girl” persona she lived for so many years and allowed her to embrace other aspects of her person. Gabrielle depicted tattoos as mechanisms partially through which she demonstrated her “subversive” traits when she was younger. As a woman in her 40s, she described using tattoos to identify as “cool” and “edgy” with younger friends.
Sylvia and Cynthia discussed tattoos’ impact on identity as that which makes bodies unique. Sylvia spoke to cohesion among tattoos as a component of “self-branding” within the context of identity, while Cynthia described tattoos as “birthmarks you choose.” The ability to make the choice to self-brand and add unique features to the body contributes to a particular definition of selfhood.

Rosa and Hallie described the ways in which tattoos contributed to overall physical and mental wellbeing, and the impact these aspects have on selfhood. For Rosa, this was an unexpected but deeply valuable outcome; her focus on physical health has contributed to better mental health and has impacted her self-perception and sense of self in very significant ways. Hallie, on the other hand, described the simultaneous process of focusing on her health and wellbeing and gaining the confidence that catalyzed her to get tattooed.

Beverly discussed tattoos as representing a person’s true identity, either in pieces of the self which are represented in the content of tattoos, or in the act of having a tattoo at all. She described this in the context of acceptance, rejection, and community, and highlighted from personal experience ways in which identifying one’s self as something other than the mainstream in particular settings can lead to stereotyping and feel dangerous. Eleanor, on the other hand, described identity in tattoos on predominantly a content level; tattoos represent important pieces of who we are and where we’ve been.

All participants discussed tattoos as preserving personally significant people, events, and/or values, which are related to identity and sense of self. These personally significant meanings signified something past or present with varying degrees of success. Most participants described positive associations of memories, overcoming hardship, relationships, reminders of important people, and values/ideologies. Tattoos were widely viewed as representing the self on
the skin, pieces of who a person is, what she believes, and what is important to her. Sylvia, however, discussed her dislike and subsequent removal of a tattoo that reminded her of hardship she would rather not commemorate in ink. Beverly and Gabrielle both discussed ambivalence, fluid identities over time, and regret, but settled on the value of marking a significant time in history in ink and viewed the tattoo(s) in question as valuable for this reason.

For some participants, the act of having a tattoo explicitly contributes to identity and selfhood. It brings a person into a community, a stereotype, or an experience, and changes the nature of the gaze of the other. Though only some participants brought this particular concept in overtly, it is likely that an alteration of the body, and bodied beings, alters selfhood in some form across all participant experiences.

**Power & Control Asserted Through Tattoos.** All participants discussed power and control in the context of getting and having tattoos. Participants described the ways in which tattoos uniquely gave them power in particular situations, or demonstrated/communicated existing autonomy and control in particular ways. Tattoos allowed individuals to assert control and power in contexts of the body, relationships, and world. Tattoos additionally were described as giving the wearer power over their own thoughts and feelings by serving as triggers, reminders, and vehicles for emotional processing after hardship.

All participants described tattoos serving the purpose of greater body control and body agency. The act of getting a tattoo necessarily means manipulating the body and making decisions about the body in particular ways. This emerged as literal control over the body, as Abigail described, and also metaphorical control, such as the demonstration that one’s body is theirs to do with what they want despite opinions of others (where “others” includes friends, family, partners, tattoo artists, and world generally). Additionally, all participants commented on
the ways in which tattoos trigger particular emotional and cognitive experiences, and that this was, to some extent, part of the intent in getting a tattoo.

Sylvia, Alice, Beverly, Hallie, and Eleanor all discussed tattoos functioning to differentiate them from parents and demonstrate autonomy. Varying degrees of conflict between participants and others resulted from these decisions, but all agreed that tattoos confirmed ownership of one’s body. Interestingly, many participants implicitly suggested that their bodies had previously been considered co-owned to some extent, which may be the result of age and developmental trajectory, but likely also speaks to cultural gender standards with regard to young women’s bodies, especially in the context of family.

Abigail, Sylvia, Rosa, Beverly, Cynthia, Gabrielle, Hallie, and Eleanor likewise suggested tattoos gave them a greater degree of control in how and where others view their bodies. Given that bodies exist in social spaces and with the history of female objectification generally within participant awareness, these participants discussed strategic placement of tattoos, highlighting particular parts of the body, reclaiming power by inviting observation (in contrast to being the target of observation without consent or invitation), and tattoos serving a protective function against stares and approaches of others. Notably, however, Beverly noted the ways in which her tattoo invited unwanted attention and even physical contact. This narrative indicates that tattoos can result in a loss of power and control by virtue of the unpredictable viewer/actor in interpersonal settings.

Rosa and Hallie described tattoos as contributing to a physical control of the body. That is, tattoos motivated initiated or continued physical health. Rosa’s attention to physical health was for the purpose of viewership, while Hallie’s was a simultaneous process of confidence from
physical health and tattooing. In both cases, the experience of physical health and other outcomes superseded the body image-related motivation for physical health.

**Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational.** All participants discussed interpersonal and relational dimensions of tattoos. Tattoos were described as social in the process of deciding, constructing, getting, and having them. Interpersonal dimensions ranged from amicable, collaborative, and supportive, to hostile and rejecting. The majority of participants described positive social encounters related to tattoos. Specific interpersonal elements in participant narratives included relating to important people (both alive and deceased), inviting observation/conversation about tattoos, creating social bonds in the act of getting a tattoo, collaborating with the tattoo artist, receiving approval/disapproval from others, and acceptance/rejection within a particular community.

Abigail, Sylvia, Alice, Rosa, Beverly, Cynthia, and Eleanor all described ways in which tattoos served to preserve memories or honor significant people. Tattoos often commemorated people who had passed, but tattoos were also depicted as honoring living individuals. All participants talked to some extend about observation of and conversation related to their tattoos. More often than not, this was interpreted as an invitation; participants generally enjoy talking about their tattoos, and they indicated awareness that choosing to have them invites a particular kind of attention. Beverly discussed the ways in which tattoos can invite unwanted attention as well, and difficulties navigating this if/when it occurs.

Alice, Cynthia, Eleanor, Gabrielle, and Hallie all spoke to the creation of social bonds in the act of getting tattoos together. Alice, Cynthia, and Gabrielle explicitly described the bonding process in getting matching or almost matching tattoos, while others discussed bonding in the act of inscribing permanently in the presence of others. For other participants, bonding was not a
significant part of the process of getting a tattoo with others; social components acted as a push to get a tattoo, but did not create lasting social bonds.

Participants described varying degrees of collaboration with their tattoo artists. Though most participants agreed that tattoos are an art, the “artist” is in question. Abigail, for example, had a very specific idea for location, content, and orientation, and needed to stand firm and assert herself when her tattoo artist made other recommendations. Sylvia, in contrast, drew her own tattoo and brought it to the artist, who made it larger and darker than was wanted. Sylvia did not assert herself in this moment, despite reservations, and chose instead to defer to his expertise. She expressed regret for this later and described this as a learning experience. Alice, Hallie, and Cynthia described longtime relationships with tattoo artists and a high degree of mutual respect and collaboration. Rosa and Hallie described the process of asserting their wishes for their tattoos and questioning their artists until the artist was able to prove that she/he could implement the idea of tattoo they desired.

Finally, approval and disapproval, or acceptance and rejection, thematically emerged across many participant interviews. While some participants, like Abigail and Alice, described a general disregard for the opinions of others due to the personally significant nature of their tattoos, others described significant interpersonal conflict resulting from tattoos. Hallie, for example, described her mother’s disapproval and ensuing conflict, while Eleanor described anxious anticipation of her mother’s disapproval, only to find her mother approved. Beverly described this in terms of acceptance and rejection from particular communities; in her small, conservative hometown, she found her tattoos invited a mix of unwanted attention and rejection. Upon integrating into the LGBT community in college, Beverly found acceptance and
encouragement related to tattoos. Eleanor and Cynthia described belonging in terms of tattooing as a passage into the tattoo community which creates new social bonds and connections.

**Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos.** All participants discussed both meaning and aesthetics as they relate to tattoos. Most participants integrated these aspects and struck a personal balance in terms of which component(s) to prioritize, when, and why. All participants described some degree of meaning present in tattoos, though one participant expressed relief at finding a community in which tattoos are accepted and valued for aesthetic appeal alone.

Descriptions of tattoos captured a broad array of meanings which looked different for every individual interviewed. General consensus on tattoos as art was also present, and likewise looked different for every person. Many participants indicated that they wanted more tattoos for aesthetics, but they did not yet have content meaningful enough and therefore were ambivalent about proceeding. Some participants argued that all tattoos, by virtue of being permanent, ought to hold significant meaning and personal value over aesthetic appeal. Others, pointing to their changing values over time, indicated this was less important than simply wanting one in the moment or appreciating the visual nature of tattoos. Still others pointed to the meaning of tattoos as marking a life stage or identity which will necessarily change over time. Some indicated neither meaning nor aesthetics were the most critical part of tattoos, but rather the social processes involved in getting them, and it is these which give rise to the meanings of tattoos. Still more participants described the importance of body/tattoo integration in considering the aesthetics of tattoos. Every participant slightly differed on their perspective of meaning and visual appeal, but all participants anecdotally indicated their personal considerations of both meaning and aesthetics during interviews.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Identity &amp; Selfhood</th>
<th>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</th>
<th>Tattoos as Interpersonal/ Relational Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection with Tattoo</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection with Tattoo</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverley</td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uniqueess</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regret</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uniqueess</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uniqueess</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Connection with Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regret</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Control of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallie</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Connection with Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Connection with Tattoo Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

104
Reflexive Analysis

All phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of the human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations… The four fundamental existentials of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality may be seen to belong to the existential ground by way of which all human beings experience the world, although not all in the same modality of course… This is not difficult to understand, since about any experience we can always ask the fundamental questions that correspond to these four lifeworld existentials. Therefore, spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality are productive categories for the process of phenomenological question posing, reflecting and writing (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 101-102).

As I embarked on this research project, I framed my questions, methods, and analysis in my own mind and in my proposal according to existential themes and fundamental principles. The value of existential considerations in psychology is that they uniquely serve to unite and integrate vastly different experiences under the same human conditions (Shaver & Mikulincer. 2012). In the moment of bringing this project to life, I found myself contemplating my own perspective as an embodied woman in the context of current political events. When this project was being contemplated, we were living in a society adjusting to new and contentious political strategies and ideological divisiveness that reared its head in a storm of controversy, alternative facts, and a seeming reversal of progress in attitudes toward women, women’s bodies, and women’s rights. In my anger and anxiety, I found myself grasping at anything that could speak a narrative I desperately needed to hear – that women are empowered agents of their own lives, bodies, and interpersonal fields. I have long admired tattoos, and though I currently have none
myself, my contemplation of getting a tattoo at this historical period lent itself to using this phenomenon as a framework for capturing narratives around women’s embodiment.

Since this project was first initiated, society has looked on while Jacob Anderson received probation and counseling in lieu of jail time for the rape of a 19-year-old woman at a fraternity party, Dr. Shafeeq Sheikh received 10 years of probation only after being convicted of the rape of his patient whom the defense portrayed as “a Latina woman with her fake boobs,” and Bret Kavanaugh was raised to the status Justice of the Supreme Court despite Dr. Ford’s powerful testimony and public outcry. Though it is important to note that each case is different and decisions made in these sociohistorical moments are nuanced and complicated, these examples are just a recent few in the much longer history of women being reduced to objectified bodies and abused, and the impact of this abuse radically minimized.

As this study was born out of frustration with women’s continued objectification and a desire to counter this narrative, it is crucial to discuss the assumptions and biases I held in the formation of the project, the implementation of the methods, and the analysis of the data. I approached and framed this project’s semi-structured interviews through an existential lens with the intention of elucidating data situated within an existential framework, a theoretical assumption in itself, and I therefore will discuss my biases and preconceived notions from this same perspective.

**Lived Space.** Lived or felt space represents that element of spatiality that affects how we feel. The space we inhabit have a way of becoming a fundamental part of our experience – for example, in a new strange city alone, we may experience apprehension, fear, or excitement. In a rural countryside, we may feel connected, disinhibited, lonely, or at peace. As a female in public sphere, we may feel burdened, angry, unsettled, or affirmed. This latter point represents one of
my biases going into this project; I assumed that most women have had some negative experience of objectification in the public sphere. I held the conviction that women may feel a variety of ways about this experience, including upset, angry, frightened, and/or validated, and that though this may shift based on context and viewer, women have had a negative reaction at some point in their lives related to objectification in lived spaces. Because we exist in lived spaces and cannot reasonably escape them, I viewed tattoos as one way in which women may assert agency and control in this rather uncontrollable realm. By making the body what she wants it to be, she reclaims some autonomy in the midst of the gaze of the other.

In my study, it seems true that most women have experienced negative reactions to lived space. The extent to which this is in awareness, however, is unclear. Furthermore, the extent to which these reactions motivate tattoos, or tattoos serve to exert some control within the context of lived spaces, was less generally apparent. Though some participants did explicitly discuss this, other participants notably did not prioritize their experiences in social spheres, and these experiences were not primary motivators for tattooing behavior. While some participants described using tattoos as subversive strategies for reclaiming the body in the context of societal objectification, other participants seemed to use tattoos to uphold societal body standards for women.

Additionally, I expected current political movements to emerge in dialogue at some point (#MeToo, for example). I expected that some conversation about the shifting social and political landscapes would happen organically given what I perceive to be tremendous social shifts and tears in cultural normalcy. I planned to focus my analysis on women’s decision-making processes to get tattoos within the last 5 years under the presumption that the world has changed significantly in this time, and that this push towards equality and empowerment may have
impacted women’s decision to modify and reclaim their bodies. I was surprised to find that the stories of tattoos from many years ago spoke every bit as much to these themes as the newer ones, if not more so. Furthermore, discussions of social movements currently taking place did not emerge explicitly in any interview. Though implicit undertones were present, they were not necessarily demarcated on the same timeline as social movements, which have picked up in recent history. Rather, in these interviews, women demonstrated that they have been prepared to reclaim their bodies for a much greater period of time than is represented by current shifts. Though current shifts are taking place, the act of tattooing serves a purpose of reclamation that has long preceded the movement itself.

**Lived Body.** Lived body represents our embodiment in the world, and was perhaps the existential category I prioritized most throughout this project. Embodiment means that we cannot distinguish our “self” from our bodies; they are inextricably linked, and to speak of one is necessarily to speak of the other. This runs in contrast to popular dualistic thought regarding the body. I assumed that most participants would view their bodies as “other”, somehow separate from the rest of their being. This proved generally true throughout participant narratives. Participants described creating and controlling the body as a physical organism, frequently inscribing identity and meaning onto it rather than living meaning and identity through it. This was not true of all participant interviews, but it was striking nonetheless. Participants with multiple tattoos similarly brought into the discussion all tattoos. It was difficult to discuss only recent tattoos when part of the narrative was nearly always rooted in previous tattoos, catalyzing events that predated recent tattoos, and body ownership/viewership as a whole that cannot be artificially broken down into pieces (such as one body part, or one tattoo). This tendency to focus
on all tattoos as part of the whole body speaks to lived body as a gestalt, and lived body necessarily being that whole entity that lives in the world.

Van Manen (1990) highlights another part of lived body which is most relevant to my study: “When the body is the object of someone else's gaze, it may lose its naturalness or instead it may happen that it grows enhanced in its modality of being” (p. 104). Harkening back to lived space, the lived body cannot be separated from relationality, and relationality for women in this society often, if not always, includes the objectifying gaze of the other. My assumption was that this phenomenon is built into the fabric of society. We socialize our young, intentionally and inadvertently, to view and live female bodies in a particular way, and this is constructed in social realms. I expected participants to discuss the ways in which a tattooed body was lived differently from a non-tattooed body in light of being the object of another’s gaze. Specifically, I hoped and expected that participants would recount transformative moments in which they reclaimed their bodies as their own via tattoos. Given that body reclamation theory comprised a significant portion of my research proposal literature review, I anticipated body agency emerging as a predominant narrative. Body agency did emerge, but not necessarily in the form I expected. Though many participants did describe an explicit intention to claim and reclaim their bodies as their own, others described this as an unintentional afterthought, and still others did not feel compelled to discuss body reclamation at all. Surprisingly, body reclamation frequently represented a developmental milestone; many participants described a process of differentiating from their parents via tattoos and other body modification practices.

Another surprising element was the “mainstreaming” effect noted by many participants. The impact of mainstreaming differed by account. Some participants felt that mainstream tattoos currently serve an accessorizing purpose, while others asserted that tattoos can be meaningful
and mainstream, while still others pointed to the de-radicalization of tattoos as stripping them of their subversive powers. In considering how mainstream tattoos have become prior to beginning this study, I reflected on my assumption that this meant tattoos could represent the superficial, and that superficiality existed at the expense of more meaningful or empowered body modification practices. In listening to the variety of perspectives on “mainstreamed” bodies, I learned that mainstreaming actually speaks to the radical process of cultural shifting that has taken place over time. That is, large numbers of women are now empowered to modify their bodies as they see fit without regard for societal restrictions or unwanted consequences. Though this does, by definition, detract from the once subversive nature of tattooing, it points to more global freedom and control over women’s bodies, as well as the history of subversive practices that afforded women these freedoms today.

**Live Time.** Lived time represents a subjective sense of time rather than an objectively measured time. Lived time is revealed in various affective states. For example, in boredom, time feels as though it lasts forever, while in anxiety, it has a way of moving quickly. In grief and loss, time ceases to move in a linear direction, but rather pulls us to the past, present, and future at will.

Admittedly, lived time is not an element of experience I gave much thought to before entering this study. I imagined tattoos, in their given meanings, might pull in concepts of time through memory, but findings in this aspect were almost wholly surprising to me. Van Manen (1990) astutely summarizes lived time in memory and experience in the following:

The temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal landscape. Whatever I have encountered in my past now sticks to me as memories or as (near) forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my
being-the way I carry myself (hopeful or confident, defeated or worn-out), the gestures I have adopted and made my own (from my mother, father, teacher, friend), the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past (family, school, ethnicity), and so forth. And yet, it is true too that the past changes under the pressures and influences of the present (p. 104).

This accurately represents this study’s findings in relation to lived time. Participants described the meaning of their tattoos in memories and experiences, and many even commented on ways in which experiences leave traces on the self. Though Van Manen describes these as forgotten or near-forgotten, participants spoke to the intentionality with which they do not let themselves forget by inscribing particular experiences into the visible skin. Participants similarly spoke to ways in which the past changes in light of the present. This was represented in discussions of changing meanings and identities over time, and ways in which tattoos’ meanings, as static, did not always hold up well over time. Participants gave varied accounts in how they integrated personal change with static words/images on the skin.

Participants further described assumptions of permanence of tattoos, which intersected in interesting ways with shifting and fluid identities, tattoo meanings, perspectives. The perceived permanence of tattoos also interplayed with participants’ reports of changing and aging bodies, fading and damaged tattoos over time, and the concept of tattoo removal. As noted, all of these findings were surprising, as this particular element was mostly out of my awareness initially, and yet this aspect was one of the primary theoretical contributions of this work: Tattoos represent past (e.g., as markers of memories or signifiers of static, past events) yet only as past is lived and interpreted in the present, and the perception or illusion of permanence indicates the future dimension, however unknown, of the tattoo and its wearer.
**Lived Human Relation.** Lived relation is that way in which we live our lives in relation to others. We experience others in flesh, in thought, and in emotion. We live relational lives; we identify and are identified in these relationships (e.g., mother, daughter, friend, colleague, partner, etc.). Relations are inclusive of more than the physical human “other”, however; we live in relation to the values we place on others, in relation to ourselves, in relation to aloneness, and in relation to other constructs, such as spiritual entities, world, and society.

Just as I assumed tattoos would have an impact on lived space, by virtue of those spaces being taken up relationally, I assumed also that human relations would significantly emerge in the findings of this project. Similar to my assumptions about tattoos as a body reclamation practice in space, I likewise assumed this would be a reclamation practice in relation to others. This assumption held true to a certain extent; participants discussed the significance of relationships to self, others, and world throughout. However, when I considered body reclamation and empowerment with assumptions of body agency, control, and ownership, I thought that the relationship with self and objectifying other would be prominent in discussion, and this was not always the case. I was unsurprised to hear anecdotes of defiance and differentiation from others. I was surprised at the extent to which women discussed their tattoos in the context of negotiating their bodies with others. This emerged in narratives of the respect for the art and the artist, in belonging as a member the tattooed community, and in consideration of others’ thoughts and feelings about their own bodies. Perhaps most surprising was the function of tattoos as an invitation to observe, notice, look, and comment on bodies, and the adaptive way in which this seems to serve to control when and how others do so.

**Conclusion.** This existentially-driven reflexive analysis serves to both analyze biases and assumptions going into the project and interpret data according to existential themes. It is clear
from this that tattooed participants, like women generally, exist in lived space according to cultural and societal norms and standards, which include formative and classically feminist elements such as objectification. Participants spoke of the culturally subversive nature of tattoos to varying degrees, though none of the anticipated dialogues about social movements related to women’s bodies emerged. Instead, many participants spoke to decisions to get tattoos years before the onset of these social movements, and “mainstreaming” of tattoos spoke to both the less radical nature of tattoos and the collective progress made towards female body agency. These elements were mirrored in consideration of lived body. Participants discussed reclamation practices as lived in the body, which often emerged in family and other social contexts. Furthermore, participants described lived bodies as whole, integrated entities; multiple tattoos, piercings, birthmarks, and so on found their way into discussions, confirming the significance of the body as a whole organism, unable to be artificially disseminated and analyzed at the exclusion of its other components. Similarly, it was difficult to separate past, present, and future in the realm of lived time. The expectation of permanence with tattoos harkens both past and future even as it is always viewed and experienced in the present. Equally difficult to differentiate were personal, interpersonal, and cultural spheres in consideration of lived human relation. Though many participant narratives focused on personal and interpersonal domains, these narratives can only be fully understood through interpersonal and cultural lens. When all of these reflections in each existential category are taken together, it becomes clear that a major theoretical contribution of this study is that tattoos serve as shifting signifiers of past/present/future and personal/interpersonal/cultural domains. They represent a nexus of a broad variety of feminist and social justice-oriented issues, even as they represent deeply subject and personal vantage points. Tattoos are not only a personal decision and phenomenon, but an
interpersonal and cultural phenomenon that exists in both space and time upon the gestalt that is the human body.

**Discussion**

“I rebel – therefore we exist.” – Albert Camus

**Global Themes Located within Body Politics**

This project was born of the assumption that women’s bodies are contested sites of power (Maccormack, 2006). Humans are their bodies – we all have experiences of the body’s demands, just as we all have awareness of ways in which our bodies are viewed in terms of appearance and abilities by others (Waylen et al., 2013). As Dworkin (1974) was aware:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom. And of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one. (1974, p. 113)

Our bodies, according to existential givens, limit us to the world of the corporeal, even as they allow us to relate to others and world via this physical realm. Our bodies are similarly situated in space and time, as is recognized explicitly through the act of tattooing, and in relation to others. Through the body’s relation to self/others/world, power differentials arise. In fact, it is our bodies themselves which often give rise to these differentials; the visibility of difference is in the flesh (Bordo, 2002). And yet, despite this general awareness, bodies are frequently left out of general sociopolitical dialogue. Body politics re-centers this dialogue around bodies as it reflects the notion that bodies are central to status and power as simultaneously sources of social power,
privilege, subservience, and oppression (Waylen et. al, 2016). One hypothesized reason for this neglect is in the assumption that bodies are “nature” and therefore have often been thought of as prescribing to the “natural order” of the world. As such, bodies have been taken for granted as givens or absolutes. In contrast to this perspective, body politics represent ways in which society and related power differentials are actually organized around bodies, and the “naturalness” of bodies is socially constructed (Butler, 1993).

If bodies, rather than strictly “natural”, are socially constructed and central to symbolic and real structures of status and power, then tattoos become significant within this dialogue. Maccormack discusses the social construction of empowerment through tattoos when she states, “[It is] not about choosing something taboo or transgressive to inscribe on the body in order to retaliate against strict regimes of signification. Tattooing is not necessarily a form of active will to present a body in relationship with the subject’s own volition. The tattooed body problematizes binaries of the natural/volitional, surface/interior, discursive and designated” (2006, p. 59). In this political sense, tattoos belong in conversations of body politics.

Body politics historically discussed intersectionality and power, or those parts of embodied selves that we are given at birth and navigate throughout life. More recently, scholars have begun discussing voluntary alterations or modifications of the bodies we are born into and the significance of body modifications in the context of society. Bordo (2002) in particular brings Foucault’s analysis of power and resistance in the world:

First, that we cease to imagine ‘power’ as the possession of individuals or groups—as something people ‘have’—and instead as a dynamic or network of non-centralised forces. Secondly, we recognise that these forces are not random or haphazard, but configure to assume particular historical forms. The dominance of those forms is achieved, however,
not from magisterial decree or design ‘from above’ but through multiple processes, of
different origin and scattered location, regulating the most intimate and minute elements
of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment. Thirdly, prevailing forms of
selfhood and subjectivity are maintained not through physical restraint and coercion, but
through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms (p. 191).

Foucault’s concepts of power and resistance helpfully shed light not only on voluntary acts of
body modification among historically culturally surveilled and controlled bodies, but also on the
relationship between body politics and existentialism. If the construction of power exists in the
context of “space, time, desire, embodiment,” body politics can be viewed as an existential
consideration; power differentials exist precisely in those areas which are existentially given and
produce subsequent existential anxieties. Indeed, power itself can be discussed in terms of the
existential anxieties that both give rise to it and result from it. As such, the existential framework
utilized in this study lends itself to the interpretation and discussion of the results through the
lens of power, reclamation, and body politics, and serves as an implicit grounding assumption
throughout the following discussion of each global theme. Each global theme identified in this
study is situated within existing literature and discourses on this topic below.

**Identity & Selfhood Captured in Tattoos.** Maccormack (2006) discusses the
complicated notions of identity and selfhood in relation to culture in the following:

Skin is the site of encounter between enfleshed self and society… Skin is a marked
surface inscribed with texts of race, gender, sexuality, class and age before it is marked
by ink. These corporeal expressions exist beyond the choice of the individual to define
them. They are inscriptions created by historical and social consensus, while tattoos are
usually formed through individual or small peer group consensus. Race and gender place
the body within a hierarchical system before the subject can reflect on her or his capacity
to represent the relationship of race and gender to self. (p. 59)

Because skin is that barrier and encounter between self and world, skin is also that way in which
self and world are navigated to produce one’s sense of identity, or selfhood. Maccormack (2006)
rightly directs our attention to the impact of our other, natural inscriptions on the skin, those
givens of our existence of which we have no control: our demographic and identifying
information. These inscriptions, while involuntary, nonetheless have great impact on our senses
of self in that self is constructed in relation to others and to world. Tattoos, then, serve the
purpose of identifying within one’s self and for one’s self that which is important to inscribe on
the skin. In this way, identity is still navigated within these relationships, but is demonstrated
with greater agency and awareness through the mechanism of tattoos.

Identity and concepts of selfhood emerged as dominant themes in tattooing behaviors in
participant interviews. Participants described the process of signifying uniqueness, contributing
to overall wellness, using the body to reflect one’s inner self, and identifying or preserving
significant people, places, events, experiences, ideologies, and/or values. This voluntary display
of identity, regardless of the form, invites others to view some aspect of the self which is not
naturally given. The function of these displays, in part, may be to demonstrate one’s inner sense
of status, power, and agency. For example, Abigail’s determination to be impulsive in a body
that rarely permits this by acquiring a visible marker of this decision serves the function of
asserting this piece of who she is and the power that exists behind it.

Sylvia discussed “self-branding” as a reason for tattooing. All tattoos, to a certain extent,
can be seen as marking (or branding) the body for specific viewership, and as traits of identity
and selfhood are often represented in the tattooed words and images themselves, the narratives
inscribed on the skin may serve to counter assumptions and biases that exist (in relation to, for example, one’s gender or race) without the help of such self-branding. Atkinson (2004) agrees that tattoos are forms of self-branding which signify one’s identity, and further notes that identities in general are culturally mediated. Braunberger (2000) advances this concept of culturally-influenced self-branding in her discussion of introjection: “Introjection… is… the way cultural symbolism is absorbed into the body… [It is] a two-way flow between the body and its world. Introjection opens a mediating site between one's psychic interior and cultural exterior. One site of introjection is the tattoo” (p. 3).

And yet, despite the inherent desires of participants to know and demonstrate their senses of selves to others through tattoos, there remains something mystical about identity and selfhood which is likewise captured in tattoos. Participants frequently discussed the static nature of tattoos in contrast to the fluid and changing nature of self and identity over time. This led some participants to appreciate their tattoos as markers of identity or selfhood at a particular time, even if no longer fitting, while other participants expressed regret related to these historical snapshots of self. Braunberer (2000) insightfully states, “Tattoos can be as inexplicable to the selves who wear them as they are to their viewers. Skin cannot so easily speak for the self that inhabits it” (p. 3). Tattoos, as a complicated construct belonging to both the self and world, is not necessarily a knowable phenomenon. Even the subject who selects her tattoo, in keeping with concepts of psychology generally, may not be fully aware of her reasons or meanings for doing so. Skin, as an integral part of identity, is more complicated than perceived notions of selfhood, and is mediated by larger cultural identities both known and unknown to the tattooed individual.

**Power & Control Asserted Through Tattoos.** This theme may be the most directly relevant within the context of body politics. We live in a world in which women’s bodies are
claimed and controlled societally through explicit oppression (e.g., rights to one’s body through limits to reproductive medical care) and again through women’s internalization of cultural and societal norms which govern female bodies. Foucault states, “[T]here is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (1977, p. 155). “Monster beauty” is a domain which stands in contrast to both explicit and internalized forms of oppression. By bringing cultural standards into conscious awareness, monster beauty then contradicts traditional beauty norms by intervening at the level of the physical body. These interventions are often the radical body transformations that do not serve popular depictions of femininity and are traditionally born of frustration with such standards and depictions. Indeed, Braunberger asserts, “The monster beauty of tattooed women has developed through larger struggles over the author(ity) of women's bodies” (2000, p. 3). This indicates ways in which women’s tattooing can serve a protective and even retaliatory function in the face of oppression and dominance.

In support of this position, participants in this study described increased control in social and public spheres and increased autonomy and differentiation from others. In the former, having a tattoo lends some control over what part of the body is viewed and in what context this occurs. Furthermore, having tattoos gives the wearer a sense of agency by inviting the viewers to look at the “art” upon the skin. This subtle but important power shift removes the person from the role of target of the gaze of the other and places her as agent. Maccormack (2006) describes the impact of tattoos related to the gaze of the other in the following:
Tattooing is an experiment in being a body among other bodies… Tattoos both invite and resist the gaze of others. Tattooed bodies are often antagonistic to being stared at because of the fissure the onlooker is affirming through their fetishization of, or distaste for, the tattooing. But looking in fascination, as an opening up to being affected, transforms looking and knowing to seeing and thinking. (p. 79)

For some participants, this invitation culminated in “a reckless kind of freedom in horrifying others, in making one's body into the seductive and scary and strange combination that is monster beauty” (Braunberger, 2000, p. 12), while for others it resulted in a more subtle form of agency that capitalizes on the gaze of the other that will inevitably occur, regardless of whether one has a tattooed body. In this sense, having a tattooed body serves to direct the gaze as the wearer chooses. Still other participants made use of the “shield” or protective nature of tattoos, or what Maccormack (2006) identifies as the antagonistic nature of tattooed bodies and in this way prevent, if not the gaze itself, subsequent encounters related to the gaze.

In terms of increased autonomy and differentiation from others, the act of getting a tattoo serves to establish ownership of the body, which directly contradicts traditional views of shared or outside ownership of/entitlement to women’s bodies. As Pits (1998) demonstrated in her research on scarification practices, modifications of bodies frequently serve to reclaim or assert authority over one’s body. To modify the body is an individual decision that can be made without reference to others. All participants in this study spoke, with varying degrees of passion, about the importance of making decisions about the aesthetics and meanings inscribed onto the body by one’s self and for one’s self. This differentiation from others was particularly complicated developmentally; most participants discussed the point of transitioning from mutual ownership of the body with parents and/or partners to independent ownership via tattooing
choices. Many participants described difficult encounters, disapproval, and rejection from parents after getting a tattoo, which was notably inconsistent with overall positive and admiring feedback from the public on the same tattoos. This points to the perception of shared ownership of young women’s bodies in family contexts, which likely stems from societal norms related to women’s bodies in public or visible spheres and expectations placed upon parents to uphold them.

In some instances, however, entitlement of women’s bodies perseveres despite, and perhaps in relation to, tattoos. In these events, tattoos may become an object of this entitlement, as was described by Beverly. The story that is read into the skin is not always – or perhaps ever – the story that is told by the wearer. Braunberger (2000) recalls the ways in which tattoos can be “empty signs to be filled with a variable assortment of fantasmatic sexuality” (p. 8) as she discusses literature and legal history in America. In her examples, she represents differences between agency and personal meanings behind tattoos versus public perceptions of them, asserting that “one does not become immanently ‘knowable’ by virtue of being tattooed” (2000, p. 3). She specifically delineated the difference between historical perceptions of men’s tattoos and women’s tattoos; heteronormative men get tattoos to represent features of masculinity, of which sexuality is nearly nonexistent. Women, in contrast, are overly-sexualized if and when they elect to have tattoos. Women’s inscriptions on their bodies are not always intended to be sexual in nature, but as women’s bodies continue to be objectified and sexualized culturally, any alteration or modification to the body is viewed through the lens of sexuality and supports this preexisting perception (Braunberger, 2006). More generally, tattoos may be interpreted by others according to any preexisting bias or assumption the viewer may have.
**Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational.** Participants described several interpersonal/relational components to tattooing. Most relevant in this discussion are interpersonal dimensions of getting and having tattoos. In the decision to get a tattoo, participants represented a broad variety of agency and assertiveness. One subtheme which emerged was the need to negotiate tattoos with the tattoo artist. Sometimes, this negotiation was done to preserve the tattoo as art (where the tattoo artist was identified as the “artist”). In other cases, participants needed to argue to preserve their own ideas and concept of self in the face of a tattooist with his or her own agenda. When the body was viewed only as an object, a canvas, a person’s sense of agency and authority radically decreased. Sylvia, for example, described regret with regard to not asserting herself when she had reservations about the drawing, and viewed this as an important learning lesson for young women generally who have been socialized *not* to assert themselves.

When the body is viewed as lived body with intention, negotiations tended to ensue, and participants described varying degrees of authority and assertiveness depending on the value they placed on art versus meaning.

Additionally, participants spoke to communities and belonging; these interpersonal elements reflect the power of groups and group acceptance or rejection. We are often delineated into various groups according to our bodies, and the category of “tattooed” is another, albeit voluntary, method of classification. This study indicated the potential interpersonal barriers in the context of belonging which are perhaps not fully overcome by electing to get tattoos and finding acceptance within this community. These barriers primarily took the forms of criticism or rejection by others (primarily parents in this study), and role of the interpersonal in upholding social norms and expectations as they relate to women’s bodies. Regarding the latter, some participants emphasized agency and empowerment in discussion of their tattoos. They explicitly
noted the ways in which they were aware of oppression and societal control over female bodies, and actively used tattoos as a method for managing this reality. Other participants described socially conforming behaviors related to tattooing and their bodies. Some noted an increase in their physical appeal and sense of femininity, and used tattoos to highlight desirable parts of their bodies. It is clear from this that “belonging” as an existential, human need can look a variety of ways. Some find belonging by pushing against the social script with others, while others meet this need within the construct of social conformity and broader acceptance. Braunberger (2006) writes:

> From the 1970s into the 1990s, the obvious femininity of the most popular images – butterflies, flowers, and hearts – equated the feminine with the natural and seemed to annul the contestation of the tattoo. These two contradictory meanings of the possessed and liberated body functioned simultaneously, meaning that for some bodies the feminine was celebrated through these images (without, I might add, anyone perceiving a need to interrogate them). For others the omnipresent rose floated next to the man's name who "possessed" that woman's body. Twenty-plus years of "Property of . . ." tattoos mark an extended backlash to feminist possibilities, and continue to factor in the lives of gang women… These tattoos signify membership and mark a sense of community, [even while they] demand a sacrifice of autonomous subjectivity. (pp. 15-16)

At a more recent tattoo convention, Braunberger (2006) discussed her observations of men’s versus women’s comportment on stage. Men displayed humility bordering on awkwardness and stooped stature, while in contrast women postured and wore decidedly performative, and sexually provocative, clothing. At the end of this convention, Braunberger conversed with the female winner, who disclosed that a year of dieting, working out, and different clothing choices
won the competition for her, while not doing these things were the reason she lost the year before. In this way, despite radical body modifications and in the context of a group of people accepting and celebratory of this practice, women are still expected to uphold societal standards of proportion, thinness, and fashion to be celebrated and accepted. This points to the ongoing tension and complex rhetoric around communities, women’s bodies, modifications, and reclamation. It begs the question of whether any woman is truly reclaiming her body in relation to others, and how this is taken up in tattooing. Pits (1998) responds to this question by challenging positions within radical feminism that present women who engage in body modification practices, including piercing, tattooing, branding or scarification, as acting out an internalized desire to demonstrate a socially-normative attractive body. She advocates for the act in and of itself as an empowering one. This study found that both perspectives are likely true when we discuss women’s tattooing as interpersonal and relational. We all likely hold some elements of internalized oppression to varying degrees both in and out of our awareness, and in our thoughts/actions/physical sensations. Though we may consciously or unconsciously act these out, we may also simultaneously contradict that we are supposed and, more importantly, whether we want to. A decision to have a socially normative tattoo that emphasizes an objectified body part is still a self-empowered choice, as demonstrated in this project.

**Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos.** Feminism has traditionally oscillated between Butler’s academic symbolized self in and through gender performativity, and Dworkin’s call to remove elements of this performance from women’s lived experiences. In contrast, Braunberger (2000) calls upon Sandra Bartky’s “revolutionary feminine aesthetic” in which “women [are] 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” (p.
2), or what in this section is called “aesthetics”. This opens possibilities for new forms of aesthetics which are deeply meaningful and culturally significant in that written and interpreted bodies (Leader, 2015) speak not to internalized forms of oppression, objectification, and censure, but rather to collective anger and desire to liberate women from these categories. This is what Braunberger (2000) takes up as “monster beauty” (p. 3) in the context of revolutionary aesthetics, and women’s tattooed bodies often provide a powerful example of this which integrates both meaning and aesthetics in tattooing behaviors. It is also true that tattooing among women need not always follow this path of monster beauty. It is possible for women to choose tattoos to become a part of the preexisting cultural script on femininity, and to mark and position their bodies in ways which make them more palatable or pleasing in the objectifying gaze of the other. And yet, this move to choose this action, also demonstrates a reclamation practice of sorts in that tattoos for these purposes, too, are voluntary. Furthermore, the chosen aesthetic is personal; no participant in this project described choosing a tattoo solely for the viewership of others. Insofar as others’ viewership was considered, it nearly always addressed a theme of empowerment (e.g., to control where others look, to highlight certain body parts, to tell a particular story, to display a part of one’s identity). In short, meaning and aesthetics are deeply interwoven, and “tattooing is one form of the many, micro-political acts a body can perform to reoccupy itself with multiple meanings” (Maccormack, 2006, p. 72) in relation to the aesthetics of tattoos.

Generally speaking, meaning and aesthetics as taken up in this study both exist in the realm of body politics, and are similar to interpersonal and body control themes in that meanings tend pull for greater body agency and control, while aesthetics tend to be more readily negotiated with others. In addition to the integration of meaning and aesthetics described above, meaning
vs. aesthetics also indicates another, more subtle possible area of body politics: the judgment and evaluation of others’ tattoos according to meaning and aesthetics. Many participants described feeling judged and evaluated based on the meaning, or lack thereof, of their work. Maccormack complicates and challenges this cultural assumption when she asserts:

Dominant discourse demands motives for the partnership of woman and tattoos. Demanding a reason is a form of violence perpetrated upon the female tattooed body. The process of definition fixes the body, just as the process of prejudice that defines ‘woman as . . . ’ has traditionally fixed the female body… The act of fixing refuses the body itself as temporal before it is tattooed, and may even perpetrate within traditional discourse the power of permanence because the risk of tattoos cited by both enthusiasts and critics is that tattoos are forever. Resistance to being a tattooed body may reside more in resistance to defining one’s body than in the act of tattooing. (2006, p. 73)

Maccormack points to the fluidity of body, meaning, and time, and the potential violence in interpreting tattoos outside of these categories. Exemplifying this, Beverly described her relief in finding a community that valued tattoos as art, which aligns with her own perspective, and which relieves her of the burden of constantly having to explain herself and define her body. Echoed in Maccormack’s words, too, are participants who discussed regret and disappointment with regard to the permanence of tattoos and the expectation that a tattoo represents something forever. The existential given of temporality often becomes lost in the narratives of defining and exemplifying “permanence” and “forever” in this way. Tattoos, with all they represent and the potential empowerment they offer women, are not immune to body politics as a strategy of monitoring and controlling other bodies. Even within this participant group, as in any group, there exist considerable differences in perspective resulting in socially constructed concepts (such as
meaning superseding artistry in tattoos’ value) by which certain people are given status and power and others are rejected or marginalized.

Limitations of this Study and Directions for Future Research

One limitation specific to this study was the limited racial and gender diversity among participants. Though there was a relatively broad representation of age, education, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic background, and relationship and employment statuses, all participants identified as Caucasian and biologically female. Similarly, though there was some differentiation among sexual preferences and religion, there were clear majorities in these domains as well. Experiences at differing points of intersectionality are extremely nuanced and diverse, and therefore homogeneity in any domain is a significant drawback to the thematic analysis and generalizability of produced themes. Academia would benefit from specific attention to the relationship between race and tattooing, especially in light of this project’s identification of meaningful markers on the body and skin, and broader dialogues around skin itself as a marker. On a related note, this project did not address tattoos in context of two intersecting categories which emerged during interviews: queer culture and class. Tattoos are a well-documented phenomenon in queer culture with many varying meanings. One participant in this study noted her shifting self-perception in relation to tattoos upon integrating into the LGBT community. This deserves more space and attention than it received; tattoos in the context of this community could have been a full study on its own, and there were neither the number of participants with this vantage point nor the scope of research to support this particular data point in this project. Instead, this data was categorized within broader themes of community, identity, and belonging. Future scholarship would benefit from phenomenological research that more specifically
examines relationships between queer culture, sexual/gender identities, and tattoos. Socioeconomics additionally emerged as an important category during interviews. Several participants noted financial limitations as the primary inhibitor of obtaining tattoos. This study demonstrated the empowering and liberating potential of tattoos, and yet this potential is limited to some and available to others according to economic privilege. This, too, could be an independent study, and future scholarship would likewise benefit from research addressing class ideologies and economic privilege in relation to tattoos. Finally, another interesting point which emerged concerned tattoo removal. This project did not have the participant pool or breadth of scope to fully address this topic, though the significance of undoing a (potentially permanent) body modification warrants further investigation.

**Conclusion**

Scholars and researchers have long contributed to historical and modern understandings of tattooing behaviors. Though significant literature still exists which pathologizes and negatively characterizes individuals who choose this type of body modification, recent trends show shifts in academic understandings of tattoos toward more body-positive approaches. Specifically, tattooing is increasingly understood as linking body, psychological constitution, and culture. For example, Atkinson (2004) noted, “‘[T]attooing…is…a social paradox and strange amalgam of cultural values about the body and its display. The tattooed body marks both long-term ‘civilized’ cultural preferences to alter the flesh as part of ‘doing’ social identity, and signifies more recent social influences on body modification practices” (p. 142). In this way, the physical body becomes the method for demonstrating social and cultural identities and particular psychological connections to them.
Particularly relevant to this psychological connection, scholars are increasingly interested in preserving the complexity of both decisions and meanings related to tattoos, especially as they relate to direct or indirect vehicles for expression and communication. Recent feminist scholars have linked tattoos to body politics and subsequent reclamation (Leader, 2016; Leader, 2016; Pits, 1998; Pits, 2003), though other scholars (Maccormack, 2006; Butler, 1993) have cautioned against over-simplifying the matter and/or re-committing bodies to their cultural allocations by asking particular questions about meanings and explanations. All of this scholarship seems to be in recognition of the fraught historical and present relationship between women’s bodies and society. This recognition has emerged consistently over the years in objectification theory, and the known psychological, physical, occupational, and social risks and detriments to women resulting from their continued objectification (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hüttges & Fay, 2015; Voyer & Voyer, 2014; Wichstrom, 1999). What I found particularly problematic in light of this historical oppression and exertion of control over female bodies is the rhetoric of pathology used when describing tattooing practices among women. This constant critical view of women’s bodies, even in the context of their voluntary actions and endeavors to undo the damage of objectification by reclaiming bodies for themselves, continues to pathologize the subject’s agency and autonomy even when such actions are completed in response to the larger cultural pathology of constantly controlling and inhibiting women’s bodies. This study, alongside notable others (e.g., Leader’s (2015) study of college students and Braunberger’s (2000) study of body reclamation) sought to understand women’s stories, intentions, and meanings, and thus begin undoing this practice of prejudice and stigma which serves to surveil, monitor, inhibit, and control our own and others’ bodies. This is consistent with body
reclamation discourses generally, which celebrate practices which resist victimization and subordination linked to embodiment (Pits, 1998).

