



Woven Memories: Arts-based Autoethnography of Scar Stigma and Body Modification

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Abstract

Women's scars in visual culture are not merely marks on the body, but sites where gendered and ableist cultural norms converge to demand flawless skin, concealment, and correction. Drawing on feminist body politics and crip theory, this arts-based autoethnography reframes my traumatic experience of scar revision surgery as a consequence of South Korean society's disciplining of women's bodies into docility, under the false promise of cure and recovery embedded in ableist ideology. Layered with autobiographical narratives and images of scars, my artwork, *Woven Memories*, challenges the continued marginalization of women's body modification experiences and enacts feminist resistance through the critical retelling of scar stigma narratives. This study highlights the potential of arts-based autoethnography to revalue the memories of women with scars and to foster self-reflective feminist art practices that open up broader conversations about gendered body normativity and disability justice in a transnational context.

Keywords: scar stigma, body modification, scar revision surgery, arts-based autoethnography, body normativity, crip theory, feminist body politics, disability justice

Woven Memories: Tagging Along with Stigma and Resistance

Woven Memories is a digitally created artwork in the form of a tag, made using images of my open-heart surgery scars. As a symbol of my memories and lived experiences of scar stigma and scar revision surgery, this work interweaves layered visual elements of my skin tone, written narratives, and images of the scars on my chest. By using the familiar shape of a tag, often attached to personal belongings or luggage, I reveal how these memories perpetually tag along with me (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Woven Memories* (Author, 2021). Digital artwork. Courtesy of the artist.

I am a South Korean woman art educator currently based in the United States. Because I was born with congenital heart defects and underwent open-heart surgery at two months old, I have carried surgical scars at the center of my chest for as long as I can remember. I actually have no memory of my body without the scars. However, I vividly recall feeling alienated by my scars as early as the age of six. I occasionally experienced a range of negative emotions regarding my scars—

shame, inadequacy, and a reluctance to reveal them.

The media representations and societal expectations surrounding women's flawless skin that I encountered led me to see my scars as a source of stigma, signifying my body as flawed and in need of correction. In U.S. and Eurocentric visual culture, flawless images of women's skin are pervasive, while women's scars are rarely shown, and are typically relegated to medical or beauty contexts (Connor, 2001). Influenced by such norms, in South Korea, scars are often viewed as bodily disfigurements and flaws that should be concealed, especially for women. This perception is deeply rooted in gendered body norms, which prioritize women's conformity to beauty standards as a core value (S. Park & Hong, 2021). Having internalized these pressures, during my teenage years, I even developed a sense of nostalgia for a body without scars that I had never truly known. These feelings became deeply entangled with my self-perception and persisted into my early twenties, when I chose to undergo scar revision surgery at my mother's urging. That experience ultimately forced me to confront the emotional and physical consequences of attempting to modify my body to align with gendered ideals of bodily normativity in South Korean society.

The creation of *Woven Memories* is particularly informed by the lens of feminist body politics (Bordo, 2004) and crip theory (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), which both challenge the way in which sociocultural power structures and cultural narratives produce normative expectations around health, beauty, and ability. While feminist body politics examines how women's bodies are disciplined through cultural norms of beauty and femininity, crip theory interrogates how able-bodiedminded¹ norms are constructed and sustained within the dominant ableist ideologies of normalcy and productivity. Together, these two lenses effectively reveal how my experiences of stigma were shaped at the intersection of gender and illness, and how the demand to "fix" or conceal my body was not merely personal, but deeply political.

1. The term "bodymind" is widely used in disability studies to emphasize the inseparability of the body and the mind while resisting Cartesian dualism and medicalized separations between mental and physical experiences (Price, 2015). In this writing, while I occasionally use the term body normativity, particularly in scar-specific contexts where bodily norms are foregrounded in social expectations, I also intentionally use bodymind to align with perspectives that affirm the entangled nature of embodied and mental experiences.

With this foundation, the creation of *Woven Memories* is arts-based autoethnography, as an act of retelling my traumatic memories of scar revision surgery from ten years ago and asserting my resistance to gendered body normativity in South Korean society. Arts-based autoethnography provides ways to critically examine the researcher's personal experiences through artistic creation, situated within broader sociocultural and political contexts (Finley, 2007; Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007; Wilson, 2018). I consider this method a "praxis of care," an approach that not only strives to understand individuals and society through the process but also aims to build coalitions against systemic oppression through the sharing of personal narratives (Visse & Niemeijer, 2016, p. 302).

Accordingly, in this writing, I first examine how scar stigma and expectations around body modification have pervaded U.S. and Eurocentric visual cultures, which have in turn shaped beauty standards and visual culture in South Korea. Recontextualizing scar revision surgery within feminist body politics and crip theory, I critically examine how expectations toward body modification have been shaped by ableist and sexist norms, particularly in relation to the docility of women's bodies and compulsory able-bodiedness. The analysis of the creation of *Woven Memories* delves into my frustration around scar revision surgery and my resistance to societal gendered body normativity. By sharing *Woven Memories*, I endeavor to speak up about silenced experiences of stigma in South Korea, and I advocate for resisting gendered ableist tropes in visual culture. In doing so, I aim to build solidarity with women with scars and—more broadly—women with non-normative bodyminds.

Scar Stigma and Expectations Surrounding Body Modification in South Korean Visual Culture

In contemporary U.S. and Eurocentric societies, including South Korea, scars have often been portrayed as aesthetic disfigurements that signify negative personality traits, vulnerability, or outsider status (Kaney, 2005; Kendall et al., 2021). Although scars are simply a natural outcome of the skin's healing process, they are often portrayed as unsightly flaws that are repulsive to others and in need of correction or removal, regardless of their cause or type. This stigma is particularly pronounced for women, as beauty standards in U.S. and Eurocentric societies place excessive emphasis on women's physical appearance (Weitz, 2011).

South Korean beauty norms, shaped by a historically homogeneous society and the influence of U.S. and Eurocentric beauty ideals of bright skin during the earlier 20th century, have further intensified the stigma surrounding scars (S. Park & Hong, 2021).

Admittedly, East Asian culture has traditionally valued porcelain-toned clear skin even before the 20th century (Frith et al., 2005). However, the intensity of beauty standards centered on flawlessness gradually increased following the modernization of South Korea in the early 20th century and the influx of US-Eurocentric cultural influences. This trend was further amplified with the spread of mass media since the 1960s. Representations in television and film began to frame ideal femininity in South Korea as requiring clear skin, positioning it as an essential trait of beauty. From the late 1980s through the 2000s, globalization further intensified this emphasis on a universal beauty ideal of “white glowing skin,” largely through the circulation of international media, which came to signify a form of White colonial femininity (S. Park & Hong, 2021; Yan & Bissell, 2022). Beauty pageants, advertisements for cosmetics and plastic surgery, and media portrayals consistently emphasized flawless beauty, further reinforcing South Korea’s culture of lookism (Hu, 2023). Building upon this foundation, during the past decade, with the global rise of K-pop, K-dramas, K-beauty and the plastic surgery industry, the unrealistic expectation of perfect skin has increasingly come to function as the ultimate marker of femininity and continues to serve as a tool of South Korean national branding (Li et al., 2021).

On the rare occasions when representations of women’s scars appear in South Korean visual culture, they are typically visible only in the context of body modification. In numerous TV, magazine, and internet advertisements for scar removal procedures or skin treatments, women with clear, flawless skin are portrayed as having recovered their true selves by erasing scars, presenting body modification as a journey to restoring normative beauty. By framing scar removal as restoring natural normalcy, such narratives pathologize scars as signs of abnormality within dominant gender norms and further increase societal pressure on South Korean women to remove scars through various medical interventions. In practice, plastic surgery, including scar revision surgery, has not only been popularized but is also widely expected of South Korean women, driven by rigid

beauty standards and a gendered social structure that reinforces body modification as a form of self-improvement and essential investment for achieving societal normalcy and avoiding social discrimination (Lee, 2016; R. H. Park et al., 2019).