With the above listed exceptions in mind, surprisingly little research has been conducted on female embodiment as it relates to tattoos, or the ways in which tattooing among women can be situated within body politics. Those few scholars who have traversed these areas have not phenomenologically investigated the specific area of embodiment, and their philosophical conceptualizations have not yet been grounded in discussions of tattooed women’s lived experiences of embodiment. Atkinson, a leading scholar in the field of tattooing behaviors, calls on future research in the social sciences to challenge overly-simplistic notions of tattooing and focus instead on concrete, lived experiences of individuals who have engaged in these practices (2004).

This study sought to address these gaps and calls to action by asking the following research questions: What is a tattoo? What is its meaning, its lived experience among those who choose to (re-)brand their bodies in such permanent ways? And what is the sociopolitical narrative which gives rise to, and is given rise through, this act of body modification along gender-bifurcated lines? This study recognized that tattooing is more than a signifier of correlated risk and protective factors, associated patterns of behavior, as has been delineated in previous research on this topic, and one-dimensional communication, but rather a signifier of the complex lived world as the tattooed individual experiences and expresses it. That is, tattooing is a bridge between self, other, and world, which can be understood through existential and political lens.

The contribution of this study is twofold: First, it provided grounded and generalizable themes demonstrating tattooed women’s embodied experiences. It responded to questions of
what a lived tattoo is and means for individual women. This particularly form of research has not yet been conducted with this population. Second, this study situated these themes within the larger discussion of body politics. While Bordo (2002), Pits (1998/2003), and Braunberger (2000) have also discussed body modification practices among women and culturally, socially, and politically significant acts, the explicit contextualization of women’s lived experiences has not yet been achieved. Foucault’s notions of power and resistance are likewise useful in this discourse as tattooing among women has been conceptualized, both in and out of this particular project, as a type of reclamation practice among a group of people who historically have shared ownership of their bodies in the context of patriarchal societies. Bordo (2002) raises important questions of Foucault’s theories of power and resistance as they relate to female embodiment. She notes Foucault’s (among many other academics) tendency to approach the practical world through intellectual inquiry and wonders to what extent these cognitive musings translate into lived worlds. Bordo (2002) particularly calls into question the degree to which Foucauldian “resistance” is enacted in women’s considerations of their bodies when she states:

Power relations are neither static nor seamless, and… resistance and transformation are indeed continual. These elements deserve their recognition in cultural analysis. The degree to which they deserve emphasis, however, must vary according to the historical realities being explored. Just how helpful, for example, is an emphasis on creative agency in describing the relation of women and their bodies to the image industry of post-industrial capitalism, a context in which eating disorders and exercise compulsions are flourishing? Does the USA have a multi-million-dollar business in corrective, cosmetic surgery because women are asserting their racial and ethnic identities in resistance to prevailing norms, or because they are so vulnerable to the normalising power of those
norms? Does an intellectual emphasis on ‘resistance’ really help us to describe and
diagnose the politics of the body within the culture in which we live? Or, rather, does it
participate in key mystifications of that culture?
In pointing out normative experiences among women and the ways in which these experiences
align better with power differentials and internalized oppression than with resistance against
these cultural norms, she identifies the gap between the intellectual world and the lived one. This
is precisely the significance of this study; it provides preliminary answers to these questions
based on interviews of lived experiences of embodiment, and arguably resistance, among women
who have elected to modify and (re)claim their bodies via tattooing. Though women in this study
certainly spoke to cultural norms and made decisions consistent with those norms, all
participants likewise spoke to body agency, freedom of choice, and reclaiming what is theirs for
personal reasons and according to personal aesthetics. This project indicates that distinguishing
between what is culturally normative and what is personally empowering in this topic is a false
distinction. The existential givens of bodies, relationships, space, and time situate us within
ourselves and culture so inextricably that to talk about one is necessarily to talk about the others,
and discussions of “resistance” in this way mean taking up complicated notions of personal and
collective conscious and unconscious navigations of the world and power differentials. This
study captures that complexity and complicates the notion of resistance and body reclamation
within the context of culture and body politics.

Though the major contributions of this study involve adding an existential-
phenomenological thematic analysis of tattooed women’s experiences of embodiment to the
existing canon of tattooing behaviors and integrating these themes within larger rhetoric on body
politics, creating this type of scholarship in and of itself is also significant. This work matters
insofar as scholarship can produce knowledge which serves as an equalizing force in an unequal world. Not only does this project serve to de-pathologize traditionally pathologized behaviors, but the four global themes of *Identity & Selfhood Captured in Tattoos, Power & Control Asserted through Tattoos, Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational, and Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos*, can, both in and out of the context of body politics, help us “think the flesh differently” and consider the significance of tattooing behaviors for women. This project demonstrated that tattoos uniquely bring together past, present, and future, and serve as a nexus of personal, interpersonal, and cultural spheres of existence. Understood in this way, tattoos are not only personally meaningful signifiers of self, body, and body reclamation, but cultural phenomenona inscribed on the landscape of the body that indicate larger systems of power, conformity, and resistance.
References


Simms, E. (2008). Children's lived spaces in the inner city: Historical and political aspects of
the psychology of place. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 36*(1), 72-89.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Background</th>
<th>Religion/Spirituality</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Heitersosnial</td>
<td>Philadelphia, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Monogamous Relationship</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Heitersosnial</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Some college, ~8 years in Marines Corps</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Beverley</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Monogamous Relationship</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Raised Christian, converting to Judaism</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree + associate's degree</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Hallie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree; accepted to Ph.D. program</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Monogamous Relationship</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Nature-based spirituality</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Ph.D. candidate</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Monogamous Relationship</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Nature-based spirituality</td>
<td>Greeley, CO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:
Reclaiming the Body: Investigating Women’s Tattoos

INVESTIGATOR:
Ashley Gill, M.A.
Duquesne University
Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
Email: XXXXXXXXXX

RESEARCH SUPERVISOR:
Eva Simms, Ph.D.
Duquesne University
Phone: (412)396-6515
Email: simms@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:
This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University

PURPOSE:
You are being asked to participate in a research project that will gather narratives about women’s tattoos and their bodies in an effort to better understand these experiences.
In order to qualify for participation, you must be:
A female who has elected to get a tattoo within the last 5 years

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:
To participate in this study, you will be asked to: Take a colored, non-edited photograph of your tattoo and email to XXXXXXXXXX, which I will print and bring to the interview for us both to reference. You will be able to give or deny permission for this photograph to be made public. If you do not wish for your photograph to be made public, it will kept private between the researcher and participant, and will be shredded/electronically deleted upon completion of the project. If you give permission for your photograph to be made public, it will be used in the presentation of this research project, and potentially on other platforms as agreed upon by participants. Participants’ anonymity will be preserved throughout the research process.
In addition, you will be asked to allow me to interview you. If you consent, we will schedule a 90-minute, in-person meeting which includes a 15-minute introduction, a 60-minute interview, and a 15-minute debriefing following the interview. During this meeting, you will be asked to sign this form, participate in an hour-long interview, and debrief if necessary. The hour-long interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews will take place at a mutually-decided location, based on your privacy, safety, and geographical preferences. These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:
There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. The benefits to participating in this study include a greater understanding of yourself in relation to your tattoo, the space and time to tell your story, and a greater sense of your emotional and/or cognitive processes associated with tattooing.

**COMPENSATION:**
There will be no compensation for participating in this study.
Participation in this project will require no monetary cost to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**
Your participation in this study and any personal information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times and to every extent possible. However, it is possible that providing and giving permission to share a photograph of your tattoo may allow others to identify you.
Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure. Your response(s) will only appear in statistical data summaries. Any study materials with personal identifying information will be maintained for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.
Audio recordings that include identifying information will be stored in a locked file. They will also be maintained for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:**
You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time by calling or emailing Ashley Gill (contact information listed above) and indicating you wish to withdraw from this study, and whether you want your data that has already been collected to be used in the study or destroyed. After withdrawing, you will no longer be contacted and your data will be used or destroyed according to your wishes.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:**
A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**PERMISSION TO SHARE PHOTOGRAPH:**
I give Ashley Gill permission to share the photograph of my tattoo at her discretion:

- [ ] Yes
- [x] No

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:**
I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.
I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Ashley Gill at XXX-XXX-XXXX. Should I have any questions regarding protection of human subject issues, I may contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, at 412.396.1886.

_________________________________________  __________________
Participant’s Signature                          Date

_________________________________________
Researcher’s Signature                          Date
Research Participants Needed!

Attention: Women who have elected to get a tattoo(s) within the last 5 years! We’d like to hear your tattoo stories.

Researchers from Duquesne University are currently recruiting tattooed female participants to discuss the decision to get one or more tattoos, their meanings, and their impact on your lives.

Participation includes a 60-90 minute interview with the lead researcher, as well as optionally sharing a color photograph of your tattoo.

If you’re interested in participating or learning more, please email womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Appendix D: General Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed!

Attention: Women who have elected to get a tattoo(s) within the last 5 years! We'd like to hear your tattoo stories.

Researchers from Duquesne University are currently recruiting tattooed female participants to discuss the decision to get one or more tattoos, their meanings, and their impact on your lives.

Participation includes a 60-90 minute interview with the lead researcher, as well as optionally sharing a color photograph of your tattoo.

If you're interested in participating or learning more, please email womenandtattoos2@gmail.com

Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
Womenandtattoos2@gmail.com
### Table 1: Abigail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Codes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection with Tattoo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to Overall Wellbeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2: Silvia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platonic Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Themes</td>
<td>Global Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellion</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Themes</td>
<td>Global Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Beverly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo as Shield</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching Without Consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Belonging</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Global Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/Belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Themes</td>
<td>Global Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Awareness and Self-Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Others</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Supersedes Aesthetics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Themes</td>
<td>Global Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Connection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo as Shield</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessorizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 9: Eleanor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Themes</th>
<th>Global Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging/Community</td>
<td>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Meaning and Aesthetics in Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos as Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix F: Global Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Identity &amp; Selfhood Captured in Tattoos</th>
<th>Power &amp; Control Asserted Through Tattoos</th>
<th>Tattoos as Interpersonal/Relational Meaning vs. Aesthetics in Tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abigail</strong></td>
<td>Preservation Body Image Reflective of Sense of Self Felt Connection with Tattoo Tattoo/Body Integration Uniqueness Tattoos as Art Self-Branding</td>
<td>Control of Body Body Agency Control of Perception Empowerment Preservation Contribute to Overall Wellbeing Overcoming Hardship Personal Significance</td>
<td>Preservation Invitation to Observe/Comment Control of Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silvia</strong></td>
<td>Personal Significance Changing Meanings Over Time Body Image Uniqueness Preservation Self-Criticism Regret Overcoming Hardship</td>
<td>Control of Perception</td>
<td>Preservation Control of Perception Invitation to Observe/Comment Platonic Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alice</strong></td>
<td>Personal Significance Felt Connection Rebellion Body Agency Empowerment</td>
<td>Connections with Others Trust in Tattoo Artist Mainstreaming of Tattoos Control of Perception</td>
<td>Personal Significance Tattoos as Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rosa</strong></td>
<td>Felt Connection Personal Significance Control of Body Self-Criticism Body Image Tattoo/Body Integration</td>
<td>Planning Body Agency Control of Body Control of Perception Body Image</td>
<td>Personal Significance Preservation Trust in Tattoo Artist Control of Perception Body Image Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beverly</strong></td>
<td>Personal Significance Uniqueness Regret Self-Branding Changing Meanings Over Time Body Image Reflective of Sense of Self</td>
<td>Control of Perception Body Agency Tattoo as Shield Touching Without Consent Uniqueness Objectification</td>
<td>Community/Belonging Trust in Tattoo Artist Body Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cynthia</strong></td>
<td>Planning Autonomy Preservation Personal Significance Uniqueness</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Trust in Tattoo Artist Body Image Invitation to Observe/Comment Community/Belonging Mainstreaming of Tattoos Preservation Connections with Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gabrielle</strong></td>
<td>Mainstreaming of Tattoos Uniqueness Personal Significance Preservation Regret Changing Meanings Over Time</td>
<td>Control of Perception Body Image Body Awareness and Self-Criticism Body Agency Empowerment</td>
<td>Connections with Others Connection with Tattoo Artist Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hallie</strong></td>
<td>Preservation Personal Significance Felt Connection Body Image</td>
<td>Planning Body Agency Control of Perception Empowerment Body Image</td>
<td>Tattoo as Shield Trust in Tattoo Artist Belonging/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eleanor</strong></td>
<td>Preservation Personal Significance</td>
<td>Body Agency Planning Empowerment Control of Perception Body Image</td>
<td>Belonging/Community Invitation to Observe/Comment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Participant Transcripts

Participant 1: Abigail

Abigail: I got this tattoo on April 26th of 2014.

Interviewer: Okay. And is this your only tattoo, or do you have others?

Abigail: I have one other tattoo.

Interviewer: You have one other? And when did you get your first one?

Abigail: My first one I got in 2011.

Interviewer: In 2011? Okay. All right. So, have you looked at the picture you sent? Like, taken a look at it?

Abigail: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Interviewer: I guess because yours is on your wrist, you can kind of see it. One kind of fascinating part of this is having people look at their tattoos, because often, we can't see our own. And I wonder if anything came up for you when you were looking at the photograph of your tattoo or looking at your tattoo on your wrist?

Abigail: That's actually why it's placed there. I fought with the tattoo artist for a bit because he's like, "Well, aesthetically, it should be facing outwards." I was like, "No, it's mine. I want to be seeing it. No, it's gonna face me." And he was like, "Yeah, but it's ..." I'm like, "I don't care." He's like, "People are not going to be able to read it." I'm like, "It's in Italian, I don't care. It's for my purpose. It's not for anyone else's."

Abigail: So, yeah, I look at it a lot.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you specifically oriented it so that it was for you to see and read?

Abigail: Absolutely. 100 percent.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about it?

Abigail: Yeah. Excuse me if I get emotional. In 2005, I lost my grandmother. And she was amazing. It was my mom's mom, and she was one of the rocks of our family. I'm really close to my maternal grandparents. My paternal grandparents still live in Philly, and my grandmother, she used to always call me "gioia." In Italian, that means "my joy." And after she died ... She used to never write. My grandfather used to be the one to write... [Pause, crying] Sorry, because my grandfather just passed in April, so I got everything.
Interviewer: I'm so sorry.

Abigail: But anyway, my grandfather that just passed, just because he knew English a little bit better and my grandmother barely spoke any English, and if it was, it was very broken and you could barely understand it. He used to always write our birthday cards and our Christmas cards and everything like that. And after my grandmother passed, I found two cards that she had written in, and she had put the word “gioia” in both of them. When I got this tattoo, I was actually, I was living in Maryland. I was going through a pretty deep depression, and I needed something. And I took one of those cards and I walked into ... I had a Saturday morning off. April 26th is my grandmother's birthday, so that's why I chose to get it on that day. I walked into a tattoo shop and I handed him the card that I liked the writing on best. And so the “gioia” is written in her writing.

Interviewer: Wow. That's a really powerful message.

Abigail: So, at the time, I wanted it to get it on my left side, because that's where my heart is. And I wanted to be able to look at it. I needed to be able to look at it because she was such a huge part of my life. My mom had me at a young age, and when we still lived in New York, my grandparents were ... they watched me. They grew up with me. And then when my family moved to Pennsylvania, they moved with us.

Abigail: And also, part of the reason why I'm so intrigued with tattoos and getting tattoos is and trying to get them is, I'm figuring out meaning for me. It's because I also have epilepsy. With having epilepsy, I can't drink, not that I think I would have, but everything is so structured for me that never in college or high school had I experimented with anything, like any type of drug or marijuana or even just smoking a cigarette or anything like that, because of what the ramifications could be. To say I can't drink, and especially with the epilepsy you feel like you don't have control of your body because you never know when you might just drop and have a seizure. And getting these tattoos was some control over my body. [Tearfully] Sorry.

Interviewer: It suits you.

Abigail: Yeah. And I wanted this one to be meaningful, and I feel like my first one wasn't as meaningful. It was on the fly that I did it. Not that this one wasn't, but I thought about it and then just did it on the fly. And the first one I was like, "Oh, I'll get that one and then add something to it." So I picked it from the wall. It wasn't like ... I still love it, but it doesn't have that meaning.

Interviewer: Can you ... Sorry, that was really powerful, what you just said. Still adjusting, but can you walk me through the process of with your first tattoo, of getting your first tattoo? It was on the fly and you have this history with your body. And there is
this sense of – it is a way of exerting control. It is a way of doing something in your body that you have agency and you're empowered to do, and can you walk me through the process of getting your first one?

**Abigail:** Yeah, so well, I'm gonna tell you because, I mean, you're not, probably leave this portion out. I went to Texas for a sports marketing conference senior year. It was in the fall, and me and a girl from ... There was four of us, so two guys, two girls, including myself. And the guys ... one night we were just in our hotel room. We were exhausted, but we were bored. And we were like, "What now? What are we going to do?" And that point, we didn't know the city enough to go roaming and I think it was Fort Worth, Texas, so it wasn't night life. And the baseball playoffs were going on. That's what the guys were doing at the bar downstairs. And then, all of a sudden, because she had been wanting to get this specific tattoo, as well. She knew what she had wanted to get. And we're in the room, and we pop up and, or I popped up, actually. I was like, "Let's go get tattoos. YOLO." So we got a cab. And I had thought a little bit about how I wanted to choose my tattoo a little bit, just to make it a little bit of my own. But with a good place, with a five star, four star whatever ranking. Is it clean? Okay. Cool, let's go there. We walk in and we're like, "Let's do this. Yes." I'm pretty sure I was terrified. I ended up picking a magnolia off of their wall and then I requested him to wrap a purple awareness ribbon around the stem of it. Purple is the epilepsy awareness color.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Abigail:** So, yep. However, one, the magnolia doesn't really have any special meaning, it was just pretty. Two, I don't know, the magnolia wore, but purple doesn't hold well as far as the color on the skin in tattooing. So, through age, and also I forgot about it, I was walking out of the shower. I was like, "Oh, I forgot this was there." So, did it have meaning then? Yes, because it was my first tattoo. It was the only thing in my life that I could ever just say, "Meet me, let's go do this." My schedule for everything else is so... I can't fall asleep on the couch because I have to take my epilepsy medication at night. Everything's so structured for me and that was the only thing that I could just say, "Let's go do it." That was my first.

**Interviewer:** You did it and you did it on the fly. It was not structured.

**Abigail:** No.

**Interviewer:** That’s amazing.

**Abigail:** Then we got back and my professor was horrified 'cause he's like, "Oh, my God." It was a lot. And we're like, "We're adults. We're 21. We'll be fine." We always joke about it to this day.

**Interviewer:** You still joke about it. [Pause] Where is your first one?
Abigail: It's on my hip.

Interviewer: On your hip.

Abigail: Yep.

Interviewer: And how did you decide on that location?

Abigail: Oh, my roommate in college had that and I went with her to get her first tattoo and she got hers I think on her right hip. And I wanted to the hip region, I thought it was sensual. I thought it was a really ... before I gained weight. And I was like, it was one place where I knew in the summer I'd be able to show it off, but I could still have it for myself and I did think that it was nice place, but it was also private for me and then just like I said, a sensual location and sexy. For me, the location didn't mean as much for me on the first one.

Interviewer: Yeah, so the location of your first one was more about who gets to see it, who doesn't see, when people see it, but it makes you feel a certain way, sexy, or something like that, and your second tattoo was all about – you were feeling a certain way and you really needed a lifeline and that was all for you?

Abigail: It was. And then because of, at the time, so no one else in my family at the time had a tattoo, had ever gotten a tattoo. I had always mentioned tattoos, as well. And my mom would always brush it off and I also felt that if I ever wanted to just keep it for myself, it was also a place that I could hide it well. And also in ... Unfortunately, it sucks, but in work places sometimes, I work with so many different demographics now and I did before as well. You're judged by it. I didn't want to be judged by something that was so close to my heart, but the place that I, but for that reason it was so secondary that it didn't even matter at that point. It was just an extra that if I chose to show it, I could and if I didn't, I didn't have to.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's a really important component for both of yours, it seems. That you can show them, but you can also hide them.

Abigail: Correct.

Interviewer: Who gets to see your tattoos?

Abigail: I don't really show those tattoos off. I know if sometimes my watch will slide down a little bit. I wear a watch all the time. Not to hide it, just because it ... I feel naked without it. People that I've known for months or years will say, "I never knew you got a tattoo." And then I'll explain it to them. And I won't get this emotional, but just the brief version. They're shocked by what something so small can mean... So, that's always a good feeling. When I have down time during the day, I look at it and yeah, it's for me. It's really for me and if people ask about it, I'm willing to tell. But it's not one of those things that's showy for me. It's not.
And that's why I fought with the tattoo artist. I'm like, "Listen, dude. I don't care. It's for me. I need to see it." Yeah, so I mean really anyone can see my tattoo. I'm fine with it. It's not that I'm not okay with it, but the purpose behind it is for me to have it, for me to look at it, for me to look back on those memories and remember her hearing me call that.

**Interviewer:** It's a permanent reminder for you.

**Abigail:** It is, yeah, absolutely. And it's great to see that after she passed, I was able to dig up. I mean down in 2005 when she passed, but closer to when I wanted to get that tattoo, I remember a girl that was interning for the company that I was with had done something similar and had gotten her mom's handwriting in something and gotten it on her, right here, her forearm on the inside. And I liked the concept of having something so personalized. I did not think I had anything in writing, and I started digging through old stuff. I have a really bad habit of ... Well, it was a good habit at that point. It actually helped me, just keeping cards for years and years and years. And I was digging through all of the cards to see if I could find one that she had written in and not just my grandfather, and I ended up with two. It wasn't even the card, I was specifically looking for did she write the word "gioia" in any of them and, of course, she did. The only two that I had in-in both, she did. This one just happened to be a little bit bigger and a little bit clearer, that I picked it. Now, I cherish those cards. You’d never think that a birthday card could ever mean so much.

**Interviewer:** Of course, of course. Whenever you ... Well, maybe I shouldn't say whenever, do you make a conscious effort sometimes to look down at your tattoo or do you find that you just happen upon it?

**Abigail:** Probably after my grandfather died was ... It was his wife. That's more of a conscious effort 'cause even though you go back to the religious portion, spiritually, whatever it might be, I hope they're together again and I hope he, my grandfather ... he suffered a lot in the end. So lately it's been more, I don't know, it's been soothing. So yeah, I will look down on it. Prior to his death, I just come across it whenever my watch would slide down or I'm at home and I take my bracelet or watch off and yeah, I still look at it. The memories just come flooding back.

**Interviewer:** Was that what you hoped for whenever you went in to get the tattoo, that that would be your experience looking at it?

**Abigail:** I don't think I had an expectation of when I got it, of what it would make me feel. I think I just wanted a reminder because of with my grandmother, we lost her so quickly that she just got sick really quickly and within two weeks she had passed. So, yeah. I just want a reminder of her having this nickname for me and calling me her joy in our native language. I can still hear it and that was the initially purpose for it, but even more time went on, the more memories would come up if...
I looked at it. Whether it was her in the kitchen because she was constantly cooking or in the summer time when she would come over to our house and me and my sister swimming in the pool. It became a lot more than I ever anticipated. And after my grandfather passed away, it was even more so.

Interviewer: I'm wondering about the timing, what was it about ... you said that it was her birthday so what was it about that first birthday after she passed that you were just in so much pain – what was it about going in at that moment and what was that process? What was it like?

Abigail: Well, it wasn't her first birthday after she passed.

Interviewer: Okay.

Abigail: So, yeah, she passed in 2005.

Interviewer: In 2005, oh, okay.

Abigail: I got mine in 2014.

Interviewer: Okay.

Abigail: The time that I was, where I was at that point mentally, I was having a really rough time where I was at... I couldn't get my epilepsy under control and I was getting more and more depressed day by day. I was away from my family. Even though it was two hours, it felt like they were a way away. Excuse me one second. I'm just gonna get tissues.

Interviewer: Sure, sure...

Abigail: So, I couldn't, the problem with epilepsy is that most people either have really, really severe epilepsy that they can't have jobs or they're having multiple seizures every day, or it's the opposite where it can be controlled by medication. I unfortunately have the kind where it's in the middle where I was having ... where I was calling off... because I would have mine in my sleep. I would wake up where I just knew that I had a seizure in the middle of the night. And it usually takes about a day or two. You literally need to sleep off the seizure because being out of exhaustion, that you go through is just you need to sleep it off. That's how it works. And I was having so many of them. I was probably having one every other week. So, I was constantly having to go, having to take off work. I was reeling for my job. I was poor as hell. Well, kept having to ask my dad for loan, or my student loan money, the rent money. I was lonely. I didn't have any friends. I actually, one girl had started with me at this particular job. She actually bullied me in front of the entire office. She started being my friend and then things took a turn for the worst and she started getting more distant. And in front of the entire office one day ... I tried to talk her like an adult and she was like, "I'm just ... I just
don't see myself being friends with a person like you." I didn't have anyone, which really ... a little regret of mine lead to my depression that followed later on in that year. And I was trying to grasp at anything I could at that moment. Just something to think of happy moments and I just wanted to focus on getting the tattoo. I mean it's something, something to be happy about, something new. So I wanted to be happy and I think that's where the timing came into place.

Interviewer: Yeah, and how did you feel after getting that?

Abigail: Oh, I walked out with the gauze on my wrist and I tried to keep it on and initially I was terrified. People are gonna think I'm cutting myself.

Interviewer: Oh.

Abigail: That was my initial reaction.

Interviewer: I see.

Abigail: Yeah, and because I was going through a depression. I was like, "Oh, it's even more heightened at this point." Not that I was self-harming or anything like that, but it was just more the awareness of what are people gonna think. But I keep finding myself pulling the gauze off, looking at it, putting it back on and putting it off and looking at it and putting it back on. It was a great feeling.

Interviewer: It was a great feeling?

Abigail: Yeah. Unfortunately, I think because of some of the other things going on, the feeling wasn't strong enough to fix everything else in my life. I mean I think at the time I thought it would fix for me, but nothing is that powerful when other stuff is going on in your life.

Interviewer: It was something, though.

Abigail: It was. It absolutely was.

Interviewer: But it wasn't the whole ... it wasn't fixing everything.

Abigail: No, it wasn't, but I still at the same time, would go home and I would look at it and just memories would come up and yeah. I mean I don't, nothing is unlike someone say I don't know, going out and drinking and relieving stress in that manner or other outlets. I didn't have an outlet. I just didn't. I didn't at the time. I didn't have some sort of stress relieving, depression relieving outlet of any sort and all the people around me were in their 20s. They were always in the office, "Oh, let's go out for drinks." And things like that. I was very cautious and awkward going to bars 'cause I have no idea what to do. It's just not in my nature. And after a couple weeks, I guess the positive tattoo things wore off and things
got sad then. Not when I looked at that tattoo, but things around me. The other things that were wrong. But it still holds a really special place in my heart because I knew that this was a tattoo that I would, this is one of the things that I would never regret getting because it meant so much to me.

**Interviewer:** It never stopped ... It was a temporary lift for you. It wasn't a fixer. It was a temporary lift, but the meaning has never wavered?

**Abigail:** No, if anything, it's gotten stronger. My expectation of what it was gonna be was just a reminder of my grandmother, but I look at it and it's very ... it's a lot of love. It's so much more and it's crazy how one word can bring back memories and times you spend together with the person and now that my grandfather has passed, even more emotions have come to the surface.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Abigail:** 'Cause he was ... My grandparents were also the couple that I have always looked up to as far as what I would want in a marriage and I saw my grandfather suffer for two years not having my grandmother. It means that there may be a chance that they're together again. No one knows, but that makes me feel a little bit better. And right now when I look at my tattoo, that's what I think about, is them together.

**Interviewer:** You think-

**Abigail:** Oh, yeah...

**Interviewer:** It's okay to cry.

**Abigail:** I know. I know. I've done a lot of it lately and I think if I would have done this ... Well, I knew it would be emotional, I didn't know this emotional.

**Interviewer:** Sure. Yeah, I understand. Yeah, I do really appreciate you sharing all of this.

**Abigail:** I'm glad to share it because as I thought more and more about what it meant to me, more and more things came into my mind that I didn't even realize or associated with. Me having one word on my wrist. So, it also made me realize I don't want to [inaudible] before me. That, I don't need to have something that's just for me personally. I don't need to have a gigantic mural on my arm circling back memories or to have a comforting feeling of remembering my grandparents. It could be simple and it happened and it worked. You know?

**Interviewer:** Yes, sure. So, the tattoo itself, the first tattoo you described getting was real ... I mean both of your tattoos are really emotionally powerful and they're connected to the way you're feeling and experiencing things. And the first one was sort of that liberation, that freedom. And the second one is just a signifier of such an
important part of your life and I think we talked pretty well about the emotional pool behind both of them. And I wonder if I could also ask you about just being embodied in general. Part of my project is about women's experiences of their bodies and in their bodies and I have some questions just about how do you experience your body? Have your tattoos, either of them changed the way you think about your body or you feel embodied?

Abigail: It's difficult 'cause I have a body that limits me, very much so. Yeah, since college I have put on a decent amount of weight so my hip one doesn't feel as sensual anymore. I don't know. I shy away from it now because I'm, now I'm not wearing bikinis anymore in the summer to show it off. I'm wearing one pieces or shorts and it's right now as it stands, it's just there. But I still see it and that was my first tattoo and that was my first just impulsive moment that I've ever been able to have and it doesn't still, in my good time, where I'm like, "Okay, I feel good today." I love the tattoo on my hip. I still, not every day like I use to. It still has that sense and that feeling that I like. That doesn't cover you more. It's like putting on a pair of pink underwear like I want to feel sexy today. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: And not be like, okay, we're just gonna roll with the boy shorts today that are comfy. So, I do still have my days where I love that particular tattoo and it makes me feel good and especially if I'm not just getting just for work. It's getting dressed for month. It's like t-shirt and sneakers. If I am getting dressed up and what not, it makes me feel that much more sexy, but no one knows about it kind of thing.

Interviewer: Is that part of it? That no one knows about it?

Abigail: Is it what?

Interviewer: Is that part of it, part of that feeling that no one knows about it?

Abigail: I think so and I don't know if this pertains to ... maybe it does. Anyway, but any time that I've been intimate with someone, it's almost like a step back when I.... A lot of people say that my personality doesn't I guess align with someone that has multiple tattoos. Ugh, no. But whatever. A lot of people I guess ... I've come to realize that I think I come off as a goody two shoes and part of that I've realized is that I don't drink. I don't do ... I don't say, "Oh, I don't drink because I have epilepsy." That's something else that not everyone needs to know about. You know what I mean? It's just ... and people will think what they think, but going back what people expect, especially the one on my hip. I've always gotten it, when being intimate, I've always gotten really shocked and then positive responses like, "That's an awesome place to have a tattoo. It's so sexy." You know?
Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: So, there are really positive things to having that placed where it is. You know?

Interviewer: Yes.

Abigail: Now, this is one more from a curiosity standpoint, 'cause not only do you have the sometimes needed it and then sometimes not, but it's also in another language.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: So, people don't, it's ... and I don't say anything, but if some asks, I'm all about telling them. And that's not what it was about. It was never to get that reaction, but that's what I've experienced. It makes me feel really good that it has that impact on other people to because it has just as much of an impact on me. Every time I get either as an awesome story, it's just even more powerful to me that I made a great decision of what I got and where I put it. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: Not that, like I said, not that I ever regretted it, but it's fun to see people's reactions about it. When I got it. I was concerned about what my grandfather at the time was gonna say. I thought he was gonna make some comment about ... He was very old school and old school Italian and like I said, up till, my family had any tattoos and things like that. His reaction was completely opposite. He goes, "Good for you." And I was like, "Yeah." That's not what I expected whatsoever. So, from a body empowerment standpoint, both have a different effect and I think that's part of the placement of that. Like I said, this one, it's, even though it's more visible than my other one, this is for me and I don't have to argue for that. The tattoo's gorgeous and then do I show it off? Do I not show it off? I remember when I first started working for my employer, my general manager, he was like, "Oh, I didn't know you had a tattoo." He goes, "You don't have to hide it. You're not required to hide it." And I go, "I mean of course. I don't think I need to hide it. I made the choice because it's for me." So, we all have a different type of body empowerment, but I definitely think it's interesting how people react to it and how it makes me feel after the fact. I hope that answers the question.

Interviewer: It does. It answered it beautifully. I also wonder what it's like for you when people tell you that your personality doesn't match a body with multiple tattoos?

Abigail: They don't know me.

Interviewer: They don't know you.

Abigail: Yeah.
Interviewer: And that's what they think your personality is then they don't know you.

Abigail: So, 'cause one, a lot of the times it's been at work. I'm a very different person at work than I am with my really close friends. I can joke like a kid. I'm not really serious, but this was the first time that I worked for a company and not had it feel like just a job. It's a career for me. So, there are boundaries I can't cross with people, whether joking around is ... there are certain boundaries you can't cross and joke around. Whether it's a funny sexual comments that I would joke around with my best friend, versus people at work. So, I think that's there the stereotype of these two issues comes into play, but I think it stems from me not drinking, me not smoking, me not. I think it really stems from those two things, the drinking and the smoking and until I tell someone, why it is. And even after I tell someone why it is, whether I just say, "Well, for medical reasons or because I have epilepsy." I'm still put in that category where, "She doesn't do these things so she must not be so badass."

Interviewer: But your tattoos say otherwise, and that's nice.

Abigail: Yeah, and those are people that, like I said, they don't know me. They don't know the things I've been through. They don't know the true me at least, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: So, and I've just come to accept that because the people that do know me, know me well and that's all that matters.

Interviewer: I wonder if it's your sense that the people who know about your multiple tattoos ... I wonder if you feel like they do get a better sense of the real you? Even people at work if they're aware that you have a second tattoo also, you feel that would mean that they know you better? The authentic you better?

Abigail: No.

Interviewer: No.

Abigail: Because usually when they see this one or take notice of it, I do mention ... Oh, I have a second one on my hip and it's like, surprise. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: And in some cases, it goes well and then I found that in most cases, that it's typically not that stemming of ... It's stupid to me, but it's something that I've just come to ignore that because I don't drink or I don't smoke or I haven't experimented with whatever, drugs or whatever it might be or because my college experience when I talk about it, is filled with ... I mean it's the internships that I did, instead of drunken nights and sleeping around. I don't have those, that
stereotypical college experience. Those are typically the people that see me as a goody two shoes is when that conversation starts like, "Oh, that night in college when I passed out and that girl." That's typically what I find ... those are the people that I find and don't know who I am and just have one opinion and that's it. And even when it comes to- to going out and things like that, and they're aware that I don't drink. It's like, "Well, we're going to the bar so I figured you didn't want to go to the bar so we just didn't invite you." And I'm like, to me, and this has happened multiple times, but it's like why would you just not invite me? I like being with people, I like going out.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: And make that decision for me.

Interviewer: That's happened more than once?

Abigail: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: Does that happen in other areas where people are making decisions for you?

Abigail: In what manner?

Interviewer: Like they made that decision for you about the bar. Does it ever happen with ... I can't even imagine in what other areas. I guess I'm just wondering if you've ever had that experience or a similar experience of someone making a decision for you and you were like, "Hey, I didn't ... That's not coming from me, that's coming from you."

Abigail: Not that I can recall right now. Yeah, not that I can recall, but the drinking is what... because it's so common, I guess, is what stands out to me the most, is that we just assumed that you didn't want to go to a bar since you can't drink. And that's stupid. It's just is because that's if I were to be like not invite someone to, I don't know, a seafood restaurant because they don't like seafood. Well, there's other stuff at a restaurant that I'm sure is not seafood. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: What people don't know about me is that I love dancing. So, at bars there's usually dancing. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: But even when they do know, the automatic assumption goes to the drinking. So, it's apparently out of goody two shoes.

Interviewer: That's a total misunderstanding of everything.
Abigail:  Yeah, yeah. It is. It's a web of stereotypes, essentially.

Interviewer:  Yeah, it is. It is. Do you have a sense of ... I wonder if you ever think about what your life would ... this is an impossible question. I don't even know why I'm asking it. Do you ever think about what your life would be like or what choices you would make especially about things like drinking or smoking. If you didn't have to worry about epilepsy?

Abigail:  Oh, I've actually thought about that a lot. It comes up again that I probably… Okay. That if I didn't have epilepsy, there would be a good chance that my year and a half to two years that I had gone through my depression, that I could have fallen into something like alcoholism or drugs or something like that. But my epilepsy prevented that. So, I've been able to turn around my help, caught up on... I’ll be four years of seizure free in August.

Interviewer:  Oh, wow. That's incredible.

Abigail:  I'm sorry, it's been five years, yeah. So, two years for me of depression turned around and was able to fix it. I don't know if I would have turned to other vices, if you will. But I was able to turn that around.

Interviewer:  Yeah.

Abigail:  So, no, I haven't thought about that in a while and if anything, I think this was my safest route. I don't know what I would have done, too, if I didn't have my epilepsy and I knew what my limits were because of my epilepsy. Yep.

Interviewer:  So, your epilepsy has saved you from some part of that risk, and then your tattoos have saved some part of what was lost with the epilepsy.

Abigail:  Yep.

Interviewer:  Yeah, I'm aware of the time and I'm aware I only have 15 minutes or so, 20 minutes or so left and I just want to make sure that there's time to ask you if there's anything that we didn't talk about during this that came up for you or you think you want to say?

Abigail:  Actually, I don't know. A lot more came out than I anticipated. I was like, "God, what are we gonna talk about for an hour? How's that gonna happen?" But I think the more we kept talking and the more you brought to light some of the questions that I think we hid pretty well, more than I ever anticipated. I don't think there's anything that I missed on. Everything that I think needed to be said was said and everything behind it. Right now, I don't know, this is just an addition. Right now, I'm ... and I don't know because it's so fresh, but right now I'm looking for something for, I'm trying to come up with some ideas for my grandfather on my
right wrist. So that I have this memory as I do with my left wrist. So, that's gonna be my follow up, too. What I have for my grandmother is impactful as it has been since my grandfather's death in April. I want to have something equally as special for him. So right now, I'm trying to figure that out. And it took years to figure something out for my grandmother. Years, I'm not just doing it on the fly. So, if it takes me another ten years to figure it out, that will be okay. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: Be that way, so.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Abigail: Yeah, but other than that, I think we really covered more than I ever thought we'd be able to and the more we talked the more I was like, "Well, this has been ..." I never thought we would have, what would have come out was what people think about my personality versus who I am. Hadn't even crossed my mind until we actually started talking.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean you're doing something that's so real whenever you make those decisions to get tattoos. They're very incredibly powerful. They mean a lot of different things.

Abigail: Yep, they do. For me, though, I think and I think I've learned my lesson on the first tattoo is I want my other tattoos to be as unique as possible. I contemplated with my profession of getting a semicolon. I haven't because unless I can find a unique way to do it that stands for something personal. I don't want to just have something like the rest of the world. I'm just not, whoever does, I need it to be unique to me and that's just something that I have to figure out, how can I make it unique to me before I put it on my body for the rest of my life. That uniqueness for me is huge.

Interviewer: Yeah, the unique part of it, yeah.

Abigail: Yeah, it is, because I can all day get tattoos that are pretty and that I love, but unless it's unique to me, that's what a tattoo means to me is a permanent piece of art that's unique to the person that you are.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, not just about the aesthetic appeal, but truly, personally meaningful.

Abigail: Yeah, absolutely. I mean because if it's not, how many people are gonna have the same tattoo that you have.
Abigail: And I think that also stems from me never stereotyping people. I don't ... I'm not gonna stereotype because I know what that feels like. It's nuts. I can't do that to another person. So, I think that other people see it just as art on their body, which is fine, absolutely. I agree, but again, it comes back to me and my preference and what I feel like a tattoo should mean to me and it means to me it means to me. It might take years to figure out, but I'm gonna wait those years because I'm not gonna pick out ... As much as I like immediately started listing everything associated with my grandfather was like, "I need this, this, this, this, this and this on my body." Until I find that thing that just feels right. I can't pull it together. It's ... I didn't want to rush because it's just too fresh to make a sound decision to permanently ink something onto my body. But I'm sure in time I'll think of something.

Interviewer: I'm sure you will, too.
Participant 2: Silvia

Interviewer: I noticed you sent three tattoos – are those your only three tattoos?

Silvia: Yes, those would be the only ones.

Interviewer: Right. And when did you get them?

Silvia: So the one – the “only time” that's on my left side, I got that when I was 18, like within a month of turning 18 I believe. Um, and so that would have been May of 2014.

Interviewer: May of 2014.

Silvia: I got that in memory of my father who passed away um, when I was 11 and, um, “only time” to me signifies the song “only time” by Enya of all things. Um, I remember like the vivid memory for me is driving around in my dad's truck as a child and that song would always be playing, or at least that's the memory I have of it. So I wanted to get something to sort of preserve those moments for myself.

Interviewer: That’s really beautiful. Yeah, that’s really beautiful. And, um, what about – what about the mountain?

Silvia: (laughs) So the mountain one is, actually, one of the peaks in the grand Teton range out in Wyoming.

Interviewer: Wow.

Silvia: I first visited that area when I was 12 or 13 with my mom and younger brother. And then two years ago, summer of 2016, I spent several weeks in Wyoming doing field research, um, and then we spent a portion of time in the Teton mountain range as well. And I really like the outdoors and hiking, um, and I felt the area is beautiful and I had one of the best times of my life while I was there sort of like, “well, I may as well get a tattoo of it” and I had been planning on getting some sort of landscape tattoo to for a while and having that experience sort of confirmed for me like, “okay, I want to get this area.” Because I don't want – my tattoos, I like to get things that have some sort of meaning to me, not just a picture for no reason.

Interviewer: Sure, sure. So this was really – going there was a really meaningful experience for you.

Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And – and when did you get this one?

Silvia: Um… last - So October of 2016.
Interviewer: October 2016. And what about the tattoo on your back?

Silvia: So that was - that's supposed to be a lotus flower. I actually drew that one myself.

Interviewer: Wow.

Silvia: Um, and I got that in October 2018. Um… that one was for – something that I got on a whim, and, I was more – more invested in it at the time of getting it, but I think I was more in love with the idea of getting another tattoo than the actual tattoo itself.

Interviewer: Sure.

Silvia: And I really regret having gotten it.

Interviewer: Ah.

Silvia: Um, it was on my back. It was larger and darker than I had ever really wanted or intended it to be, which is why I’m going through the process of having it removed now.

Interviewer: Oh?

Silvia: Um, I’m having, like, laser removal on it, and it – the tattoo faded significantly, um, and I was like, “Okay, maybe I can live with this tattoo, the tamped down version of it.” Um, but after maybe like a year of having it faded like that, I started to think it just looked really ugly and like, I felt like I had like a literal target on my back, and I was like, “I want this thing gone,” like this is not – I had more negative feelings about it than positive ones, so, like, okay. And I haven't really thought about getting more tattoos since, um, only because I don't want to make that same sort of mistake in my eyes again, just more painful and more expensive to get a tattoo removed than it is to get one.

Interviewer: A literal target on your back?

Silvia: Right.

Interviewer: Wow. Yeah. Is it, um, can you say more about that?

Silvia: Um, like the target on my back part? Um… I mean, I guess just when I initially got it, it was so dark and it's centered, like, right there. Um… I can't see it, you know, for my day to day, but if I wore like an open back shirt, like other people could see it and might like wonder about it or have questions. And I got a lot of compliments on the piece. They're like, “Oh, I really like it,” and with my other tattoos, when people tell me that they like them, I’m filled with, like, joy and I'm like, “Oh yeah, like here's the story behind it.” But with that one they’re like, “Oh, I really like it,” I just want to like brush it off. I'm like, “Yeah, don’t, I don't want to talk about it.” (Laughs)
Interviewer: (laughs) So – so you don't really like it, it wasn't what you imagined, and therefore you imagine that when other people are looking at this – you don't want them looking at it, or they are critical of it, something like that?

Silvia: Um… not – I don't think others are critical of it. I think maybe more I’m embarrassed by it.

Interviewer: You're embarrassed by it. And you don't want other people, whether they like it or not, to see it.