As such, I often encounter social expectations surrounding bodily modification through friends’ and relatives’ casual suggestions that I pursue scar revision surgery or concealment of scars. Despite my long reluctance to undergo the surgery, my mother most strongly urged me to do so. I knew that, even in my early years, she had occasionally hinted at her deep sense of responsibility, feeling that she needed to ensure the revision of my scars to attain acceptable beauty. This was largely due to prevailing cultural prejudices, which regarded scars on a woman’s chest as a serious disfigurement that not only diminished her femininity but could also potentially hinder her future marriage due to perceptions of lower sexual attractiveness and the stigmatic marking of past illness. Like many other women who were considering surgery in South Korea in the early-2010s, I knew that a woman’s marriage was regarded not only as a normative milestone but also as the fulfillment of her parents’ duty (B.-H. Kim et al., 2016). My mother felt the burden of this responsibility and had long worried about its impact on me. Understanding my mother’s long-standing distress, I ultimately felt compelled to undergo the surgery shortly after graduating from college.

However, I must also acknowledge that the decision was not entirely imposed on me. I, too, was always conscious of my scars and could not help but harbor a silent desire to align with South Korea’s gendered body normativity and its expectations surrounding body modification, even though I had a critical awareness of how these societal pressures affected women. This illustrates how a woman’s choices are, in reality, never entirely separable from the broader visual culture and the social structures that shape them.

Scar Revision Surgery Through the Lens of Feminist Body Politics and Crip Theory

The societal pressure on women to modify their bodies can be understood through the lens of feminist body politics. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (2004) argues that the pursuit of hard-to-attain standards of femininity is a “discipline and normalization of the female body” (p. 166). She asserts that sexist

social structures impose a perpetual sense of inadequacy by framing women's bodies as either deficient or excessive and further compel women to undergo medical interventions to attain "docile bodies," which are bodies subordinated to societal bodymind normativity (Bordo, 2004; Foucault, 1979). Moreover, by framing women's engagement in body modification as a personal choice rather than a societal expectation, these structures effectively obscure the systemic pressures that enforce bodily conformity. Bordo's analysis demonstrates that this structure not only naturalizes the disciplining of women's bodies but also compels women to participate voluntarily, ultimately transforming them into a form of "cultural plastic," which is malleable and expected to conform unquestioningly to prevailing beauty standards (p. 246).

Bordo's (2004) framework exemplifies how the societal pressure surrounding my scar revision surgery reflects the disciplining of the female body to conform to dominant beauty norms that equate femininity with flawless aesthetics. My open-heart surgery scars extend from the center of my chest, approximately halfway between my clavicle and sternum, down to just above my navel, making any meaningful revision practically impossible. Instead, the plastic surgeon recommended removing the most visibly indented portion at the lower end of the scar, which had taken on a curved shape resembling a winking eye. The surgeon assured me that suturing it would create a more aesthetically pleasing appearance. This experience also raises critical questions about the standards that shape normalization, as well as whose perspectives legitimize such judgments. On a micro level, my scar revision was primarily about achieving a body that was not deemed unsightly in the eyes of my mother and the surgeon, thereby aligning my body with the ideal of the docile body. However, given my mother's concern about my future marriage prospects, the implications extended beyond this immediate context. The imagined gaze of potential future viewers—such as my future male partner, his family, and, more broadly, patriarchal South Korean society—played a significant role in shaping the perceived necessity of modification. This entanglement underscores how women's bodily docility is inseparable from patriarchal norms, and how the two reinforce each other through aesthetic and social discipline (Bordo, 2004).

The framework of crip theory can also productively inform the

examination of societal pressures surrounding scar revision surgery. The term "crip" is a reclaimed term used by disability studies scholar Robert McRuer (2006) to critique the pervasive "compulsory able-bodiedness" (p. 1) in ableist society and to embrace a more "fluid, ever-changing" (Sandahl, 2003, p. 27) understanding of embodiment that resists medical categorizations of disability (Chen et al., 2023).² Through this expansive scope beyond the conventional understanding of disability, crip theory opposes the ideology of cure in ableist societies through the solidarity of disabled people, while simultaneously challenging the "potential risks and exclusions of identity politics" (Kafer, 2013, p. 15). In this sense, this framework provides a lens through which to analyze my experiences with surgical scars, often stigmatized as signs of weakness and ugliness, subjected to social discrimination, or pressured into modification within ableist South Korean society.

Crip theory particularly frames how the promotion of scar revision surgery functions as a falsely promised cure that burdens women with scars. Numerous visual representations and textual narratives of scar revision surgery in South Korean advertisements have often framed these procedures as a means of "recovering" one's pre-scar self and "regaining" confidence (Ivy Plastic Surgery Clinic, n.d.). This rhetoric suggests that the current post-scar self is incomplete or inauthentic, not recognized as belonging to the future, while the pre-scar self is positioned as the real or true self, which is seen as the necessary condition for attaining a livable future (Ehlers, 2014). Such portrayals align with what Kafer (2013) critiques as the pervasive framing of disability as a "sign of no future or at least no good future," rendering it something that must be eradicated or cured to make a viable future possible (p. 31).

In line with this ableist future-centered logic, most South Korean plastic surgery medical complexes refer to scar "revision" surgery as scar "removal" surgery to reinforce a dramatic narrative of body modification (Yoo, 2016). The

2. The term "crip" is a shortened form of the pejorative term "cripple," subversively utilized by people with disabilities as a term of empowerment and identity. The term challenges and subverts traditional perceptions of disability, transforming a historically negative label into a positively-valenced identity and culture. This reclamation signifies a rejection of societal norms that view disability solely through a lens of pity or deficiency. Instead, "crip" embraces disability as an integral and valued aspect of human diversity, fostering a sense of solidarity among those it represents (McRuer, 2006).

complete removal of surgical scars is impossible, as most surgical treatments inevitably involve suturing unscarred skin together to create new marks that are simply less visible than the original scar. Nevertheless, by labeling such procedures as “removal,” the medical industry effectively sells a false promise of cure to women with scars, conjuring an ableist future devoid of scars (E. Kim, 2017). This, in turn, forces many women with scars who seek to conform to societal gendered body normativity to confront the inevitability of their failure when complete removal proves unattainable. What remains is the time, effort, and financial burden of undergoing these diagnostic processes and procedures, with all costs falling entirely on women with scars. Accordingly, these frameworks offer a more nuanced lens through which to reinterpret my own scar revision surgery in South Korea and the enduring emotional consequences it wrought, revealing how experiences of docility and crip existence leave lasting imprints on the bodymind.

Weaving Frustration and Resistance through Arts-based Autoethnography

With the theoretical understanding of scar revision surgery and body modification in South Korea in mind, I explored my memories of the scar revision surgery through arts-based autoethnography. By interweaving the researcher’s personal experiences with artistic creation, arts-based autoethnography provokes reflective thought and facilitates a nuanced understanding of the self (Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007; Wilson, 2018). To better retell my embodied knowledge from this inquiry, I explain three distinct layers of *Woven Memories* (Figure 1) while dispersing fragmented narratives of my experiences rendered in red text, which directly testify to my embodied memory of scar revision surgery at the plastic surgery clinic.

First Layer: The *kkoripyo* of “Woman with Scars”

The receptionist’s voice brought me back to reality. She mentioned a possible date for the procedure: the 23rd of December. As I hesitated, unsure about the proposed date, my mother quickly stepped in, explaining that I would be available since that time was my school’s winter break. The receptionist, marking the calendar for 2 p.m., tried to reassure me with her practiced professional smile. “The surgery would be a great Christmas *present* for you.” Although my mother

smiled gratefully back at her, I mustered a hesitant, somewhat awkward smile, and answered, “I hope so.”

The Korean word “꼬리표 (*kkoripyo*),” means a “tag” that is attached to and follows an individual. According to the Standard Korean Dictionary (n.d.), *kkoripyo* connotes a bad reputation or evaluation that can persistently haunt someone throughout their life. As a compound word of “tail (꼬리: *kkori*)” and “label (표: *pyo*),” *kkoripyo* visually symbolizes how stigma can cling to a person as an ever-present “tail” that one can rarely discard. I have long thought of my scars as my own irremovable *kkoripyo*, not only marking me as a woman with scars, but also signifying the way in which I am a woman with birth defects and illnesses.