Silvia: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. I see, I see. So the first one you got was the “only time.”

Silvia: Yes, and the flowers that surround that one were an addition.

Interviewer: Were an addition? Oh, when did you get those added?

Silvia: I got the flowers the same time that I got the mountain done, like in the same session. So it would’ve been that October of what, 2016 as well.

Interviewer: Okay, wonderful. So, um, so the way that we can maybe dive in more depth fully, um, is there – is there one of these that you want to kind of ground the conversation in? One that maybe feels a little more compelling?

Silvia: Hmm… I’m inclined to say the “only time” one with the flowers. Just because I – yes, that one. I think it weaves together both the experience of my dad, and then the flowers are also native ones from Wyoming as well, so it ties in that part of my life, too.

Interviewer: Okay, wonderful. So we'll, we'll keep this one in mind as we're discussing, and if the others come up too, that's really fine as well. So you've told me a little bit about what these words mean to you, um, what it sort of calls you back and flowers around, what those represent that it ties into your other tattoo and it ties into this other really meaningful experience for you in Wyoming. Um, I wonder, is there anything else that whenever you – have you looked at the images? I think it's fascinating sometimes to have someone who is wearing the tattoo actually look at the image, because we don't often look at our own bodies that way.

Silvia: Yeah (laughs)

Interviewer: Did you –did you take a look at your photograph?

Silvia: I did. I, um, I looked at them. Because, my um, my tattoos are position in places where I don't normally see them. So they're normally, like, on display for other people. So they’re - Yeah, I definitely do, I mean I look at pictures and I’m like, “What? What’s that look like?” (laughs)
**Interviewer:** (laughs)

**Silvia:** Um, but yeah, when I look at, like, the photo I sent you, it's a very different perspective from what I'm usually seeing, because it's like on, like right underneath, like, my armpit area and I usually just get to see like the front corner or like an odd angle of it. Um, so sometimes it surprises me. I'm like, “Oh. Ah. Interesting. Okay.”

**Interviewer:** It's surprising?

**Silvia:** Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

**Interviewer:** What else does it – What else were you thinking or feeling whenever you were looking at the picture you sent me?

**Silvia:** Um…hmm. I guess I was like – I definitely wanted to send a photo that made the tattoo look good. I didn’t want to send a photo of that, you know, was a bad angle or made it look distorted or something like that, which I think is kind of interesting, like, with tattoos in general, like, we get them to sort of show them off in some ways and you don't want them to look bad to the viewers that happened to – have the privilege of like seeing them.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. You get them so that other people can experience them, too.

**Silvia:** Yeah. Artwork, you know?

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Yeah. So it's - it's deeply meaningful for you, what it is, you know, in and of itself, but it's also for other people to enjoy. It's a beautiful piece of art.

**Silvia:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Interviewer:** How did you decide your location?

**Silvia:** Um… I felt like, the “only time” one, I decided that location because I wanted something discreet enough that most people wouldn't see it on like a normal day. Like when I'm wearing a shirt you can't really see it unless it's low cut. But I also wanted something that wouldn't be totally be hidden all the time. I didn’t – I never wanted to get a tattoo that only I could see, like I'm not going to get it on, like, my butt or something that I'm not even gonna see because it’s behind me and then probably no one else will ever see as well.

**Interviewer:** Sure.

**Silvia:** So I was – it was very intentional to get it somewhere, you know, semi-private, not totally just for myself, and that one, the “only time” one, I got when I was 18, um, there was definitely a factor of putting it somewhere where my mother wouldn't see it (laughs)

**Interviewer:** Oh (laughs)
Silvia: It – she was very, uh, anti-tattoo until she found out about that one.

Interviewer: Wow.

Silvia: So I didn't want to get one on, like, my wrist or something because she would have seen that, uh, right away.

Interviewer: What was it like for her to find out that you had this tattoo?

Silvia: Oh my gosh (laughs), she was pissed, to say the least. She was definitely really upset initially, and it didn’t last that long, just the shock, I guess. Once I explained what it was for, she kind of was more understanding, but I remember her comment was, “That's – that’s huge!” And I was like, “No it's not, you don't know what other people have tattooed on their – this is small, it's not like dark shading, it's just, you know, a script, like single line work.” Um, so I think she's come around a little bit. I know when she saw the one on my back, she saw it when it was really dark and large and she (pause, laughs), she cried when she saw that one. Um, and her comment was “Just don't get any face tattoos.”

Interviewer: (laughs) Just don't get any face tattoos? Wow. Did you need that caution?

Silvia: I… don't know. I guess – I guess she thought maybe?

Interviewer: Wow. So she cried. Did she come around to the back tattoo as well?

Silvia: I… I guess. You know, I think she just kind of knew that I was becoming more of a young adult, um, and it wasn't really her role to tell me what I could or could not do with my body. So she's kind of like, “Eh.” Um, but she was raised in an environment where like tattoos were viewed, like, negatively, or were like associated with like motorcycle gangs or something like that. So I think she was like, “My daughter has two now,” and that was very shocking.

Interviewer: Sure. Did it – did it symbolize something like that for you too, that you are – you get to make decisions about your body? You're an adult now?

Silvia: I think somewhat, yeah. I never really had, like, an epiphany, like, “Oh yes, this is symbolic of me sort of like growing up or coming of age and being able to do what I want with my body.” But it definitely served as a tool for, like, arguing my case to have more freedom when it comes to, like, parents.

Interviewer: Sure. Sure. So does your mom know about your third tattoo?

Silvia: She – I think she knows about them? I've been on beach vacations with them since, but she hasn't made any comments about them, or the flowers, or the mountains. So I think she’s okay with it (laughs).

Interviewer: (laughs) It's been a very gradual process for the two of you.
Silvia: Yeah. Mmhmm.

Interviewer: What about other people in your life who – who get to see your artwork? How do they respond?

Silvia: Um, I think most of my friends really it. They say, like, it’s beautiful or they'll ask what the meaning is, or why I got it. Um, a lot of them are really intrigued by the one that I'm getting removed, but I still get compliments on that, and they're shocked when I’m like, “Yeah, I don’t like it.” So that's always, uh, something I have to explain to people. They're like, “Oh, why?” and I go through telling them the same spiel that I gave to you, and, um, explaining then also how it takes a lot more and it costs a lot more to get something like that removed. Um… I haven't really like – mostly just compliments from friends who say they like it. I haven't really been in a situation where I was, like, in like a sexual setting with like a partner and they're like, “Oh wow, like this is so beautiful” or whatever. That's not discussed (laughs).

Interviewer: Yeah.

Silvia: My-my current boyfriend has asked before, like why I got it and if it meant anything to me, but the way he talks to me about that isn’t any different than say, oh, my friend or roommate would.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So it hasn't really positively or negatively impacted anything about your sex life, that it's not a – like a discussion.

Silvia: Right. I don’t think it’s a discussion. Um, I think personally it's positively impacted me. Like, I particularly think, like, the ones on my sides make feel more sexy. I like the way they look on my body in that way, and I feel more suave, uh, because of it. But it hasn't developed into any sort of conversation within that particular setting, it's sort of more of like I feel sexy on my own, independent of what others are thinking about them.

Interviewer: Yeah. So if I'm understanding you, the tattoos were discretely placed, but they're there in places that can be visible to certain people. For example, like when you wear certain clothes or whenever you have a sexual partner, but it's not always for other people. In fact, it's not just the meaning that's for you. It's also the way that it makes your body look.

Silvia: Right. Absolutely.

Interviewer: That’s for you as well.

Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: How else do you feel about, um, visually even, or otherwise, about your body when you think about your body now, uh, versus before you had any tattoos?

Silvia: Hmm… I definitely – I think the tattoos add more character to my body and, like, give me and others something different to look at than what normally people would see on, like, your rib
cage or your back or something. Um, but I – in the way that the two of my side taking feel more sexy, the one on my back definitely makes me feel less attractive.

**Interviewer:** Uh huh.

**Silvia:** Um, and, like, sometimes when I catch a glimpse of my back in the mirror, I'm just like, “Uhhhh,” and kind of like cringe a little bit inside. Not really outwardly, but I can imagine what my back would look like without that, tat-tat-tattoo there. Excuse me. I know before I've looked at old photos of myself where I don't have it on me, and I kind of, like, fantasize about like the day that I won't have that on my back again.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. So you liked the way that your back looks better without tattoo like that?

**Silvia:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So… I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought there (laughs).

**Silvia:** (laughs) You’re OK.

**Interviewer:** Let's see here. Can I – can I ask, like, do you know any – have you noticed any differences or anything that's kind of, um, changed or altered in any way since you've gotten your first, second, and third tattoos?

**Silvia:** I noticed that on the flowers that I got around the “only time” tattoo, some of the ones that are more toward my back have faded a little bit, and I think that's probably due to maybe healed a little bit incorrectly or also that's where my bra rubs on a daily basis so that it's, um, not uncommon for tattoos to in places where it's, like, constantly rubbing against clothing or like another body part, um, but the artist that I got that piece done with does, um, free touch ups and I've been meaning to go back to her to get that filled in. Um, I just haven't yet because it's not too important to me to get it taken care of at the moment, I'm like, “I'll get to it eventually” and I still think it looks okay for now. Um, so not, not in a rush to get it corrected, but I have noticed that that particular area is fading.

**Interviewer:** Mm. So you noticed that you feel more of a rush to get the one on your back removed than you do to touch the one on your side up.

**Silvia:** Right, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Because it still looks good and it makes you feel good.

**Silvia:** Yeah, absolutely. It – also like there's, like, a strategy behind that too, like it's advised against – like, you shouldn't get a new tattoo while you're doing a tattoo removal process, um, because then it's kind of almost like your immune system is doing double duty on trying to heal this new tattoo and also recovering from the laser treatment and taking away that broken up ink

175
as well. So if I were to get a new tattoo at the same time I'm doing laser, the laser process would go even slower. So I'm not trying to inhibit that, uh, in any way.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah, yeah. Because that's definitely the priority.

**Silvia:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So are you currently in the process of getting it removed?

**Silvia:** Uh huh.

**Interviewer:** OK. And how many treatments have you had?

**Silvia:** Uh, I go again in ten days. I’ll go for my 8th or 9th appointment.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Silvia:** So yeah.

**Interviewer:** Quite a process.

**Silvia:** (laughs) The guy that’s doing my tattoo said that mine's taking particularly longer to, um, get rid of compared to other ones that he’s seen. We think it's, you know, because it's such a new tattoo, it's like less than three years old. Um, and I might be, like, the ink that was used. Some folks have their tattoos gone in like three treatments, but here I am sitting at eight or nine, and it's still all there (laughs).

**Interviewer:** How are you feeling about that?

**Silvia:** Um… definitely frustrated. I thought that would mostly be gone right now.

**Interviewer:** Mm.

**Silvia:** But it’s also been a lesson for myself to definitely be more thoughtful about any future tattoos that I might want to get, and I try to impart that wisdom onto friends and family who are thinking about getting one and are on the fence. I'm like, “Don't rush it” because of the experience that I've had with it. So, I'm patient. I'm not angry. Maybe just a little, like… disappointed that it’s taking a while? But I’ve come to terms with the fact that it's going to take a while and that's okay.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, it's going to take a while, but it will eventually be what you want it to be.

**Silvia:** Right, right. Yeah.
Interviewer: So have other people – You said that, like, if someone's on the fence, you tell them “Don't rush into it.” Have other people been sort of, telling you about – have you had to give that advice?

Silvia: Um… yeah. I've given it to a few folks. I was just talking to a girl at work, what, maybe two weeks ago? She was saying that she wanted to get a couple things, she just doesn’t know what it is yet, and I said, you know, “This your first one, when you do decide to get one, um, be confident that it is what you want, and don't be afraid about speaking up to the artist, if they have something drawn on paper. Um, say, like, ‘Hey, no, no, that’s too large’ or whatever. Um, don’t have any fear of saying something before they take the actual needle to you, because once they do that, then that's kind of, like, set in stone.”

Interviewer: Yeah.

Silvia: And even – the artist puts, like, the stencil on your skin, and it's just, like, basically pen on you – if that positioning doesn't look good, you can say something. It’s a product that you're paying for, it's gonna be with you forever.

Interviewer: Oh yeah. Yeah. So you're – you're telling them that it's – don’t be afraid to speak up. Don't be afraid to change things even when they've put the stencil on you.

Silvia: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Is that coming from your personal experience too?

Silvia: I would say, yeah. Um, I remember when I got the one on my back, like, in my memory, I recall it looking okay and it being a size that was all right. Um, and then she did the stencil on my back, and I could kind of see it in the mirror, but it was a little difficult so I couldn't really make a judgment call. Um, in hindsight, if I were to get another tattoo in a place that's not easily visible to myself, I would ask the artist to, like, take a photo so that I could see it before we, like, proceeded, and I didn't do that in that instance. Um… I learned from that time (laughs).

Interviewer: (Laughs) did it occur to you to ask for something like that, or it just wasn't even on your radar at that point?

Silvia: It was not even on my radar at that moment. Um, I was just kind of like, “Yeah, that looks like what we agreed on” sort of thing. And I think it's also a note that has an element of maturity to it as well. I got that tattoo when I was, what, 20? I don't know. It's only two years ago, or three years maybe, but… I was 19. Um, I think I’ve just learned a few things about being aware of decisions you’re making, the commitment, and not having fear of slowing things down, like, being a young girl (indistinguishable).

Interviewer: Yeah. It sounds like you’ve, um, I heard you use the word “maturity,” and I hear you describing what it's like to be assertive, to know what you want and to not be afraid to tell other people what you want.
Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So that – part of that lesson at least came from this experience of the tattoo that you don't like.

Silvia: Right. Part of it, for sure, not all of it, but definitely some of it.

Interviewer: Some of it came from other areas.

Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So I wonder if you can tell me, um, what led up to – what were the events that led up to you getting your “only time” tattoo? You were 18? Uh, you can fill in the blanks here.

Silvia: Uh… hm. I recall, I guess how it happened. Like, I always... So my dad passed away when I was 11, um, from, like, (indistinguishable) melanoma, and I always knew that I wanted to do something, um, to remember him by, and I remember growing up, having friends’ parents, or just seeing that it was common for people to get tattoos of, like, loved ones that they had either passed or something like that. And, um, at that age I thought that would be a nice way to remember him. I was also influenced by just different styles of tattoos that I saw on social media and the way they – well, in fifth grade I remember thinking like, “Oh, like, a side rib tattoo would be, like, pretty cute.” And I also had wanted to get one for my dad you know, and I was like, “Well, maybe I'll get one here.” Um, and I was talking about it with one of my friends who was a year older than me, and she's like, “Oh, I'm going to go get one for my mom on my foot, let me know if you want to get one, we should go together,” and… so I had been planning, thinking about it for a few months, and the same friend called me one evening, um, while I was doing an art show for my high school, and she said, “Hey, I'm at the tattoo parlor right now, the artist said he can fit in another one,” so spontaneous and getting one.

Interviewer: Yeah. You were breaking up just a little bit, right whenever you said the word “spontaneous,” can you fill in what you said since then?

Silvia: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I said I had always wanted my first had to be somewhat spontaneous, but I also planned exactly what I wanted. Like I knew that I wanted the words “only time” on my body. So what it took, the nudge that was required for me to get the tattoo was my friend saying, “Hey, I'm already here. You can get it now.” Um, otherwise I don't know when or if I would've taken that step. So I really kind of credit that first one with someone else sort of being like, “Oh, come and do it now, whatever.”

Interviewer: Someone else going through that, too.

Silvia: Which I’m happy about.

Interviewer: Yeah. So is that what the spontaneity is about? It's the push that got you to do it?
Silvia: That's what – for that one, yes, that particular one, because I feel like I was afraid that getting a tattoo would hurt. When I decided on the “only time” tattoo, I knew that I wanted it to be there on, like, my upper rib, uh, area, and I – you know, everyone says that that area is really painful to get a tattoo, so I knew going in that it would hurt. Um, it wasn't ready to up the complainant will may go for something that I knew it was going to be painful. It was really helpful to already have a friend present, in the moment on that day and being able to have someone there.

Interviewer: did, uh, did that change or alter your relationship with your friend at all? Going through that experience together?

Silvia: uh, I don’t think o. Not really. She and I aren’t in contact anymore (laughs), so yeah, I think it was just… it was interesting, for sure. But I don't, I don't think going together was really significant at that time. No.

Interviewer: Yeah. So that her as an individual wasn’t, it was just having someone there to give you that nudge. That was, what was important.

Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, wonderful. And it was it as painful as you thought it was going to be?

Silvia: It's hard to answer. I think it was more painful than I expected. I – I don't know if you have any tattoos, but depending on where you get them, it's an interesting sensation on your body. Like when it goes over, at least on myself, um, like, bony areas with thin skin almost feels like vibrations, like penetrating through you, um, as the needles, like, injecting ink. So that was interesting. I also did not realize how sensitive the skin is right underneath your armpit because I was very, like… It was a sensation of pain and tickling at the same time, which was – that’s really hard to keep still (laughs). So the reality versus expectation of that tattoo was definitely different. Um, but I don't know that it was really better or worse one way. All I can say is that I remember it being different and probably a little bit more painful.

Interviewer: So you were, you were prepared, you knew what you wanted to get. You had an – an idea in your head about what it might feel like, that you knew it wasn't going to be a, you know, warm and fuzzy sensation.

Silvia: Right.

Interviewer: But there still isn't really anything that can quite prepare you is, that's what I hear you saying.

Silvia: No, definitely not. The only thing that can prepare you is getting one and then if you decided to get a second one, you kind of know what to expect.
**Interviewer**: Even the act of going, you know, you were prepared if, if it were to arise, you were prepared. You knew what you'd get. But nothing can quite prepare you for actually putting that on the calendar and making that call.

**Silvia**: No, definitely not.

**Interviewer**: Wow. And then that changed for your second tattoo. You made that decision on your own?

**Silvia**: I did make the decision on my own. I was like, oh, like, and that was the one that's all my back. Um, I, like, saw other lotus tattoos on people that I really liked and then, you know, when I saw those in person, I was like, “Oh, like, I'll look up some online.” I saw, like, more of them, like, images online and really liked this and was reading about the, like, symbolism behind lotus flowers and it's, like, long story short it’s like beautiful things like lotuses can grow in like murky waters. So good things can come from bad things sort of deal. And at the time that I got this one done I was going through something personal, like fighting with all of that. Um, so, so in the moment it felt more powerful to get. And sometimes I speculate that maybe the reason I dislike that tattoo so much must is because I associate with this negative time in my life. I'm no longer in that place, so I, you know, I want to, like, kind of erase that memory and feeling. Um, but I don't, I try not to put too much value on that because I don't know how much of that is true and how much is just me mulling over these things because I had time to think about them at night (laughs).

**Interviewer**: Sure. I wonder – I wonder how you felt about your tattoo immediately after it was done. The first time you saw maybe a picture of your back.

**Silvia**: Yeah, it was definitely a mix of pride and surprise. I was excited to have it, it was like a cool new thing, I liked what it represents, etc. But I do remember initially thinking that it was a lot darker than I had initially intended. The darkness was always the concern of mine from, like, just a few hours after I got it even. So, it was – I never really bought into fully loving the tattoo because from the get go it was darker than I wanted. It was because so many mixed feelings about it.

**Interviewer**: Yeah. So you were really excited about it and it sounds like you might have liked it more then because of what it represented and then over time you feel a little more removed from that meaning too.

**Silvia**: Right, right. Yeah.

**Interviewer**: So when you – when you speculate, because you have this time at night to think about it, where do you think that comes from? This idea that maybe there's – there's more than one reason why you don't like that tattoo?

**Silvia**: I – I guess just patterns of like other things from that time period in my life that I no longer like as well, like certain songs or even, like, people, um… places, I guess? There’s not a ton, but a handful of objects and experiences that I associate with that period of time in my life
that I no longer enjoy or like because they bring back those memories. So it kind of just, uh… what was that, extended that pattern to apply to that tattoo.

**Interviewer:** I see. So there are – there are other things that are like that, like you mentioned songs for example, that you used to like, that meant something to you then, and now when you hear them it reminds you of the bad times.

**Silvia:** Yeah, yeah. Definitely.

**Interviewer:** So when you – when you look at that tattoo, you see, maybe not so much anymore, right? Because it's getting removed, but you would see how big it was and how dark it was and you didn't like that. When you look at that image, are you experiencing other things too?

**Silvia:** Um… Well, I do like an eye roll at myself for getting it in the first place. I was like, “Oh, like, you should have been more assertive or proactive or thought about this more before you got it.” Um, so maybe a little bit of regret with it when I look at it, but I really try not to hold too many feelings toward it because I mean I'm confident that it will be able to be fully removed, then I won't have to deal with it anymore. So just like take it as it is now because it's already here. I can't, I don't want to waste too much of my time and energy, like, being upset over it. It's not going to be something in the future.

**Interviewer:** Sure. You said that you sort of do an eye roll to yourself?

**Silvia:** Can you repeat that? You broke up a bit.

**Interviewer:** Oh, sure. Can you hear me now?

**Silvia:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Perfect. So you said that you do kind of an eye roll to yourself. If that eye roll could speak, what would it be saying?

**Silvia:** Hmm… It's hard to imagine what it says when I'm in the moment, but like right now what's coming to mind is like, “Oh, you were so silly. Like why? Why?” (Pause) I don’t know, in some ways, I want to be like, “Why did you think that this was a good idea?” (laughs)

**Interviewer:** (laughs) Why did you think this was a good idea?

**Silvia:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you have a sense of why you thought it was a good idea at the time?

**Silvia:** I think I probably thought it looked good and like, um, was cool or something. Uh, I think that I thought that the symbolism of the lotus would play a bigger role in my life later on and it totally hasn’t. Well, maybe it has, but I don't really care about it as much as I did then. So that's part of it as well. It's just the symbolism behind it isn't a philosophy I really subscribe to today or,
you know, rephrase that: I do subscribe to it, but it's not something that I feel the need to display on my body.

Interviewer: I see.

Silvia: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's not something you need to display on your body. So when the meaning was lost, some other part of that was, like, visually it was already a negative thing for you. Whenever the meaning started to be to become more meaningless, relatively speaking it was really was just, “I'm ready to be done with this.”

Silvia: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: It sounds like you've, you've had a lot of situations in which you've gotten a lot of positive feedback for all three of your tattoos. Have you, barring maybe what we talked about with your – with your mom's feelings about tattoos and you know, her daughter growing up and everything that goes along with that, have you had any negative experiences? People looking at your tattoos, seeing your tattoos?

Silvia: I don’t think so. No one's outwardly told me that they don't like them or where they think they're ugly. Negative – most of the negative experiences I've had with my tattoos have come from my own concerns about what other others think about them. So, like, even my mom's reaction to my tattoos, when I met my boyfriend's parents for the first time that we were going out, we were going to be spending a day at the lake and I was going to be in a swimsuit, I remember asking him, I'm like, “Are they going to be, like, weirded out or offended or anything that I have tattoos, or like what are their viewpoints on it?” And he said they don't care, like, they're not going to be upset that you have them. So that was reassuring for me to hear, and I never heard either of his parents say anything about it.

Interviewer: Excellent. So that was – you saw how that could have been a negative reaction, but it really didn't end up being one.

Silvia: Right, right. Yeah. Yeah. I don't have many negative experiences to share.

Interviewer: That's great.

Silvia: It is fortunate.

Interviewer: Yeah. Have you noticed, has anything in your life or about your life changed since you've gotten tattoos?

Silvia: Definitely some of my clothing choices. I, you know, sometimes I'll intentionally pick things out to show off the ones that are on my sides. Um, especially when it's like summer type of clothing, I want others to see them because I think they look really good. And conversely, there are times where I'll be going out and I don't want anyone to see the one that’s on my back
so I'll intentionally wear something that's high backed or doesn’t have like a key hole on the back so you can't see it. So like definitely some clothing preferences in certain scenarios have been influenced by my tattoos. Um, I’m trying to think if there’s anything else that's really influenced me… I think the style of them. If I were to get more, I would want to get other tattoos that are of a similar look and style of the two for the two/three that I plan on keeping. Um, that's one of the – another reason I don't like the one on my back as much, I don't think it blends well with the other ones that I have.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Silvia:** So I definitely want cohesive.

**Interviewer:** I see. You want cohesive. So if you get one more or twenty more, you want them all to have some kind of cohesion.

**Silvia:** Right. Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** What is it about that, about having cohesive tattoos?

**Silvia:** Even though they’re individual tattoos, they still are somehow working together on my body. And um, I had, you know, I think each person who has tattoos tends to, has, they tend to have a style that they gravitate toward and they want sort of a look, and like almost something that identifies them and makes me unique. If two people have an owl tattoo, um, you know, they would want them to vary slightly. You don't want the exact same one as someone. At least that's my perspective, I don't want the exact same one as someone else because I would want it to be adapted to be unique to myself. So it’s really self-branding in a lot of ways.

**Interviewer:** It’s self-branding. And part of your brand is to be really cohesive and that you have a particular style that you're putting forward.

**Silvia:** Right. Exactly. It's like, I think of tattoos the same way that I think of wardrobe. You want all of your pieces to work together and kind of make sense together, and I want all art that’s on my body to do the same thing.

**Interviewer:** Right. Yeah. Have you felt any changes in the way that you think about yourself or the way that you think about your body since you've gotten tattoos?

**Silvia:** (pause) Not too, too much. I think I would say, like, I want to say in better physical shape so that they don't distort if I, like, were gain a lot of weight or something like that, and then they would no longer look the way they do now. You know, for a while I kind of wanted to get a half sleeve done. I don't think I want to do that anymore, but when I was thinking about doing that I was just like, oh, like I would want to have like toned arms so that, like, that tattoo piece looked good.

**Interviewer:** Ah, yeah.
Silvia: In some ways I would, like, try to make sure my body doesn't distort too much, so that tattoos don't also distort. I don't know, but age is one thing. So we'll see what happens at 60 years. I guess I probably wouldn't care by then. (laughs)

Interviewer: (laughs) So that also went into the decision-making process for where they're located too – thinking about aging or weight fluctuations or something like that?

Silvia: Yeah, a little bit. A little bit, yeah.

Interviewer: You mentioned that, um, the, uh, the, the question that I have now is whether your, any of your tattoos have affected specific areas of your life. We talked a little bit about that it hasn't really impacted your sex life and that other people are not talking to you about it, but it does make you feel a certain kind of way. You feel sexier, you feel better. Um, what about other parts of your life? Your social life, your work life?

Silvia: I'm fortunate that with professional work, like, it hasn't really affected much. Um, the other, some of the other folks that I work with at my office had visible tattoos on their arms and we're pretty casual so it's not problematic for those to be showing and that professional setting. Um, and again, I chose the placement of these for the specific reason that maybe one day I would work in some sort of setting where tattoos were frowned upon professionally. So I hope that culture eventually goes away, I don't think that's a reason to judge someone's professionalism. Uh, but, you know, when I got them I intentionally did that to ensure that I wouldn't hinder my chances of getting hired years down the line. I was trying to think of other ways that the tattoos could maybe influence my life. [pause] I mean, socially, it's a talking point with other people. If I see others with artwork on their bodies that I find beautiful and appealing, it's nice to talk with them about that and ask like, oh, like, does that mean something to you? Like, why did you get it and where did you get it done? You can – it's a way to bond with other people who have tattoos for sure. Um, so I've definitely had positive experiences socially that way.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Silvia: Do you have other questions that clarify that if? Did I answer what you were asking?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's perfect. There's something really social about having a tattoo and being around other people who have tattoos also. [pause] Um, so think, uh, I'm aware of the time, I'm aware that we're about at our hour, but I do want to ask you one question that might feel a little weird, so if you can go with it, go with it: A tattoo can sometimes tell a story, right? Sometimes, they're literally stories that we inscribe on our skin. And it sounds like that's especially true for you. Um, you said that you really only get tattoos that have some kind of meaning, or that's your preference. Um, so I suppose starting with the, um, with the "only time" one, if you, if you could narrate a story, and I know this is really off the cuff, I'm asking for you to basically tell me, tell me a tale. Could you give me the story that is inscribed in your skin?

Silvia: Personal to me, not made up?
Interviewer: Yes. So it's, um, I don't want to say what, what other people see when they look at your skin, because obviously it's your meaning, but if you, you know, if you were the tattoo and you had to tell your story and knowing everything you do about yourself and your history, how would you tell that story?

Silvia: I’d say that that particular piece, like, it is part of me that's integral to me. It's sort of represents my first hardship in life and has carried me, like, from that point to where I am today in some ways. It's literally like a memory box for me. Like when I see it, I'm reminded of those experience with my dad, driving around in his truck, having that be on the radio. [pause] so that tattoo, and the other two ones, they stay with me day to day. They still means things, even if my perspective about them shifts, they still remain static. They’re static and don’t really change even when I do.

Interviewer: Even when you do, which was what happened with your back tattoo.

Silvia: Right.

Interviewer: What is the story that your lotus would tell?

Silvia: That one is more, like, I feel like a pest. Or, I think of it in the same way with think of like mosquitoes. It's just like always there kind of like buzzing behind you, like in your ear, in my ear. I'm reminded of it only when I catch glimpses of it, like in the mirror. Otherwise they don't really, I don't think about it regularly, so I always tell them from a mosquito perspective, it's just watching me even when I don't see it. I'm like, it's been a continuous, constant, like, battle in some ways, to get rid of it, but like real mosquitoes, they’re always coming back. Just like this one is not going away.

Interviewer: Not going away. It almost sounds like the other two that you have on your sides are with you, they’re stastic and you might not always be feeling the things that the tattoos are feeling, but it makes sense to you and you guys are still one unit. And the thing on your back almost has an agenda of its own.

Silvia: Absolutely. Yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. Thank you so much. I wonder, as we went through some of this conversation, was there anything that came up to you, any thought or feeling that you didn't get to express but you might want to?

Silvia: Um, I think about birth marks around my mountain tattoo. I have a freckle above it as well, it looks like a moon in the sky, like it was intentionally placed there. But when I got the tattoo, I didn't realize that I had that little freckle there until after the fact and I noticed that and I was like, oh, it works with the rest of the scenery, so. I think kind of a little treat that I relish in. I think it's funny.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's funny and it's, it works. You like it. You like that it works. Yeah. Great. Is there anything else?
Silvia: That's all I have to say. So thank you for sitting down and chatting with me about this.
Participant 3: Alice

Interviewer: How many tattoos do you have?

Alice: Five. One, two, three, four, five.

Interviewer: Five. And when did you get your most recent tattoo?

Alice: Four weeks ago.

Interviewer: Four weeks ago. I'm wondering, since the most recent one is the one we'll be focusing on, that's where the questions are oriented, but if any of your other tattoos come up or seem relevant, feel free to talk about them, too. Can you tell me a little bit about your tattoo?

Alice: My most recent one, probably about January of this year my youngest daughter Bonnie, my niece and myself talked about getting tattoos of the adult coloring book pictures that my mom had been coloring. She loved to just sit and color adult coloring books that are all the rage right now. She just had hundreds of pictures of these coloring books that she had colored. So in January we made appointments for Bonnie and my niece and me to get tattoos of pictures that my mom had colored. Bonnie got her tattoo in March, but Claire, my niece, and I, we couldn't have our appointments until June. So Bonnie got a tattoo on her shoulder of, they call them, like, mandalas or something. It's like a very abstract, beautiful color of a tattoo, and my niece had my mom color her a tattoo of some flowers and a leaf and a sunflower. When I saw the one that my niece was getting, I asked her if it was okay with her if I got the same tattoo. Now, background to that is that Bonnie and I both have the same tattoo, very similar, color differences, but almost identical tattoos on our feet and twofold with I thought it would be really neat to have that sort of connection with my niece also. She was really happy and she was like, "Yeah, absolutely, get it." Unbeknownst to us, I'm going to try really hard not to cry, but I'm going to cry, my mom died, as you know, on June 6th, and our tattoo appointments were literally, like, two weeks later. We were sort of like, "Wow, what timing this is." You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alice: We had no idea my mom was sick. There was no ... she died in a 12-hour time period from her being sick to passing away. It was very fast, very sudden. So it made it even mean more to get these tattoos that Claire and I got. I'm trying hard not to cry.

Interviewer: That's okay.
Alice: So the tattoo I have that my mom colored is a sunflower and a peony flower and then it has a feather in the background of it. My niece got the same ... mine is on my arm because I like to have my tattoos where I can see them. A lot of people get them on their backs or the back of their neck or tramp stamps or things like that, where I like to be able, especially this one, it was very important that I got it somewhere where I could see it. So I got it on my lower, between my wrist and my elbow, and my niece got hers on her chest, like, right above her heart, right above her boobs on her chest. Hers has a little bit different design. It has some Aztec things to it, where mine is just straight flower. It's sort of meaningful that it is the one that my mom colored, but it's also ... I love to garden and I love birds. I have a hummingbird garden in my backyard. So taking the flowers and the feathers was, like, meant a lot to me, as it meant a lot to her. That's why I [inaudible 00:06:37] and that's the whole reason for it. I look at it every day and think of her and feel her. I'm sorry.

Interviewer: It's okay.

Alice: It's just been hard. We really didn't expect to lose her.

Interviewer: I know.

Alice: It's been really hard. She was my best friend. But it's been a rough six months in general, the beginning of this year. But that's how I ended up with this tattoo. It's sort of like very much fate that it just happened to be that we had these appointments. Most people that notice it on me are like, "Oh ... " I tell them why and they're like, "Oh, that's sweet that you got that, you got it after your mom past." And I was like, "No, this was totally planned." She knew we were doing this, too.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Alice: My mom, if you think I'm a smartass, you should have met my mom, because she's even more smartass than me. She was like, "Don't you be saying you're getting those tattoos for me. You're getting those because you want them." This would be all while she was coloring the pictures for us. You know? So that was my mom. She was like, "Okay, I'm going to color it, but don't you be telling people you're doing this for me." Then, as soon as Bonnie got hers she was like, "Let me see. Let me see. Let me see." She was very excited to see it. She would tell me when I started getting them and especially with Bonnie getting them, she was like, "If I were 40 years younger, I probably would do it, too. But in my day and age you just didn't do it." She would say things to Bonnie to, "Go show your, Pap. Maybe it'll be the heart attack I'm waiting for," and she would just giggle laughing. You know? She was a hoot. But that's why I got that one.
Interviewer: So she was actually coloring these pictures for you to get tattoos?

Alice: Yes. We all gave her a picture. I even gave her a picture of one of those mandalas or whatever they're called, mandalas, I forget what they call those abstract pictures, and she colored it for me. Bonnie got hers and I was holding onto mine and Claire was holding onto hers, but then when she died and I saw this one that she had done for Claire I was like, "You know what? I just want that." I couldn't really explain it. It was like I wanted this connection with Claire because my mom and I raised her. Her mom died when she was born. So my mom and I basically raised her. So I wanted that connection with her, too. Yeah, she knew. She colored these pictures specifically for us.

Interviewer: Wow.

Alice: She knew we were getting them tattooed. I'm sure she's up there somewhere saying, like, "Yeah, they said it was for me, but it wasn't for me. But, hey, look, did you see my daughter's tattoo?" That's what she would be doing. That's exactly what she would be doing.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it's like to feel connected with Claire and connected with Bonnie, like, having the same tattoos?

Alice: I don't know. I think that that is just ... what first started it was my very first tattoo that I got. And I only got my first tattoo maybe eight years ago or so. So I've just done these all recently. But my very first one I got was, like, a flower on my foot. Bonnie came to me and she has 20 now, I think, 19 or 20 tattoos now. She just got one on Monday night, so she's really fresh. She just got another one. But when she came to me and was like, "You know, I really like that flower that you got. I'd like to get that. Would you care if I got that flower?" And I was like, "Absolutely not." I felt sort of honored that something that I got she wanted on herself. So when I saw this picture that Claire was doing and I just started thinking about it I thought, "You know, I so enjoyed having that connection that ..." You know, Bonnie shows people her, you know, when people ask about particular tattoos, she'll tell them, "Yeah, my mom and I have that same tattoo." And now that's what my niece is doing, too, when people are questioning her. She's saying, "My aunt Linda and I have the same tattoo." And I say the same thing if somebody questions me. I say, "Oh, my niece and I have ... this one's the same. And that one's the same as my daughter's." So it's nice to tell people that, too, and let them share in that being a reason why you got the tattoos to begin with.
Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. So you said that you prefer to have your tattoos in places where they're visible to you. Do you have any tattoos that are not visible to you?

Alice: No.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about your tattoos generally, the other four?

Alice: Well, the first one I got is on my right foot. It is just a blue flower with some swirly green and black stems and things going through it. That's the one that Bonnie got the same, but hers has a couple flowers and more stuff going through it. She made it a little bit bigger. Then, my second tattoo I got is on my left wrist. It's three hearts connecting, interlocking hearts. I got that for Joe, Sheryl and Bonnie, my daughters and my husband, because I just wanted something to represent them. That's on my left wrist. Then, my third one I got is on my left ankle and it is a hummingbird. It's a hummingbird that lives in South Africa and it has this really long tail that sort of curls up at the very end of it. It's the hummingbird, and the tattoo artist put the tail going around my ankle and connecting.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Alice: It almost looks like a chain around my ankle, but it's actually the picture of the hummingbird's tail. Then, my next one ... I'd been talking about getting one on my right forearm and I kept coming up with little ideas of, you know, I wanted something for, again, Bonnie and Sheryl and my husband. Bonnie just started sketching things and she came up with a heart that one side of the heart is made out of a rose and then my husband is a landscaper, so that was to represented him, because he does gardening and things like that. Then, the other side, the opposite side of the heart is a feather, and that's to represent Bonnie, because she's into birds and she has her pet parrots and stuff. And where the heart meets on the top is a Mickey Mouse head, and that's for Sheryl, because she's the one that got married on the Disney cruise and her and her husband go to Disney at least once a year if not more frequently. Then, in the heart I have four little paw prints for each of the dogs that I've owned as an adult. So it's like my dog paw prints in the heart, and there is room to put more little dog prints along there, too. Then, the last one is the one I told you about that I got for my mom with the feather and the flowers.

Interviewer: Yeah. So how do you pick the locations, other than that they're visible to you, how do you decide where to put them?

Alice: Sometimes I will go into the tattoo artist that we use ... he worked with my husband when he was a teenager doing landscaping. So we've known him for a long, long time. I will go in with an idea of what I want and I'll say to
him, "I was thinking about putting it here or I thought maybe I'd put it here. What do you think? Where do you think it would look better?" And he'll give me his advice and, ultimately, then they put a transfer on you that's just like Magic Marker kind of thing so you can see what it looks like in a certain place and then that's sort of how I decide. Now, he does know that I like them to be visible. Like, when I went in with the one from my mom I had two choices of getting it. One was there on my wrist, or the other I thought about getting on just the outside of my calf above my hummingbird. So he was like, "Well, we could do it bigger down there or we could do it up here." I just liked thinking about just being able to look down at my arm and think of the meaning of it.

**Interviewer:** What has happened ... what's the experience been like since you've gotten your most recent tattoo?

**Alice:** You mean like with other people and stuff like that?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, with other people and also just with yourself, because it's so visible to you.

**Alice:** You know, I've never really had a problem with them healing or anything like that. So the day after, I just let them be visible. A lot of people will keep them covered until they heal because they can look pretty disgusting when they're healing. But I've been lucky in that I take very good care of it and put lotions on like they say, so mine have looked good even while they're healing and I'll show them. I think some people that know me, especially people that knew me when I was younger are a little bit surprised that I have tattoos, because they just don't think of me ... I was a very quiet, shy, geeky kid and teenager. When I run into someone, because I live where ... I grew up in this town, so I will run into people at the store or something that I'll know from school or something like that. I think those kinds of folks are very surprised that I even have tattoos. But for the most part, everybody is sort of like, "Oh, they're so beautiful," or very positive kind of reactions to them. Even the clients at Duquesne, you know, at work, I've had clients come in and notice the new one because it's very, very powerful. They'll be like, "Wow, that's gorgeous? Where did you get it done?" That's first and foremost, like, 1,000 people's question, is, "Where did you get it done?" Because it's just such quality work. So I carry my tattoo guy's cards in my purse to pass them out for him.

**Interviewer:** Oh, wow.

**Alice:** But then second, you know, they'll be like, "Well, does it have any meaning?" It seems like a lot of folks that get tattoos do get them because they have some meaning to them. So when you're talking with someone else that has tattoos, they seem to know right away, "What was the
reasoning behind doing this sunflower," whatever. That's how ... but no one has ever not liked it.

My dad asked me, before I had this one completely done they first etched it out in black because it is fairly large, it took two sessions for me to do it. Bonnie can sit for three or four hours and get tattoos done. I'm like, an hour and a half max and I'm like, "Get me out of here. I can't take it anymore." So he did it all in black outline and one day when I went up to see my dad ... he has dementia and Alzheimer's. There are times when he's really with it, and then there's times that he just doesn't even know who I am. We happened to be sitting outside and I had my arm up on the table. He looked at me and he all of a sudden recognized who I was. He was like, "Hey Linda." I'm like, "Yeah, Dad. It's me." And he said, "What possessed you to get those things?" And I was like, "What things? What are you talking about? What things?" And he said, "You know, the ... " he couldn't put the word to it, but he just pointed to them. And I said, "You mean the tattoos?" And he was like, "Yeah, yeah. What possessed you? What would possess you to do something like that?" And I said, "You know what, Dad? I've been a good girl all my life. It's time I went a little crazy." He just looked at me and nodded his head. And he said, "Yeah, you've been a real good girl." Like, that was the end of the conversation and he went back into wherever he goes in his mind.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Alice: But, you know, I think that sort of was the first ... when I did get my very first tattoo it was like, "Yeah, you know, I have been the good girl my whole life. I've taken care of my family and taken care of my parents and helped raise my niece and never drank, never smoked, never did any of that stuff." So this was sort of my way and ... I started with one and I was like, "That's going to be all I'm going to get." This was my sort of way of going wild. And like they will tell you, when you do get one it's like an addiction. I'm sure you're finding this out. People always end up getting another, and then another. I don't know. I think it just becomes something that ... you just like it. I don't know. I can't explain it. But I'm at five and I keep saying, "Oh, I have another one that I want to get." I've got some planned out.

Interviewer: What was it about eight years ago that made it so that you decided? Was it a sudden decision? Had you been thinking about it for a while?

Alice: You know, I think it was Bonnie ... we were at one of my husband's nephew's wedding and Bonnie was in high school when we first found this particular tattoo artist. When she was like, "I want to either get a tattoo or get my tongue pierced," then I was like, "Bonnie, give it up. I don't want you getting the tongue pierced and you don't need a tattoo." So she then goes and talks to her dad, well, of course he's an ex-Marine that has tattoos.
up and down both of his arms from when he was in the service, and said, "Dad, I want a tattoo." And he was like, "Okay. We'll find somebody." Well, we were at this nephew's wedding and this big, bald guy comes walking up to Joe, my husband and hugs him, and he's tattooed on top of his head to the tips of his toes. My daughter is looking at him with all these stars in her eyes as he's telling Joe how he has his own shop now, he owns his own shop and he hires people from the Art Institute and stuff like that because he really wants quality artists doing his work. So, literally, he walks away and she turns to me and she says, "Now what's your excuse?" I was like, "All right. We'll go check it out." I said, "I want to go and see his shop." My thing was the cleanliness and the sanitary stuff. So we went and checked out his shop and he showed me how all the needles are disposable and the inks are ... they don't even use the same inks. Whatever they use on somebody, they throw it away and put new ink out. He says, "You're worried about the sanitary aspects of it for your daughter to get a tattoo." He said, "I'm more in danger than she is." And I was like, "I don't really understand that. Why would you say that?" And he said, "Well, the blood. I tattoo somebody with some disease in their blood," he said, "I'm going to be the one that's going to pay, because if I'm not super careful I could have problems with that." I'd never thought of it that way, but it is very true, because you do bleed when you're getting them. Then, Bonnie made an appointment and I went with her and my husband went with her and she got her first one. Then, she made an appointment for her second one and she was like, "You know, Mom, you said you wouldn't mind getting one. Why don't you come with me and make an appointment and just get something little or whatever you want?" So that's sort of what started it. I think because she assured me that it wasn't horribly painful, that it wasn't worse than childbirth or anything like that. So that was what sort of started me getting them. I saw that it's such a thing in society now, where it used to be sort of bar alleys and hidden in a corner. It's out there right now. Everybody. You never know who you're going to see that's going to have a tattoo somewhere on their body. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alice: From the most respectable people on down.

Interviewer: Did that make you feel better about getting tattoos?

Alice: I think so. I think so. But, honestly, by the time I was 50 or whatever when I started getting them, I got to the point in my life where I really didn't care what other people thought. So it was just like, "This is something I want to do for myself." I was more worried about what my husband would say than anybody else. And he was like, "Hey, do it. If you want it, do it." You know? He came with me and Bonnie and her husband came with us, too, to hold my hand, basically.
Interviewer: You had the whole team there?

Alice: I had the whole team there, yep.

Interviewer: And it sounds like the reactions to your tattoos have mostly been positive.

Alice: Yeah, even my mom, who I told you when we started talking, my mom was like, "Why would you want to do that?" Blah, blah, blah. As soon as I would come home with one she would be like, "Okay, let me see it." She would be very curious about it. So, you know, "I would never do that, but they're sort of pretty. It's nice." And then she would say ... the next line would be, "I can't believe you waste that money on that." You know? But she always wanted to see them and she always wanted to see Bonnie's new ones, too, so-

Interviewer: She's interested.

Alice: Yeah, she was always interested. Well, my dad when I got my ears pierced when I was probably 15, he didn't talk to my mom for about two weeks because I got my ears pierced.

Interviewer: You're kidding.

Alice: No. So my dad, he never saw my tattoos in the beginning. I would wear sleeves around him. Then, he started with the dementia so he really never noticed it. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah. So even as an adult you didn't want your dad to know?

Alice: Well, I didn't want to have the battle that I knew would come.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Alice: That was it. I was always the good girl and I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I just felt that if he would see them he would be disappointed in me back then, so it wasn't worth the aggravation.

Interviewer: So related to that, not wanting to disappoint and recognizing that it's kind of a battle, you said that some people who have known you for a really long time are surprised that you have tattoos?

Alice: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that?
Alice: I think just because people that did know me have this image of me in their head. Like I said, I got married very young, had my kids right away, I was a very hands-on mom, I was, you know, homeroom moms and PTG presidents and I did everything for my kids growing up. My husband and I, we've been together a long time, we've lived in the same house, like sort of the normal American family. I think when people see that I deviate from that image in their head of me that that's sort of what surprises them, is like, "Wait a minute, you have tattoos?" Like, "Yeah." Because I'll put them on Facebook. When I do get a new one, I put them out there for social media and stuff. I can tell the people that would normally reply to a picture of a fly on my Facebook page and don't reply when I put up a picture of a tattoo. Now, my older daughter, the first time that Bonnie got one, called her trashy. So my older daughter just totally thinks that we're crazy trying to get tattoos and waste the money. But it's sort of funny, some of her very close friends all now have tattoos, too.

Interviewer: So she's sort of the anomaly there?

Alice: Yes. I think she's sort of like my young adult life. She's the good girl and just can't see herself doing that. She's the one that's the pediatric oncology nurse. One of the families that she got very close to was one of her first patients that passed, their mom and dad came with us on the cruise when Sheryl got married and it was the first time the dad had ever even been on a plane, let alone on a cruise.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah.

Alice: So we then ... the mom started talking to me about trying to get my daughter to get a tattoo because they have a symbol for their daughter that died that's a little pink teddy bear and it's a saying that says, "Thinking of Nikki." It's a particular ... they have ... it's not a GoFundMe page, but they collect money from things and buy stuff for children's hospitals, cancer kids. They go at Easter time and it's this Thinking of Nikki Foundation, that's what it is that does this. They've tried for a couple of years to talk Sheryl into getting a Thinking of Nikki tattoo, because her school teacher who Sheryl's really close to and the mom and another nurse that took care of her, they all got this Thinking of Nikki tattoo. So I sort of think in my mind there will come a time where she'll get that. But, you know, for right now she just shakes her head at us two.

Interviewer: So she doesn't give you negative reactions, but she's definitely not encouraging it?

Alice: No, definitely not. Definitely not. She would never say anything to me about it. Now, Bonnie on the other hand, she would make a comment, but...
she would never make a comment about mine, and especially this one that she knows is because of my mom.

**Interviewer:** Do you think eight years ago if it hadn't been for Sheryl and meeting the tattoo guy and your husband, do you think you would have gotten a tattoo on your own?

**Alice:** Probably not, had it not been for Bonnie getting them and me seeing the whole ... I would have really had no reason to go see ... I don't think I would have went to a tattoo parlor myself to see how it's all done and what it's all about. But going with her and seeing it and realizing how safe it is nowadays, that I think is what encouraged me to get it done. But, no, I don't think I would have just done that on my own. No, I don't think so.

**Interviewer:** Had you ever even thought about getting tattoos before?

**Alice:** You know, when Joe and I first got married, it's sort of funny that you did ask that, because when we first got married we got into a big argument when Sheryl, my older daughter, was probably about two. I don't even think I was pregnant with Bonnie yet. We got into this big argument about him getting another tattoo because he went and got one ... he disappeared on me for a day is what happened, and went and got this tattoo.

**Interviewer:** Oh my gosh.

**Alice:** At the time, it was right after my niece's mom died. I didn't know where he was for, like, hours. We were poor as sin raising a baby, so the fact that he spent that money and once he did it, like, that really upset me. So I sort of said to him at the time, like, "Well, how would you like it if I just went and spent $150 on a tattoo?" Knowing I never would have really gone through with it at that point. But, you know, yeah, I did think about it at that time.

**Interviewer:** You thought about it as, like, "I'm going to do this to get back at you," kind of thing?

**Alice:** Yeah, like, "If you think you're going to go blow that kind of money, I'm going to go blow that kind of money." That kind of thing, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, that's funny.

**Alice:** Yeah, I did think that very briefly, but I don't think I would have, had it not been for Bonnie doing it and Joe coming with us and knowing the tattoo artist like we do. I don't think I would just go to Carson Street in a shop and get a tattoo.
Interviewer: Fair enough, yeah.

Alice: I don't think I would ever do that. If it wasn't for this guy, I would never do it.

Interviewer: Yeah. So since you've gotten your first tattoo and with every additional tattoo that you've gotten, do you find that any areas of your life have been affected or feel any different for you?

Alice: No.

Interviewer: Yeah. So that can include anything from work or social life or just the way that you feel about yourself.

Alice: No. No, I can honestly say I think that's one of the nice things of working in psychology, is that the folks that I work with and even my boss, is accepting of that. I don't think she would ever say to me, "You need to cover that up," or something.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you-

Alice: Yeah, I totally have never had a situation arise where I felt that I needed to cover them up or anything like that.

Interviewer: So you don't have to ... a number of people have talked about cultural pressures. You don't really experience any of those?

Alice: No.

Interviewer: That's great.

Alice: No. Hmm-mm (negative).

Interviewer: That's amazing. What about clothing choices? Do you find that you buy particular kinds of clothes because of your tattoos?

Alice: No. No, not at all. I buy what I want, not even thinking about the tattoos, to be truthful with you. No, I can tell you, my niece who has also said she'll talk with you if you want to-

Interviewer: Oh, cool.

Alice: She, I know since she has gotten her tattoo, she got it with me, you know, whatever, a month ago or whatever it's been, since she got her tattoo, Bonnie made a comment yesterday, there was a picture of her on Facebook, she teaches autistic kids and special needs children, so she,
instead of just doing nothing this summer, especially with my mom passing, because my mom was a big part of her life, I would say that her and I were the main caretakers of my mom and dad over the last five years or so that they've been needing everyday kind of help, she took a job at a summer camp and got her tattoo the day before she started summer camp and had to go to summer camp, not go swimming with her kids. Because you aren't allowed to go in a pool with a new tattoo.

**Interviewer:** Oh, yeah.

**Alice:** So it became a situation for her. But it worked out that a couple of her kids wouldn't go in the pool, so she ended up being able to stay in the shallow end and watch her kids in the pool kind of thing. But she put a picture up on Facebook the other day of her at the end of summer camp with a couple of her teachers and Bonnie said, "I have never seen Claire wear so many tank tops than I have since she got her tattoo." I didn't think about it, but it's 1,000% true. She has been wearing ... she definitely doesn't show it to certain people, but for the most part she has been wearing clothing to show off this tattoo all the time. It's crazy. We find it very humorous.

**Interviewer:** I guess that's one of the benefits to getting your tattoos kind of where you want them and they're visible. People can just see them. You can just see them.

**Alice:** Right, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you think very much or care very much about who else sees them? Or whenever you place them it's just because you want to look at them?

**Alice:** Yeah, just basically because that's where I want them.

**Interviewer:** That's where you want them?

**Alice:** Yeah, I don't put in my mind ... I don't really let ... at this point in my life, Ashley, I don't let someone else influence ... Like I said, the only person that would influence where or what I would do would be my husband. And that would be just a respect. We've been together 38 years. You don't make it that long without having a certain respect for what they do and what they want. I would never do something that he would ... I mean, I'd probably do it anyway, even if he would frown upon it. But I would definitely give it a second thought if it were something he would be the only person that would be able to say, "You know, maybe you don't want to wear that today because we're doing this," or something. But he never has either. He's never said it and I've never had any situation arise where I've been embarrassed by them or anything like that, or ashamed. Nothing.
Interviewer: Do all of your tattoos have some kind of meaning for you?

Alice: The first two didn't start off that way. They were just ... like I said, I got the flower for my first one, just because I am very into gardening and things like that, so my first two came from my love of gardening, and my second one being a hummingbird. I have a hummingbird garden that's bigger than my office in Duquesne in my backyard. So the hummingbird, that was the reason why I got the hummingbird. I wanted something that wrapped around my ankle. I said, "Just give me a vine with a hummingbird on it or something." And he was like, "Wait, there's a hummingbird in South Africa that has a tail. Let me look up a picture of it." And he did, and I was like, "Yeah." So those were the first two, but the three that I've gotten now do have meaning to them to me. There's been something behind the last three that, you know, family kind of stuff.

Interviewer: So the meaning, it makes it pretty powerful for you, but you don't get tattoos just for meaning. The first couple, you made a decision to get a tattoo.

Alice: Yes. Yeah, I just wanted a tattoo and I started Googling tattoo pictures and then it was like, "Okay, I want a flower." "Flower tattoo pictures" kind of thing. Then I took in a bunch of different pictures to the guy that does our tattoos and said, "I sort of like this one, but I like the vine better on that one. Blue is my favorite color." He asked, like, "Well, what's your favorite color?" And I said, "Blue." So he combined a bunch of the pictures into my first tattoo. That was how that one came about.

Interviewer: Wow. That's so cool. So the tattoo artist also has a pretty big role in all of this?

Alice: Yes, I trust him immensely. I trust him. If I didn't trust that it was a very safe process and that he did quality work and wouldn't screw us up, I would never let Bonnie go. Myself, I wouldn't care as much as getting some screw up on me, but I'm that mama bear. Excuse my french, but don't fuck with the mama bear. You know? Don't mess with my kids if you're going to do something ... I would have never let just ... That was the whole reason why we put off getting her first tattoo so long, was because I didn't want her to just go to the bar places on the south side and go get a tattoo. You know?

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Alice: So I wanted her to definitely get something that would go somewhere that I knew was quality care. And he does have a lot of influence. And because he does ... he's been doing this for a long time and he goes to tattoo shows.
He used to compete. He's won all kinds of awards for his artwork. He's won awards. He does these fantastic portraits of loved ones on people's bodies. They get actual portraits done. He's done some, like, I've seen pictures of ones that he's done that are just breathtakingly beautiful. So I do leave a lot of it in his hands. Like, even with this flower, I wanted him to stay pretty close to the actual picture because my mom drew it, but I was like, "I don't like the Aztec stuff." And my niece had my mom color more with purple because purple's her favorite color and I was like, "You don't have to do the purple for me. I'd sort of like it to just be a little bit more colorful. I love sunflowers, so you can make that, you know, [inaudible 00:48:23] sunflower does." So I leave a lot of trust in him that he's going to do a good job.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And he does, it sounds like consistently-

Alice: And he does. He really does. If he does by chance screw something up, I wouldn't doubt for a second that he would find a way to fix it. You know? He's itching to get his hands on my husband, because his tattoos are all from when he was in the service. He's 60, and that would have been 42 years ago, because he went in straight from high school.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah. Oh my gosh.

Alice: His are really ratty looking and you can't even tell what half of them are anymore. Our tattoo artist, Chris, he's just like, "I want to get my hands on you so bad, Joe. I'll fix these up. I'll make it." Joe's just like, "Yeah, someday, someday." He just puts it off.

Interviewer: That's funny. So you-

Alice: Yeah, we do put a lot of faith in him and a lot of trust in him and he's never let us down.

Interviewer: That's amazing. I feel like that helps every time you want to get another tattoo, knowing that you have someone so reliable to go back to.

Alice: Yes, yeah. I wouldn't go anywhere else.

Interviewer: You wouldn't go anywhere else? Yeah.

Alice: No, definitely not.

Interviewer: I also wonder ... you said that tattoos are addictive. I wonder, what's your take on that? Why do you think that is?
Alice: You know, I wish I could tell you exactly what that reasoning is. I just think because it becomes a piece of art on your body that, you know, you think to yourself, "Well, maybe my next one ... " I sort of would like right now, I would like to have a phoenix, because the phoenix is the symbol of rebirth and phoenixes die and come back to life in mythology or whatever. I sort of have always had that in the back of my head, that I would like to get a phoenix just for that symbolism of rebirth and thinking that there is an afterlife, that I'm going to see my loved ones again some day. I think that's part of it. Like, you're sitting there in the chair getting something and you're thinking to yourself, "You know, I could do this, too. Yeah, I could do that." You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alice: So I think that's sort of how it becomes addictive, that you just keep getting more. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah, that it's art on your body and it's beautiful and you can just keep getting beautiful things.

Alice: Right. Right. And, you know, it's like ... I don't know, it's just something that you do for you more than anyone else. I think that's it, too.

Interviewer: That actually leads me to something else I wanted to ask you. In this project I'm really interested in why and when and how people get tattoos and if the tattoos have meanings and what that looks like. But I'm also interested in women's senses of their own bodies. Whenever a woman or anyone gets a tattoo you're, in theory anyway, permanently modifying your body. What does that do? So my question to you is, since you've gotten your first tattoo eight years ago and with your tattoos since, do you feel differently about your body? Do you feel the same? What's changed?

Alice: You know, I don't really feel any differently. I think that it's just ... I think I hit an age where I just felt like I didn't care what anybody else thought anymore and that was why I did it. I do not feel any differently or embarrassed or ashamed or nothing like that. Not at all.

Interviewer: What about, like, if you were in a vacuum and no one else really ... I mean, it sounds like no one else really matters anyway, but just you by yourself looking at your tattoos, does that make you think about your body differently?

Alice: No.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.
Alice: No. Hmm-mm (negative). Not really.

Interviewer: So a big part of you getting your tattoos was doing it at a time whenever you didn't have to care or just didn't care what other people thought about it anymore?

Alice: Yeah. I think because I did live my life so worried about ... Like I said before, I was always the good girl. I married the bad boy, which was the first big surprise, that everybody couldn't believe that I even married this man who was an ex-Marine and a big drinker and a big partier. I was the person that didn't even like to go to the bar. So I always lived sort of being the good girl and stuff. I just got to a point in my life where I was just like, "You know, I want to start doing things and not care what anybody else thinks. I'm going to dress the way I want to dress, I'm going to put my hair the way I want to do my hair and I'm going to do to my body what I want to do to my body and not let it matter to anybody."

Interviewer: That's amazing. When did you start feeling that way?

Alice: I think as I got older. You start realizing your mortality kind of thing. I really think when I was in my ... Honestly, Ash, I think a lot of it probably goes back to starting to have health problems and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Really?

Alice: And thinking, "You know, I'm 57 years old. I've probably got a good 20 years before my body's going to crap out like my parents did and I'm going to be the one with either the Alzheimer's or the dementia or with my new diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, so I'm going to do whatever I want to do right now for the time that I can." I think probably when you get into your late 40s and early 50s and you start ... your family, your kids don't need you as much anymore, you're at a steady keel with marriage and my husband and we've just been together so long we just sort of mesh. I think that it just became, "I'm just going to do this because I'm going to do it." Now, I do remember, I'll tell you this, the one person who did have something to say about my tattoos was the old secretary in the department that worked with Marilyn. I don't know if you remember Norma or if you remember hearing about Norma?

Interviewer: I remember hearing about Norma. I never actually met her.

Alice: Okay. So she retired from the department probably, I think like the year before you came, because I think she's been retired for about six years now. But when I got my first tattoo and showed it to her she was appalled and said that, in psychological terms I was self-harming.
Interviewer: Oh, you're kidding.

Alice: That that was like cutting. No, that's what she told me.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

Alice: She was like, "These people probably do research on you and that's..." I forget the word that she used. It was not like self-harm, but it was like abusing your own body or some term she used. That was the only person who said anything negative to me. I was just like, "Well, you know, I like it." She just doesn't even say anything, and I know she probably, when I leave, goes, well, you know, something about my tattoos. But she does not say anything to me anymore.

Interviewer: Yeah, what was your reaction to her saying that to you?

Alice: I just blew it off. I was just like, "Well, you know, I really like it. I'm excited to have it."

Interviewer: Did it bother you at all that she said that?

Alice: I just said, like, "And I'm not a cutter or anything like that. I just wanted a tattoo."

Interviewer: Gosh.

Alice: Yep. But that was the only person that really said anything negative to me. But I didn't let it bother me.

Interviewer: Yeah, it seems like it didn't.

Alice: I wasn't about to.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's her opinion, not yours.

Alice: Exactly.
Participant 4: Rosa

Interviewer: Okay, and the picture of the tattoo you sent me, when did you get that?

Rosa: The tattoo I got in November I believe, October or November of last year.

Interviewer: October or November 2017. So you're coming up on a year of having it. Is it your only tattoo, your first one?

Rosa: It is my only tattoo, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah? So we can just dive right in. Can you tell me a little bit about it? Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Rosa: Actually it is ... My sister, she's younger than me, she's about a year and a half younger than me. She's always been more of an artsy kind of person and she read this poem in middle school actually, and it was this really awesome poem. And I actually took a piece of it, and it's on my tattoo, and everything incorporated in my tattoo has to do with her poem. It's kind of about an oriole and he's like the overseer, I guess, of the woodland, this little ... It's this place that's in a glass bubble I guess, and it ends, the end, up the oriole dies. It's really kind of sad, but the oriole dies and everyone has to move on, they can't stay stuck on this great overseer passing away basically. But it's a really cool thing and I gave a piece of it to my tattoo artist, who's from Slippery Rock, and he made this all up on his own, and I think he did a really good job.

Interviewer: Wow, so he came up with all of the designs?

Rosa: Yeah, he came up with the whole tattoo itself.

Interviewer: Yeah, so what is it about the poem that really speaks to you, that made you wanna get this?

Rosa: I always just thought it was really beautiful, and then my dad passed away in 2013, and it just kind of hit something [there] to you. And I thought it's be really cool to have something on me that my sister wrote herself, and it also has some feels for me relating to my dad.

Interviewer: Yeah, so your dad passed in 2013?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Had you thought you wanted to get something to commemorate that for a while?
Rosa: Yeah, I definitely did. I wouldn't say this fully commemorates that. It definitely makes me think about it, but I definitely still think about getting another one to maybe be something like that. But yeah, I definitely had that on my mind.

Interviewer: Yeah. So it seems to fit in with that, you just thought it was really beautiful. And then the artist, is it someone that you know?

Rosa: Actually he did my boyfriend's tattoo and both his sisters', and his sisters grew up with him. I think he used to work at Crayon's over in Monaca, but he opened his own shop in Slippery Rock about two years ago I think. I've kind of been waiting to get a tattoo, 'cause I was afraid to go somewhere and have somebody mess up, but I'd seen so many things that he had done and I was really confident in him. So I was like, "I'm definitely going there."

Interviewer: So you knew his work, you knew it first hand, you knew several different people he tattooed. So then you went in, and what was the process like? You gave them the poem, or the piece of the poem?

Rosa: Actually, he does it kind of different, I feel like, to other people. I messaged him on Facebook. He'll usually have whoever he talks to message him on Facebook and then kind of give him an idea of what they want. So I sent him a bigger piece of the poem just so that he could read it and get a feel for it. Told him what I wanted in the tattoo, and then I told him I wanted an oriole, I wanted the two roses up top. And then I wanted more flowers around, but I actually got ... I don't know, the flowers in the back are flowers from around Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Rosa: They were from around here, they weren't just random whatever flowers. And his girlfriend actually loves planting flowers, so she was taking pictures of stuff from that house to draw off of, which is pretty cool.

Interviewer: Wow, that is pretty cool.

Rosa: Yeah, but I sent him all that stuff, and then what he does is, the night before your appointment he will text you, and he'll make sure that he has a full idea of what you want, and he will send you a picture of what he drew up. If you don't like it, he'll fix it, or do whatever, and then if you like it he's like, "Okay, see you tomorrow." And then ... This was actually two appointments, two four-hour appointments, but my second appointment ended up only lasting three hours. So yeah, it was about seven hours, which-

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Rosa: Yeah, it was a while. But it was definitely worth it.
Interviewer: Yeah, did you say it was two different appointments?

Rosa: Two different appointments, yeah. He would only do a max of four hours at a time, just because. So I had to do two separate appointments.

Interviewer: Two separate appointments. And when he sent you the text the night before, was there anything you needed to change?

Rosa: No. Actually, the drawing ... It's weird, 'cause how the drawing is, it's obviously not as detailed as the actual tattoo. What I was kinda skeptical about is like, "You know what, he knows what he's doing so we'll go with it." And it came out beautiful. It was just in in the drawing he sent me, there's glass in my tattoo also, and it looked like, on his drawing, mountains. And I was like, "I thought they were mountains." So I had asked him, I was like, "I want glass in there, you know." And he was just like, "There is glass." And I was like, "Oh. I thought it was mountains." But it turned out really nice there.

Interviewer: Did you tell him that you thought it was mountains?

Rosa: Yeah, I did. He was like, "Wow." Just gave me a hard time about it, but it looks a lot different whenever there's shading and stuff, so ...

Interviewer: So you put a lot of faith in this guy, you trusted that he knew what he was doing, and it worked!

Rosa: It did, it definitely did.

Interviewer: So you said you were skeptical, were you skeptical about other parts of it, or was it really like the glass not looping that had you worried?

Rosa: I mean that was really the most. And when I saw the whole tattoo altogether ... I'm not good at picturing things if that makes sense, so it was hard for me to picture it, but when I went in, and he had his drawing ready, and he put the tracing of it on my arm, I was like, "Okay. I can see it now."

Interviewer: Yeah, and then you could see it. So was it something about the way that it fell on your arm that made it come to life in a different way for you?

Rosa: I dunno, I can't really say. I dunno. I definitely like how he placed everything, because when he did do the initial drawing the roses at the top only had the outline done, and it looked kind of weird to me. But I mean, it's just weird how everything comes together. It's really hard to picture at the beginning, especially when you're used to there not being anything there.

Interviewer: Yeah, and only having the outline I can imagine would be ...
Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: And the drawing. Did you say anything when it looked kind of weird?

Rosa: Yeah I did. I didn't say anything rude or anything, I just told him it looked weird. And he's like, "Don't worry, You'll love it when it's done." And I was like, "I believe you, so ..."

Interviewer: How did you decide on a location?

Rosa: I found a couple pictures of tattoos, I was looking on Pinterest and stuff, and I'd seen a couple tattoos kind of half sleeve like this other girls that I thought looked really pretty, and I think that's how I decided. 'Cause I thought about a lot of different places, but I knew that to get what I wanted, it was gonna have to be a bigger tattoo. So I thought that that would that be a nice place. And it would be somewhere that people could see it, it wouldn't be hidden.

Interviewer: So it was important that other people be able to see it?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are there times when you need it to be hidden, or you can show it pretty much anytime?

Rosa: Yeah, there really hasn't been any times that I've had to hide it. At work they don't really care, and we have short sleeve, button up collared shirts that we wear, and there's a little, tiny bit of my tattoo that sticks out, but other people have them lower down on their arms and stuff, and it doesn't seem to be a problem.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you wanted it to be visible, you needed a space that was big enough for it really be what you wanted it to be, and you saw pictures that looked really pretty on other girls who had them. Okay.

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you got this tattoo a little under a year ago, and I'm wondering why then?

Rosa: I finally had enough money, and I could just plan it and go. Before I was working where I was now, I was doing landscaping so I was outside all of the time everyday, and that wasn't really an ideal time I guess. And also with the marines, they were starting to get weird with tattoos, so I didn't really wanna just push any of the buttons there. So yeah, it was just the perfect time. I had enough money, I didn't have to worry about the marines, my job that I have, I didn't have to worry about it getting messed up in any way, or being in a bad environment.
Interviewer: Yeah, so you were just good to go. You had the money, you had the time, you had the right kind of job.

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Cool. And then you sorta talked a little bit about what it was like to actually go and get it done, and negotiate what you wanted it to look like, and trust in the artist, what other events led up to pulling the trigger? Did you go as soon as you had the right job and money, or did you wait a little bit?

Rosa: I wanna say I just waited til I was comfortable, because I had been in my first place on my own, and I was supporting myself, and doing all that, and I was just comfortable, and I've been wanting to get a tattoo for a long time. I just really didn't wanna get something that I was gonna later regret, I wanted to know that it was it. And whenever I finally had him draw this up I was like, "I'm doing it, I'm ready, let's go."

Interviewer: That's awesome, and how have you felt since you got it? What's happened since then, immediately after, and now, more recently?

Rosa: I mean right after it was really cool 'cause you're not used to it, so every time you look in the mirror or whatever, you see it and you're like, "Hey, that's pretty cool, clever." I don't know. 'Cause you can't feel it really, it's just there. Actually lately, I wanna say recently, I won't even think. I'll forget that it's there and then it's like, "Oh, hey." You know what I mean? But right after you get it, it was weird. 'Cause you'll be moving around, and you'll just see it out of your peripheral vision, and you know? [inaudible]. So that's kind of neat. But I mean I've gotten a lot of compliments on it, and I just really like it. I'm really happy that I got it.

Interviewer: Yeah, so other people also give you a lot of positive feedback on it?

Rosa: Yeah. It was really important to me that my sister liked it, because it was kind of around something that she had written, and she absolutely loved it. She's just like, "It's so bad ass, blah, blah, blah." She loved it so much, so that was what was really most important to me about it, 'cause I don't think I would've felt as good if my sister was kind of like, "You know, whatever." When it was something that I took from her, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah. So did your sister know you were gonna get it, and what you were gonna get, before you got it?

Rosa: Yeah, I kept her very updated in the process.

Interviewer: Yeah. How did that work, did you ask if it was okay, or did you just say, "Hey I'm gonna do this"?
Rosa: Well she had known for a while. I had talking about using that for a couple years, just 'cause I really liked it, I just couldn't figure out where. Yeah, so I guess I did think about it for a while. I knew I wanted to use the piece that I used, I just didn't know what I wanted to do where, and I guess I wasn't in a rush to figure it out either. 'Caus 'Cause like I said, I didn't really have the money or the perfect anything for it, so when I did, I just kind of pooled everything together to make-

Interviewer: Yeah I see that. You mentioned that you were looking at pictures of other women with tattoos. Have you always known that you wanted a tattoo, have you always liked tattoos?

Rosa: Yeah, I've always liked tattoos. It was just before I knew what I wanted. I mean I really had no idea what I wanted. there was a lot of stuff that I would be like, "Oh it'd be kind of cool if I got this." But nothing really I was 100% convinced on, 'cause I wanted to be 100% convinced that I wanted that before I went. And I don't know, I've done ... I have a couple friends who [inaudible]. I'm not mad at what they do or anything, but it'll be like a thirteen dollar, Friday the thirteenth, they'll get a random tattoo and get it slapped on their arm, and I'm just not a big fan of that.

Interviewer: That's not your style?

Rosa: I want it to be something that ten years later I'm not gonna be like, "Why the hell did I get that, What is that?"

Interviewer: Yeah. So it needs to mean something to you?

Rosa: Yeah, I want it to be something that ten years later I'm not gonna be like, "Why the hell did I get that, What is that?" You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah. So it needs to mean something to you?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Rosa: It means something to me, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, cool. Let me see here, so part of what this study is ... Well maybe before I go there. Before you got a tattoo, whenever you were thinking, you've always liked tattoos, if you were to see a woman ... At any age, whether you were a really young kid, or adolescent, whatever, if you were to see a woman with a tattoo, what would you think of her?

Rosa: I don't know, I don't really think that it makes me necessarily think anything of them. I'll look at the tattoos or be like, "Oh, I really like that." Or just, "Okay, that looks like a tattoo." I don't know, I don't think it really makes me judge anyone I guess, but I enjoy looking at them. The only thing I feel that might, not off-put me, but I'd just be kind of like, "Eh", like I don't agree with that, is maybe if you were covered in tattoos. Just because from my standpoint, most jobs you can't have your face and neck covered in tattoos. Stuff like that, do they work? That's...
the kind of stuff it makes me think of, what do they do that that's okay for them to ... You know what I mean?

Intv: To be that tattooed?

Rosa: Yeah, not looking down on them or anything, but it just makes me think. 'Cause in our society it's very ... If you want a professional job, you can't really have any eccentric hair or be covered in tattoos. Usually if you cover it up, people are okay with, you know?

Intv: Yeah. So it's kind of a practical thing that you're thinking?

Rosa: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah.

Intv: Yeah, but if you were to see someone before you got a tattoo who had tattoos, you're not gonna judge them negatively or think any worse of them?

Rosa: No, I've never been against tattoos, I always thought they were pretty cool.

Intv: So sometimes whenever you look at people, you think you admire them, you're judging them positively?

Rosa: Yeah.

Intv: Yeah? Cool. That's something that's coming up a lot in these interviews, which has been fun to see, like how many people throughout a lifespan have always looked at tattoos in this really positive way, which is nice. So I also wanted to ask, since when we get tattoos, we get them on our bodies, and we're not usually looking at our bodies the way that other people are. So I wonder, did you look at the picture that you sent, did you actually get to really look at it whenever you took it?

Rosa: I mean, yeah. I didn't have a picture on my phone, like a good one of it after it was finished, so I was trying to take a good one when I planned to send it to you. That's why I was like, "This is not good enough, I can do way better." But it was dark in the house too, so I was trying to get the light of the window.

Intv: No, this was actually a great picture, it looks really good. Very clear.

Rosa: Oh, really?

Intv: Yeah, but I like to ask, because you don't often get to see it like that, what you think as you look at the photograph of it.

Rosa: I think that it's really pretty and I love it. I really like it a lot, I do.
Interviewer: It's beautiful, it's really beautiful.

Rosa: He did such a good job. I get a lot of people telling me that too, especially with the bird, the oriole, the detail that he put into it, like the eyes ... My sister actually has an oriole on her back, in between her shoulder blades, but when she got it, she's had it for a while now, but the tattoo artist that did it, I don't think they were the best with detail, and the eyes are literally just black circles, so it looks like this demonic bird kind of. And she wants to get it fixed, I don't even know how. 'Cause it's just black circles, so I don't know what they could do to ... But I just went over to my cousin's not too long ago and he wanted to get a tattoo that had a duck in it, and he was just like, "Wow!" 'Cause I guess he knows other people that have birds and stuff in their tattoos, and I guess people aren't necessarily that good at the detail with them, 'cause there is a lot of detail that needs to go in, and that's also why I was waiting too. And I knew that this guy, Devon, that I went to, was very good at his attention to detail, 'cause that was very important. So that's why I wanted to get her there also, 'cause I didn't want a demonic bird coming out of it. And this is all black and white too, so it wasn't like he had color to play with, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah, his shading abilities are amazing.

Rosa: Yeah, he did a really good job.

Interviewer: So part of this project is ... I'm interested in a couple of different things. First of all, I'm just really fascinated by tattoos, it's basically making your body into artwork. So I want to know why people get tattoos, what it's like to get tattoos, what the process is, how you decide what to get, and so on. The other part of this is figuring out how women feel in their bodies before and after they get tattoos, just because women's bodies are a thing that is often up for public consideration. I'm interested in what this has done in terms of what you feel about your body.

Rosa: I mean it's kinda weird, 'cause when I got this, I was kind of ... I don't know, when I was in my younger twenties I wasn't unhealthy, but I didn't necessarily take care of myself I guess. I just ate whatever I wanted and didn't really work out or anything. I mean I did, but I did the bare minimum. Being in the marines and stuff, I should've done a lot more, but I just stuck to the bare minimum. Around when I got this tattoo, I guess I kind of was starting a healthier, better me, I guess, and I think that it kinda helped me because I liked looking at it, and back then [inaudible]. To me, they were kind of like [inaudible].

Interviewer: Aha.

Rosa: Did you hear that plane?

Interviewer: Sorry, you broke up there just for one minute. What was that?
Rosa: I said, "Did you hear that plane?"

Interviewer: Yeah, I think that might have been what it was.

Rosa: Yeah, my computer was making a weird noise too and I was like, "I think that's what it was." Okay, sorry.

Interviewer: No, you're good.

Rosa: Yeah, around the same time I got that. I guess when I got it, it pushed me more to be like, "Okay I wanna start working on myself." 'Cause I really hadn't been, and since then for the most part, well it was a little bit after that I guess what it started, but now in my life, I work out. At least five days a week I do my own work outs at home and I've been eating like ... My eating has changed a lot, and it's actually changed a lot of how I feel every day. And I think that my tattoo even looks better now, because my arms have shaped up a little bit, and I've lost a little bit of weight, and I just all round am feeling better about myself now I guess. 'Cause it puts change in how you actually feel, and your mental state I guess, and just all that kind of stuff. I'm gonna say that really did help me, 'cause when I got the tattoo I wanted to show it off and I was kind of embarrassed about how my arms were just gross to me. So it's just pushed me to start doing stuff that I've been wanting to do and that I felt like I needed to do.

Interviewer: So you-

Rosa: Well actually I've ... Oh, sorry.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you started with the working out and eating healthier after you got the tattoo?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And it was kind of motivated by the wanting to show it off?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. So how else have you felt changed, like you said that it makes you feel differently, just living a healthier lifestyle?

Rosa: Yeah, I just felt like crap basically every day. I just never felt good, I just felt like slow. I don't know, did you ever feel like you were dragging something around? That's what I would feel like all the time, and I was tired all the time, and it's amazing that just by changing what you eat just a little bit and working out a little bit every day, it can make you feel so different. I get so much more done, I'm in a better mood all the time, and just so many good changes have come from it.
Interviewer: Yeah, so you started doing this because you wanted your tattoo to look different, your body to look different. Did you expect all of these other changes to happen?

Rosa: I kind of knew, 'cause I've been in and out before, and I always knew if I would just keep up with working out, I would feel better all the time, but it was one of those lazy things, but I guess I never had a reason that I could use in my head that was good enough. But then I got the tattoo, and I was just like, "Oh, I need to show this off." So it helped a little bit, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, totally. So when you said you were embarrassed before you started working out, did you show it off anyway, or did you keep it hidden until you felt better?

Rosa: When I got it, it was October, November, so it was kind of colder, so I wasn't really showing it off too, too much just because of the weather, but I knew summer was coming, so ...

Interviewer: Yeah, so you were getting ready.

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: So before you got your tattoo, you were sort of not eating as well, not really working out as much, feeling like you're dragging and tired. How did you feel about your body, and in your body, before your tattoo?

Rosa: I wouldn't say I feel bad, or I felt bad, but I've never been super confident with myself. Whenever I was younger, I don't even know how to explain it, I've just always wanted to be skinnier I guess, 'cause I never have been. Even after when I was in the marines, and I got out of bootcamp. I was skinny, but I never had a completely flat stomach or anything, so I guess that was something that I would like to get to, but I'm more motivated in just being healthy. I don't really fully care how I look I guess, now it's more about how it makes me feel, and I know that if I keep doing what I'm doing, it's gonna ... 'Cause I've noticed so many changes, my arms are defined and they've never been. They haven't been defined in a long time, it's been years. And I've been getting tons of people come up to me, and I've only lost like three pounds, four pounds, it has not been anything crazy, but I guess I look a lot different, so I've had a lot of people say stuff. And that really helps, when other people are like, "Hey, did you lose weight?" Or just, "You look really good, what have you been doing?" Those kinds of things make you feel better like, "Oh, I'm doing something and it's working."

Interviewer: Totally. So it's like that cycle. You start doing something, you get feedback, you wanna do it more, you get more feedback.

Rosa: Yeah, yeah.
Interviewer: That's amazing. Have people been talking about your tattoo differently since you've been working out and you look different?

Rosa: No, not really. Not that I've noticed anyways. I mean, I definitely think that it looks better. The tattoo's always looked awesome, but I guess it's just me being more self-conscious about my arm just because the tattoo's there, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah. People are looking at it more?

Rosa: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Have you ever been in a situation where someone has had a negative reaction to your tattoo?

Rosa: Not that I know about, not yet. Yeah, I don't know, I don't think so.

Interviewer: Good, and I'm also wondering how your tattoo has affected certain areas of your life. So you mentioned that at work it's not an issue, it's never been an issue. I wonder, have you felt like it's impacted at all your social life, or your clothing choices, your sex life?

Rosa: I think it definitely has changed my clothing choices, but that goes along with being healthier too, like I've been able to wear clothes that I didn't feel as comfortable wearing before. I wear them now, and I like to wear things that let my tattoo hang out 'cause I don't wanna hide it all the time. If I have a long sleeve shirt on, I don't mind, I'm not upset about it, but if I can wear something where you can see my whole tattoo, I would like to do that. Especially when it's nice outside, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah. So your clothing has changed on both of those levels, both on being different and having the tattoo?

Rosa: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Has your tattoo changed any other areas of your life?

Rosa: I don't really feel like it's changed that much else besides the clothing. I mean it could have, but not that I can really say that it has. I feel like everything else has been pretty much the same, I guess.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So do I have this right? If I were to summarize the biggest impact your tattoo has had in terms of how you feel in your body, it's that it's made you totally change the way you eat and work out, it's made you healthier.

Rosa: Yeah, it has. I think so.

Rosa: It's weird, just how it sounds.

Interviewer: No way, I think that's an amazing outcome. Yeah, so I've pretty much gone through a lot of the major questions that I had about the tattoo environment. I wonder if there's anything that we didn't cover related to your tattoo that you feel like would be interesting to point out.

Rosa: I learned something since having tattoos. Apparently a lot of people have allergic reactions to their tattoo months up to years after they get it.

Interviewer: Oh?

Rosa: Yeah, I got a mosquito bite on the bird, and it was one of those really big mosquito bites where you can kinda see a cut in the middle. As soon as it healed, I got hives only in the outline of my tattoo, and it was directly around the mosquito bite.

Interviewer: Oh no!

Rosa: Yeah, it was the weirdest thing that I had ever seen. So I looked it up, 'cause I was kind of freaked out, 'cause it was literally only in where I had the outline of my tattoo, it followed my tattoo. It was the weirdest fucking thing and I guess sometimes tattoos just have reactions like that to different things.

Interviewer: Wow, so that's yours.

Rosa: Yeah, yeah. It was just that was really weird. That probably has nothing to do with this, but I learned that, and it was kinda neat because I didn't know. Apparently it's a common thing, I guess.

Interviewer: And did it affect your tattoo at all, or once it was gone, it was gone?

Rosa: No, no it didn't. It was just really itchy and my tattoo was kinda peeling where it was, and I was trying not to touch it. And it went away, it's fine now, but I didn't know that was a thing. And it was just kinda freaked me out at first, because I was like, "What's going on?"

Interviewer: Yeah, that would freak me out too.

Rosa: It's just so weird. So yeah, it was really weird.

Interviewer: That's something.
Rosa: That's the only thing I can really think of.

Interviewer: Okay.

Rosa: Yeah, it was really strange. I've never heard anybody talk about it, but when I googled it, 'cause I googled it first of course, it was like a lot of people had had it and it was normal, it wasn't a weird thing. So I was like, "Okay."

Interviewer: Mm. How long did take for the hives to go away?

Rosa: Like a week or two. I wanna say it's closer to two weeks, they were there for a while. That freaked me out 'cause it was kind of red, like red round there too. It wasn't terrible, which is why I wasn't like, "I need to go to a doctor." But it was still really weird. So I'm glad that's gone. It's back to normal now, no problems. It doesn't look weird, so ...

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean from the picture you'd never know that you had an allergic reaction there.

Rosa: Yeah, it was so weird.

Interviewer: Yeah. So the only other question that I am asking participants is, why is it that you were interested in participating in this study?

Rosa: Well I always like to help people out if they're doing something. I saw that you put that, I always really like you, I know we haven't really hung out a lot or anything, but I was like, "Oh Ashley's doing this thing. I'm gonna reach out, I'll help. I'm her friend."
Participant 5: Beverly

Interviewer: Do you have more than one tattoo?

Beverly: I have three.

Interviewer: Three tattoos. Can you tell me when you got your tattoos?

Beverly: Yeah. The first one I was 16. The second one was my sophomore year of college, like two and a half years ago, and the third one was like, oh no, the second one I was 18 and the third one was like two and a half years ago.

Interviewer: Oh okay, 16, 18 and then like 2 1/2 years ago?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Cool. And, is there any one in particular that feels like more meaningful than the others, more significant?

Beverly: I'm going to send you pictures. I just forgot. I don't care if you use them.

Interviewer: Oh, thank you.

Beverly: But the one on my right foot is a daffodil and that's my mom's favorite flower. I think that's my most significant one.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Beverly: Well, I grew up in a single parent household, so I wanted to get something ... I've always wanted to get a tattoo for my mom because she means so much to me and daffodils were just a big part of my childhood. We always had them around, played with them, so-

Interviewer: So it really connects you to your mom?

Beverly: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. And can you remind me, I've already forgotten, where is that tattoo on your body?

Beverly: On my right foot, top of it.

Interviewer: On your right foot. How did you decide that location?
Beverly: Well, I ... my first tattoo was on my wrist, but after that I decided that I wanted to get them in places that would be easy to cover if I needed to and it's like the only part of your body that's really like sort of a flat display you have, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah. So you wanted something that would ... You wanted it to be flat so that you could see it better?

Beverly: Yeah. Like I wanted to, even though it was hideable, I still wanted to be like display it when I wanted to and see it when I wanted to.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: What about the one on your wrist?

Beverly: The one on my wrist is a Bible verse.

Interviewer: Yep.

Beverly: And I got it when I was 16.

Interviewer: Yeah. That was the first one you got?

Beverly: Yeah. I really, really wanted a tattoo and the only way I was allowed to get one is if it was religious.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Beverly: So I did that.

Interviewer: Whose rule was that?

Beverly: Huh?

Interviewer: Whose rule was that?

Beverly: My mom's, because she had to sign off on it.

Interviewer: Oh, gotcha.

Beverly: Because I was 16, I wasn't 18 yet.

Interviewer: So you knew before you were 16 you definitely wanted tattoos?
Beverly: Yeah. I've always, I don't know if always, but definitely before I was 16 I have always wanted a tattoo. I always liked tattoos. I knew I was going to have tattoos someday.

Interviewer: Awesome. Can you tell me a little bit about how you used to see or perceive tattoos before you actually got one?

Beverly: I know used to ... I mean there was obviously a time between this viewpoint and when I got one, but I thought they were stupid and I thought I would never like something that much or long enough to put it on my body.

Interviewer: Wow.

Beverly: Yeah. And in Washington ... Washington is a pretty conservative area, that's why I didn't see a lot examples of tattoos were like, I don't want to say trashy, but like trashy.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: And I didn't know they could be beautiful.

Interviewer: Oh yeah. So what was the first time you were exposed to a really beautiful tattoo?

Beverly: Can we come back to that? I don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: I'll have to think about that.

Interviewer: Totally.

Beverly: Okay.

Interviewer: So there was a point in time when you started to realize that tattoos can be beautiful and that started changing the way you thought about them?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then what led up to you actually making the decision to get one or wanting one?

Beverly: Well, okay. It's sort of a long story, well not a long story, but I, like I said, I'm converting to a different religion now and I've always been in part of my mind very scared about being a Christian, and as a person who grew up in a Christian family and a Christian town, it scared me. So part of my rationale was, well if I get a tattoo of it I can never leave it. I'll be trapped and that was my reasoning, so
I was like, that'll be good. So I really wanted it for that reason. I also really wanted to ... I was the first person that I knew my age that had a tattoo. I liked that idea.

**Interviewer:** You liked the idea of being the first person?

**Beverly:** Yeah. That I had one in my group of friends.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Beverly:** I thought it was cool.

**Interviewer:** Can you say more about what it means to be the first person in your group of friends to get one?

**Beverly:** It was ... I was pretty young. I think in Pennsylvania maybe. I think you really shouldn't get a tattoo at 16 that's a parent rule. So, I thought that was just so cool, so edgy. I just thought I was the coolest around, because I got a tattoo. It was really exciting. I remember now, the first time I saw someone who got a tattoo that I thought was really beautiful. My best friend, who was older than me, got one first. I think it was on her wrist, and it was like Italian and beautiful. I was like, “Cool. That's really pretty.”

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So, did that influence your decision on where to get your first tattoo?