In this light, I deliberately chose to give *kkoripyo* a form that reflects my embodied memory of being constantly followed by a particular social label (woman with scars), as well as a persistent gaze that carried an unspoken pressure to assimilate. Since childhood, I have had to navigate the tension between concealing and revealing my scars. Yet even when I attempted to hide them, I often felt as though others were persistently looking at my chest. When I sensed that a stranger’s gaze had briefly rested there, I imagined that they, much like some of my relatives and acquaintances, might be wondering why I had not pursued further body modification. This internalized pressure was shaped by the pervasive ableist logic that presumes disabled people should seek a cure (Clare, 2017; E. Kim, 2017).

Of course, the desire for a cure or the elimination of impairment among some disabled people should be respected; after all, my own decision to undergo scar revision surgery was, in part, driven by such a desire. However, South Korean society does not ask whether we hold this desire; it simply presumes that all individuals inevitably long for a cure and, in doing so, universally promotes body modification as the expected course of action. This realization, as a result, led me to render *kkoripyo* as an extension of my own skin. Skin itself has been theorized as the “most intimate experience and the most public marker of raced, sexed, and national histories” (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001, p. 1). The light beige color digitally painted on the *kkoripyo* represents the very skin onto which countless societal expectations—regarding my beauty, ability, and ethnicity as a South Korean woman—have converged.

Second Layer: Cocooned Scars, Silenced Narratives

Said the cosmetic surgeon: “I have to say that I cannot fully remove these scars. Instead, I might be able to make your pitted scar to be minimal. This would become a thin line of scars. I bet it would look way *better*.”

The second layer of *Woven Memories* features brief narratives of my memories of scar removal surgery that I inscribed on the *kkoripyo*. By narrating my lived experiences in Korean language in the artwork, I sought to highlight my inner voice, which I am sharing for the first time in nearly a decade. Below is my English translation of that narrative:

On the operating table, I lay

The plastic surgeon raised my pitted scar.

With delicate precision, he then closed it.

Stitch by stitch, thread, and needle working afar.

Cocooned, my scar now lay

In the smallest room, just above my navel.

But another mark remained

Imperfection, yet another struggle to unravel.

“Am I really perfect now?”

I longed to ask, but the silence was all I could sustain.

This narrative captures moments from my scar revision surgery and the emotions that followed immediately after. At that time, I was caught between the hope that my scars would become less visible, and a deep sense of self-reproach for willingly placing myself on the operating table and thus conforming to societal standards. Alongside these feelings, fear and disappointment lingered, further complicating my emotions in the aftermath of the procedure. In retrospect, the source of my profound frustration and self-reproach lay not so much in the

experience of the surgery itself or its immediate outcome but in the process leading up to it: the consultations, the diagnoses, and the evaluations.

Each time I exposed the scars on my chest, I sat in silence as doctors assessed their severity, discussed how visually unpleasing they appeared, and deliberated how they should be redesigned. The way these discussions objectified my body inflicted a profound emotional burden. I felt as though I were no longer an autonomous subject, but rather a malleable clay, shaped by the preferences and under the surveillance of patriarchal society (Bordo, 2004; Wendell, 2013). As a result, I felt trapped in a perpetual moment in which not only was my surgical treatment ongoing, but I also remained psychologically situated in that space even after it had ended. To visually convey this sense of stagnancy, I repeated this same narrative several times, inviting the viewer to circulate around these short frustrating moments of recollection.

Third Layer: Revealing, Weaving, and Connecting

“Open your chest more so I can capture your scars clearly. One, two ...”

I closed my eyes tightly, even before the doctor’s camera flashes went off.