**Beverly:** I think so, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Beverly:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** What else were you thinking whenever you were deciding where on your body to get it?

**Beverly:** I wanted people to be able to see it at that time. I was like ... like my mom tried to convince me to get it in a place that was less visible and I was just dead-set. I wanted people to see it, and I wanted to talk about it, and I wanted for it to be a part of my daily life.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Do you regret your location choice now?

**Beverly:** Yeah. I regret the whole tattoo.

**Interviewer:** You regret the whole tattoo?
Beverly: Yeah. That's not the case with my other ones. I love my other ones. I've never had any second thoughts about them. But, this one I regret placement and ... I don't regret getting the tattoo when I was 16, I just regret what I got, I guess.

Interviewer: What you got, and what it represented?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you ever think about getting it removed or you're gonna keep it?

Beverly: Actually, I have looked into getting it removed, and it is expensive, and it seems painful for what ends up being a pretty obvious scar anyway. I recently looked into getting it covered, and I think I will maybe get it covered someday with another tattoo. It's just going to be too expensive right now. So I won't be able to do it now.

Interviewer: So, you regret the placement and the content of that tattoo. Was there anything about getting a tattoo when you were 16 that feels like a positive experience still?

Beverly: I think if I like knew who I was now and I could go back, I would still get a tattoo. I just think it would be different because I just feel like that's kind of who I am. So, I don't regret getting it at that age at all. I don't know, I've always been a little bit stubborn, so I sort of admire that about my younger self but it was stupid, once you did it, and it's done. I sort of briefly admire that. I wouldn't not get it at all.

Interviewer: Yeah. You admire that you were stubborn, and you took the plunge, and you just did it?

Beverly: Yeah. Everybody told me not to, and I was like, “Well.”

Interviewer: You've always sort of been your own person like that?

Beverly: I like to think so, yeah. I do.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, your mom was really supportive of you getting a tattoo at young age?

Beverly: No. She wasn't gonna let me at first and then at all. And then I was like, “I'll get a Bible tattoo”, and she was like, “Well.” My brother was in the seminary and my dad wasn't around, he's sort of like the father figure, I guess. He's a lot older than me. He was like, “Well, if that's her," what did he call it? "My testimony or something like that then you should let her do it." Then she was like, "Well I guess I have to." And after that she didn't have a problem with it after that because it was done.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about the tattoo you got when you were 18?
Beverly: Yeah. It's on my other foot and it's Saturn, which is my favorite planet. That one was a really last minute. I googled a picture of Saturn and I gave it to them, and it's sort of fading now, but I don't regret that one at all. It was fun and it's cute.

Interviewer: So, that one happened really quickly? You googled a picture and then went to go get it done?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you find your tattoo artists for each of your pieces?

Beverly: The first one, we had gone into Pittsburgh, and I wanted to go to Jester's Court, which is where I went for my third one, but they would not tattoo me. "We don't do 16 year olds at all, even if the parent's there." So, we went down the street and they were like, "We know this other place that will do it." Well, great. We just walked in and they did it. The second one, it's a place called Old Soul in Canonsburg, which is in Washington where everyone got their tattoos. That was the place to go. Then the third one, I actually did some research and I went to Jester's Court because I really loved their art and I made an appointment for him, that artist.

Interviewer: Cool. So the first one, you had to really negotiate with your mom and there were some conversations, and you had to think about what verse to get and then you went to get it. Your second one was pretty spontaneous and on the fly and your third one was really like researched and thought out.

Beverly: Yeah. I thought about it for a long time. I did, several drawings were made.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through the process of picking the drawings?

Beverly: Yeah. He had like four or five drawn out and a couple of them, well you'll see it when I send you a picture. But it's long and it goes along my foot, and a couple of them were like had only one daffodil head and a couple of them all of them were sprouting. When he showed me I thought, I liked that it was all overgrowing sort of, metaphor. There's one. How many? Yeah. There's one blossom but there's three buds around it. I thought it was a nice capture of a bud in the process kind of thing. That's why I picked that one.

Interviewer: That's really nice. Does your mom know you have that tattoo?

Beverly: Yeah. After I turned 18 she sort of washed her hands of it. She likes them, she thinks they're pretty. She doesn't care and she loves, loves the daffodil.

Interviewer: That's nice.

Beverly: Yeah.
Interviewer: So, it kind of worked the way you wanted it to?

Beverly: Absolutely. I have no regrets, at all, about that one. I would do it the same every time if I could.

Interviewer: That's wonderful.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: You said that, for your next two tattoos, you decided you wanted to get them in places that were a little easier to cover up and I'm wondering. Well, we'll start with, why?

Beverly: I'm worried just about employment. If I knew I would have no job issues I would get a sleeve probably. It's not a personal preference to hide them. I'm just worried about a job, being professional, and the fact that ... I hope it doesn't play into it, because eventually I would like to have the sleeve anyway, but I know they're [crosstalk]. Only, solely, because of jobs.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, work consideration. If work weren't a factor though, you see yourself with a lot more visible tattoo?

Beverly: Absolutely, yeah.

Interviewer: Since a couple of them that you do have are concealable, I wonder who gets to see them? Who doesn't get to see them?

Beverly: The job I have now, at a daycare, they don't care at all. So, I wear Birkenstocks and display them really nicely. In school, I never hid them. I've never hid them from religious members or whatever but when I worked, really when I interviewed at ... I worked as an intern for the Pittsburgh Public Words and when I interned and when I worked there, I wore Tot's or full shoes. I wore a long sleeved shirt.

Interviewer: So, it's still pretty rooted in employment what's acceptable in employment.

Beverly: Yeah, I don't hide it from my family or from my friends or anything like that.

Interviewer: So, if you're with your family or with your friends you would, I mean weather-appropriate of course, but you'd choose to wear your Birkenstocks because it shows it off?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: You want people to see it? Is, I think, what I'm asking.
Beverly: Yeah. Ideally, I like to show them off. I think they're pretty.

Interviewer: I'm sure they are. I'm excited to see them. That brings up another good question. I'm wondering how getting tattoos has, if it has, and how it has changed your life in certain areas of your life. For example, you spoke on the work thing how it sort of affects that, clothing choices, sex life, are there areas that it affects?

Beverly: Yes, I know we already talked about how it affected how on my religious life. I would say it had, when I was dating, a small effect on my dating life. I don't know that anybody conscious ... I don't know that anybody deliberately lost it or like keep it if they had because I had tattoos, but people made comments like affirmation when I was thinking about tattoos. I think sometimes it makes me look or seem a little bit more unapproachable.

Interviewer: Unapproachable?

Beverly: Yeah. Not specifically but timed to where it's how I look. I sometimes feel a little bit unapproachable, generally. I wouldn't say now that it affects any facet of my life. Because, like I said, the job that I have now I don't think it directly impacts me as [inaudible]. There have been people, not really with my feet ones, like people will comment on them and say they're pretty, but people, older people who will really grab my arm and like hurt it. So they can see my wrist and I don't want that.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's happened?

Beverly: That's so intrusive but it happened a lot.

Interviewer: That's happened on more than one occasion to you?

Beverly: Oh yeah, like several times.

Interviewer: In what context?

Beverly: Because it's like a religious tattoo, they think they can just start talking to me and like touching me. That like it's okay.

Interviewer: That's wild. Who is doing that? Is there a certain setting in which that happens, or it just happens sometimes?

Beverly: It's happened a lot more in high school, with like older people. It doesn't happen as much anymore. But I think people still sometimes when I go to shake their hand will like turn my arm like automatically. Usually, I want to say it's older people, people my age will say, "What does it say?" And they'll ask. So yeah, I
would say mostly older people. I'm going to plug my phone in it's going to die. One second.

Interviewer: Okay.

Beverly: ... So now I don't know where I put it ... Okay, is that okay?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's perfect. So people in the past, not as much anymore, would just ... it almost gave them a kind of entitlement over your wrist, over your body?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you ... you told me that was intrusive, absolutely. I wonder, can you tell me a little more about the experience of just having people feel like they can take your arm and do what they want?

Beverly: Yeah, I just felt, especially when I would jump in, it felt pretty condescending and ... really invasive like I said. But it made me feel also, like I had to talk to them. I couldn't think of a graceful way to exit the situation. As I said, usually it made them want to talk to me about like god and stuff. And I didn't want to do that. Yeah, so it definitely made me feel very uncomfortable, and not an interaction I wanted to be having at all.

Interviewer: You said that doesn't happen so much anymore?

Beverly: Yeah, I think it's a combination the fact that I moved to Pittsburgh from a very Christian area, where all these people just start talking to you about religion. So I think they felt sort of entitled to do that to me, more there, in that area. Since I've moved to Pittsburgh it hasn't been as much of an issue. I think people, in my experience, back off a little more.

Interviewer: So it's kind of like a location thing more than anything else?

Beverly: Yeah, a lot of things are different between the two locations, that's one of them.

Interviewer: That's one of them, yeah. You mentioned that you feel a little bit ... you used the word unapproachable I think?

Beverly: Yeah, and I always have, for different reasons. I have like a resting bitch face. I don't like that phrase, but you know what I mean.

Interviewer: What is it? What's the phrase?

Beverly: A resting bitch face.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.
Beverly: People say I don't like that term but that's what it is. And I have like my face, you can't really ... because I have my face pierced and I recently cut my hair real short, so I think the combination of it all together makes me feel more approachable. I feel like my tattoos a little bit, I don't go [inaudible] so much anymore. My community [inaudible] but sometimes when I'm with I guess people who aren't necessarily my same demographic, I feel a little bit unapproachable, or a little bit ... I don't want to say silly, but I look...

Interviewer: So it's strange for me to try to wrap my head around how one tattoo can be such an invitation for people to approach you in these really unacceptable ways. And other things, other body modifications can be such a “stay-away from me” statement. How do you make sense of that?

Beverly: How do you mean?

Interviewer: Why that difference?

Beverly: I think in general, especially like I said with people from my hometown, the less I looked like that way they think women should look like, the less I think they think I'm ... The more they assume that I'm gay, or they assume that I'm not typical to them, they think that I'm a heretic. I feel like that's ... not really here, not really with my demographic, but I grew up in a small, religious town. That's how it makes me feel, that's how comments have made me feel. When I look less like what people expect for them to look like, they get upset.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that perception?

Beverly: Sometimes it makes me feel like scared, threatened, but the majority of the time it does not bother me. I think these people I don't really want anything to do with anyway. When I'm not scared, I have no ... I don't care.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the time that you felt scared?

Beverly: Yeah, I have been called a homophobic slur in public. And stuff like that. Have gross things yelled at me, just things like that. And I feel scared because I feel less consumable, it makes me feel more threatened. When I've dated women in the past, I feel less consumable, it makes me feel more threatened.

Interviewer: When you say consumable, what do you mean?

Beverly: Like available. Like I think a lot of men, most men who have been in my life, any woman they see is like is something that they could achieve. Something they could consume. When they have to doubt for a second that maybe they're weaker or relative to them. Men in general, not interested in that kind of lifestyle, friends then.
Interviewer: Oh, yeah. Seeing someone like you then, with the comments that have been made about you. That's a tough pill for them to swallow?

Beverly: Hmm?

Interviewer: That's a tough pill for them to swallow.

Beverly: Yeah, I guess. It seems to be for whatever reason. I don't understand why, but it seems to be ... just like upsetting.

Interviewer: So the times when you have felt scared or threatened, the perpetrator, the one who has made you feel that way, has always been male?

Beverly: Yes.

Interviewer: Women generally don't make you feel that way?

Beverly: Like when we talked about turning my wrist, several times that has been women. But specifically that feeling is specific to men, but the invasion of privacy about tattoos I think definitely includes women.

Interviewer: So women can invade your privacy just as much, but feeling truly threatened, that's coming from men. I understand. Then, on the other side of that, being seen as kind of unapproachable. I wonder what that experience is like for you?

Beverly: It makes me sort of sad because when people finally do approach me they're like, "Oh, I never would have thought you were this nice. I never would have talked to you. You seemed so angry." Or sad, or whatever, "I wasn't going to talk to you." And that makes me sad because I'm not an angry person, I don't think. And I think personality-wise I'm pretty approachable. That makes me sad, it makes me feel like maybe I've missed out on certain people or certain things.

Interviewer: So it makes you kind of sad you might have missed out on some stuff. Are there any other feelings or experiences associated with being unapproachable?

Beverly: I think it has ... it makes me in general more self-conscious about the way I look, the way I feel about myself, my tattoos. At the end of the day it's something that allocate to [inaudible], something I can reason away. But at the moment it makes you feel ... it makes me feel self-conscious and ... not somebody some people want to actually see.

Interviewer: So in another interview someone used the word shield. And I wonder if you feel like that fits for you too? Like tattoos and other ways of body modifying can kind of be like your protective shield in some ways.
Beverly: Yeah, I would agree with that. In some instances it feels good and it feels fun to look different and look sort of ... like sometimes it's fun to look unapproachable, I don't want to talk to anybody. I like putting off that sort of persona, the shield sometimes, yeah.

Interviewer: I'm thinking even with what you said with resting bitch face. It's very functional sometimes.

Beverly: Yeah absolutely.

Interviewer: Part of this project, I'm interested in tattoos themselves. Like the meanings attached, the significance that's attached. How people make the decision to do something so permanent. I'm also really interested, and you're hitting on this on your own, on women's senses of their own bodies. And the ways in which tattoos can or cannot change that. I wonder if you could speak a bit to how you have always experienced your body? How you've experienced your body since getting tattoos?

Beverly: I've always had a battle with my body. And having tattoos does make me feel like ... for me, for myself it makes me feel prettier, more delicate, not delicate but more feminine. It makes me feel ... I like the way I look better with tattoos. It betters my self image.

Interviewer: Yeah, are you able to say anymore about why it makes you feel better about your self image?

Beverly: It just makes me feel like I have to be more confident. I feel like that's the reason I did a lot of my modifications to my image. Like with my hair, my piercings, and my tattoos. All because I feel ugly it forced me to have to be a little more confident. Because it's just louder, my tattoos are there, and now I have a desire to show them off. It makes me feel like better about the body that I'm in.

Interviewer: So tattoos generally have really improved the way that you think about your body?

Beverly: Absolutely, yeah.

Interviewer: And in terms of location, were you ... the locations on your tattoos. Were you thinking about anything that's a body image whenever you decided on your locations?

Beverly: For my last one I was, just because ... it's very feminine, it's a very delicate tattoo on my foot. That location made feel like ... I don't know, I don't like feet. I don't like feet in general, I'm must not crazy them. But having that there made me feel like, "Oh wow, now it's so pretty there." I can pretty this area up with my body that I don't really like.
Interviewer: So that one, and the when you were 16, did you ... Were you thinking about ... You had seen someone else with a really beautiful tattoo on their wrist. But were you thinking other than what was modeled about how tattoos would look in various areas on your own body?

Beverly: I thought about getting tattoos in probably pretty much every location on my body. Some of them have been directly related to making my body, for myself more attractive. Like I've ... I don't know if I'll do this, but I've always wanted to get tattoos on my breasts, because I think that's very sexy, very feminine. And that would be something I would do formally to feel more attractive, to feel better about my body. And if I got one on my hip that would be really easy and sexy. I don't feel I'd get one in those places for any other reason.

Interviewer: So you can imagine getting them on some areas of your body that would make you feel more attractive. But there's some ... there's a reason that you're not currently pursuing that? Pursuing those locations?

Beverly: Yeah, I'm not ... for my hips, I'm not going to get a tattoo on my hip. I'm worrying about someday being pregnant and regretting that location for my hips. The same with my breasts, I guess. But that sounds really painful, getting a tattoo on your breasts, that's one of the reasons I don't want to do that. But the hips, that's not something that will always stay the same.

Interviewer: Was the idea of pain a factor in any of your decisions?

Beverly: No. After the thought ... I was like wow, maybe I should have gotten it somewhere else. Because wrists aren't that bad, so I'd heard. But the top of your foot is a very painful location. And I didn't ... the point I got my left foot was the first four. And I didn't realize how painful it was going to be and I didn't look into it at all. But that pain was not bad.

Interviewer: Were you surprised in any of your tattoo sessions at the actual physical experience of getting a tattoo?

Beverly: Yeah. The first one definitely just because it's a brand new sensation. It felt like being stung by a bee. But the one on my left foot is the first time that someone ever shaded on me, and that was very surprising. I did not expect it to feel that way. I was not expecting. I didn't consider shading and how that would feel at all. That was crazy. And on my right foot I was surprised that I bled. I wasn't expecting that.

Interviewer: So did any of those experiences alter your next decision?

Beverly: After I got my first one on my left foot, I was like, "Oh, I'll never get one on my other foot." And I did anyway. So, I thought it did, and then it didn't. I am worried
about ... pain I guess now is relevant to my decision. Like I would like to get one on my ribs, I wouldn't get one of my ribs because that sounds really painful. But I don't know that ... I guess knowing how tattoos feel now I would never get one on my wrist.

Interviewer: You thought about getting one on your ribs, too? Is that another area that you would get to make yourself feel more attractive?

Beverly: I would think so if I did, yeah. I think they're pretty, I like the ones that ... are like right below your chest line and then come down. I think that would also be something I would get ... like if I got a sleeve it would be animals, but if I got the rib it would probably be like flowers or leaves or something like that. Something aesthetic.

Interviewer: Why the animals for a sleeve?

Beverly: Just I've always been sort of tomboy. There's lots of pictures of me picking up frogs and snakes. We had ferrets and we had a lot of like ... we didn't live on a farm, but it's woodsly. So with raccoons and possums, and deer, all that stuff. So I just ... it's just a part of my childhood that I led on there.

Interviewer: Did you really pick up a ferret?

Beverly: Yeah, we had two ferrets.

Interviewer: You had two ferrets, wow.

Beverly: And we had chickens at one point, a lot of snakes, frogs.

Interviewer: So are those the animals you would get on your sleeve?

Beverly: I wouldn't get a chicken, I don't like chickens, they were a pain. But I would get the rest of them.

Interviewer: The rest of them, leave out the less than fond memories. And then the other ... so the sleeve would be something again that signifies something for you, but the other areas ... If I'm understanding you correctly if you get it in certain locations of your body that make you feel sexy or more attractive or something, the whole tattoo would just be aesthetic. You wouldn't be worried about the meaning behind it anymore?

Beverly: Probably not. I might if I had to pick between kinds of flowers and kinds of leaves. I would probably pick something that had a little bit of meaning to me. But nothing probably beyond that. Because flowers would be meaningful for my mom, but I wouldn't ... There's no person that I feel the need to memorialize.
Interviewer: You got your first tattoo when you were 16. And you got your most recent tattoo 2-1/2 years ago. I'm wondering at what point you made the decision to get your most meaningful tattoo, the most recent one you got?

Beverly: Could you say that again?

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm ... I didn't word that very well. What did I mean to ask? When did you decide that you wanted to get something that commemorated your mom?

Beverly: Well ... For my mom?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: I don't know ... I'm sure something happened that I said, "Oh wow, I really love my mom." But I don't remember what it was. But I love tattoo so I've always wanted to get one for her. That's right, and my roommate got a tattoo for her birthday. And I was like, "Oh, I'll get one. Let's do that together." That was why I got it when I did.

Interviewer: So why you got it when you did, but you had been thinking about it before that?

Beverly: Yeah, I had had ... I've always had several tattoo ideas sort of lined up in my head that I think about, and that was one of them.

Interviewer: Whenever you wanted to get the tattoo when you were 16, you had to get something religious based, but did you have other ideas of what you wanted to get if you just had total freedom?

Beverly: When I was 16?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: I don't remember. I was in a band, I probably would have gotten music, or something like that. Something unoriginal. Yeah, I do not remember.

Interviewer: You said something unoriginal, is it important to you that tattoos are original?

Beverly: To a certain extent, yes. I don't think I'd get like music notes or maybe an anchor, or a feather. Just because these are things that I ... I probably wanted in the first place because they had significance for me, but because I've seen ... a lot of people who I, this is going to sound petty, who I don't respect or I think are creative people have. That turns me off to them. The idea of them in general. It's not that I think they're ugly, apparently I don't but ... my experience of people with those tattoos.
**Interviewer:**  So do you think they are not creative because of their tattoos? Or you know they're not creative and then you see their tattoos?

**Beverly:**  I think it's a little bit of both. People who I think ... I knew in the first place that they weren't creative, that they were ... who didn't seem like themselves much. And then when I saw the tattoo, I'd say, "Oh that makes sense, this specific one." So I think it's a little bit of both.

**Interviewer:**  Can you tell me a little more about the experience of getting a tattoo with someone else?

**Beverly:**  Oh sure. It was really fun, she got hers on her ankle. So they were in sort of the same area. And we were both so excited and the day creeping up and like, "Ooh this many more hours." And then we made a whole day of it, we went out to eat after. And it we unveiled them together. It was just really fun.

**Interviewer:**  So it was a whole day event, it was something you guys decided you were going to do together, like a social or a bonding kind of experience.

**Beverly:**  Yeah, absolutely. Recently we tried to go again and get tattoos together. And we tried three times, we were drunk every time. But I still will do it sober. But anyway, it was closed and we couldn't. But it was something that we would do again, to bond I guess.

**Interviewer:**  So there's something like ... it can be really social about tattoos. Whether it's getting them together or just having them together. Like I'm thinking about conversations with your mom about the daffodil. It can be kind of an invitation sometimes?

**Beverly:**  Absolutely. A lot of it I would say is social, yeah. And I feel like it's maybe like a testament to a tattoo artist and their work. And I would call it a social invitation.

**Interviewer:**  Also I'm thinking about you as the perceiver of other's tattoos and it kind of gives you an indication of their personhood. Like I'm thinking about the uncreative person you were thinking of. So that makes tattoos really kind of meaningful in terms of perception.

**Beverly:**  Absolutely. There are people who, this is petty and it's mean, and it's shallow, but there are people that I will say, I wouldn't talk to them based on their tattoos.

**Interviewer:**  Based on their tattoos?

**Beverly:**  Yeah, not because they were not creative, I wouldn't ... but there are people who look like ... who like wear certain tattoos that I wouldn't ... I probably would not talk to you if you had certain things.
Interviewer: Can I ask for an example, does something come to mind?

Beverly: Like crosses with barbed wire. I would not talk to a person with the cross and the barbed wire. It's just so ... it's just not a personality that I perceive would mesh well with mine.

Interviewer: It conveys a really serious message.

Beverly: It does, it really does. It's not... I don't really think that people who have those tattoos are religious in the first place. It's just ... it's aggressive.

Interviewer: It's aggressive?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Sometimes tattoos can actively oppress other people?

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Kind of what I hear you saying and something that is a question I'm holding as I do these interviews is tattoos as language. Tattoos speak, and they speak for other people even if those other people aren't speaking.

Beverly: I would absolutely agree with that, yeah.

Interviewer: Interesting. You've told me a little bit about the relationship between your tattoos and your religious background. And that was rooted in your Christian background specifically. Is there anything more about being Christian and getting tattoos? I am especially curious about your transition to Judaism and having a tattooed body.

Beverly: When I was a Christian or ... I would first have to separate like my religious experiences, three separate parts. When I graduated high school back ... for four years before that was all for the past year and a half. I would say that for the first part of my life and maybe the first year of college I was actively ... I wanted to be part of the Christian community. I wanted that. And then there were periods where I gave up on it and where I found [inaudible]. In the first part I thought that the tattoos [inaudible] tattoos for religion. That's the only thing that's like forever. And so I perceived them as religious and other people backed me up on that. They were like that it's okay that I got a tattoo because it was religious. I was perceived as a very good girl in high school.

Beverly: And I took that standing because my tattoo was religious. I wasn't a bad kid. In my hometown you had a tattoo you were bad.
Interviewer: You could have both. You could be the good girl and you could still be a part of the tattoo culture.

Beverly: Yeah. And ... Can you tell me the question one more time I got lost.

Interviewer: Yeah, sure. I was wondering, you started to tell me a little bit about the relationship between getting tattoos and Christianity. I'm wondering too, what it's like ... And you said there are actually three religious phases of your life, so I'm curious about that too. But what it's like as you transition into Judaism or start to practice Judaism. What it's like to be a tattooed body with those spiritual leanings?

Beverly: I would say in the intermission, that's when I got my space tattoo. And in sort of a time when I was like ... like I said I was drifting farther from religion, nothing matters. I didn't think this enough about it. And I still [inaudible] but I was in that moment a body, it doesn't matter. I was sort of losing this fear of god that if I got a tattoo that means I'm not good enough. And then coming into Judaism because of my background in Christianity and because of the way I was raised, I knew that there was ... People were buried in a cemetery, I knew that and I wasn't too concerned about it. Because converting to a form, and that would seem a religious kind of issue in the Jewish community. The rabbi that I meet with has tattoos, I think, I'm pretty sure.

Beverly: And she does not at all practice that sort of exclusion. But then my boyfriend’s grandpa is ... he's not orthodox but he practices in an orthodox manner. And that's one of the places that I know for a fact that he doesn't like them. He thinks that they're nice but I'm like not as good because I have them. But that also has not I guess the first instance of ... of that. Religions seemed like, "Oh, tattoos." My boyfriend says he loves tattoos, not because of me, he always has. And they're like, "Oh, you can't be buried in the cemetery."

Interviewer: So you said your boyfriend also has tattoos?

Beverly: No, he wants to get one, he doesn't have any right now.

Interviewer: Oh, he wants to get one. So you are getting to know his family. Are you one of the first people to be tattooed in that setting?

Beverly: Yeah, I think so, as far as I know.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on his grandfather's reaction?

Beverly: His grandfather doesn't like me for a lot of reasons, tattoos are a part of it. There's nothing I can really do about it, I can't undo them. I wouldn't anyway. It seems a lot, his grandfather I think it would make me sad but since he isn't it doesn't bother me that much.
Interviewer: So in terms of your phases of religion, would you say that your three tattoos kind of represent a different stage?

Beverly: Yeah. I can say that I think. I got the third one before I really seriously considered Judaism, before I was even introduced to it in a meaningful way. I don't know if then I have one that really signifies the third place in my life. But I would say that the first two are definitely well represented.

Interviewer: So the first two are well represented. The third one happened prior to getting into Judaism. But now that you are into Judaism, none of your tattoos an issue at all. There's no conflict there?

Beverly: No. I'm sure that there might be some day if I'm part of a synagogue community would be. But I don’t think so, just because like I said I'm converting reform and they don't have an issue with it. So I hope there wouldn't be. I'm not super worried about it.

Interviewer: That's wonderful. Is it safe to say that you had more concerns and worries over tattooed bodies when you were Christian than currently?

Beverly: Yeah, I would say so.

Interviewer: And do you-

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah? Was there something else in that?

Beverly: I was trying to think. I feel like I had something more to say, but I guess I just felt more pressure when I was Christian to get tattoos that meant something and I could never get tattoo that was just fun. Now, I have a fun tattoo. That's one of the reasons I like Judaism, is I don't feel pressured. I just didn't feel any need to consider that when I got this new tattoo.

Interviewer: Can I make a leap and you can tell me if it fits for you. You talked a little bit about bodies in the public sphere and bodies around men. And specific kinds of bodies around specific kinds of people. And I wonder if there's something about taking back your body in your religious conversion?

Beverly: I think that there definitely is. I feel like I'm taking a large stake in my identity that is mine. And I think that was true for all my tattoos. I felt like tattoos were a part of staking my identity as my own person. And converting is part of that, just making my own life and making myself my own person.

Interviewer: So it's part of the big identity picture.
Beverly: Absolutely.

Interviewer: You're spiritual leanings, your tattoos, your decisions on where and what to get. Your piercings and haircuts and things we talked about. All is this reflection of the inner you? Can I use that language?

Beverly: Yeah. I would say so. A lot of the people actively encouraged me not to do them. So when I did them it felt that much better to do them. So I would say that they're part of my identity, as important personhood.

Interviewer: Your personhood, that's good language. And how much do you think you're religious backgrounds have impacted what you've gotten, when you've gotten, and where you've gotten tattoos?

Beverly: The first one obviously directly, completely and totally. The second two ... I know I had some weird religious justification for the one on the left foot after the fact. In fact I was like ... explained it away, I don't even know what it was. It was something about god and the cosmos. I was going to get it anyway, whether or not I had a religious reason to. So I think I sort of backtracked into a religious reason for that tattoo. But the last one I didn't feel any need to.

Interviewer: You were just kind of totally free to do it.

Beverly: Yeah, I was like this is for my mom. My mom was always important to me, she always will be. I'm confident in that.

Interviewer: So you were looking for that permanence factor in all three of them?

Beverly: What do you mean?

Interviewer: Like some meaning that will be permanently lasting. Like the first one religion, the second one Saturn, the third one for your mom?

Beverly: Yeah, I would say the first one and the last one was some kind of permanence. Like I said, my Saturn was just sort of more fun. I wasn't really looking beyond it. The last two, yeah ... The first and the last one I was, "Okay, what does this mean for my ... who I am in the universe?"

Interviewer: So with the Saturn one, whenever you came up with the justification for it after, was that to put your mind at ease or was that so you had something to tell other people who might question you?

Beverly: Both. Definitely both. Because I was like ... I was 18, I was the ... I don't know I think it was the summer before I had gone to school, I think. So I was still ... even
when I went to school I was still in kid mode. I still felt like I had to have a justification.

**Interviewer:** When did that justification start to not feel as important to you?

**Beverly:** The further I got from Christianity and the further I got into I guess the LGBT scene on campus, the more I felt like they really spoke to me about the idea of it doesn't have to mean anything. You like it, that's enough. And I think that's when.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. There's something really cool about someone who can look at an image and just say, "I just like it."

**Beverly:** Yeah. It's cool. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Can I ask why Saturn is your favorite planet?

**Beverly:** I like the rings. I think they're cool. And it always has been. That's one thing [inaudible] I've always really liked Saturn and the rings. I did a project on them in elementary school.

**Interviewer:** You're right, it is a pretty cool planet.

**Beverly:** It is.

**Interviewer:** My favorite planet was always Pluto and then they took that one away.

**Beverly:** Now it's a gaseous thing, or whatever.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. I am aware of the time and I don't want to keep you over the time limit. I wonder if there's anything that I didn't ask you about, or that you didn't get to say that you'd like to?

**Beverly:** ... I would like to say I think that ... realizing my sexuality and coming to that community made me feel a lot more comfortable with tattoos. That's saying that I think that they're much more widely accepted and prevalent in the LGBT community. It made me feel better going forward about getting tattoos that I just liked. It made me feel more attractive.

**Interviewer:** I'm so, so glad you said that. I feel like I've been following the religious thread, and if you have a minute I would love to hear more about how the LGBT community has helped you with that.

**Beverly:** I have time.

**Interviewer:** So can you say what it is about it, or how that happened?
Beverly: I have always ... my interest with women has been with women who are luxurious. So if I saw them I began to recognize that attraction. It used to be a fixation. I didn't really understand it. So part of it I thought would be ... I didn't know if I liked it or not. I just was like fixated on it. When I started to realize it was an attraction it made me feel a lot more comfortable with tattoos. And I realized if I could find it attractive in another person then I could find them attractive on me. I could find them fun and interesting. So that was a big thing for me.

Beverly: Also just that I felt like I made more and more friends, they all had tattoos. And I was just like, you know. All my friends from high school are LGBT we ended up having ... for me there is a tight correlation.

Interviewer: Between the LGBT communities and bodies that are tattooed?

Beverly: Yeah, bodies that are tattooed. I would say that ... I guess this is a very ... within my circle all my friends, pretty much all my friends are LGBT and pretty much all my friends have tattoos. So it's really sort of close for me.

Interviewer: That's a really unique kind of thing that you've been involved in. You started in such a community that you were kind of this radical kid who got this tattoo really early on. And you were the only person who was tattooed at that age. And then going to the other end of the spectrum where it's really part of what it is, part of the in-group thing to have tattoos.

Beverly: It is definitely is. I don't want to say it's part of it because there are people who don't but it just is more common. You kind of expect it.

Interviewer: So getting involved in the LGBT community helped with the larger body image, body concept thing for you. And tattoos was definitely a part of that?

Beverly: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: How did you find the ... the words you used I think to describe being the unique person who had a tattoo when no one else did. You called it cool. Which it totally is, by the way. And then I wonder what the opposite end of the spectrum felt like for you? How did you feel having tattoos with all these other people that had tattoos?

Beverly: I didn't really feel as special. But it felt good to not feel so like a sort thumb. Not that I felt like a sore thumb, none of them are on my face or anything. But it made me feel like I fit in, it feels normal, it's something I'll do, it's a big shared experience ... yeah.

Interviewer: And I wonder too about you described feeling like ... I think, correct me if I'm wrong, you were talking about just in like a general public space feeling
unapproachable. I wonder what happens to that whenever you're in the LGBT community?

Beverly: I don't feel that way as much. Especially with all the other tattoos. I don't feel like as much of an unapproachable vibe. Even part of it is me, too. In those spaces I'm more open, I want to talk to people more. And less like ... you know? So I think it's both ways.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think do you use the word understanding or accepting whenever you were describing the LGBT community?

Beverly: Yeah, I think I said I would be more accepted. They were more accepting of me.

Interviewer: I wonder is it fair to say that when you're in that community you don't really need the shield as much? Like tattoos are versatile, they can shield you from things and they can also connect you to other people?

Beverly: Absolutely yeah. I felt in the LGBT community I could have them and people could say they were pretty. And they were like ... they didn't ask about anything else. They didn't ... like somebody else I was so used to them saying, "What does that mean?" And like it wasn't really an issue anymore. It was, "Oh, I like it." And that was it. That made me feel a lot more comfortable. It made me feel like I can have these things as decorations, but not these things that have to integral and [inaudible] about them.

Interviewer: Yeah, you're unraveling something I think really important that I hope shows up in this project. And it's we're all in Western culture, pretty cognitive and intellectual in a lot of ways. And we forget what it's like to sort of aesthetically experience. And it sounds like being in that community has really brought that in a really visceral kind of way for you.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: You can just have things that just ... like aesthetics, that is meaning.

Beverly: Yeah, it is. I think especially in specific things in the community. Like what it was being a bisexual and there's this really interesting ... more tattoos and the clothing and the hair. There's more aesthetic [inaudible] before if it looks good believe in the thing. Like I said, Let's represent, and it's this way. So that was a release, I guess.

Interviewer: That's fascinating. I don't think that I talked to a single person who has not said that aesthetics did factor into a decision. But the degree to which people acknowledge that that's okay is so varied.

Beverly: Really.
Interviewer: Yeah, it's fascinating to hear different takes on it.

Beverly: I wouldn't have expected that, it's interesting.

Interviewer: Yeah, the way people choose body locations and all kinds of ... it's been amazing getting to talk to everyone about their tattoos.

Beverly: I'm sure.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you'd want to bring up that you think might be relevant or interesting?

Beverly: ... There's something about tattoos and sexuality. I think when, especially in my experience with men, but women too, there's a certain degree of objectification when it comes to tattoos and sex. And I don't mind [inaudible] particularly sexy thoughts about it. But there have been moments where I felt like that was part of the reason someone was attracted to me, not in a good way. Not necessary just because of that but that adds to it. So I think that there is a certain degree of specific objectification that comes with having tattoos.

Interviewer: In some experiences you've had, when you say not in a good way, you mean like a fetish or something?

Beverly: Hmm?

Interviewer: Like a fetish in some way, you were being fetishized?

Beverly: I don't know if I would call it a fetish, just like, "Oh, those are hot. That's hot, blah, blah, blah." Just like gross. I don't know if I'd call it a ... maybe but just a like ... not because they think they're pretty or because they like what they are, or where they are, anything deeper. Just the idea of a tattoo. Just to some men ... I don't know.

Interviewer: Like you're being evaluated as a person on the basis of their physical attraction to a tattoo or a tattooed body.

Beverly: Yes.

Interviewer: So your value comes in these couple of things and they don't necessarily even know you or take you as a human seriously.

Beverly: Yeah. It's how they see them, how they interpret. I think men think that we're more attached to ... like we're more sexually active, more sexually weird or ... I think that's true. I think it devalues ... because that's not why I have them. I have them because I like them. I think it devalues why I have them maybe.
Interviewer: So not only are you being objectified in this way but you're also being stereotyped.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: And you're pointing to the tension between you got these tattoos for your personal reasons and they do reflect, like you said, your personhood. And even though you know that, someone who sees them is deciding that it's just a further objectification or sexualization of you. Yeah.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's interesting. Part of this project is ... I don't know what the data set really looks like yet, but some of the research that went into it is all about body reclamation practices. So like, women's bodies are constantly in the public sphere for consideration. Whether you want it or not. And we can do certain things to reclaim our bodies and one of them is body modification, and that's where this study came from. It's really interesting that you say that. That you have both reclaimed your body, and seen how that reclaimed body gets taken back up in these ways.

Beverly: Yeah, it's sort of like two-sided. On the one hand I said it makes me feel sort of separated. But then on the other hand it's a way to reclaim my body, now I like that sometimes. I like the idea of a man of not liking them sometimes. I'm like, "It's not for you anyway." I enjoy that. It's part of the reason I've modified my body, it's like look this is for me. And if people don't like them it's like, "Good! They're not for you." I sort of find enjoyment in that, the reclaiming is like ... like you said, it's always on display, it's still on display in a way it's more on display. In a way it's two sided I guess.

Interviewer: Yeah, just like ... is this a fair reflection? Just like if you're in a partnership there are quality about your partner that you really like and love and admire. And there are some qualities that you could probably do without, right? So anyway in which you modify your body, your partner doesn't have to like all of them to like you, because they are a reflection of your personhood.

Beverly: Yeah.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Beverly: That's one of the reasons I love the perfect person I'm with so much now. It's not like my attractiveness to him, does it increase or decrease based on certain ... based on ... for example my hair. He would say, "I don't ... it's not ..." It's one of the reasons I like him so much ... my body's part of the feature but still not, you know?
Interviewer: Yeah.

Beverly: They remain mine in the partnership.

Interviewer: The expectation is not that you have to share those things.

Beverly: Yeah.
Participant 6: Cynthia

Interviewer: And the tattoo you sent me, when did you get it?

Cynthia: I got it at the beginning of May.

Interviewer: The beginning ... oh very new.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Wow yeah. How did it hold up to the sun and everything?

Cynthia: It looks just fine. It healed before I left. It was good to go.

Interviewer: Ah, that's excellent. Is that your only tattoo?

Cynthia: No. I have eight other tattoos.

Interviewer: Eight other tattoos. Oh this is great. When did you start getting tattoos?

Cynthia: I have to say I was 21? 21.

Interviewer: 21.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you've been getting tattoos for like 13 years or so.

Cynthia: Yes.

Interviewer: Nice.

Cynthia: But I've got one scheduled coming up in the next two or three weeks.

Interviewer: Do you? So how often do you get tattoos? Did you go a long period of time without getting any or you spaced them out over the years?

Cynthia: They were pretty spaced out until probably the last two months because one is my friend's ... he runs this tattoo shop. He started tattooing out of his house and he doesn't really charge me that much.

Interviewer: Nice.

Cynthia: So I've been getting a lot more lately. Yeah. He has more hours of availability, he lives close and everything's set up there. So I can just get an idea and he runs with it. I can go over any time I want so.
Interviewer: That's so convenient.

Cynthia: That could be dangerous in the future.

Interviewer: So when money is less of a concern and timing, scheduling is less of a concern it's really easy to just keep getting tattoos.

Cynthia: Yes. Absolutely. My friends know him too. So anytime they schedule with him they're like, "Oh do you wanna tag along? Do you wanna come too?" And I was like, "Oh of course, yeah. I'm sure I get other ideas along the way. Why not?"

Interviewer: Yeah. So you have been in the tattoo scene, like actively in the tattoo scene just with friends, for yourself, knowing people who are artists.

Cynthia: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Cool.

Cynthia: And a lot of my friends have a lot of tattoos. So they know a lot of people too so of course. As soon as someone has new work I'm like, "Oh that's nice. Where'd you go?"

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: I need to go too. Take me with you.

Interviewer: So whenever you were making the decision to get your first tattoo when you were in your early 20s, how did you make that decision?

Cynthia: Well my first tattoo, it's a band symbol tattoo. So it was like the current music I was listening to is what led me to get that one. I still have it but it's like pretty faded. That one did not set well. That one didn't heal correctly at all.

Interviewer: Oh geez.

Cynthia: It swelled up and I had so many problems with it. I had to get it colored in three or four times after that. It was experience but I recovered from it.

Interviewer: Then how long between your first and your second tattoo?

Cynthia: Probably about three years.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you have misgivings going into your second one given how your first one went?
Cynthia: No. I went to a different shop. I went to different people who have been open longer and it was a lot, I'll say more organized and cleaner and better environment. So I wasn't too worried. They seemed to know what they were doing. Like first-

Interviewer: Yeah. Then have you had-

Cynthia: I just went somewhere down the street and I was just like, "Yeah this'll be fine. This is great. This is what they do at all of them." And then I went to other shops and I was like, wow. No.

Interviewer: So have you ever had any tattoo issues since your first one?

Cynthia: No.

Interviewer: Okay.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So did you always know you wanted to get tattoos or was it kind of an impulsive thing?

Cynthia: Oh I knew since I was little. I always used to go to the grocery store and get those stick on ones and I would just put them all over me and show them off like at the playground or at school and I was like, "Look at all this. Look at all this."

Interviewer: So you've always loved tattoos.

Cynthia: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah. What's the reasoning for the timing of your first tattoo?

Cynthia: I was just getting out of college when I got that one. So it was like my I'm not of school, I'm kinda sort of on my own. Let's do something spontaneous and cool and fun. Like that.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: It was out of college and being on my own. I was like, I have my own money now and my own job now. So that's what I put it into.

Interviewer: Time for some tattoos.

Cynthia: Yeah.
Interviewer: So what about your tattoo that you sent me, the one you got in May? Can you tell me a little bit about that one?

Cynthia: Oh yeah, absolutely. What this is is my mom passed away this past February.

Interviewer: Oh I'm sorry.

Cynthia: She had cancer for about two and a half years and I took her handwriting. I went to my friend's place. He was able to scan her handwriting from a card she had written and made a stencil. So he put that ... that is her actual handwriting from her Christmas card this past year.

Interviewer: Wow.

Cynthia: Yeah so it's a nice reminder to like ... I feel like she's always with me. I get to take her places with me.

Interviewer: It's a way to bring her close.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. First of all I'm really sorry. It's not easy. So this is all very fresh for you.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. If at any point during this conversation you don't wanna talk about this anymore, that's okay too.

Cynthia: Okay sure.

Interviewer: So this-

Cynthia: But-

Interviewer: I'm sorry?

Cynthia: I said so far so good.

Interviewer: Good. So this is ... the meaning behind it is to keep your mom close with you to be able to carry her around.

Cynthia: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. I also have, on my back I have a tattoo for my grandparents who are her parents. I have their initials on my back.

Interviewer: Oh wow.
Cynthia: So I kind of ... they're all with me.

Interviewer: They're all with you.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So your grandmother, your grandfather on your mom's side and your mom.

Cynthia: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

Interviewer: And your grandparents have passed as well?

Cynthia: Yeah. One did when I was in college and one did about seven or eight years ago.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay.

Cynthia: So. Yeah. So my tattoos, I kind of like ... it just feels like they're all my family. They're all a part of me.

Interviewer: They're all a part of you. You are-

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: ... literally keeping them in your skin, on you.

Cynthia: Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you tell me about the process of going to get this tattoo in May?

Cynthia: Oh yeah sure. Like I said, it was my friend. He live maybe about 10, 15 minutes away and I had gone with my other friend Kimmy. She had ... how I got the idea for this tattoo, I wanted something to commemorate my mom and I wanted to get her handwriting or something special but I didn't know people who did it. I had seen her tattoo. Her boyfriend passed away and she got his handwriting up her arm. And hers turned out really well. So I went with her to our other friend who had done it and we went to his house. His entire bottom floor of his house is converted into a studio. So it's real ... I didn't expect that 'cause I've seen his house before and I was just like, eh. I mean I'll look. We'll check it out. No. His place is immaculate. It's like a brand new studio.

Interviewer: Wow.

Cynthia: I was all in once I saw that. It was like, okay, it's done. I trust him. So yeah. We went over there and he had a photo scanner, scanned the card and blew up the stencil on the screen so I could check it out. It looked ... he has a ... It's like perfect. It matches almost identical.
Interviewer:  Wow.

Cynthia: So yeah. I was so surprised 'cause I was just like, "Can you get it to somehow look like that?" He goes, "No. I'll get it spot on just how she wrote it." Technology's amazing what they can do now.

Interviewer:  It really is. So you were kinda skeptical at first.

Cynthia: Yeah. 'Cause when he said he left his shop and then moved into his house and was doing it out of there, I'm always a little bit leery of sterilization and sanitary, you know. It's like well it's your house. You have pets and kids. But I was like, eh. So I went with her and she's like, "No. Just go and look and you'll see and then you'll be fine." And I looked and like I said, it was immaculate.

Interviewer:  Wow.

Cynthia: It's his own professional setup so. I just thought I was like, I'm gonna be sitting at like your basement table and your buddies are gonna be wandering in and out and your dog's gonna jump on my lap. And I was like, "I hope that doesn't happen."

Interviewer:  Yeah. Sounds very different.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer:  So when he said, "I can get this exactly accurate," so did you believe that? Did you think that was true?

Cynthia: Yeah. I was like, okay sure. 'Cause I saw my friends and she showed me a handwriting sample that he took and she showed me her tattoo and it was spot on. And when he was like, "Yeah that's easy. I can do that one." And then when he put the stencil on my arm I was like, "Wow. It's like my mom wrote on my arm." Its that close.

Interviewer:  Yeah.

Cynthia: So. I shoulda sent the picture of the card too.

Interviewer:  Of the card?

Cynthia: Yeah, the handwriting, but it looks perfect. I mean it looks good on my arm but you didn't know what it came from.

Interviewer:  No this is ... I mean hearing you talk about it is perfect.

Cynthia: Oh okay.
Interviewer: Yeah. So whenever he put this stencil, the tracing on your arm and it truly was as though your mom had written on your arm, what was your experience?

Cynthia: Oh I was just like wow. I kinda felt better. I felt like it was like a sense of peace. It was just like I feel like she's there now.

Interviewer: Yeah. What has life been like for you since getting this tattoo?

Cynthia: It's hard but I feel better that it's there. 'Cause it's like a daily reminder to keep going.

Interviewer: Keep going?

Cynthia: Yeah. And it's like my other family, they really like it too. They were like, "Oh that turned out ..." 'Cause I told them too. They were a little bit skeptical about it. 'Cause they were just like, "It might be close. Don't get your heart set on it looking exactly like it 'cause it might look a little different." But when I showed them too, they were like, "He nailed it. It looks great." My one cousin was like, "That's so beautiful." And I was like, "Yeah. It turned out really nice."

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. So you've been getting a lot of positive feedback.

Cynthia: Yeah. Absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you generally get positive feedback for your tattoos from others?

Cynthia: Yeah. Usually. Most of mine though you don't really see them. I have one on my feet and on my back and on my side. So you don't really see them, I'd say like 90% of the time. 'Cause like they’re hidden or like my shirts cover everything else. But when they see them people like them a lot.

Interviewer: People like them. So the one that you sent me, the one on your wrist is the most visible one you've ever gotten.

Cynthia: Right. 'Cause you can't really cover that up.

Interviewer: Yeah. How did you pick that location?

Cynthia: I just wanted it somewhere where I could see it all the time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Because I felt like it was like a smaller one and I figured if I got other tattoos that are like this it might kinda get lost in the shuffle of all the other ones. If it's on my back or something I can't see it all the time.
Interviewer: Yeah. So this tattoo is meant for you to see it.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is that for others to see it as well?

Cynthia: I mean they will but I think it was more so just for me to see it on a daily basis instead.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I notice even the direction of the writing is for you.

Cynthia: It's for me. Yeah. 'Cause normally when they do wrist tattoos they do them facing out. So when you're writing stuff other people can see them. But I got it facing towards me.

Interviewer: Yeah. Did you have a conversation with your friend, with your tattoo artist about which direction the writing should go?

Cynthia: No. He asked and I kind of put it where I wanted to put it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: He said he normally faces them the other direction so when your arm's down or out it faces outward. But I was like no.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Cynthia: I liked it this way.

Interviewer: This is for you. This is visible. But even though it's visible it's visible so that you can see it.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. What about your tattoos in general in terms of how you decided where they should go? How did you make those decisions?

Cynthia: Well primarily because I used to teach and if you had anything on your arm they made you cover it up. So I didn't want to have to wear long sleeves or ... I didn't wanna be warm at work so I got all of mine on my feet because they were covered with my shoes anyway. I got them on my back so they'd be covered. We weren't really allowed to have super visible ones working at the district. 'Cause I had friends who had them on their arms and they made them put bandages and bandaids on them. And I was like, "I think that's more of a distraction than just leaving it be there." If the kids see it one or two times they're kinda used to it.
being there. But if you're walking around with a giant gauge taped on your arm it looks like you got hurt.

**Interviewer:** Totally. It looks like you got hurt. It draws a lot of attention.

**Cynthia:** Yeah. Really I think it's more of a distraction than what's actually there. So yeah. I didn't get anything on my arms or anywhere else that's visible because of where I worked.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. I remember when I worked in restaurants for a lot of years and I've always had this nose ring and I had my managers that tell me I had to put a bandaid over it. So I was walking around with a bandaid on my nose, like that doesn't draw attention.

**Cynthia:** I just got my nose done last week. It's like really tiny.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Cynthia:** But yeah. Most people that I talk to didn't even notice that I had it.

**Interviewer:** So you got all of your other tattoos during a time whenever you had to think about your work attire.

**Cynthia:** Yeah pretty much.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Cynthia:** Yeah. Now that I'm in the unemployment ... I was in a car accident a few years ago. I broke my neck and I'm still not cleared to work from all of that. So that concussion is on top of it. So I'm not cleared from all of that but now I'm kinda just like well, might as well get 'em. If not now when?

**Interviewer:** So do you ... you said you're anticipating getting more tattoos? Do you think you'll get them in visible places or hidden places?

**Cynthia:** I kinda ... I probably won't get any on my arms right away 'cause I don't ... like I said I'll see those all the time and I'll want them. I don't have any more profound ideas that I want to look at all day long so I'll just get 'em on my feet and my ankles where they're kind of covered.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So this one on your wrist is really special and it's one you want to look at all day long.

**Cynthia:** Right.

**Interviewer:** But the others can go in-
Cynthia: I think they're ... they're nice. I really like them and I wouldn't have gotten them if I didn't like them. But they're not anything profound or super important like this one was.

Interviewer: Yeah. So in terms ... so meaning plays a big role in where you're putting them.

Cynthia: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

Interviewer: What they mean to you.

Cynthia: Yeah. When I got my grandparents' initials, I was working for the school district too. So I had to get that somewhere where it was gonna be covered or like I said, they were gonna make me put bandaids over it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: That one's in between my shoulder blades.

Interviewer: Yeah. So the ones that are hidden, you got them in coverable places for work because of work. But I'm wondering, who gets to see your tattoos?

Cynthia: Well now it's summertime so everybody does. Summertime feels like ... some of my friends didn't even realize I had them, some of them. They were just like, "Oh I never look at your feet 'cause they're in shoes." [inaudible]. I'm like, yeah. They're like, "You have everything all over your feet." I was like, "I do." Sometimes I surprise myself and I forget they're there until I'm walking around another place. "Oh yeah that's right. I have these."

Interviewer: What's it like to kinda surprise yourself like that?

Cynthia: Fun. I like it.

Interviewer: You like it?

Cynthia: I feel like I don't see most of them all winter. Other than in the shower or getting dressed. In the summertime I get to show them off. I'm like, "Hey look at all this stuff."

Interviewer: So being able to show them off is fun.

Cynthia: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: You want people to see them.
Cynthia: 'Cause I go up to like the pool a lot or my friend's house swimming a lot so I'm like, "Hey I forgot I had all this."

Interviewer: Yeah. So anyone can see them as long as you can kind of wear clothes that can show them.

Cynthia: Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer: Do your tattoos influence the kind of clothes you buy and wear?

Cynthia: No not really. I wouldn't think so. I think the seasons more so influence it.

Interviewer: The seasons.

Cynthia: 'Cause like spring and summer I wear a lot more ... like dress according to the weather. Like shorts and sandals and flip flops and all that. So you can see them then. Then in the winter I have to wear socks and shoes and boots. 'Cause Pittsburgh winters, you're bundled all the way up. So you don't get to see any.

Interviewer: So whenever it's summer are all of your tattoos visible or are there any that even with summer clothes they're still hidden?

Cynthia: No you can see them all in the summer. I have them on my ... when I wear swimsuits you can see the one in between my shoulder blades and then I just recently got one probably, I think it was like the end of June on my side and you can see that one in my swimsuit.

Interviewer: And all the ones on my feet, my ankles you see them in my flip flops.

Interviewer: Oh okay. So you picked places that you can cover but how did you pick the specific locations, like your thigh or your shoulder blades?

Cynthia: Well the one ... the most recent one I just got on my side, that was more so ... one of my best friends and I we got the same tattoo and we got it on our sides. She is covered in tattoos and there was only so many spots that she had open on her. And she wanted to get it in the same spot. So I kind of worked around her on that one. But all the other ones I don't know. I always just ... I like wearing sandals and I like having it like my feet are decorated. So I like having fancier looking feet.

Interviewer: You like having fancier looking feet.

Cynthia: Fancier looking feet I feel like. Yeah.

Interviewer: I like that. Yeah. So you choose that because you like the way that tattoos look on your feet.
Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. What about how did you pick your shoulder blades?

Cynthia: Well kinda like the same thing. I didn't want it to get lost in the shuffle of everything going on on my feet and my ankles and I wanted it separate. So I just kinda put it up on the top of my shoulder blades.

Interviewer: I see.

Cynthia: 'Cause based that I was at work, I couldn't get it on my arm. At that point I didn't want anything on my front torso so I had to put it on the back.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you have tattoos on your shoulder blades, on your side, on your wrist, and on your feet and ankles.

Cynthia: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah. Have you noticed that over the years getting tattoos have changed any part of your life? Like your social life, your sex life, your work life? Any part?

Cynthia: Well I knew work life for me I had to keep them covered. So I wasn't really supposed to have them unless you couldn't see them. But social life, like I said now a lot of my friends have tattoos and they've taken me to different tattoo shops and I've met different tattoo artists. Now that I know this person that lives close I think I'll be getting a lot more in the future than I probably would have.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Most people I dated have tattoos and I like that. But sometimes I think people look very plain. And I'm just like, "Oh you have all this skin. You need it colored up. Something needs to go there." I'll tell some of my friends, I'm like, "You don't have anything. You need this or you need that." And they're like, "No we're good." And I'm like, "But what if you just got this little thing. It would be fun."

Interviewer: I like that. People look plain and they need a little color or something.

Cynthia: Get a little color. Yeah.
Interviewer: So did you feel like before you got your tattoos, did you feel like you looked plain?

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Yeah. I did. 'Cause like I said, ever since I was little I'd put face tattoos all over me or like draw designs on me and now I'm just like, this is what I needed.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: I needed that extra pizazz.

Interviewer: Do you know what it is about getting things on your skin that makes you feel like you have that extra pizazz?

Cynthia: I feel like even though a lot of my tattoos, I mean they're not anything crazy different. But I just feel like it's almost like a birthmark that I picked for myself. If that makes sense.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Everybody has a birthmark or something that makes them different and I'm just like, this is a birthmark I picked for myself.

Interviewer: So it's something that makes you unique and different but you also get to decision exactly what it is.

Cynthia: Right. Exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah. A birthmark that you picked for yourself.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So part of this project is unpacking a specific tattoo to figure out what it is for you, what it means. The other part of this, I'm trying to get a sense of women's senses of their own bodies or embodiments and the ways in which getting tattoos impacts that. So I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about what it was like ... what your experience of your body was before getting tattoos and then during the process of building up your tattoo repertoire and now that you have them.

Cynthia: Sure. Yeah. I kind of think it makes me feel ... like I said, it's a birthmark I picked for myself. I feel more somewhat in control of my own body I would have to say. It's a thing I choose to do on my own and pick for myself and design for myself.
and where I wanna put it. I mean, I feel like, I don't know how to quite put it. But I feel like you're born a certain way. Like your hair's a certain way, your eyes are a certain way. You look a certain way and that's not really left up to you. This is something you decide on your own. You kinda feel like more of a sense of self and like more connected.

**Interviewer:** More connected?

**Cynthia:** Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Interviewer:** Like connected with what?

**Cynthia:** I feel more ... like I said I have my family on me so I feel more connected to them. And my friend and I we just got a matching tattoo so I feel more connected to my friend. I'm just like, you're stuck with me now it feels like. We got a tattoo on our side, like I said probably like a month ago. Her and I picked it out. It's two little arrows that cross over each other. Like I'm one arrow, she's the other arrow and there's a heart in the middle and it has a J and a 2, like J squared. 'Cause her name's Jenny and she calls me Jenny. So we're Jenny squared. So, and a little J2 on our side and I was like, "Well you're stuck with me now. We have this tattoo."

**Interviewer:** So it-

**Cynthia:** So I feel like, depending what you get ... like I said it made me feel more connected to my family and my friends.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So four of your tattoos, or five? Are your grandparents two separate tattoos?

**Cynthia:** They're like one together. I have stars that connect and on each of the stars is their initials. So it's like one.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Cynthia:** Yeah. I have my friend's and my mom's and my grandparents' one.

**Interviewer:** Those are all ways of connecting you to important people in your life.

**Cynthia:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. What was it like to get this tattoo with the other Jenny?

**Cynthia:** Oh that was ... I went with her to her guy and so I was not knowing what to expect. But it was nice. This guy, he talked a lot, like a lot. We got in there, our tattoos were schedule for 6:00. He didn't have the area ready 'til like 8:00 because he talked so much.
Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

Cynthia: He was just telling us all these stories about everything. And I asked her, I was like, "How long have you known this guy? Is this like your best friend?" And she's like, "No. He's just close to my house and had a good work portfolio." I was like oh. He told us his whole life story about how his wife was pregnant, this whole thing. And I was just like, are we gonna get to what we're doing or [crosstalk]? So my friend told me, 'cause she had gotten other things done from him. She's like, "Whatever you do when he's tattooing, do not talk because he will talk and it will take him forever and it will hurt longer." She went first so when she got hers done I didn't really say anything and I just sat over in the corner so he would just draw and be quiet. But when it was my turn, she just kept talking and it was like, shush. Please stop. 'Cause he'd draw a line and then he'd like quit and tell a 10 minute story.

Interviewer: Oh no.

Cynthia: And then he'd draw another line and quit and I laid on the table for like an hour. She was done in 15 minutes and it was on my side so I was laying longways across this table that's really uncomfortable. It was ... it's on my ribs and I'm just like, "Can we be done?" Then it was my turn he thought of something and her and him kept talking. I was like, we're never gonna end.

Interviewer: So that's quite the experience.

Cynthia: But he does good work and I wanna go back to him. But I'm gonna be like, "Hey buddy. Let's just get down to business."

Interviewer: Yeah. We'll schedule the tattoo and then we'll schedule a conversation after.

Cynthia: Yeah. Like we can talk when you're getting ready and we can talk afterwards but during we can just stick to the plan.

Interviewer: So can you say a little more about your involvement in the tattoo scene? You're involved in the tattoo world. You know the artists, you have friends who really like getting tattoos.

Cynthia: Yeah. I think that I've always been interested in them. I love to see people with them. I love to hear their stories about them. Like I said, I guess I've just reinforced people that over the years that have them that I feel like people look plain or something if they don't have them. So I've always been interested. I'm so nosy. I'll go up to people when I'm out. I'll go, "That's really cool. Where did you get that? Tell me about it." My friends are like, "You can't just talk to people you don't know. You just can't." I'm very inquisitive as to their artwork and if they designed it or if the artist designed it. 'Cause it's a locked in art piece on some
people so yeah. I've made a lot of friends getting tattoos and I've made a lot of
friends with artists over the years. They've kind of become my friend group now.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: So actually getting tattoos, your being involved has led to your friend group.

Cynthia: Right.

Interviewer: Yeah wow. So you said that it looks like art. Like it looks like art and you said
on some people. Are there some people for whom it doesn't look like art?

Cynthia: There are some people it's not and I mean, I don't think it's necessarily what they
pick. I think maybe they just didn't go to the right place or the right artist. Or
maybe that artist wasn't as skilled as they thought and I've seen some pretty bad
tattoos. I mean the ideas behind a lot of them were good but the finished product
is not. My brother had a really bad tattoo for a while. He got it in honor of my
grandpap. Him and my grandpap used to go fishing and he had a catfish coming
out of the water on his arm. I think if he woulda went to the right person it would
turned out differently. But he went to his friend at the time who was still in tattoo
school and was just doing him out of his living room in his apartment for nothing.
So I feel like you get what you pay for on that one.

Interviewer: Sure.

Cynthia: It looked like ... the outline looked like a catfish coming out of the water but the
color was just all over the place. It looked like a watercolor painting and in theory
it was supposed to be nice. Like the catfish had a hook coming out of its mouth
and a line and the line was kinda supposed to go to my brother's heart.

Interviewer: Wow.

Cynthia: What a nice thought. But the line didn't go to his heart. It went halfway up to his
neck.

Interviewer: Mm.

Cynthia: It was really weird looking. He got it, I guess ... my brother's 30 now. He got it
when he was in art school when he was 20 or 21. I don't know how to describe it
other than the pigment looked like it just fell out of his arm. It didn't even fade. It
was there the one day and then it just, there were spots in the tattoo where there
was no color at all.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.
Cynthia: So he just got it covered up.

Interviewer: I bet. So that's what you mean. It's about the quality of the actual tattoo more than anything else that makes it not look like art.

Cynthia: Right. 'Cause I've seen people who are just like they get a random idea like a cartoon character or something they like and they get it. But I think it's the artist that does it that kind of really puts the life into it and makes it look good.

Interviewer: Yeah. So I'm also curious. You say that you get really inquisitive and you just want to approach people to ask them about their amazing artwork. How do people react?

Cynthia: Most people just talk about it. I'll be like, "That's really neat. Where did you get it? Who's your guy?" Most people are super friendly and they show 'em off. They've been nice.

Interviewer: Yeah. There's something really social that you're describing about tattoos.

Cynthia: Yeah. 'Cause I feel like you're not just gonna walk up to a stranger and be like, "Oh you're hair's pretty. Where do you get your hair cut?" 'Cause they would be like, "What is this person doing?"

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Cynthia: If you do that with tattoos I feel like it's completely different.

Interviewer: It's like, the tattoos almost invite that in a way that like you said, plain things don't.

Cynthia: Right. Exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah. I wonder if there's something about choice in that. I'm thinking about what you said with birthmarks. Like I can't imagine approaching someone and saying, "Oh cool birthmark. Tell me about it." But you can totally ask about-

Cynthia: Like I really like your mole. Or like hair color. You don't say that.

Interviewer: Right. It's benign, right. But you can ask-

Cynthia: You didn’t choose that.

Interviewer: Yeah. You can ask about things that people choose though.

Cynthia: Right.
Interviewer: They choose the tattoo. Is that part of it?

Cynthia: Yeah. I think that's also part of it too.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's fascinating. Let's see. So I'm thinking about the areas of your life that your tattoos have affected. It sounds like there's actually been a really big impact on your social life.

Cynthia: Yeah. I'd say it's more of a positive thing because I get to see my friends more but we're more connected. We have more outings. We make more friends through the artists we meet. So yeah. It impacts my life in a good way.

Interviewer: Oh yeah. Yeah. Can you tell me a little more about the experience of going to get a tattoo with Jenny?

Cynthia: Yeah. She's been one of my friends probably I'd say for the last 12, 13 years. I met her like [inaudible] in my neighborhood. So she's covered. So she's never afraid. She's always up for a new one. So she's waiting for the next idea to come along. She came over and picked me up and we drove out. It was out by her. She lives probably about 45 minutes to an hour away from me depending on traffic. So we got to hang out and we talked in the car. Like I said, we went to her ... like this place we went to, I didn't even know it existed. She had found it a couple of weeks before that. It was just a little place in a strip mall. It didn't even have any label on it that it was a tattoo place. A window wasn't even open and they had blinds and I was like, "Where are we going? This is ..." She just totally knew ... I mean it wasn't ... It was clean and everything. It was nice on the outside of the building but I was like, you wouldn't even know it was there. So we went and like I said, the guy was very friendly. Told me all about his life. Told me all about how his wife gave birth to their child. I didn't even know but like ... he got really in depth. Yeah. She found this person and the place we went to, it was like in an old dance studio that he had converted over. 'Cause part of it was carpet and part of it was like a big wood floor with mirrors. But he straightened it out really nice. It was a really clean place. Since I guess she brought me in, he gave us a really good price on it. Normally I pay like $100 or above for anything you get done. Some people expect by the hour, some people charge by the piece. But actually he gave us a deal where it was 60 bucks for the both of us. That wasn't that hard.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's easy.

Cynthia: She had other pieces. Normally how I go to places is I have to see someone's actual work on a person as opposed to like pictures on websites and stuff 'cause I don't trust that. But yeah. She had work from this guy and I saw it on her and I was like, "Okay we'll go to him. This looks legit." And her and I, we had a good time. Like I said, she went first. She was in and out of there, 15 minutes off the table, cleaned up ready to go. This guy, no. Talked to me forever. Then she kept
talking and I kept shooting her this face. I was like, "Please stop talking. We're never going to finish." It took us four hours.

Interviewer: Mm.

Cynthia: His wife had called during the whole thing and he was like, "Yeah. I got one done. It's gonna take me like 20 minutes to do this other one. I'll be right home." Four hours later we're still sitting here.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's wild. So how did you and Jenny decide on the design too?

Cynthia: Well her and I, we wanted to get a tattoo for a while and we've always looked online for ideas and nothing had really caught our attention or seemed like anything we wanted to do. She just redecorated her house recently and she has arrows all over her house, like decorative ones in different ways. I thought that was kind of cool so I was like, "We should do something that's like that." So I was like well there's two of us so two little arrows that cross over. I didn't even realize, I looked online and it's a Native American friendship symbol. I had no idea.

Interviewer: Until after you guys got them.

Cynthia: Well after we got it, I was like that's cool.

Interviewer: That worked out really well.

Cynthia: Yeah and we thought that the J2, like I said 'cause we're Jenny squared. There's two of us. And she's always called us that for the longest time so that's kind of what we do.

Interviewer: Now are there other people in your life that you can imagine getting matching tattoos like that with?

Cynthia: Yes. My friends and I, we were actually going to get one while we were at the beach. My friend Amanda and I. I met her at the same time that I met my friend Jenny. Kind of our ... we were all in the same mutual friend group. So yeah. Amanda and I actually wanted to get one at the beach. We were gonna get a sun and moon thing. But they said you needed a Delaware state ID to get one. I was like, "We're old. We have other ones. What's the deal?" And they were like, "You need a Delaware state ID." I was like what? And they were just like, "Yeah. We can to it." But I think also that place was trying to avoid people getting done vacation tattoos.

Interviewer: I see. Where were you guys thinking about getting them?

Cynthia: We were gonna ... like on our person?
Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Like on our ankle.

Interviewer: On the ankle. Yeah. So you would add to what you have going on your feet and ankles.

Cynthia: Yeah. Exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's neat. So you didn't end up getting that one. But the future tattoos you're thinking about getting, will those probably be on your feet and ankles or are you thinking about other areas?

Cynthia: One's gonna be on the outside of my left ankle. I wanna get a mermaid.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Cynthia: Yeah. It ties in with my family too 'cause when my cousins and I were little our favorite movie was the Little Mermaid. My cousin, I don't know if you've seen them on my Facebook, all my cousins have little kids and they're all little girls and they all pretend to be mermaids in the pool like we did.

Interviewer: Oh that's sweet.

Cynthia: So I'm just gonna get a little silhouette of a mermaid on my ankle for all of us.

Interviewer: That's really nice.

Cynthia: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: So how do you make these decisions? You get the ideas on your own it sounds like and you find artists that you trust and that you've seen their work on other people. But do you go and get the tattoo and then tell your family and friends about it or do you tell people about it first and get feedback? What does that look like?

Cynthia: Usually if I'm not ... like I only have one matching one. But her and I had to plan that out. So obviously we talked in advance. But otherwise no. I just get an idea and then I see who's going or who has an opening and then I go. Then usually I come home ... most of the time I don't say anything about it 'cause I'm just like, "They'll notice it." And then usually when they do they're like, "Oh when did you get that? Where did that come from?" And then I kinda pretend, I'm like, "Oh that's always been there. You didn't see it? It's always been there."

Interviewer: Do they buy it?
Cynthia: Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. 'Cause I'm like ... my mom, she really didn't care. But I wouldn't say anything where I was going. When I'd come and she'd see it a few days later and she's like, "That wasn't there. That's new." And I'm like, "No. I've had it. I've had it." She's like, "I'd notice if you had had something like that on you for a long time." I'm like, "No. It's been there."

Interviewer: Is there a reason you tell them that it's always been there?

Cynthia: 'Cause I don't know. I don't want them to think I'm just going out spur of the moment or there wasn't thought put into it or something.

Interviewer: You want them to think that you have thought this through.

Cynthia: Yeah. Like I said, I usually do. Mine are pretty ... I don't usually stick anything random on me.

Interviewer: What would it mean if someone thought that you just did it really impulsively?

Cynthia: I don't know. I want them to think mine have meaning and they mean something to me. 'Cause I've seen a lot of weird impulsive ones where I was like, "That was like a bad decision," and I don't want people talking around being like, "Yours looks stupid."

Interviewer: And they would ... it's not that the tattoos themselves look stupid but you're worried that other people would think you did it randomly and that's stupid.

Cynthia: Yeah. 'Cause the idea was dumb or like what were you thinking on this one?

Interviewer: Yeah. So you don't always share what the meaning is with people.

Cynthia: Right. That's true. But sometimes I feel ... I don't know. Sometimes I see really bad ones that are weirdly ... I'll see cartoon characters doing something obscene and I just feel like, what's going on in your brain?

Interviewer: Sure.

Cynthia: You know what I think? When I see those where it's like, uh oh. Something went ... were you drinking? Or I'll be like where did that come from?

Interviewer: And then you never wanna be seen that way.

Cynthia: Right. Exactly.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm also wondering since you've been getting tattoos for more than 10 years, has your experience changed at all or reasons why you get tattoos? Has any of that changed over time?
Cynthia: I feel like yes and no. Both. 'Cause my ... the ones that I get for my friends or other people, that's always been a thing. But when people pass away, I wanna get a memory of them. So those are more remembering other people than ... 'cause other things, the other ones that I have are just things I like or music I listen to. But the other ones are people I wanna remember. So it's slightly changed.

Interviewer: It's slightly changed.

Cynthia: Slightly changed.

Interviewer: So the more recent ones are more like commemorative of important people.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: And your other ones are kind of commemorative of maybe like earlier life stages or something.

Cynthia: Yeah. We'll say that, yes.

Interviewer: We'll say that.

Cynthia: That's the idea.

Interviewer: Has your decision making around getting tattoos changed over time at all?

Cynthia: I don't think so. My stuff is pretty thought out, whichever one I get. I don't go to random places. Like I said, I go to people that I've seen their work and I trust their work.

Cynthia: No, I think it's been the same.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Ever since the first botch job, I like to do my research. I like to know where I'm going. I like to know what I'm spending.

Interviewer: You definitely take your time on that.

Cynthia: Yeah. Definitely.

Interviewer: Let me see here. As you were thinking about getting more tattoos I hear you talking about getting them on your feet and ankles because you like the fancy feet and all of that.

Cynthia: Yes.
Interviewer: Do you think about getting more visible tattoos at some point? And if you do, does that change the way you think about your future employment, your future social life? Anything like that?

Cynthia: I think like nowadays tattoos in the workplace, I mean depending what they are, if they're within reason, I think they're more acceptable and they're not gonna make you cover it with gauge or a bandaid or anything I feel anymore. I feel like they're just allowed to be out as long as they're not like obscene. So I think I would get one on my arm or somewhere more visible but I think I would need to really think it out more. That would have to be something major. Like if I ever got married or if I ever had a child or something like that, that is something I'd put on my arm like that. Like as of right now, I don't think I have anything worth as much putting on display on the upper half.

Interviewer: I see. So when it's visible like that it needs to be really, really meaningful.

Cynthia: Right. It needs to be really meaningful and I have to find someone to give me exactly what I wanted.

Interviewer: Ah, yeah. There's no room for error.

Cynthia: Right. 'Cause that's the main showpiece. You don't wanna mess it up.

Interviewer: Yeah. Also the other part of what you said is really interesting. That your sense of that the world has changed since you first started getting tattoos.

Cynthia: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: I feel like a lot more accepting, a lot more open. It's kinda like almost the norm now 'cause before it was like oh that's so crazy and off the wall. People that have tattoos are a lower class of people. Or they've been in trouble or things ... like they stereotype people like that and I don't think that's what's going on anymore. Everybody, I think they're very ... I'm pretty sure a lot of people I know have them. I think more places are a lot more open to it.

Interviewer: Yeah. They're more mainstream, they're not as radical. People aren't judging them as much as they once were.

Cynthia: Right.

Interviewer: Yeah.
Cynthia: Like I said, as long as it's not something like vulgar or obscene. Swear words or some sort of hateful image or obscene image, I think people just let you by now.

Interviewer: What do you think that's about? How do you think that kinda change happened?

Cynthia: Think maybe it's more people got into it and like I said, with me I just met more friends through it and just kept getting more. I think it just kinda progressed.

Interviewer: Yeah. So more people got it, more people started liking it. I wonder if it's like ... it's almost like a generational thing. Like the younger demographic got more tattoos and got more into tattoo culture, like yourself.

Cynthia: Yeah. The younger generation kinda started to grow up and then like I know my friends who have a lot, their kids ... like she had her kids young so some of her kids are already in their early 20s and they have a bunch. Then I think it just goes down the line like that.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's really interesting. So you don't have any concerns about future employment or anything like that when it comes to tattoos?

Cynthia: No.

Interviewer: Cool. That's wonderful.

Cynthia: I don't think ... I wouldn't get them on my neck and I wouldn't get them on my face. But I think other than that, jobs just kinda let you go.

Interviewer: That seems to be a pretty general consensus. That's something I really thought of going into this project. But a lot of people say, not the neck, not the face. But other than that I'm good.

Cynthia: Yeah. I think everybody's fine.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's interesting. Cool. Well so that's about ... I wanna ... I'm keeping an eye on the time here too. I think I got a lot of my questions out of the way. I wonder if there's anything else that we didn't cover in this conversation that you'd like me to know or you think would be a good thing to know in this project.

Cynthia: Like I just said, I think tattoos are becoming more socially acceptable, more workplace acceptable. I think a lot more people are getting them because of this. So that's my thoughts on it.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's a little more freeing for someone like you or me who want to get a tattoo and feel a little freer to get tattoos then too right?
Cynthia: You're not so worried about, "Oh they're gonna see this and I'm not gonna get hired."

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: I don't think anyone's worried about that anymore.

Interviewer: Yeah. I wonder if I can ask you one more question actually related to that.

Cynthia: Sure.

Interviewer: So if things weren't changing, if it weren't mainstream but still were like a really radical move that could have some impact in real life, would you still get tattoos? Especially the one on your wrist?

Cynthia: I think I still would.

Interviewer: You still would.

Cynthia: Because I'm one of those people that it's just like, I'm gonna do it. Like I said, if I was trying to get a job or something I'd be like, "That shouldn't matter. You should look at my resume, look at my schooling, look at everything that brought me to you."

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cynthia: Worry more about what's going on in my head than what's on my person. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah. These tattoos are mine. They're for me.

Cynthia: Yep.

Interviewer: And this is what I can offer you as my skillset. Yeah.

Cynthia: Exactly. It's like, worry about my education or my schooling or like what my character is like and how I treat people more than what I look like and what's on my skin.

Participant 7: Gabrielle

Interviewer: I see that you've sent me a picture of a tattoo. Is that your only tattoo?

Gabrielle: No, I have three others.

Interviewer: Three others. And can you tell me when you got each of your tattoos?

Gabrielle: Sure. The first one's on, it's in the middle of my back right between my shoulder blades. I got that when I was 19. So 22 years ago.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gabrielle: 1990 what, eight?


Gabrielle: No, 1996.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gabrielle: '96 I think. Wait no, yeah, I guess it was '96. '96 or '97. And then I have one on my shoulder that I got at 21. So that would've been like 2000, 2001. And the one on my wrist I just got, I got it touched up this year, a couple weeks ago. But I recently got it done, last year.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gabrielle: Yeah, and they kind of fucked it up. So I went back to the same place, like a dumb ass, to get it fixed, and it got fucked up even worse.

Interviewer: Oh, jeez.

Gabrielle: Yeah, so I'm super unhappy with it.

Interviewer: I'm looking at the tattoo now, what are you- what's fucked up about it?

Gabrielle: The lines are extremely blurry. They call it, what did he call it? He said, he called it blown out. The lines are blown out, they're not clear lines they're real fuzzy and real blurry. I could send a different picture if you want, but if you look at it, you can see it.

Interviewer: Yeah, I can see what you're talking about.

Gabrielle: Yeah. So I made a plan to go back to the same place and have the owner work on it for me. But one of my friends talked me out of that. Was just like, "Dude,
you've gone twice now. Don't go again." It's a nice place, too. I was out of state for vacation, and my husband who lives out there recommended the place because he's got some nice tattoos. I was real disappointed, so.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, that is disappointing.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, it sucks. Oh, and I have one more. I always forget about it, because it's been so long. I got it when I was 15. A friend of mine, I guess around the area that I lived, a lot of the, I guess around that age a lot of people were doing these, what do they call them, stick and poke or whatever?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Gabrielle:** Like a needle and India ink. And a lot of them were putting them in their fingers, their toes, and I was like, "No, I want it somewhere that no one's going to see it." So I have a tiny little heart outline that's about a centimeter high on the middle of my left butt cheek.

**Interviewer:** Oh, okay. And you said you got that one when you were 15?

**Gabrielle:** Huh?

**Interviewer:** And you said you got that one when you were 15?

**Gabrielle:** 15. So it would be 1993.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah. '93.

**Interviewer:** You started this really young. Did you always know you wanted to get tattoos?

**Gabrielle:** No, no, no. I definitely didn't. I think I always thought tattoos were cool, but then when my friends were doing them I was just like, "Yeah, whatever. Like, it'll be fine, like, big deal."

**Interviewer:** So it was more of a social thing to do?

**Gabrielle:** Social. I mean, I guess. I'm not sure if I would ever have qualified it as social, but sure. I mean, I hadn't thought about it.

**Interviewer:** What, can you just tell me, you can talk about any of the tattoos you've ever gotten, although I'm looking specifically at the picture of the one you sent me, but, in general, what's it like to have a tattoo?

**Gabrielle:** To have it or to get it?
Interviewer: To have it.

Gabrielle: Well, I think that, like, nowadays, especially, it's like no big deal. There's probably people that have lots more tattoos than I have, and they're much more visible, too. My tattoos are easy to cover. So if I want to cover a tattoo up for any reason, I can just wear a short, like a half-sleeve dress or a half-sleeve T-shirt and it covers the one on my back and the one on my arm. And then if I wear a large bracelet, they're all covered.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gabrielle: So, for me, but I haven't actually done that in years. I don't feel like I've ... Actually, you know what? I don't feel like I've ever had to cover a tattoo, except for maybe I feel like I should for work. But I never really have had to. No one's ever said anything to me. So having a tattoo makes me feel a little bit cool. It makes me feel like, I turned 40 last year and that's when I got this last one, and I was like, I kept telling everybody, "I'm going into my 40s cooler than I was in my 30s." So it's cool. It makes you feel cool.

Interviewer: Yeah, do you have any sense of where that came from, feeling like it's cool?

Gabrielle: Where what came from?

Interviewer: Feeling like tattoos are cool and it makes you feel that kind of way.

Gabrielle: I think that, as time passes, and I've been through several eras, and at this age I've been through, I was cognizant in the 80s and the 90s, and the 2000s and now. And I think as time has passed it's become less of a taboo, punk rock, biker thing and more of a hipster, young millennial thing and it makes me feel young. It makes me feel, "Wow, I can keep up with these millennials." And a couple of my good friends are millennials. One girl's like 21, and the other's like 29. And they both just, they get tattoos on a whim. It's crazy. I've never gotten a tattoo on a whim in my life, and it's just ... It's just, they, you know, it's like, "Oh, you finally got that one filled in. You got a new one." Next week, "Oh my god, you got a new one." They go on vacation and they get these tattoos as mementos. So it's kind of like become this, I'm not sure I would go as far, I'm not sure I would be as crass as to say it's trendy, but it's definitely much less of a big deal. It's much less of a decision, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah. So when you first started getting tattoos, '93 and '96, it was a much bigger deal?

Gabrielle: Yeah. A lot of people that I knew had them, but I was also part of a more of a punk scene. I was living in DC and I was part of this young, subversive ... It's back when subversive was subversive. Nowadays I feel like subversive is
mainstream and back then subversive wasn't mainstream. You were looked at as being strange if you had purple hair. Whereas nowadays, little kids and grandmothers have purple hair. So at that time it definitely was, for me it was much more of a big deal. Even in the last one I got on my wrist, it wasn't last minute at all, but I didn't put as much thought into it as the ones I got in the 90s.

**Interviewer:** I see. So how did you, so you told me about the heart, about how that decision was made. How did you make the decision to get your next one?

**Gabrielle:** So the one on my back is my biggest tattoo. And I was working at a restaurant in DC that, there was a tattoo parlor above it. And I got my nose pierced there. And got to know people that worked up there. And I guess some of my coworkers had some work done up there. And I just was fascinated by the whole thing. I think I had a crush on the tattoo artist. I used to got here to hang out because I had this thing for the guys that worked up there. And I was like, "Well, I'm going to get a tattoo." And so I came up with a design that I wanted and then the artist helped me draw it. And he put it on me.

**Interviewer:** Nice. How did you come up with the design?

**Gabrielle:** I was trying to think of what things are permanent, because I knew it was going to be on my body forever. And so I tried to think about what things are permanent in life. And the only thing I could come up with was love, which was very naive. Love, and myself, those are the only things I could come up with is love and myself. So there's a little heart in the middle for love. Which, it's weird, because I've got, so strange that I haven't thought about it until just now, but I have two hearts tattooed on me and I fucking hate hearts. I don't like heart jewelry. I wouldn't want a heart tattoo. It never even dawned on me until just now. I hate hearts, but I've got two of them permanently inked on me. Isn't that strange?

**Interviewer:** It sounds unusual.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, but I definitely was like, like I like love but I hate romance. I like romance, but I hate this pop romance that everybody's like, "Oh, the 'Notebook!'" And all that. It's like, that's just such bullshit. And so that's what it represents to me and all these perfect cheerleader girls that walk around with their heart-shaped necklaces and their heart-shaped diamond rings for their engagements, it's like, "Gag me." Oh my god, so, so it's kind of very strange that that's what I ended up with. So what I thought was permanent was myself and love. And so the sun represents me, because I'm a Leo, which is ruled by the sun. Which, I don't believe in astrology any more, so that's kind funny. And then there's an ankh, which is a symbol of eternal life. So that's permanent. For me that meant permanence, and then the heart is love. So that's how I decided on that. There's some tribal shit coming out the sides that doesn't mean anything.
Interviewer: So how do you feel when you're describing tattoos that meant something to you then that, it sounds like it means something a little different to you now. How are you feeling about those tattoos that you got years ago?

Gabrielle: Well I've never regretted my tattoos. Until recently, I've started to be like, "Ah, man, these are stupid. Why didn't I get something better?" Or they're fading, or I want something different now that represents who I am now. So there hasn't been very much buyer's remorse. There has been a little bit of when I look at them and think like, well the one on my shoulder, I actually did the drawing myself and had them put the drawing that I did on me. And so that's like a piece of my own art that I really like.

Interviewer: Yeah, wow.

Gabrielle: So I don't really regret that one even though it's getting faded. The one on my back I do regret a little, I think, because it seems childish to me, naïve. The meaning of it is naïve.

Interviewer: Okay. It seems childish to you now. Sometimes I hear people talk about, like, it's okay if you don't agree you with what it thought it meant then, or what it meant to you then, because it represents an important life stage. Do you feel that way too?

Gabrielle: Mm-hmm [affirmative], for sure.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: Well, I even feel that way about the one that's on my wrist that I'm not happy with. Because it was an experience and it is what it is. And like yes, I want it to be perfect and I'm going to have to get more work done on it to make it be perfect.

Gabrielle: But part of me just wants to leave it alone and get something else tattooed. Because it represents an experience.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: I definitely plan on getting another one. My best friend and I are thinking, because we always go on vacation together, to the same place, to the beach. And we're thinking about getting waves tattooed on us. So that's cool. I think we're going to do that.

Interviewer: That is cool. Do you have any idea where you'll get that one?

Gabrielle: What part of my body, you mean?

Interviewer: I'm sorry, yeah, where on your body?
Gabrielle: Oh, no, I've always thought that the inside of a forearm right by the elbow was a cool spot.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Gabrielle: But then a friend of mine has some stuff done on the lower part of her upper arm, on the outside, that looks pretty cool, too. So, I don't know, I'm very much of a plus-sized person so I have to think about it a little bit more than I think thinner people do, because, you know, if it's not going to cover the whole space it's just going to look swallowed in a sea of fat. So I have to think about it.

Interviewer: So is that how you have always thought about where to get tattoos?

Gabrielle: Yeah, for sure. I've always thought about that, for sure.

Interviewer: Is there, you said that all of your tattoos are visible, like the one on your wrist, for example, is visible, but you can hide them if you want to.

Gabrielle: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you then say that you've actually never really had to do that?

Gabrielle: No, I never have done that except ... I mean, I have a terrible memory, and my life has been, I'm 40, I'm not 25, so there's lots of stuff that I don't recall. But as far as I can remember, I don't think I've ever had ... You know, there might have been a job where I had to wear at least a half sleeve to cover it. But I honestly do not remember.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah. I guess that the bigger question that I'm wanting to get here is: how have tattoos affected certain areas of your life? Like your social life, jobs, clothing choices, sex, any of it.

Gabrielle: I would say probably not at all. I've always thought it was sort of fun to show off my tattoos. I've never had, I don't think my mom was super impressed by my tattoos, but she also didn't pitch a fit. My parents are hippies, so I grew up in a very permissive environment, perhaps too much so. So I don't think there's ever been a time where anyone said anything negative to me. I really don't think there's ever been a time where I've had any negative reactions around my tattoos, except for the newest one where I just sort of shoved it in people's faces and been like, "Look how shitty these lines are!" And people like, "Oh, yeah, they kind of are." No one wants to say anything bad, but they're like, "Oh wait, okay, you're right."

Interviewer: It's fair. I looked at your tattoo, and I thought it was just a closeup version of a new tattoo. And I didn't even realize the lines until you described it. But then I did see it.
Gabrielle: That's the thing, on first glance it's like, "Oh, it's a cute little lotus flower." But then when you look closely, it's like, "Oh shit, they really jacked that up."

Interviewer: So it's awesome to hear that you haven't really had any negative fallout or negative reactions to your work. What about positive? Have your tattoos affected areas of your life in a positive way?

Gabrielle: Definitely. I feel like the one on my wrist that I just got last year, I got it done at the beach with my best friend. And she got a tattoo at the exact same time. We were being marked at the same time and it was a wonderful bonding moment. And once in a while she still will, like when we have a good moment, instead of pounding fists about it, we'll be like, "Touch tattoos!" So there's that. I'll put my wrist up to her hand, where she got hers. It's like, "[inaudible]." So there's that. And I also feel like I have, and I mean, I don't know, I'm not sure, the couple of my friends that are millennials, I spend a lot of time feeling like I'm not cool enough for them. So having tattoos makes me feel like I belong a little bit more. Especially since I'm like, whatever, like, dude, yeah. "Oh," they'll be like, "oh, you have your nose pierced." Because I have my nose pierced. It's real teeny tiny. And people realize, "Oh, you have your nose pierced." Like, "Yeah, I've had my nose pierced for 22 years. What about you?" And now what. So it's kinda cool being an old head. Like, "Oh yeah, I've been tattooed since before you were born."

Interviewer: Yeah, you did this stuff before it was, like you were saying, mainstream.

Gabrielle: Right. Of course I would never say that. I probably should, I should probably rub it in their faces that I'm old and I was cool before they were born. Like, "I may not be that cool now, but I was fucking cooler than you are now back then." Yeah, so, I don't know, sometimes it's positive in that way. And then people are usually interested in tattoos. I have a lot of people asking me what they mean. Because it's not just a flower or like ... A lot of the tattoos that my friends, these millennial girls have are real obvious. It's like, "Oh, it's a mountain. Or it's a flower, or it's an outline of all the states that you've been to. Oh, it's a couple little birds." And there are these like, you know, tattoos that are overdone that everybody's getting. And mine are unique and people are always asking what they mean. So that's kind cool.

Interviewer: So one theme I'm hearing as you're talking, and feel free to jump in if this is all wrong, but there's a lot about connecting with other people. Like you connect with the friend you go the tattoo with and you connect with people when they're asking about your really cool, unique tattoos. And you're connecting with some of your younger friends.