As the final third layer, I incorporated images of my scars into my artwork. This was only the second time in my entire life that I had ever been photographed with a focus on my scars; the first was for scar revision surgery at a plastic surgeon’s office. At that time, I was a passive object, my body scrutinized under the clinical gaze, awaiting the verdict of medical intervention. This time, however, I was the one looking—confronting my scars, tracing the life histories they hold, and reclaiming them as part of my own narrative. While this work stands as a painful testimony to my personal experiences with forced scar removal surgery, I sought to affirm that I, as a woman with scars, am here, visible and living with them. Unveiling these images of scars is my act of resistance against not only South Korean but also U.S. and Eurocentric cultural taboos, which have long compelled me to conceal, minimize, and erase them (Ehlers, 2014).

However, I also remain wary of my experience being reduced to a simple narrative of moving from skepticism about body modification to acceptance and resilience. Such linear recovery narratives are often socially imposed on

disabled individuals, pressuring them to demonstrate resilience, or to overcome their disability, or adopt an asset-based mindset (Goodley, 2013). This pressure ultimately risks depoliticizing disability by ignoring systemic ableism and the urgent need for structural change, instead placing the burden of assimilation solely on disabled individuals (Clare, 2017; Shildrick, 2019). Thus, I strongly assert that *Woven Memories* is not a straightforward testimony of personal resilience. Rather, it acknowledges my ongoing struggles with the emotional wounds left by body modification, resists the ableist pressure to assimilate, and simultaneously reveals my continued reluctance to fully disclose my narrative within this artwork given the societal stigma in South Korea.

Due to these entangled and contradictory feelings and thoughts, I tried to overlay images of my scars onto my written narratives, deliberately obscuring certain words. Through this act of concealment, I sought to create a fragmented narrative that allows viewers to breathe within the gaps and silences. Additionally, for those who cannot fully comprehend the Korean language, the narrative may remain entirely inaccessible, yet this very incomprehensibility creates another layer of absence, itself a deliberate gap. Much like a scarlet letter, my stigma narratives blend with my skin tone, evoking my feelings of alienation as I create this work in a foreign colonial master's land. Through this extended pause, the work aims to open a deeper discourse on stigma by engaging those viewers who have experienced scar stigma, (in/directly forced) body modification as cure, and disabilities of various kinds. Thus, my creation of *Woven Memories* is not merely the outcome of my inquiry; rather, it is an unfolding dialogue and a proposition for the ever-evolving interweaving of lived experiences and resistances.

Conclusion: From Fragmented Memories to Self-Reflective Feminist Art Practices

Dominant U.S. and South Korean media and visual culture continue to saturate our daily lives with glowing images of women's flawless skin. At the same time, women with scars' wounded memories under ableist patriarchy are often fragmented and frequently dismissed as merely subjective, emotionally excessive, and untrustworthy. These parallel realities may reinforce the illusion that society's expectations for women's scarless beauty are unshakable. However, by revisiting,

creating, and narrating my experiences through arts-based autoethnography, I have come to realize that artistic inquiry grounded in one's fragmented memories and lived experiences can begin to fracture dominant gendered and ableist ideologies from within.

The new interpretation of the complexities of my body modification experiences as struggles and the tenacity of my resistance offers an alternative narrative that challenges the binaries of victimhood and triumph often imposed on disabled or marked bodies. Granted, for some, my arts-based autoethnography may seem unresolved, lacking the typical narratives of "overcoming" or healing in the face of disability (Clare, 2017). Yet, I argue that this ambiguity lies at the heart of my inquiry, as it acknowledges the permanence of an irreconcilable past while also affirming that living with the scars and the stigma that continue to tag along is itself an act of resistance. My artwork, thus, becomes tangible testimony, encapsulating the intricate interplay of scar stigma, body modification, and resistance as an ongoing, evolving process.

I acknowledge that my lived experience represents only a fragmented glimpse into the varied realities that South Korean women with scars experience; it cannot speak to the full complexity and diversity of their experiences and relationships with visual culture. Therefore, through this sharing, I hope that my work inspires other women with scars—particularly those situated outside dominant U.S. frameworks—to bring their memories to light and challenge the longstanding silence and lack of recognition surrounding the lives of women with scars across different societies. By revaluing and reimagining our fragmented memories, we can, together, shape self-reflective feminist art practices that open up transnational and inclusive discourses on scar stigma, gender equity, and disability justice.

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