Gabrielle: Yeah, and I even feel like there was a connection with, like, whatever, I'm kind of a sex addict, so I feel like my connections with the tattoo artists is important to me too. It's almost sexual being tattooed, because it's so intense. So even with the
artist, even the first artist that ever tattooed me, it was really, extremely, intensely, I wouldn't say exactly sexual, but definitely there were elements of that too. So it's fairly sexy in a way, too.

**Interviewer:** So that was the one you got when you were 19?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And the ones after, have they been the same kind of way, where you felt a real connection to all of your tattoo artists?

**Gabrielle:** Not so much. The second one that I got, that one was the most, it wasn't on a whim, like I had the design ready. But I didn't know the tattoo artist. I just went to this tattoo shop that had just opened up. And it was a really quick one, because it's not very big. And so I didn't really connect with that guy. But the one that I got this time, I don't know, I thought the artist was kind of cute, and then as he continued to work on me, he had a nice attitude towards the fact that I'm a big baby about pain, so I really liked that. And then when I went back and he worked on it again, I was definitely like, I would've totally jumped him.

**Interviewer:** So can you describe in detail the experience of getting tattooed?

**Gabrielle:** Okay. You definitely have to understand that I'm a pretty extreme extrovert. So anything that I, any of my behaviors, you have to frame it like that, because I don't think most people are as [inaudible] as I am in some ways. I like to make a production of everything. Not in a drama way, but in a, you know, when I walk in, I don't just sit down and wait my turn. I have to talk to people that are there. And I ask them what they're there for and what they're getting. I want to talk the people that are behind the desk that are too cool to talk to anybody. I just want to try to bring them out of their shell. If you're working at a tattoo shop, you're like the pinnacle of coolness. So I always try to bring these, like, people who think they're too cool for me, out of their shell. And then when the artist comes out I always make them laugh and I'm always making some crazy joke or telling them what my story is and what I want done and why I want it done. And just getting, connecting with them as much as possible. So it's not, you know what, you're right, it is a very social interaction, there's a lot of social interaction. I think that if I were to have the opportunity to get a tattoo done without having any, like ... If I were to just go to somebody's house and have them tattoo me that I didn't know and not talk to them hardly at all, I wouldn't like it. Yeah, so lots of interaction.

And then I try not to be a wuss whenever I'm getting tattooed. But it's so fucking painful that I make lots of faces, and I grunt, and I squeal. And I like for people to watch. Like the last one, like my mom watched for me a little bit. And I like a lot of attention. I understand that I'm kind of, I know that I'm an extrovert, but I understand that I'm kind of a little bit of a attention whore. So I do like for people to watch or interact with the artist or me while it's getting done. And yeah, so
yeah. I think that's it. And it is very painful, especially on the wrist. I will never, oh god, I'm going to have to get work done on my wrist again. I don't want to.

Interviewer: The wrist was the worst?

Gabrielle: Yeah. By the way, I don't smoke. My voice doesn't normally sound like this. I've got really bad allergies right now. I'm a singer, so tonight I've got a show, and I dunno how I'm going to sing. But I realize I sound like I smoke a pack a day. But I have really bad allergies right now.

Interviewer: No, I'm sorry to hear that. But you're totally good. I'm sorry about your voice though. You're a singer?

Gabrielle: Yeah, I'm a singer. That's my third job. I got three jobs.

Interviewer: What kind of venues do you sing at? Or other locations?

Gabrielle: Just bars and stuff mostly.

Interviewer: Awesome.

Gabrielle: The casino and stuff like that once in a while. It's a little, very part-time job so. But it pays a little bit so I like it.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's amazing. Very cool.

Gabrielle: Thank you. Anyway.

Interviewer: So you're describing how the actual process of getting a tattoo is extremely social and then you also mentioned pain. And before you mentioned that it's almost kind of a sexual experience. Is there anything more about the feeling in your body when you're actually getting a tattoo?

Gabrielle: No, not really. I think the last time ... I tend to be pretty confident about my body even though I'm a very big girl. I tend to be pretty confident and pretty outward and pretty sexual. And I don't, it doesn't really stop me much. But sometimes it does. Sometimes I feel really shitty about my body and am just cringing. And I noticed that the last time that I was getting this tattoo repaired ... Quote, unquote "repaired." I was sitting in a spot where I could see myself in a full-length mirror. And it was a really shitty feeling. I felt really horrendous. I felt awful. Because I was sitting down and that's the worst position for my big belly. And I was just like, it sort of took something away from the experience. Normally the experience is very intense and very sexy and I feel cool. And that made me feel not. That made me feel the opposite.

Interviewer: Ah, and it was because you were sitting in front of that full-length mirror?
Gabrielle: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: So the other times you've gotten tattoos it's just been you and the artist and whoever's watching you?

Gabrielle: Right.

Interviewer: I see.

Gabrielle: Yeah, exactly, I couldn't see at all. I couldn't see in the mirror at all. I definitely don't want to repeat that.

Interviewer: Yeah. So normally, when the full-length mirror isn't there, can you tell me more about this feeling like it's sexy and cool?

Gabrielle: Well I mean, let's just say the people that are doing the tattoos are not, they're not square at all. They're usually very cool looking people. And I feel like getting, like I'm sure that nothing, I'm sure that my little dumb ass tattoos are not impressive to them at all. These are people who are tattooed all on their necks, and they have full sleeves and they've been doing it for years. And I'm getting this dumb little tattoo that I found online. But I feel like I can be, I don't know, I can be on their level for a second. And I can interact with people that are cooler than me. Maybe this is too much of a theme in my life. I can be cool around people who are cooler than me. Oh, god.

Interviewer: No way, you've already said you are cool. You already know you're there. But there is--

Gabrielle: Yeah, you're right.

Interviewer: There is something about your attraction to people that you perceive as being cool, too, whether it's a physical attraction or just like an attraction to the kind of human they are. But with people who are sitting in the tattoo shops with tattoos on their necks and just are the, like you said, epitome of cool, there's like a--

Gabrielle: Yeah, they're like very devil may care people and I admire that. As much as I, like I have like ... Everybody has multifaceted personalities. But I think that's something that I guess I admire, that sort of attitude of like, "Hey, fuck everyone. This is my career. This is my path. I'm going to tattoo my fucking face." Like, Jesus, the kind of balls you have to have to tattoo your face. Or even your neck. Oh my god, I have a friend who has this big ugly ass tattoo on her neck. And I can't believe the balls it takes to get it. Or, you either have to be really dumb, or really ballsy to get a neck tattoo.

Interviewer: Do you ever think about getting a really ballsy tattoo?
Gabrielle: Oh, nope.

Interviewer: How come?

Gabrielle: Never, never. No, I mean, I definitely want more tattoos, the main problem for me is that they're expensive is the only thing that would really stop me from getting more at this point. But, you'll notice, I didn't get any tattoos between 2000 or 2001 and 2017. So I went a really long time without getting any tattoos. And I don't know, I would say that probably most of that was financial. But they're both so, I think there's also been a social, like I said, there's been a social change, but then also when I became friends with these two millennial girls in the last two years, I've been much more, feeling much more like continuing on with body modification.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: But yeah, nothing major. I wouldn't want to get anything crazy.

Interviewer: So part of the reason you did go so long was financial, but the other part was that--

Gabrielle: Oh, for sure.

Interviewer: You didn't really want to again until you started hanging out with these younger women.

Gabrielle: I think there's been periods of my life, like probably every couple years where I've been like, "Oh, I'd really like another tattoo." But then then the financial aspect of it has been prohibitive for sure.

Interviewer: I see. Has the financial aspect always felt prohibitive?

Gabrielle: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like, even whenever you get them?

Gabrielle: Yeah, because I think the one, oh my god, this is going to tell you how long ago it was, the one on my back, it's like, maybe like six inches by four inches. Maybe a little smaller, I don't know. And that $120.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah.

Gabrielle: And then the one on my shoulder was literally $35. And it's like three, two by two. That was like, $35. And that was like a million years ago. And now the one on my wrist that I got, which is about the same, it's a little smaller than the one on
my shoulder, that was over $100. So, you know what I mean? So it was expensive back then and now it's way more expensive.

**Interviewer:** Totally. So if cost were no issue, do you think you'd have a ton more tattoos?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah. I do. For sure.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, so it really is the cost.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, for sure, yeah. I would definitely have more tattoos, for sure. There's plenty of spots on my body that are very easy to cover with a t-shirt and shorts. Or a little skirt. So.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So this, so you did mention that you don't really have to hide your tattoos. And that's been kind of a cool thing about having them is realizing that you don't need to hide them. But in terms of the ones that are just kind of naturally hidden, like the thing about the heart on your butt. Who gets to see that and what do you think of that?

**Gabrielle:** Everybody can see it if they want to. I literally will show it to just about anyone who asks. Mostly women, because I don't really show my ass to [inaudible] unless I'm a sexual partner. I've had quite a number of sexual partners and all of them have seen it. And I'm never hesitant to show it, and then when my friends ask me about it, I'm like, "Do you want to see it?" And then I show my ass. So, you want a picture? I'll send it to you. That's my attitude.

**Interviewer:** So you sound very free about your body, like, tattoos or otherwise. Just your body in general, you sound very free about it.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, I am. Because I'm a little bit of an exhibitionist and I am, my therapist, I think thinks that I'm a sex addict. I'm not really sure that I am. I'm not sure if I am or not. There are definitely some issues of compulsive sexual activity. And so I have, over the years, I guess I sort of like, I mean my parents were hippies, so I was raised in a, like I said, a very permissive environment. Very open minded environment. So there's that. And I'm also just, I don't really care what people think of my body. So over the years I think I have developed, almost as a defense mechanism maybe, I've developed an attitude of just like resistance against this whole idea that you have to be thin to be beautiful and thin to be sexy. And I've had plenty of people, even if my opinion of myself was based on other's opinions of me, I would still have no reason to think anything bad about my body. You know what I'm saying?
Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: It's not, it's based on the fact that I could give two shits of what people think of me.

Interviewer: Right.

Gabrielle: That's probably not actually true. It's probably that I haven't had too much trouble finding partners, despite my size. That I have gotten this, I don't know, it's kind of complicated, I guess I've gotten this idea that there's nothing wrong with my body. And maybe it's like both based on my badassery of just being like, "Well, whatever, I'm going to wear what I want, I'm going to be who I want, and I'm going to have this radical idea that I might be beautiful and sexy even though I'm big." And then it's also based on the fact that there are people out there who agree with me. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: So maybe if there was nobody that agreed with me in the world about my body being beautiful and sexy then I might not believe it. I might not have continued to have that feeling. But there are plenty of people that agree. But my best friend, the one that I was telling you about that I got tattooed with, she's now 150 pounds heavier than I am. And she does not feel the same way. She has had like one partner in her life and she's very down on herself. And she's had a really tough time struggling with that. So, you know, I know it's a form of resistance.

Interviewer: Your attitude is a form of resistance?

Gabrielle: Pardon?

Interviewer: You're saying your attitude is a form of resistance?

Gabrielle: Yes.

Interviewer: I see. Have you always had this attitude? Or when did you develop that?

Gabrielle: I think that I have, yeah. I can think back all the way to seventh and eighth grade where people were bullying other kids and making fun of kids that have special needs or whatever. And my reaction to that was to go and sit with those kids at lunch. You know what I mean? Find ways to make the lives of those people easier. And also, for example, I remember, I think I was in eighth or ninth grade when ... Because I was always a weirdo, my parents and I, we traveled a lot from school, I dressed different, I acted different. And so kids, these like farm boys, "Oh, you're a lesbian." And I'm like, "Well what if I was?" I'm not, and I never was, I never have been. I've had some things with women but it's not my thing at all. But so what if I fucking was? So what?
Interviewer: Yeah, so what?

Gabrielle: You know, so that's kind of how I was raised, I guess. So maybe I can't take a whole lot of credit for it, but that, for sure, has been my attitude, I'd say all my life.

Interviewer: So that has really helped you get, it sounds like a pretty positive self concept.

Gabrielle: Yeah, it's not easy to maintain, but I don't think it is for anybody. Just being thin doesn't make you have body positivity and it doesn't make your self confidence easy to maintain.

Interviewer: Totally. I wonder how your tattooed body fits into that attitude.

Gabrielle: Yeah, probably, I mean it's probably just another way of saying, "This is mine and I must do with it what I want. And look, it looks cool, and if you don't like it, you're dumb and old." So it's a way of maybe separating myself from the losers.

Interviewer: The people who aren't claiming their own bodies, maybe.

Gabrielle: What's that?

Interviewer: The people who aren't able to claim their own bodies like you have.

Gabrielle: Or the people who would stop you from being an individual, from being unique. It's so crazy to me that people are going around throwing around this term "snowflake," throwing that around, that's like a derogatory term. It's like, "Hell, yeah, I'm a fucking snowflake! Yes, I'm a unique individual. I'm an interesting, unique person. There may be other people out there that agree with me about some things, or disagree, whatever. But that doesn't mean that I'm not special." I don't think that I'm so special that I don't need to have a job. I don't think that I'm so special that I should be treated like, I feel like a lot of people feel like they're, "Oh, I'm daddy's princess, I should've have to work for anything and everything should be handed to me." That's way more snowflakey than being like, "I'm a badass and I listen to whatever music I want to and I tattoo my body. And I go braless."

Interviewer: Yeah. Snowflake is not a bad, it's not bad to be unique and just be your own person.

Gabrielle: Yeah, so I am a special snowflake.

Interviewer: Uh huh. I've been asking participants about how, any changes they've noticed from before and after getting tattoos. I feel like that might be kinda tricky here
just because your first tattoo was when you were so young. But maybe you have some ideas?

**Gabrielle:** Lemme think back to how I thought about it. I think there's definitely a sense of being able to handle shit after that. I was only 15. So to have somebody poking your ass, and not just like the physical pain of it, but the stamp of adulthood or the stamp of, I don't know, it just felt ... I guess, as I look back, I think that it was like a rite of passage kind of a deal.

**Interviewer:** A rite of passage.

**Gabrielle:** And not on purpose. It wasn't a quinceañera or something like that. It was just sort of a surprising moment of, "Well, I can handle some shit better than I thought." Or, "I've got this thing now that makes me different from the squares." And I guess that's the theme. It seems like the theme in my tattoos and maybe in my life, to be different from the straights, you know.

**Interviewer:** What is it about being a square that you really just don't want to be?

**Gabrielle:** I think close minded, racist, hateful.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Gabrielle:** There's a lot of people that I've known growing up that've just been like, "Well, I would never do that. I'm going to say in this little bum fuck town and drive my tractor until I die. And I ain't never going to see a black person. And I ain't never going to know anybody different from me." I did grow up there, but ... So, I didn't grow up in the town where I went to high school. I only lived there for a little bit. But that really had an impact on me of like, sort of the American, the common American culture being sort of bullshit.

**Interviewer:** Wanting to subvert it?

**Gabrielle:** What's that?

**Interviewer:** And then you wanted to subvert it?

**Gabrielle:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Gabrielle:** I feel like I always kind of have. And I was married for a little bit. And he's not American, he's Egyptian, I lived in Egypt for four years.

**Interviewer:** Wow.
Gabrielle: And came back with my husband. And we are getting divorced. But I think my point is even with him, American or not, men have an idea about what is their role and what women's roles are. And you think that you've found somebody who doesn't subscribe to that bullshit and then they fucking do. They do and they can't help it, they've been socialized, it's been internalized. They've been totally, you know, it's just this internalized sexism and internalized, I mean, not racism on his part. But this internalized sexism that they cannot get rid of, where it's like the women of the world owe them something, regardless of, "Oh, well, maybe you wash your dishes but you act like you're helping me." It's like no, man, you're not helping me, you're doing what you need to do. And I feel like, on some level, 99% of white America is like that.

Interviewer: Sure.

Gabrielle: So, that to me is, I don't want to be a part of that.

Interviewer: And there's something about tattoo culture that does break away from that, it sounds like you're saying.

Gabrielle: Yeah, for sure. I think it's a part, it's a small part of a greater movement away from this 1950s mentality.

Interviewer: Yeah. I wonder what your thoughts are then, in terms of how mainstream tattoos are becoming, would you say that that is a really good sign? Like more people are breaking away from some of those really unfortunate norms? Or would you say that tattoos just don't quite mean what they used to?

Gabrielle: My first reaction would be to just say some of both. But let me think about it for a second. I mean, it's possible that, I don't know, I think society, I think our society in America, at least, is more polarized than ever. But there are tattoos on both sides. So I think that it continues to be a symbol of, well, not just both sides, there are more than one faction, but I think that they're, tattoos are definitely more mainstream. I don't think they're any less, I think they can be meaningless, for sure. But I don't think they're any less ... I don't know. I guess tattoo culture's changed a lot because even if you look back to the '90s or whatever when I was just getting my two tattoos like we said, like, it was a little bit less common. So, like, for example, my friend who's a millennial, these two girls that I know that are millennials, they get tattoos on a whim and they're still very meaningful to them. Some of the tattoos I just roll my eyes, because I'm like, "Oh, what are you doing?" But most of them are pretty meaningful to them. And I think that, yeah, I think for sure that that continues to be important. It continues to be meaningful to people. But, yeah, no, I think, I'm just talking through my thoughts about it. I really do think there's some of both.

Interviewer: Some of both, yeah.
Gabrielle: Yeah, for sure. I mean there's definitely people who are getting tattoos that are less meaningful, but then there's also this, I think there's this large amount of people, or a strong faction of people who are getting tattooed as markers of something.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's a question I have not really been posing to participants, that sort of general what's tattoo culture now vs then. But I think you have such an interesting history, and you have such a long history with tattoos, that it's important to get your thoughts on that.

Gabrielle: Well thank you.

Interviewer: Yeah, I appreciate you thinking it through.

Gabrielle: Gladly.

Interviewer: So I'm wondering too, in that same vein ... I'm sorry, my dog is barking. One second.

Gabrielle: No problem.

Interviewer: In that same kind of vein, I'm wondering if there is someone who is naïve to tattoo culture, doesn't really know anything about it past or present, is there anything you would want them to know about individuals who get tattoos? Or just about you and your experiences getting tattoos?

Gabrielle: So some piece of knowledge, like wisdom, to pass on to people who don't have tattoos?

Interviewer: Yes.

Gabrielle: Well, I have to say, a friend of mine just sort of hit me with a piece of information today that kind of weirded me out. So the first thing that I would say, I'm sure that I have more to say about it, but I think the first thing I would say would be to look into the possibility that tattooing is cultural appropriation. Because I really haven't, I really never thought of that, and I was talking to one of my friends today about cultural appropriation and racism and institutionalized racism and all that stuff. And she was like, "Well what about your tattoos? And what about your nose piercing? Those aren't white American culture. Those are appropriated from other cultures." And I was like, "Holy shit. I don't know anything about that. Let's research that." So I would say to anyone who doesn't have tattoos to not be a part of cultural appropriation if that's the case. So I would say that there needs to be some research done at least, I mean, I'm sure there is. I just haven't, I don't know anything about it yet. So I would say that's the first thing. Don't be a part of that. Don't be a part of that. Make a conscious decision about whether tattooing is part of an appropriation of a culture's symbols. Be wary of that. Because a lot of
people, even to take it one step further, a lot of people have these tribal designs, or they have a Maori design or whatever. My husband wanted Egyptian stuff. He's Egyptian, he wanted something Egyptian tattooed on him and that's cool, because you're Egyptian, get something Egyptian. And he's like, "Well what about this? This is Italian." I'm like, "Dude, you're not fucking Italian." So I would say to be aware of ... You know, you don't want a Chinese symbol tattooed on you, like, Jesus Christ. I mean, have you been to China, have you connected with Chinese people? Do you feel a special connection to Chinese culture because of that? That's one thing. I went to Egypt for four years, I feel like if I got some Arabic tattooed on me I would have a really good reason, when somebody said, "Hey, what the hell are you doing?" I'd say, "Oh, I lived in Egypt for four years. This is something that really was important to me, it meant a lot to me, and that's why I got this Arabic tattooed on me." So just go getting some bullshit tattooed on you because you think it's pretty, so I think that's probably the main thing. Yeah, I guess that's probably the main thing. I don't know, I'm sure, you know, when you ask an open-ended question like that, I'm sure, like, I'm a very talkative person, I'm sure I could come up with a bunch of other stuff. But that's the thing that's been on my mind because of what my friend said to me today. So I think that it's really important. Well, I was watching a video the other day too about a Maori woman, and that's Maori has come up, who had the facial tattoos. And about, there's like a woman who is not Maori, who is a white person, who had the same tattoos done on her chin. And that it's extremely offensive. Because you never know, unless you're deeply involved with the culture, you never know what that means to them. It can be very private, it can be very personal. It can talk about heritage and connection with the community. And you don't fucking have that. That doesn't belong to you, so don't take it. You know what I mean? So I think we all have to be careful about that. A lot of people roll their eyes and say, "Oh, snowflake." And, "Oh, everybody, you get upset and protest about everything." It's like, "Yeah, you're damn right I do." Any time you're stepping on the toes of people who have been oppressed, you're damn right. Step on my toes, I'm white. Step on my toes. Don't step on the toes of the Native Americans or the whatever, the Polynesians. My soon-to-be-ex-husband has a friend who is also Egyptian with this big, humongous, beautiful Polynesian tattoo on his chest and shoulder. And it's like, "Dude. Dude, you're not the rock. Don't [inaudible]. You're not Polynesian. Get a fucking clue." So I think that's gotta be my wisdom.

**Interviewer:** That's good wisdom. So you're pointing to the difference between unfairly taking what's not yours and appropriating it vs the example you gave if you were to get something in Arabic, it would be a true celebration of an actual life experience and event in your world, and that's something people should know?

**Gabrielle:** Well I also know that it wouldn't be offensive to anybody. I wouldn't be getting, like if I were to get Cleopatra tattooed on me, not only would I be possibly offending Egyptians, I would be most definitely offending the American black community. Have some idea of what your tattoo means ...
Interviewer: Absolutely.

Gabrielle: I think that the best thing is to create your own vision for what your tattoo is that doesn't have anything to do with, that it's personal to you. And that way you never have to regret it, you never have to be concerned about it affecting anybody else.

Interviewer: So when your friends started talking about how a lot of tattoos, just by nature of getting something tattooed or pierced can be cultural appropriation, did that make you start rethinking your tattoos?

Gabrielle: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, that's the kind of person I am. When I'm presented with information that goes against something that I think and that I think is right, I try to think about it. But I do want to clarify that she wasn't talking about, like I took it to the point of being different styles of tattoos, but she was talking about being tattooed in general. And I don't know anything about that. Because my tattoos are very personal. The lotus flower that I have on my wrist, I can talk to you about it for quite some time as my experience as a Buddhist for eight years and the fact that I lived in Egypt and it also has meaning to Egyptians. So my tattoos are very personal to me. And I would never regret the designs of them in that way. But I would like to read some literature about where tattooing started. Whether it's been multiple cultures around the world or whether it just started in one or two places. And where, how it progressed through history to become this thing that it is now. So very curious about that.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Gabrielle: And she's like, "Well, what, are you going to get your tattoos removed?" And I'm like, "No, I can't afford to get my tattoos removed. But I certainly will have the appropriate shame about it if that's the case."

Interviewer: So you bring up a good point. I got so excited about talking about the process of getting tattoos that I didn't even ask you one of the major questions. And that is: can you tell me a little more about the meaning of your tattoo on your wrist?

Gabrielle: The one on my wrist? Oh yeah, sure. So, it's funny, because when I first got it I didn't even think about the Egyptian connection. But then one of my Egyptian friends saw it and was like, "Oh, it's a lotus flower. That's an Egyptian thing, too." And I was like, "Oh yeah, it totally is." So there is a dual meaning to it, even though I wasn't thinking about that when I first got it done. So the Egyptian meaning isn't really that important, it's just one of their symbols of, I believe, a like life and fertility kind of a deal. But I don't, like I said, that wasn't the reason I got it done. I got it done because I love the symbol of the lotus. Like I said, I was a Buddhist for eight years. And as a Buddhist, the lotus flower, at least in my sect of Buddhism, which is [inaudible] Buddhism. The lotus flower is very important because it signifies the simultaneity of cause and effect. Which, to me, which in a grander way basically means everything's happening all at once. It's all
simultaneous. There's no time. As an atheist I always believed that, as a Buddhist I was also still an atheist. But there is no time. This is all, if you can even qualify it as a moment. It's all happening at once. Infinity is all happening at once. And the lotus flower symbolizes the simultaneity of cause and effect because it flowers and seeds at the same time, which is very rare in nature. So it's flowering and seeding at the same time. The cause and effect are happening at the same time.

**Interviewer:** That's lovely.

**Gabrielle:** Yeah, so that's the meaning behind it.
Participant 8: Hallie

Interviewer: And the tattoo that you sent me, when did you get that done?

Hallie: Last year in February.

Interviewer: Last February.


Interviewer: Okay. Is that your only tattoo or do you have others?

Hallie: No, I have, I think, 12 tattoos, but that's the most recent one.

Interviewer: That's the most recent. And can I ask when you got your tattoos, like what the timeline of those look like?

Hallie: Yeah, sure. So I got my first one when I was 19 in 2011 and I've been getting them over the years since.

Interviewer: Okay. In terms of the tattoo that you sent, I'm looking at the image right now, actually. Did you have a moment to really look at the photos that you sent?

Hallie: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's sometimes interesting because it's a different perspective. I wonder what it was like for you to look at some of those photographs.

Hallie: So I hadn't looked at a photo of it probably since I got it and the artist took pictures. He's a friend of mine and he put them online, so I haven't really looked at pictures of it since then. I guess I was noticing detail in it for the first time. So, the last time I saw a picture of it was when it was really fresh and new and I expected certain details ... like there's white ink in it, I expected that to fade and I was kind of surprised that it was still there. As for as an emotional response, I don't know if I really had one. It was just noticing the detail, I guess.

Interviewer: Yeah, the coloring-

Hallie: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: And how it's held up over time.

Hallie: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Great. And can you tell me about this tattoo?
Hallie: Yeah, sure. So I had been wanting to work on a constellation sleeve for a while and it started off with this one right here- Which is Sagitta, that's the smallest constellation in the sky. I really like Astronomy. It was my minor in undergrad and I taught about it for, I've been teaching Astronomy, like outdoor star gazing classes and stuff, for seven or eight years now. Sorry, my cats are growling at each other.

Interviewer: Sure.

Hallie: And so I got that one first and I always knew that I wanted to start working on a constellation sleeve, and this is the second tattoo in the sleeve. My friend who's a tattoo artist posted a watercolor he did of, basically it was this bear and it was kind of the mountain, outdoorsy scene inside and he had done it in black and white and I immediately texted him and was like I want this as a tattoo. That's going to be my Big Dipper tattoo because I knew I wanted a Big Dipper tattoo of Ursa Major, the Big Bear, and so he worked in the Big Dipper in the sky there and made it almost like a twilight scene with the blues and the clouds and the moon because I wanted it to match this arrow tattoo because the only color in it is the little bit of blue in the arrowhead and so that's been the uniting theme of the constellation tattoos is that they'll be mostly colorless but just with some blue.

Interviewer: With some blue in it. So stars and constellations and what does all of that mean for you? What's that significance like?

Hallie: I guess really it's kind of my closest connection with nature. It's kind of what my life revolves around being an ecology student. Most of my hobbies tend to be hiking, star gazing, being outdoors and the stars are like the most constant aspect of that. Even living in the city, I just bought a house on the south side of Pittsburgh and there's not a whole lot of nature down here other than what we can put in our tiny little paved yards. I can still see the stars here. Right? It's just something I've been fascinated with ever since I was a little kid and saw the Milky Way for the first time and just thought it was so cool. Going out to the country and being able to see stars as a city kid, right? It's just something that I really love and I love teaching it. I do night walks for communities around here.

Interviewer: Oh wow. What's that like?

Hallie: Sorry?

Interviewer: What's that like, doing the night walks?

Hallie: Night walks. It's really cool. Not a lot of people know very much about Astronomy anymore and so I find that whenever I do the night hikes and the night walks and the star gazing, people are really, really interested and have tons of questions which I really like. So it's usually a full moon walk and we don't really
Interviewer: You mentioned going out to the country as a city kid?

Hallie: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: Do you make it out to the country often or did you grow up-

Hallie: Yeah. Yeah, as often as I can. My partner has ... he lives out in the Allegheny National Forest so that's where I used to go as a kid. I still try to go there now at least a few times a year, we'll take friends and float the river and have campfires and everything and then I even went to undergrad out near there, so I specifically chose to go to college in a small town out that way in Northwest PA.

Interviewer: So really feeling connected to nature is a huge part of your life.

Hallie: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: It's a huge part of your life and it's your goal for your constellation sleeve.

Hallie: Mm-hmm [affirmative], definitely.

Interviewer: So what does that do for you in terms of actually getting that on your body?

Hallie: Well, so it was my most recent tattoo and I think the more tattoos you get, the more, at least for me, the more I've just been kind of like well that's something I love, I want to put it on my body [inaudible]. And so that's how it was for this Sagitta one. I really like the idea of the arrow and it signified seeking, for me, that's what it means, Sagitta means seeker and kind of like shooting among the stars. Right? Shoot for the stars kind of idea. So this one, it was really I saw this beautiful piece of artwork that my friend did and there was just a moment where I realized that that's the next piece of art that I'm getting. Yeah, I don't know, it just fit me, I guess.

Interviewer: Yeah. So one, the arrow you loved what it meant, you loved the concept. The other is meaningful and significant in ways too, but it's also you like it for the aesthetics, it sounds like?

Hallie: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: You liked the way it looked.

Hallie: Definitely the aesthetic and I think that getting the Big Dipper was ... it's the constellation that the most people can recognize. Right? Even when I'm here in
downtown Pittsburgh, you can still pick it out. And so it's basically the most basic constellation that we know.

**Interviewer:** Sure. So how did you select this tattoo of all 12 of them for this study?

**Hallie:** It's my favorite one.

**Interviewer:** It's your favorite one?

**Hallie:** Yeah. I just really like the artistry of it, the tattoo artist, like I said, he's a friend of mine. He really put a lot of love into it and I like that it came from something that he did on his own and it just really spoke to me and you're able to create something personal out of it.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So you customized it. It's also the connection to your friend and it's just something really beautiful that you saw that you liked.

**Hallie:** Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about ... I'm going to jump back to your first tattoo.

**Hallie:** Sure.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about the decision to get that tattoo?

**Hallie:** Yeah, sure. It was a really spur of the moment. It was my freshman year of college, I was on spring break, but I was just at home, I wasn't anywhere cool, and I'd always known that I really wanted tattoos but hadn't really had an idea yet and actually, most of my tattoos were very spur of the moment decisions. And some of them I even just drew it myself, went in, handed it to them and was like put this on me. And that's how my first tattoo was. So my first tattoo, it's on my side and it's very tiny, but it's some Chinese characters, I speak Chinese, so I actually know what it means and I wrote them myself.

**Interviewer:** Wow. Impressive.

**Hallie:** Yeah. But I just wanted something simple and small for the first one and I was reading *The Tao of Pooh* at the time, so I got something from that book.

**Interviewer:** And that is something from that that connects you to that book? Your tattoo?

**Hallie:** Yeah, yeah and then the philosophy of it. The book relates Winnie the Pooh to Taoism and it was just a philosophy that really spoke to me at the time. It doesn't so much ... I mean I haven't really kept up with it, but at the time it meant a lot to me so I don't regret it or anything.
Interviewer: Yeah. It sounds like it might even be pulling some emotions, stirring some emotions as you're talking about it.

Hallie: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: Yeah. So even if the philosophy itself doesn't currently fit, it still feels really powerful to you?

Hallie: Yeah, yeah. I wouldn't say it doesn't fit now, it definitely does fit but it's not something I necessarily think a lot about anymore.

Interviewer: In the way that you once did when you first got it.

Hallie: Right. Right.

Interviewer: I see. I see. So it was spur of the moment, you said a lot of your tattoos were really spur of the moment.

Hallie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through a couple of those?

Hallie: Yeah, sure. This one I did myself.

Interviewer: Ah.

Hallie: Yeah, so that's a stick and poke I did.

Interviewer: Wow.

Hallie: And that was just, I don't know, some of my friends did tattoos themselves, one of my friends did one on my ankle for me so that was another spur of the moment one. I don't know if you can see that-

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Hallie: It's kind of crappy. A friend had done that one and then that one's the astronomical symbol for Saturn and then I was just sitting around with some friends and we talked about how I had gotten these stick and poke tattoos and they were like, oh can you do them? And I had done them before for a couple of other people, so I did a couple for two of my friends and then I just did this one when we were sitting around. It's just a little triangle on my finger. This one on my arm here is a door hinge and actually the same friend who did the Bear did the door hinge and that was at a charity event where they were doing ... it was like barbecue and tattoos, and they were doing $50 flash tattoos and donating the proceeds to a local organization and there was a flash sheet, and I was just looking at it and I was like
if there is something I like, I'll get one and I saw the door hinge and when I was in college, I lived in a house that we called the door hinge and we had always talked about getting a fancy door hinge tattoos all together and I was the only one that ended up actually doing it. Yeah, it just felt right, so I got it. Then another spur of the moment one is this bird I have on the back of my arm. It's a swallow and that was a Toys for Tots drive where you bring in a toy to the tattoo shop and you get a flash tattoo in return. It's like a toy drive for Christmastime.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah, very cool. So do you have any tattoos that were really very pre-meditated?

**Hallie:** The Bear.

**Interviewer:** The Bear.

**Hallie:** It was pre-meditated. Let's see I have one on the back of my neck which was pre-meditated because it was a cover up. Let's see if I can turn around and show you.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah.

**Hallie:** It's like a mandala on the back of my neck. It was a cover up because I used to live in Texas and I worked at a really funky law firm and for our work party, my boss hired a tattoo artist and he was doing free tattoos as long as it was under 15 minutes to do it or a half hour or something and it had to be all black, so I got a little crescent moon, but it came out kind of lop-sided. I ended up moving back to Pittsburgh so I couldn't have the artist fix it in time, so I went to a couple shops around here once I moved back and a lot of people wouldn't take it.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Hallie:** Because, I guess the back of the neck is a really hard place to cover up and it was a very dark tattoo, about that big. So I found a woman who was willing to do it and she drew up this really beautiful mandala tattoo. She said it had to be something really dark, really floral. She told me she was really good at doing dark cats or dark florals, so I chose the floral. We went through a few designs before we found one that I liked, so it was probably the most pre-meditated out of all of them.

**Interviewer:** So that one was a process.

**Hallie:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** What was it like for you to get the crescent moon and have the realization that it's not what you wanted?
Hallie: It was a little disappointing. I realized it not very long after it was done because my co-workers were all comparing their new tattoos and I swept my hair up and showed everybody and they're like ooh, nice and I was like oh no, it looks bad. At first, it didn't really bother me but ... so I was living in Texas, it was really hot there. Right? It was 100 degree summers and I never wanted to pull my hair up because I had this lopsided moon there and a lot of times, I just chose to sweat rather than swinging my hair up, and probably the hardest part of it was whenever I moved back home and I was living with my mom and my grandma for a little bit until I had saved enough for an apartment and everything and they hate my tattoos. At first, it was a big point of contention, but now it's like a joke to them and I was like they are going to make so much fun of me when they see that I got that tattoo. You know? Because I had always brushed off everything they said, I'm like whatever, I like my tattoos, whatever you say doesn't bother me, but this ... if they made fun of this one, they would be right and so it was a little bit of a joke for a while and I just wouldn't wear my hair up around them again because I didn't want them to say anything. Pretty much as soon as I found somebody that was willing to take that on, I got it covered up.

Interviewer: Oh yeah. Did your mom and grandma ever see the tattoo before it was covered up?

Hallie: Yeah, they did.

Interviewer: Did they say anything to you?

Hallie: Yeah, they were like ... at that point they weren't as nasty about tattoos as they had been when I first started getting them, but they definitely were like you know that that too looks really bad or that tattoo looks really bad. Right? And I would just be like yeah, I know. I'm going to get covered up. I was probably ... I only had about a month between when I moved home and when I got that covered up.

Interviewer: So what were some of the initial, like the nastier reactions you were getting when you first started getting tattoos?

Hallie: Me and my mom really got into it over my first tattoo. So, I had sent a picture to my sister, trusting her and not necessarily thinking that she would show it to my mom, but she did and my mom got really angry. I mean like screaming, said I looked like a whore, really angry. I actually, like I said, I was home on spring break from school. I packed up my suitcase and had my dad drive me back to school that night and I didn't talk to her for probably three months, until she sent me an apology email where she was like I've had some time to put it into perspective ... it's just a tattoo. I probably shouldn't have freaked out as much as I did. She was like I was just upset because I found out from your sister and not from you, so she said she wanted to know about things I did like that from now on. So I did tell her at first and I would let her know, like oh, I pierced my nose. I got another tattoo.
Interviewer: Were the reactions better?

Hallie: Yeah, for the most part. She didn't like that I was piercing, but she doesn't even notice it now. It was always just kind of like well, I really don't think you need to do that. You're making yourself look silly by screaming and calling me names, so.

Interviewer: Yeah, it has leveled out. It's not perfect, but it's certainly not what it once was.

Hallie: Right. Right.

Interviewer: So you mentioned earlier that you always knew that you wanted to get tattoos and how did you know that? What's that like?

Hallie: I just think it's like a really beautiful art form and form of self expression. I've been really into art ever since I was ... I mean I can't remember a time where I wasn't drawing and creating things. I just think tattoos are a really beautiful extension of that. I've just always really loved art and I saw no reason why I shouldn't put art on my body.

Interviewer: It's a way ... it's like your body is the canvas that you're working with.

Hallie: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: So when you say you always knew you wanted tattoos, can you remember when that started?

Hallie: I can't remember a specific moment in time, but I definitely remember looking at other people with tattoos when I was really little and thinking how cool and beautiful it looked and just wanted to be old enough to do that myself.

Interviewer: So you've always seen tattoos on bodies as beautiful, beautiful pieces of art?

Hallie: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Interviewer: I wonder, too, let me see what direction to go with this here ... How did you decide on the locations for your tattoos?

Hallie: For the first few tattoos, I wanted them on my side because I wanted them hidden and I wanted to be able to hide them easily with clothes and then I started moving out of that realm. When I first started, I really wanted to still be able to look quote, unquote professional and I didn't want to prevent myself from any ... not prevent myself, but be excluded from getting jobs and stuff like that because I'd grown up hearing if you have tattoos, you'll never get a job. Right? But then once I was out of college and started working, I realized that wasn't necessarily true, at least in the field that I've chosen. I've been working in basically the environmental
field and I've never, ever had any issue. If anything, I've gotten complimented by a lot of employers on my tattoos. And so once I was out of college, I started expanding. I put some tattoos on my arms, I have the one my hand which is probably the most visible one and in the last few years, I've really taken a lot of direction from the artist as where to put the tattoos. I may go in and say I know I want it somewhere on this arm because this is my constellation tattoo arm and Jeff, the artist, said well, I think it will look really good across the top of your shoulder and then you'll still have lots of room to play with the future tattoos. Another tattoo he did of mine, he did a T-Rex skull on my hips, like on the front and I had wanted it on one side and he actually insisted on doing it on the other side because he said it would look better with the ... basically with the curve of my body and so I totally deferred to him for that and I didn't really regret it. So, ever since then I've been very trusting of the artist if they say we should move the placement a little bit.

**Interviewer:** Have you ever had an experience of disagreeing with things like location or placement?

**Hallie:** Yeah. With the dinosaur skull I really didn’t agree with Jeff at first because I had had it in my mind that I wanted tattoos of a certain type on one side of my body and tattoos of another type on the other side ... I know, it was that I felt like I had too many tattoos on my right side already and that's why I wanted it on my left side. So what he ended up doing was he put the mock up of the tattoo on both sides to show me how it would look in comparison with the way my body looks and also the way my other tattoos looked. And I was like, okay, I do see what you're talking about so I deferred to him on that.

**Interviewer:** And you said you don't regret it. You like how it turned out?

**Hallie:** Yeah, I don't regret it at all. Ever since then I've been really trusting of the artist if they have suggestions as to where to put it.

**Interviewer:** So some of yours are very visible to the extent that random people off the street or people you work with and employers and so on are able to see them and comment on them. The ones that are hidden, how do you feel about those in terms of who gets to see them, how they make you feel?

**Hallie:** It doesn't really bother me about in terms of who gets to see them. I kind of view it as almost like jewelry. I wear that to, I don't know, accentuate my outfit or accessorize or ... I mean my tattoos are just part of me now so it doesn't really bother me in regards to who sees them.

**Interviewer:** So you say "my tattoos are a part of me now", was there ever a time when they didn't feel as much a part of you?
Hallie: Yeah, I would say when I first started getting tattoos and I felt like I had to hide them. It was like less a part of me and more a secret, I guess, and not like necessarily in a bad way, it was just I felt if they were visible I wouldn't be accepted in society and I was at an age where feeling accepted was really important to me. I was a young adult. I was 19, 20, 21 years old and just starting to explore the world and make my own friendships and not being supervised by my parents constantly and everything, but I feel like as I got older I've not only cared less if people have opinions about my tattoos, but also I've met so many people who had really positive reactions to my tattoos and that helped me gain confidence. And it's also been just really helpful to be in a field that I love and that is very accepting of all sorts of looks, I guess.

Interviewer: Totally. Totally. So you made ... part of the decision that you made when you decided to go from having hidden tattoos to visible tattoos was related to knowing what industry you're going to be working in and that you weren't closing any doors-

Hallie: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: By modifying your body in these ways. Was there anything else that went into the decision to go from hidden tattoos to visible tattoos?

Hallie: No, I mean it was really just becoming more comfortable with my career path and also just being more comfortable with myself, I think, was a huge part of it, just reaching a point in my life where I didn't particularly care if other people thought that I looked trashy with tattoos because I think I look good. Right? That my opinion of myself started to supersede the opinions of others.

Interviewer: Your tattoos are for you, they're not for other people. I wonder if, related to that, part of this study is figuring out how women negotiate their bodies because historically women's bodies have sort of been in the public sphere for everyone to have opinions about-

Hallie: Right.

Interviewer: So you're saying a lot about that and I'm wondering if you can just speak generally to how you experience your body and maybe how you've experienced your body over time, before tattoos, when you had the hidden ones and now that you have them out there for others to see.

Hallie: Yeah, sure. So I feel like I have a really good relationship with my body. I don't necessarily try to change the way it looks, per se, I'm pretty happy with how it looks. More than anything, I like what my body can do for me. I'm super active. I love being outdoors and hiking and climbing and kayaking and all these activities and it makes me feel strong and in tune with ... I don't know, maybe how I feel like humans are meant to live. I don't necessarily think we're meant to sit all the
time. We're not necessarily meant to sit at work and sit in a car, you know what I mean? In that sense, I feel like I have a really good active relationship with my body. When I was younger I would not say that I did, I was super sedentary. I grew up in a very sedentary family. I was always really skinny as a kid. I had a terrible body image and I think a lot of that stemmed from other people constantly feeling the need to comment on my body and say you're so skinny or you need to eat more, but I was a little kid and little kids bodies are all over the place. Right? I don't feel like I ever really had a good image or relationship with my body until as an adult, it was really around the same time that I started getting tattoos and that I became more active and actually in tune with using my body for something that made me feel good rather than just not paying attention to it and taking it for granted, I guess, and really only thinking about my body whenever other people felt the need to comment on it. I've noticed in the same vein, in the last few years people don't comment on my body. I don't have ... even when I was a young adult, or younger adult, I feel like I would always have strange men coming up to me and making lewd comments and that doesn't happen anymore. I don't know if I've just gained more confidence and that exudes, like I'm not somebody that you want to make comments to, but it also came around the same time as the tattoos and I feel like for some people, at least, tattoos can be a bit of a shield.

Interviewer: You think that's true for you?

Hallie: If they are, I would say it's subconscious. I don't think I ever got a tattoo wanting it to be a shield. I feel like they're more an expression of my growing confidence.

Interviewer: Yeah, your confidence is really your shield.

Hallie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And your tattoos are just symbolic of that confidence that you have now.

Hallie: Right. Right.

Interviewer: So what was going on around the time that you started your relationship with your body totally changed? You were acting differently and you were inscribing things on it. What was that about?

Hallie: Was going on. I would say a big turning point for me was I got my first job working outside. I spent a summer collecting rock samples out in the Rocky Mountains and I was kind of thrown ... I thought I was active before and I was not. I was just walking everywhere and compared to what I started doing, it was not being active. I was thrown into hiking 12 to 15 miles a day a lot of the time while carrying my lunch, water for the day, rock samples I collected. When I came back, I felt and looked completely different. I had little baby muscles, which I don't have right now in comparison, but I felt good. I've always had stomach issues and IBS and that led to, I think, a lot of babying myself and lethargy and
not ever wanting to move around for fear of upsetting my stomach, but it was really kind of ... I needed the opposite where when I came back from ... it was only a four week job and when I came back, I felt amazing. I felt strong. Food didn't upset my stomach. I just felt a lot better and so I stayed active, not as active, all the time, but I make time to hike and be in nature and take care of my body. If I can't go hiking, I'll at least do yoga or something to make me feel like I'm using my body for something.

**Interviewer:** So tell me if I've got this right, if I've got your timeline right. So you grew up getting a lot of feedback about your body in a way that didn't make you feel very good about it and as a young adult, you got a lot of ... it sounds like a lot of sexual content and feedback about your body and that didn't make you feel very good. And then you went on this amazing excursion and maybe this was the turning point or maybe it was a turning point, you went on this amazing excursion and you started testing your physical limits in a way that because of a lot of these stomach issues, didn't feel possible before and you found that not only are they possible, but they make you feel better and they make you feel connected and strong and these wonderful words that you used and that produced this kind of confidence in yourself and that confidence ended up being kind of the catalyst to start making your body the canvas that you always thought was beautiful and unique. Is that fair?

**Hallie:** Yeah, yeah definitely. And so once I came back ... maybe a year or so afterwards, I started getting tattoos in visible areas and yeah, it was really around that time. I don't know if it was the confidence or the tattoos, but people don't make comments like that to me anymore, even though I feel like I look and feel better and I think I exude that now.

**Interviewer:** So it sounds like you kind of think maybe it's the tattoos, but maybe it's also this awesome aura that you carry now. You mentioned a couple ways in which things in your life have changed since getting tattoos, both visible and hidden, one of them is the family dynamics, something was happening there, another was a pleasant realization that you can be a totally valued, working employee with visible tattoos and the third thing you mentioned was men's, strange men's reactions to you out in public domains ... I wonder, are there any other areas of your life that you notice have changed since you've gotten tattoos?

**Hallie:** Yeah, so this is an interesting one, but I've been working with kids for a long time now and kids, I think, are more receptive to me teaching them since I've gotten tattoos. It's kind of an icebreaker with them. If I walk into a classroom, the first thing kids want to know is why do you have all those tattoos? You look like you're my mom's age, but you ... it's like a cool factor with kids. I would say that the nose piercing helps with that too, but kids that I teach have been ... they've opened up to me a lot more easily since having the visible tattoos. They used to kind of leery of me even though, at the time, I was closer in age to them really. I was kind of seen as more of an authority figure and now they are just more,
they're more open with me about their lives. I feel like they listen to me, not necessarily in an authoritative kind of way, I think kids see me as less of an authority figure now, but I do feel like when I go into teach a group of kids they listen to me, to my message, to what I have to say, to what I'm trying to teach them more, but if I'm trying to tell them you guys need to settled down, here are the directions for what we need to do, that sort of thing, I do have more trouble with that.

Interviewer: So there's something like being more relatable, like on your kind of level.

Hallie: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: And the cool factor you mentioned. It sounds like they care about the meaning of what you say. Is that fair?

Hallie: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: So what age kids are you talking about?

Hallie: Mostly middle school, so ... I started working with middle schoolers right around the time when I started to get more visible tattoos, but I was generally covering them up with a cardigan or something. I think the most visible ... the lowest one I have is this one so even if I wear a short sleeve shirt, that's covered up. And then in the last few years as I have more tattoos, the kids definitely find me more relatable, for sure.

Interviewer: Yeah. So that's a big area that's changed. Any other areas? One that I always ask about are relationships, romantic or otherwise, sexual encounters, anything like that that feels different now?

Hallie: I mean I guess I would say every relationship I've had has been different so it's hard to relate that to tattoos. My boyfriend right now is really interested in tattoos and I'm not 100% sure he would be if he didn't see mine everyday, but he is really interested now in the artistry of it and he's been drawing designs ever since I met him, really. Yeah, I don't think that I ... sometimes they maybe attract a certain type of person, you know? Like a guy might hit on me at the bar or something and open up by asking about my tattoos. That's happened a few times, but I wouldn't say that that's super common.

Interviewer: How have you felt when that's happened?

Hallie: Sorry?

Interviewer: How have you felt whenever that's happened? What have those been like for you?
Hallie: I mean it's flattering and I like talking about my tattoos so I'll usually engage, but I really only ... I don't really enjoy being hit on necessarily, probably the most enjoyable part about it, for me, is shooting it down. Yeah, I don't really have a very strong reaction to it, it's just kind of it is what it is.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So there's something about the way that you've talked about your tattoos that they're like ... it's almost like a social encounter in and of itself, with kids, with peers, with family.

Hallie: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is that something you anticipated when you started getting them?

Hallie: No, it wasn't at all. Every time I got a tattoo, it was just kind of like I have this idea, I want to put it on me and it was always very a self centered decision and they've pretty much all caused sensual encounters at some point, which I generally enjoy. It is something that I like talking about and sharing with other people and comparing tattoos with other people.

Interviewer: So I'm stuck on the word you used, the words self centered. Can you break that down for me?

Hallie: Yeah. It's definitely something that I've really only ever done for myself and that's kind of the only person I'm thinking about when I do these tattoos, or when I've gotten tattoos. If I have been thinking about other people, I might have talked to my mom before I got my first one or like if I'd thought for a second about what is your family's reaction going to be if you do this, then I probably would have, at least, given them a heads up or something. Or even when I've gotten a tattoo while dating somebody, I haven't given them a heads up at all either, it's always just something I've gone and done by myself. For I think, I would say about a third of my tattoos, I've at least called up a friend and like hey do you want to go with me? Or like the two tattoos I got from charity [inaudible], I was there with a group, but it's always been a decision that I've made with only myself in mind.

Interviewer: So, as you're talking about how you make those decisions and for whom, how are you feeling about the way that you made them? So, for example, whenever you say I never consulted a boyfriend, I didn't tell my family, is there a “should” in there, like you should have, or you feel like you did it the right way it should be for you?

Hallie: I mean I think I did it the right way. I think it should be for me. I don't think that my family would agree with me because whatever I do, they would probably say reflects on them. Right? But I don't really agree with that. I think that my decisions regarding my body are my own. I really try to have my own agency in decisions regarding my body. I think if my boyfriend came home right now and I'd gotten another tattoo, he would probably be like oh wow. Why didn't you tell
me? We tell each other everything. I think that the things I do to my body should be 100% my own.

**Interviewer:** Was there ever a time when you didn't feel that way?

**Hallie:** Yeah. As we're talking about tattoos and boyfriends, there was a time where I really wanted to get my nipples pierced and I mentioned it really offhand to an ex and he was like I don't want you to do that. Don't do that. That's something that is also my territory and that kind of made me really angry so I just went and did it anyway.

**Interviewer:** You went and did it.

**Hallie:** Without explaining it or telling him at all.
Participant 9: Eleanor

Interviewer: Do you have more than one tattoo?

Eleanor: Just one.

Interviewer: Just one? When did you get it?

Eleanor: Honestly, I'd have to look back at the date that I sent you. It was in March. I want to say March 17th, 2017.

Interviewer: Yes, okay.

Eleanor: It was some time in March. Okay, yeah.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Eleanor: Yeah. Unfortunately, I was thinking yesterday, and I didn't get my partner to take a picture. Because it's on my back, and so obviously it's kind of hard to get myself. I thought about that, and then he left this morning and I was like, "Crap, I didn't get it." It's the word always, and it's just simple, black, not too big. I mean maybe no more than six inches in width I would say, and about inch and a half tall I would say, an inch and a half to two. It's the word always in like a cursive font. It's just straight black, and the A in always is the Deathly Hallows symbol from Harry Potter.

Interviewer: Okay.

Eleanor: I'm not sure if you're familiar with what that symbol looks like.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.


Interviewer: I'm there.

Eleanor: Yeah, so that's the A. Then the rest of it is just normal, really just simple like nice cursive for the rest of the word.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about what that tattoo signifies to you?

Eleanor: Yeah, absolutely. I've always loved Harry Potter. I own a time turner. I have a wand. I have coloring books. There's a really funny picture of me from, gosh, probably two or three Christmases ago when we were ... my mom got the picture. They had just been to the Orlando Harry Potter World, and she got me the wand, she got me the time turner, and then for some reason I was just really emotional
that day. Like I opened it up and it was the Harry Potter coloring book, and I just started sobbing. Like I was so happy. Who knows? I don't know what was going on. I think my hormones were off. I don't know, because I was like a mess. I don't know. I think it's little moment like that where it reminds me of how much I love the series. I think it made a pretty big impact on me as a kid. It was really a point of connection with my mom and my brother. My parents divorced when I was five, so I spent most of the time ... I'm still really close with my dad, but we spent most of the time with my mom. I remember all of us sitting down, and reading the books together, and lining up like 12 hours before a movie premiere to go. It was really a point of connection with my mom, and my brother, and I. We're still very close. I think kind of on the one side it's this broad idea of Harry Potter and it really reminding me of family. I think that always, like I'll always have my family and they're very important to me. I think I guess still related obviously to the Harry Potter but on a little more of a specific note, a little more individual to me, was that when I was growing up in grade school, or middle school, or high school, I was more of the book smart nerd. I was valedictorian, all that kind of stuff. I think it took a bit of my own identity exploration to really kind of embrace the fact that like I was a nerd and that's okay. Like it's okay to be smart. In my adult life, I mean obviously when you're a kid you don't quite have an appreciation. You're like, "I want to be popular," and that's what you want. I think obviously I didn't get this tattoo very long ago, but I think kind of looking back there was this ... I had always felt a very strong connection with Hermione. Her wand is the one that I have, of course. As a kid, having this strong female brilliant character to really kind of idolize in a way and to look and say, "Wow," I feel like I have a connection with her. In her world, it's okay to be smart, right? Like she has amazing friends. She goes on these amazing adventures. I see myself in her, so I think it was more internally as a child this point of seeing in her this strength that I also could kind of feel myself, and that permission that it's okay to be like her. It's okay to be smart. It's okay to have that be one of your main attributes. I think part of that kind of identity exploration with myself, and being more comfortable, and that I don't need to be a popular kid or anything like that, and that it's okay to be who I am. I think that point of connection on a more individual level I guess.

**Interviewer:** I wonder if- is that there was a period of time in your life when you felt like it was not okay? When you didn't give yourself permission?

**Eleanor:** Absolutely, absolutely. I remember it was more so middle school than high school, and I think it was just naturally a process of growing up, and being in high school is just a different feel, and I think people act a little bit differently. I remember in middle school I got in fights with my friends, like friends that I'm not ... well, one of them was at the wedding I just went to, but the others I'm not necessarily still super close friends with, and that's okay. They were I think at a very different level of comfort with themselves than I was. We got in a lot of fights and arguments, and they would be like, "Stop trying to be this person you're not," and I couldn't get away from that. Like in middle school, I couldn't get away
from it. I wanted to wear the clothes that the cool kids are wearing. I wanted all those things, and I think it really ... Like I look back now and I wish I would have been able to see, to have the wisdom, and absolutely we always do, right?

**Interviewer:** Of course, of course.

**Eleanor:** Want to have that wisdom and knowledge that I have now to know that I didn't need to be anyone else, and that it would have been okay, and that I would have had this strong friend group behind me to really be myself in that way. It didn't happen until high school, and that's okay, and even then it was definitely I think even still a continuing growth process. We're always growing and learning about ourselves and our identities. I would say those three years were a really hard time for my own kind of identity, and not accepting myself as really who I was, and having it not be okay.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. There's the themes and motifs in the books themselves and also this particular character that you really connected with who was a role model for you in some ways?

**Eleanor:** Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Interviewer:** I'm wonder too what about the actual, of all of the Harry Potter related imagery or words you could have chosen, why that one?

**Eleanor:** Yeah. The always or the symbol?

**Interviewer:** Both.

**Eleanor:** Or both. I think the always really spoke to me. I mean in the Harry Potter fandom we know that always is kind of a, I don't know, a thing that tends to pop up. I think for me, I tend to like very succinct, very concise kind of things. Although, by talking to me you're like, "Yeah, but you talk a lot, so no."

**Interviewer:** No, no.

**Eleanor:** I'm just teasing. I knew that when I got a tattoo I didn't want it to be huge. I didn't want it to be this whole script on my back, or a long quote, or anything like that. Part of it was the convenience of the fact that it's just a very simple, short word. I also think that that moment in the books for me and that moment in the movies when Snape says always, it was kind of funny. It was a point of debate among my brother, my mom, and I about Snape in general. There's all the debates about Snape. Until the last book came out, you're like, "Was he good or was he bad?" It was this whole argument. I think part of it was that connection to that moment that all of us had a really kind of strong reaction to and it just felt very powerful in that moment. My family and I ... uh oh, we turned again.
Interviewer: Yeah, we did, didn't we? Maybe it's my end.

Eleanor: We were good for a second. Funny. Well, does that work?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's good. It might have been mine actually, yeah.

Eleanor: Okay, there we go. That works.

Interviewer: You were saying it's that point of connection.

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Just in that moment and in that scene, I think we all had a lot of discussion about that scene, so there's a lot of memories behind that scene for me with my family. I think also just what that word means. It's always. It's never ending. In a way to me, it kind of ... Unconditional I guess would maybe be a word I could also connect to it. Again, my family's always going to be there. I can always be who I am and be my own person, be my true self. I can always count on my mom, my brother, my family to be there for me, and I can always go back to the books for comfort, right? I do. Every couple years, I go back and reread them.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I have to ask, is he good or is he bad?

Eleanor: I very much, and it's funny ... My partner and I talk about this all the time. Just like humans in general, I don't know that any person is good or bad. I'm very much the it depends. Like in our field, it depends. It always depends, right? I'm very much in that gray area with him in that I think I understand the motivations behind a lot of what he did, and I don't think he was inherently bad, and I don't think he was all good, right? I mean he made some decisions, especially kind of before he came to Hogwarts and Dumbledore took him in. He made bad decisions. I don't know. I think about the circumstances surrounding his life, and of course I'm like, "Let's look at the system, right? Let's look at the family." For me, it really falls in a gray area. I think everybody's both in their own ways.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that gray area?

Eleanor: As a counselor, that's something that I think I've gotten a lot more comfortable in as I've gone through the process of learning how to be a helper and be in a helping profession. I always talk about how half of my brain is really, really okay with the gray and then half my brain really loves the black and white and loves the answers. I've definitely grown more comfortable in the gray in a million different ways in a million different settings, and there's that part of me that I feel like not maybe constantly but I've been fortunate enough that I've constantly had something to spark that black and white part of my brain too. Like right now I do assessment and data outcomes for my GA. I'm basically doing stats, and numbers, and Excel spreadsheets all day for that job. That really satisfies that part of my brain that's the black and white. Like I'm still getting fulfilled in that, and I have something that really serves that part of my brain, and I think it will be a continual
thing until I am no longer on this planet being more and more and more comfortable with the gray. That being said, I think I'm way more comfortable with it than I used to be. That's one of my main things I try and do with clients is try and help them see that it's okay to be in the gray something. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** I ask that because it reminds me of what you were saying in terms of your own identity development when you were younger. You're either smart or popular. You're this or that. I wonder if some of that represents that part of your identity formation was realizing that you could have great friends and you can be smart, and ambitious, and driven.

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. Absolutely, yeah. I absolutely think that's accurate. It reminds me of I guess part of why I idolized Hermione in the books was because she did have that. She had the great friends, and she had the great adventures, and she was a brilliant witch. To see her kind of, I don't want to say have everything, but to have these different parts of herself and her life that were happy, and she was comfortable with, and that she really thrived in, I think at least that was a big part of her that I did idolize. I guess I've never thought about that, that gray area, in application to my own identity though. That's an interesting thought.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Eleanor:** I think now if I'm just in the moment thinking about it, absolutely.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. It also occurs to me that Hermione as a character came up against a lot of rough stuff too. She was bullied. She was harassed. Not everyone liked her. Not everyone say her as, for example, a pretty woman or whoever she was supposed to be at certain points in her development. I wonder if any of those themes resonate with you too.

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, definitely. Again, middle school was pretty rough for a lot of reasons. I think that was a big point of connection with her as well was that middle school was rough in terms of my own identity, and I discussed that a little bit, but also that people weren't super nice. I mean outside of my immediate friend group, people weren't very kind, or friendly, or welcoming, or inviting. At that point, I moved in fifth grade, midway through fifth grade. Then I had about half a year before I started middle school to get to know people, and to make my place, and make my friend group. I was really fortunate. I mean obviously, I just went to one of their weddings. Like I had a really supportive friend group. There were a lot of those challenges and people not necessarily being very accepting and inviting that was really hard. Like honestly, I think back to middle school and I'm like, "I don't want to think back to that. That was really, really hard." That was during the time, like middle school was during the time when a lot of the Harry Potter stuff was coming out, and books were still coming out, and all that kind of stuff. Again, I think kind of a source of strength was broadly reading those and that connection with Hermione.
**Interviewer:** With her and the connection with just being unconditionally accepted by your mom and my brother.

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. It was a big moment to get the tattoo.

**Interviewer:** I want to hold the meanings like as we go through, so if they come up again or if they seem relevant, jump in. I also want to talk about generally what it's like to have a tattoo. Can you speak to that a little bit?

**Eleanor:** Yeah, absolutely. Sorry. My cat, my wants to play. He's like, "Mom." He's so funny. He always tries to put the ball up on ... I'm on the couch right now. He always tries to put it up, but then he misses and it falls back down. Anyway, sorry. Excuse me. Got distracted. Yeah. This tattoo, I have been thinking about getting this tattoo for I would say at least three to four years. I mean I thought about it a really, really long time. I had friends when I was in college that were getting their first tattoos and being away from their parents for the first time. I thought really long and hard about do I want a tattoo, and the answer was yes. I don't think that it was ... it wasn't like a rebellion thing, right? It wasn't like trying to say screw you to my parents and get one even though like they don't have any tattoos, they're very ... I mean in terms of they don't really drink or anything like that either, so I would say more straight laced kind of people, which that makes tattoos sound bad and they're not. They just aren't into that, which is fine. I know a lot of my friends were getting them like, "Ha ha, I'm free. I'm going to get a tattoo," right? I was like, "Yeah, no." I know I had a friend who he got a little shark on his butt cheek, and I was like, "Why?" He's like, "Just because I can." I was like, "I cannot get behind that." Like I would never want something permanently on my body that doesn't have meaning for me. I've always, even before I got it, like I always said I will never get anything that doesn't have a really special place for me and a really special meaning. That's different for me than it is for other people, right? He was like, "No, it's cool. I have a shark." I'm like, "Great." If you're happy, I'm happy. That's wonderful, but that's just not my take on it. I had thought about it for years and years, and what made me actually get it was we have a really cute little tavern place in town and they do bottomless mimosa brunch. You can see where this is going.

**Interviewer:** I can see where this is going.

**Eleanor:** It was one of my really close girlfriends. She was in the program. She's no longer in it. I was actually talking to her this morning. She's no longer in the program, but she was. My partner and then her I guess ex-fiance now, but it was kind of a couples date, the four of us. We had done mimosas, and we got on the topic of
tattoos. My partner, he's all tattooed. He has like basically down to his elbow on his right arm wrapped under his whole ... like from his elbow up and then onto his chest, like color, gorgeous tattoos. He has a tree on his back. He's all about them, right? My girlfriend Mandy that I was there with, she had had a couple smaller tattoos. Like her faith is really important to her, so she had a cross. I don't remember where. I think on her foot. We just got on the topic, and I was telling them like, "I don't have any, but here's what I would want." Then one thing led to another, and then bottomless mimosas, and we went and got the tattoo. There you go.

Interviewer: You got it that same day?

Eleanor: Indeed, indeed. I was a little intoxicated and called the tattoo shop and was like, "Do you have room for two people?" We went, and that was that. I remember sitting there and getting it done, and it hurt. I was like, "Oh, my God. This is not a pleasant experience." I mean it wasn't horrible, but it hurt. I got done, and by that time the booze had worn off, and I was pretty sober, and I said, "Okay. Well, somebody take a picture." I sat there, and I was debating, and I thought am I going to show my parents that I got this tattoo, and like what would that mean to show my parents. I was really nervous, because again my mom is a very open minded person. Like we can have great discussions about social justice and tattoos. Just she's very open minded. She just doesn't make those choices for herself. My dad is definitely ... Part of the reason they got divorced, he's way more closed minded, very, very, very religious, very I guess ... I would say if I had to call one of them straight laced, it'd be him. He's a cop, and he's very by the book kind of a person. I debated like am I going to tell them, and how are they going to react, and I was really nervous. I think it was one of the more empowering moments in my life where I said, "I don't care how they react." It took some processing, right? I mean I was nervous at first, but then it really ... hi buddy. It really came down ... yeah. This is Nox.

Interviewer: Hi, Nox. That's perfect.

Eleanor: N-O-X, yes, from the spell. Yes, I know, right? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he's our little boy. It was I think one of the more empowering moments of my life making the decision and feeling very confident in that I'm proud of this, this has meaning to me, and I want to share this with them. If they don't like it, fine. It's not their body. Like really it's not their body. Not that I don't care what they think, but if they have a problem with it, then that's their problem, not mine. Confidently I sent it out, and both of them were like, "What? You didn't tell us you were doing this." They weren't mad. They were like, "Okay, cool. Whatever." I think my dad probably had some more negative feelings, but he just chose not to share them because he knew it wouldn't have mattered.

Interviewer: It sounds like they also have some recognition that it's not their body and it's not their choice.
Eleanor: In some ways. My mom for sure. Part of the reason I was nervous with my mom, given that she's a very open minded kind of person, I was 18. I was graduated. I was on my way to college, and I had teased her and kind of pranked her, and I was like, "I got another ear piercing," like up top here, and she cried.

Interviewer: Wow.
Eleanor: Like from a little tiny piercing on my ear. I was really nervous about how she was going to react to that. I think they were surprised that I did it, but for the most part I think there was that acceptance of, "Hey, your body, your stuff, your money. If you're happy, then we're happy, and that's fine." I think it was a really nice moment to get that reaction from them, of course surprise but not like anger in any way, but also, again that empowerment that I felt of like I can own this. I'm proud of this. I can explain it to you. It's not that I don't care what you think, but like I really kind of don't care if you don't like it, because it's not your body.

Interviewer: It's not their decision. It sounds like there's also something in like even though it's your body, it's your choice, they do not get to make decisions, if you wanted to get a tattoo on your forehead you could, right?
Eleanor: Right.

Interviewer: But you also want their support in some way.
Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely, absolutely.

Interviewer: It's you feeling ... Correct me if I'm wrong. I'm just trying to make sure I'm on the same page here.
Eleanor: Sure, sure.

Interviewer: It's you feeling empowering, and this is your body, and this is your choice, and you're proud of it, and you like it, and you want to share this with people you care about, and you want them to feel those things too. You also want them to know that it's your body and your life.
Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

Interviewer: I'm so glad you had such good experiences with sharing.
Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Some other family members, mostly on my dad's side, were like, "What?" My aunt in particular. I'm very, very close with my aunt, but if there's somebody even more straight laced than my dad, it's her. Yeah, that's a whole thing. I love her. I love her to pieces, but she's a little close minded. I really would say like nobody had a negative reaction. I think they were kind of projecting their own, "Well, I wouldn't want that." Cool, so you didn't get it. That's great.
Interviewer: Right. Good thing you didn't do it.

Eleanor: Right, right. I think there was a little more explaining that had to be done, but I know pretty shortly after I got it done we went to visit, like a whole family caravan basically up to Nebraska to see one of my family members. She can't travel anymore, so it was like a whole caravan of us went up to see her. I wore a shirt that showed it intentionally. I was like, "You know what? Again, like I'm proud of this. This is empowering for me to have. I want my entire family that's going to be there, if they have questions, they can ask me questions, but I want to share it with them." Really, I mean no like blatant negative reactions, at least externally that they showed.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. You mentioned that you wear certain types of clothing. Like based on its location, you can choose to show it or not show it.

Eleanor: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: I wonder how did you decide on that location?

Eleanor: Yeah. Part of the reason was because the size I wanted it, and kind of in combination with how I do want to be able to cover it up if needed or to be able to show it off. Kind of that combination of the size I wanted it plus the ability to cover up or not, it seemed like a pretty simple ... or I guess kind of the best choice to put it on the back, kind of back of my shoulder here. I had also thought about my foot. Part of the reason, a big part of the reason, is because foot tattoos hurt way worse I've heard. It's like I don't know that I want that there. I also know that foot tattoos tend to get worn down a lot, because your shoes going on and off and socks rubbing. Like I know I have several, several friends with foot tattoos, and almost all of them have some amount of fading even after like a year or two. Pain and kind of the wear and tear. I guess another part of it, I would say less so, but I would say this is a newer realization I've had many in like the last six months, but I really like my back, and I find that to be like a very sexy part of my body. Like I really like that. When I'm in a bathing suit, you can very obviously see my tattoo. Like when we were in Aruba, I was kind of looking in the mirror and checking the straps on my swimsuit, and I was like, "I like that. That looks really good there," because I feel like my back is kind of a sexier part of me. To be able to have something that's meaningful and I think, I don't know, just adds a little something to that part of my body, I think that was a part of it too.

Interviewer: You said that's a newer realization.

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: How did you realize that?
Eleanor: That's a great question. Honestly, I wonder if part of it ... well, yeah. I think part of why it's newer is because of the fact that I have something on my back now, I pay more attention to my back. Like when I get out of the shower, like I'll look in the mirror and look at it. I think, I don't know, we don't often see our backs, right? That's not a part of our body that we really see. Kind of having a reason to look has made me just see it more and appreciate that I really like the look of my back. I think another part of that is probably my partner. I think most people, regardless of any kind of orientation, like having their back tickled, and scratched, and that kind of stuff. In the last year or so, I've been able to spend more nights with my partner. We've been together for almost three years, but in the last year with schedules and all that kind of stuff we've just had some more time to spend night together. He'll like rub my back and touch my back. Even like when we're having sex let's say, like there's something about him touching my back that feels really sexy to me. I think that's part of it too.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's like the tattoo sort of drew your attention to that part of your body in this really positive kind of way. With or without the tattoo you like the way that your back looks, but you would have never focused on that part of your body without it.

Eleanor: Right, right.

Interviewer: It's even enhanced things, like whenever your partner will touch you or something like that.

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you think that you would have had that experience with any part of your body that you had chosen to get tattoos? For example, if you got a tattoo on your foot, do you think that you would like the way that your foot looked better?

Eleanor: That's a good question. I don't think I would. Not on my foot at least. I don't know that I would have liked my feet, or my ankles, or anything on my legs better. That's actually a very insecure part of my body is the lower half. Like maybe if it was on my leg or something, which I don't think I'd like the look of that. I don't think that it would have been. That's a really ... I don't know. That's a hard question.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's hard to imagine.

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. I would say no on my foot. If it was on, like I'm thinking my arm, right? Like maybe the inside of my forearm. I could see that that could make me feel like that's a more attractive part of my body.

Interviewer: Yeah. Here, I'll share with you the purpose of my asking those questions.
Interviewer: I'm curious now about whenever you say that the upper part of your body is the part of your body that you like and the lower half is the part you feel a little more insecure about, is it totally coincidental and fortuitous that you happened to discover a real positive connection with your back, and it's appealing, and you like it, or did you specifically place your tattoo in an area of your body that you like, and you want people to look at, and you want to look at, and so on?

Eleanor: I would say both.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Eleanor: I would say both can be true in that case, yeah. I haven't necessarily thought about it that way, but like imagining getting a tattoo let's say on the back of my thigh. I'm like where would I even get that? Like if I got the same tattoo on my lower part of my body, not my foot but let's say somewhere on my legs, I imagine on the back of my thigh is potentially where I would get that. Having attention drawn to that area, it's hard to say whether I would feel sexier or not. I don't know that it was a conscious decision, but maybe kind of subconsciously there was potentially part of that motivation to get it on my upper body, to not necessarily draw more attention to my upper body than my lower body, but not to draw extra attention.

Interviewer: To the lower body.

Eleanor: To my lower body, yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. The tattoo becomes just something you can feel totally good and comfortable about.

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean like if I would have gotten it on my lower body, I think it would have taken a lot more time to accept that people might look at those parts, if they can see it obviously.

Interviewer: Yeah. What about the semi hidden nature of it? Like when do you show it? When do you hide it? Who gets to see it? Why? When?

Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. I mean like I said, I'm really proud of it, and there is a million Potterheads on this planet anywhere I go. Like let's say I'm wearing a tank top but I'm at the grocery store and you can see it, right? I mean really any time I have anything that doesn't have sleeves on it at all, like any tank top or dress that doesn't have sleeves or anything like that, I mean you can see it, at least part of it, at least the Deathly Hallows symbol, which so many people recognize. I'll be at the grocery store in a tank top, and somebody will be like, "Oh, my gosh. I love your tattoo." They're like, "I am such a Potterhead," or, "I have one too. It's on my," whatever, "It's on my foot," or whatever. I think for me it's partially the
setting chooses when and where I show it. Most the work that I do most of the time is in an office by myself. I don't interact with a lot of people. I don't have to dress super professionally. Obviously when I'm with clients that's a very different thing, but for my data analysis job. Like that, I'm by myself. When it's warm enough, I wear like a tank top style dress almost every day to the office. It's partially out of just comfort and convenience it's hot out and I want to wear a dress, and I don't have to look super professional here because I'm not interacting with anyone by myself. Whereas with clients obviously that's a different story. I generally don't show my shoulders with clients, or at least I have like a little jacket on if I'm wearing a tank top dress or something like that. It's not something that I wouldn't show clients. Like I wouldn't be ashamed or worried what they would think about me if they saw that I had a tattoo, but I think it's kind of the nature of where I put it that I tend to wear more modest clothing when I'm with clients and it's just covered up.

**Interviewer:** You're not covering the tattoo. You're just like covering your shoulders.

**Eleanor:** Totally, totally. Yeah, yeah. Kind of by default it covers the tattoo. I guess the times when I moreso not even intentionally show it off but am more aware that it's visible is when I'm on any type of vacation or in a setting in which I'm in a bathing suit. I think a big part of that is that obviously, depending on what kind of bathing suit, I wear bikinis so people can not only see the tattoo, but they can see my back. Again, that's that part of me that I find I really like my back. I think it's very sexy and attractive. It's not like an intentional thing, but I'm very more aware of the tattoo and more of like, "Yeah, I have one of these." Like it's neat, right? Like when I'm in a bathing suit, I think that's ... I also feel really sexy in bathing suits, so maybe that's combined with it.

**Interviewer:** You're getting at something that is very interesting. Part of this project, I want to know why, and when, and how women get tattoos and the meanings, because everyone has a different idea of what a meaning can look and feel like. I'm also really interested in women's embodiment and like what it is to be a woman, embodied woman in our culture. You're pointing at something, and I want to ask you what your thoughts are on this. You have this part of your body that you really like that you like when people look at it, because you feel really good about it. There's almost a way in which by placing your tattoo there, whether intentionally or inadvertently, you were asserting some form of control over how other people look at your body. I wonder what you think about that. Like they're not just going to immediately focus on the parts of you that you feel insecure about. They're going to look at your tattoo first. You did something.

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I think it feels like when I ... I don't know. I guess there's this one. I was on a cruise last December with my sister, and I was wearing this dress. You couldn't see the whole tattoo, but you could see part of it. It kind of came up in like a halter type of tie, so you could see a good part of it on my back shoulder. This guy came up, and I was with my partner still so it wasn't like in a weird
hitting on me kind of way, but he was like, "Oh, my gosh. You're a Potterhead." I was like, "Yes, I am." I think of that moment and then just other moments like that. I don't know why that one sticks out so strongly in my mind. I think I felt really sexy in the dress, so that was probably kind of a combination. In other moments too, like having people notice that part of me and having that be that automatic like, "Oh, my God. Your tattoo." It's not necessarily about my back, but kind of inherently it's on my back, right?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Eleanor:** I think there's a lot of confidence that comes from having people notice that and feeling like they're noticing a part of me that I really love too. Not in like a creepy way, right? Again, like not in a I'm trying to hit on you, or pick you up, or anything like that, but just kind of an appreciation of like, "That's a really nice tattoo, and the line work's really nice," so kind of complimenting on the tattoo, but in my mind it's like and whoever sees this is kind of having to by default pay attention to this part of me that I'm very proud of, and I find very attractive and sexy, and that I really like about myself, and they're not focusing on those parts of me that I don't like.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. They're not focusing on those parts. It also occurs to me that they're focusing on the part of you that you chose, the part of your body that you chose.

**Eleanor:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You said twice they're not in a hitting on you, not in a creepy kind of way. There's a way in which like that guy was approaching you to talk to you about your body in a non creepy or hitting on way. Maybe this is the only scenario where someone can comment on a stranger’s body and it wouldn't be creepy or odd.

**Eleanor:** Totally, totally, totally. Yeah, yes. I think tattoos have such a point of connection for people. Like if somebody doesn't have a tattoo, it's not that they can't understand, but even for me like with my partner, he has his tattoos way before I had mine. We were, gosh, together for probably a year and a half by the time I got mine. Like anywhere we are, if he sees some really nice artwork, he's like, "Hey man, nice artwork," and they have a whole conversation about it. I was never really part of that. Now that I have a tattoo, and still again I'm not full half sleeve and whatever he is, but even having that point of connection, I think it takes away from that this person is talking to me to try and be weird, or hit on me, or anything like that. Instead it's really this point of like, "Hey, wow. Your tattoo's great, and you like Harry Potter, and this is a point of connection for us." It's not just about my body. It's kind of this separate part of me that just happens to be on my body.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. It's something that you think, and feel, and believe, and other people who think, and feel, and believe that way, you can communicate something.
Eleanor: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

Interviewer: It identifies you in a particular way it sounds like to other people.

Eleanor: Yes. Yes, definitely. Yeah, automatically people know. They're like, "Harry Potter. Oh, my gosh." I mean obviously you can start a whole conversation on that, right? Yeah, it's that identification that there's some point of connection that people can make with you.

Interviewer: Yeah. Have you ever encountered anyone else with a similar tattoo?

Eleanor: Tons.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Eleanor: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's that experience like?

Eleanor: None that are like the exact same. A lot of people have color on theirs, and again mine's just very simple, just like line work and just kind of minimalist. I love meeting people with similar tattoos. Again, I love obviously by profession and just I think naturally for me, I love connecting with people. To have that automatic point of connection with those people that have a very similar tattoo, I feel like I'm growing my circle. Again, as a graduate student, in the office I work in I have a couple undergrads. I work for the honors program, for the undergraduate honors program, so I get to meet 60 new kids every year. Well, probably closer to like 90 with the other one, like let's say 100 new kids everywhere. A lot of them being honors kids, they tend to like Harry Potter, right? It tends to be a nerdier type thing, to stereotype, right? I've had a lot of them notice my tattoo if they happen to come in the office. They're like, "Oh, my gosh. Look at mine on my forearm," or, "I have that symbol but with watercolor," or, "I have this." I think what it's like for me is firstly it's a really awesome point of connection, and I love that. I feel like I'm growing my circle. I feel like I can better talk to these people, understand them, empathize with them, and have that connection. It also gives me ideas for not necessarily a future tattoo, but like I've thought about adding color to this one. Just getting these different ideas and really having a respect and appreciation for the artwork that goes into it is a really fun process.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you imagine getting more?

Eleanor: More on that one or more in general?

Interviewer: Either.
Eleanor: Yeah. Actually, my partner and I recently talked about this. He was like, "When are you going to get another tattoo?" I told him. I said, "When I find something that's going to be meaningful to me again, that's going to be that meaningful that I would want it on my body, I'll do it. But at this point, nothing ..." The closest thing are my cats, and half the time I want to throw them out the window anyways because they're ... like they're not worth it. I imagine if we have kids someday, like maybe that'll be something that'll be meaningful enough to me that I might get something, like a tattoo of that, or their initials, or whatever. At this point in time, do I want another one? Yes. I follow Pinterest, and Instagram, and all these different tattoo things. I see them and I'm like, "Oh, it's so gorgeous." But I step back and I think like, "But would it have meaning? Like will these things be meaningful enough for me to permanently have on my body?" I just haven't found anything like that yet.

Interviewer: That's fair.

Eleanor: Yeah. I have thought about adding color to this one. I'm a proud Hufflepuff through and through, and there's really beautiful ... I've seen like watercolor just coloring around the Deathly Hallows symbol that I even considered when I got it done the first time, but I was like, "No, I'll just keep it simple for now." I know that the color tends to fade pretty easy. It's harder to touch up. It's expensive to get that color done. I could see myself in maybe five, ten years maybe adding color to it, but for now that minimalist, just very simple, beautiful cursive, I don't know, I think it suits me right now.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Also, I'm wondering about the timing as well. You said that you had been thinking about getting this particular. You weren't even like it suddenly came to and you got it, but you had been thinking of this for a while. I know the mimosas, the conversation, the planets kind of aligned there for you, but what was it about that point in time? Presumably you've had mimosas before. You've had these conversations before.

Eleanor: Right, right, right.

Interviewer: What was it about that point in time that you were like, "Yeah. I'm ready to do this now"?

Eleanor: Along with the mimosas, the girlfriend that I was with, Mandy, love her dearly, she is the best convincer and peer pressurer of all time. You could like own, I don't know, you could like own five cars and she could convince you that you need one more, like you really do. You'd go out and buy one that day. Like she's just that kind of person, which I love about her. She's very supportive, in a very supportive way, right? Like not like an aggressive, pushy way, but she's just very supportive and kind of flies by the seat of her pants sometimes. When we were at the restaurant and talking about it, I was like, "I don't know," and I was sharing
with her all my doubts, because she was the one that was like, "Let's get tattoos." I was like, "Girl, no." She was like, "No, no, no. But yes, and here's why." She's a wonderful person, a great friend. Again, we were just talking this morning. She lives halfway across the country now. She lives in Chicago, and we still talk all the time and are pretty good friends. We had a pretty, granted mimosa fueled, but pretty long discussion about why I didn't want to get it, and how long I'd been thinking about it, and pros and cons, and all those kinds of things. Go ahead.

**Interviewer:** I was wondering what were the cons that you guys came up with?

**Eleanor:** Cons were mostly the reaction that I was at first worried about from others. Well, from my family essentially. Yeah, again that went away and it turned into a very empowering thing for me, but at first those were one of the cons. The other thing, which I think is a great strength of mine and also can be a weakness, is I am a huge planner. Like the fact that I didn't know where we were going to eat in Aruba before we even got there, like that causes me a lot of anxiety. Like I am very much a planner. I mean it's a huge strength. Like I can plan great trips. I can plan like events. If counseling doesn't work out for me for any reason, I know that that's probably what I'll do is event planning. I mean seriously I am such a planner and I'm very detail oriented, so strength and limitation sometimes. It kind of plays into both. I think that was another thing, and that's what Mandy really helped talk me through is, "Yes, you didn't necessarily plan this, but so what? Like it's okay still. You kind of have planned this, because you've wanted this for three, four, however many years. You wanted this forever. You have planned it. Like there's nothing else to plan except picking a place to go and doing it." I think that was I wouldn't say like a connection, but a big part of that conversation was the lack of planning.

**Interviewer:** Like the process you described sounds to an outsider to be really contrasted with the way that you probably usually do things since you're a planner. What was it like? Not only are you getting a tattoo, which in and of itself was something, but the way that you got it you had a couple drinks. You went to this place. You just did it.

**Eleanor:** Yep, yep. I think had I had a little more time to sober up, honestly I might not have gone through with it.

**Interviewer:** Wow, yeah.

**Eleanor:** I really might not have, because the planning part of me, like that part of me, it's very, very strong. It is. It really comes through. I think it was made easier by the fact that we were drinking, and that was that. I think kind of looking back on it, like the next day waking up and being like, "Wow, it feels like I have sunburn. Oh, shit. I got a tattoo. Wow. Wow. Oh, my gosh. I got a tattoo yesterday," it was that whole process for me. I think it was a little anxiety provoking honestly. I think I had moments probably in those first couple of days where I was like,
"Should I have done this? Do I regret it? Do I regret it yet? Do I regret it yet?" I really kept questioning myself. There was never a moment that I did. I checked in on myself and was like, "Do I? No. No, I'm still good. Okay. I don't regret it yet. That's good." It was definitely anxiety provoking, and I think looking back on it I was really proud of myself for going through with it and really for putting all of my instincts aside. Granted, alcohol for sure helped, but being willing to kind of lean into this spontaneous, unplanned unknown, that was huge for me, because I don't do that. I really don't often do that. I've done it. I don't know that this was the first, getting the tattoo was the first case of it. I'm becoming more and more comfortable with letting myself by spontaneous, and that's a personal growth thing that I've been trying to do for years, but I think it was a good example of how I can let go, and be spontaneous, and not plan, and have things go really well. Excuse me. I think it was a good learning opportunity for myself.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Do you think if there is something, you choose to get another tattoo, do you think the process would look different or do you think part of the fun in getting a tattoo is that spontaneous, "We're just going to go do this"?

**Eleanor:** I think next time ... Well, I say this as a blanket statement, but there's probably caveats. I think I would be a little more intentional about it. I know that the place we chose to get it done we chose because my partner knew that they were a good shop. There was still a little part of being somewhat intentional and planning in that, because again he has gorgeous artwork, and he chooses his artists, and he's very careful about the way he does it. I think if I were to get very simple line work done again or something that doesn't take a huge level of skill, I could see it happening in a more spontaneous, fun way. But if it's something that would be a little more detailed and require a little more skill, I think in order to guarantee that it's going to turn out good and not ... I mean we've all seen the tattoo horror stories, right, and really bad ones. I think it kind of depends on what it is and whether or not I would even, even with mimosas let's say, like whether or not I would let that happen and really allow myself to let go.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. I gotcha. I think I just have one other question for you.

**Eleanor:** Sure.

**Interviewer:** I'm wondering if your tattoo has affected any other areas of your life. You've already hit on sex. There's something that has been positively influenced. With your work life, it really hasn't influenced anything because of the nature of your job. You're also proud of it. You don't feel the need to conceal it. But any other areas that you feel like your tattoo has affected?

**Eleanor:** The only thing that I can think of, and I would say it's in a more positive way, and we've touched on it a little bit, but it's kind of the social parts of that. Feeling like when my partner's having a conversation with somebody who has tattoos about tattoos, like I'm not felt out of those conversations. Not that they left me out, but
that I feel like I can be more a part of those conversations. I think that point of connection with whoever sees it and if they have a comment, or if I notice theirs, then we can kind of automatically have that connection point and have a conversation. I tend to be pretty good at small talk in general. Just naturally like I'm comfortable with those kind of things, but I think it's depending on what kind of crowd we're in and the type of people, excuse me, that we're with. I think in some ways having an automatic point of connection and an automatic conversation starter makes those ... Nobody really likes small talk, right, but I think it makes it a little bit easier to engage in those different social situations. It can at least, right? If I'm like hanging out with dad's church buddies, we probably won't be talking about that. Not that I ever do that, but I'm just thinking of a case where it wouldn't. I don't know. I can't think of any other I guess areas of my external life that it's impacted. Definitely that internal empowerment, and confidence, and identity I think has been the bigger impact, but I can't think of any other external ones.

Interviewer: Can you say more about that identity?

Eleanor: Yeah. God, I feel like it's a complicated interwoven thing. I'm not sure where to start with that. I guess the first part of it is partially that empowerment and recognizing that like I am my own person and that my body is mine, right, and it's mine to control. I think that plays, not directly. This might seem like a weird connection, but social justice and autonomy for all people. I think all people should have autonomy over their bodies. That's such a huge value to me, and it comes up in my work, in my clinical work. It comes up in my personal life. I think having something that is really empowering for me and that really helped reinforce that this is my body, and this is my own, and I get to make those choices has even further strengthened those beliefs that I have. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: That does make sense. That makes perfect sense.

Eleanor: Okay. Okay. I think also getting back to the connection with Hermione, and being smart and able to hold these different pieces, and being able to hold that I'm smart, and I have great friends, and I can do fun things. It's like I don't have to be just one thing. I think having that as a reminder of those things and that my identity is more than just being the smart one, or being this or that, and that I'm allowed to be all these different things like she was. I think it serves as a reminder of that, and I think in turn kind of helps me feel more confident and empowered in who I am. Just I guess having a reminder of that is helpful.

Interviewer: That's lovely. I suppose maybe to close, I just want to invite you to share anything. I want to ask you if there is anything that I didn't ask you about or we didn't get to dialogue about that you feel like would be important to share or relevant to what we're going for here.
Eleanor: Let me think. I don't think so. Nothing comes to mind. I think I expected some unexpected questions. That's always good, right? It kind of makes you think. No, I don't think so. If I think of anything, would it be okay to email you or share those with you later?

Interviewer: Absolutely, absolutely.