Visual Culture & Gender Vol. 8 2013
an annual peer-reviewed international multimedia journal
Karen Keifer-Boyd & Deborah Smith-~~Shank~~, editors. Published by Hyphen-UnPress

Skin Scarring as a Palimpsest

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Abstract

Looking on, in, and under scarred skin, problematizes understandings of memory, subjectivity, and self/other relations. Using arts-based inquiry, I investigate my scarred life stories while connecting it to feminist perspectives that expose social constructs of gendered scarred skin. As I peel back the complex surfaces, I highlight my female voice and personal experiences to explore the layered meanings in my scars. Questioning assumptions and understandings of scarred skin in relation to self and others, my goal is to stimulate new ways to view, understand, and engage with skin scars.

Keywords: Arts-based Research, Narrative Inquiry, Skin, Scar, Gender

Investigating the Surfaces of Scarred Skin Through Arts-Based Inquiry

Waiting in line for an aerobics class, my friend and I were casually talking about our daily events. As she looked down at my legs, she was surprised to see a few light colored scars on my left knee. She curiously asked what had happened. I began to tell her about my scars, many of which resulted from an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction surgery. I explained that I was a gymnast from age seven to eighteen. Although I had partially torn a ligament in my knee during the end of my junior year of high school, I had decided to wear a knee brace and continue my regular training schedule (since college recruiting was in the near future). One night during practice in my senior year, I began a floor routine, which I was never to finish. During my second tumbling pass, I did not finish my twisting rotation before landing on the ground. As I landed incorrectly on my legs, I felt a sharp pain, yelled out, and collapsed to the floor. I instantly knew what had happened and was overwhelmed with disappointing emotion. My decade long dreams and hopes of earning a full gymnastics scholarship to college had crumbled. The very next day, I went to an orthopedic doctor and scheduled the needed surgery. Two weeks later, my left leg was scarred and changed forever.

In this paper, I examine skin scarring as a palimpsest—a multi-layered space of knowledge that acts as a connective tissue between the self and other. A palimpsest can be defined as a historical manuscript that consists of text written on top of multiple semi-erased layers of older texts. An artifact that contains a record of its history (Gerber, 2003), a palimpsest conveys knowledge through traces of layered words, which are so entangled that often there is no discernible chronology. The visibility of strata allows access to the semi-deleted documented information; its content never being fully forgotten. As the layers link together, they can generate unique narratives from a past time, space, and/or place. A school chalkboard is an example of a palimpsest. Although text and images created with chalk can be erased, traces of visible chalk layers remain. The continual process of writing, re-writing, and erasing provides information (or at least visual references to past events or content depending on the degree to which these marks are legible) regarding who produced the

chalk writings, his/her beliefs, and when the writings may have happened. The layers convey meanings not always apparent on the surface but rather penetrated deep within the *tissue* of meaning itself.

Scars, the marked or damaged surface of the skin, as a place of knowing and understanding can be conceptualized as a palimpsest as it contains traces of the past, present, and possible future. Prosser (2001) suggests that "Skin is the body's memories of our lives" (p. 52), and through an investigation of the skin, memories and stories from the past can re/surface. Skin records, remembers, expresses, and conveys messages and stories often through scars, similar to the function of a book or canvas. The scar is a seam that can signify struggle or conflict; a site where memories and thoughts collide; a mark on the skin that was once open to the world, but then quickly closed off for protective reasons. Even though scarred skin may be healed, there is a "continuous reopening of the wound" (Adams, 1998, p. 63). Although erased or forgotten information relating to the scar may not be outwardly visible, the scar trigger memories that are recorded in the brain/mind/long-term memory. What caused a scar? Who caused a scar? When a scar originated, and where a scar is located on a body are also questions that can promote an exploration of memory, subjectivity, and self/other relations.

In this visual essay, I explore the idea of the scarred skin *as* a palimpsest through arts-based inquiry while examining the many layers of scars as a way of making meaning of my-self, others, and the world. Blurring the boundaries between art and science, arts-based educational research renders inquiries through artistic means (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). My artworks, which include visual digital works and a sound/audio art piece (i.e., a transformation of this written text into a computer generated voice), are aesthetic representations of how skin, memory, identity, society, and technology can intersect to complicate research. Using digital technologies, I create new images, ideas, identities, and experiences in ways similar to how medical technologies create *new* altered bodies.

Engaging in arts-based narrative inquiry highlights my position as both a researcher and subject. Narrative inquiry is an approach to understanding/researching experience (i.e., the ways in which people make meaning of their lives) as narratives, and recognizes that how we understand experience is inherently connected to time, society, and place (Bruner, 2004; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Autobiography is one form of narrative inquiry that explores our storied lives (Freedman, 2007), and by conceptualizing scarred skin as a site of autobiography, I attempt to write (through words and imagery) and work through my own *skin autobiographies* (Prosser, 2001). "Autobiography works like skin; it is the skin the author sends out that at once conceals and reveals the self" (Prosser, 2001, p. 65).

Weaving together personal life narratives with artworks and related writings, I experience art as an embodied way of knowing and understanding. It allows me to expose private details in order to engage the audience/reader by promoting emotional responses, personal connections, and dialogue. I am not concerned with whether my stories/artwork/skin reflect my past accurately, but what kind of person it shapes me into, that is, the consequences my story produces, and new possibilities it introduces for living my life. Re-looking and re-working my scars on an intimate level, I engage in a process of living artistic inquiry. Throughout this visual essay, I attempt to peel back the layers of my scars and look beyond and beneath the scarred skin. Examining particular scars on my body, layers of my life experiences rematerialize, and my scars become more than just a mark on my skin; they become a site of overlapping boundaries providing an entry point for critical thought and awareness.

Figure 1. Author. (2013). "Photograph of one of my two surgical knee scars."

On the Surfaces

Although I often temporarily forget about the scars on my left knee, people often recognize the markings when I wear dresses, shorts, and bathing suits, which sometimes become a topic of discussion. Figures 1 and 2 are digital photographs depicting my two surgical knee scars. Through documenting my body, I attempt to show how my scars are outwardly visible to the

world (i.e., how I and others see the scars).

Looking at scars and engaging in conversation conjures up many personal past stories and memories. Jay Prosser (2001) states, "We become aware of skin as a visible surface through memory ... the look of our skin—both to others and to ourselves—brings to its surface a remembered past" (p. 52). Although the scarred skin is publicly visible to the world, it has a much deeper personal meaning to me; it symbolizes a distressing experience. Trauma can create bodily memories and the skin is "one site for registering this trauma" (Stacey as cited in Prosser, 2001, p. 53). Every time I look at my scars I am reminded of physical pain and shattered dreams, and the presence of the scars sparks curiosity in others regarding the painful story. At the same time, I am also reminded of pleasant memories that surround the scars (e.g., how I loved to perform and defy gravity, how my closest friends were my teammates, and my top-notch physical shape). But, because what one remembers is not always how it actually happened, I must be critical of my memories. As I choose to remember the unfortunate outcome of my gymnastics career and the painful surgery, I seem to create a happy fairytale-like depiction of my life as a gymnast before the injury. But, in reality, there were many difficult times. I often forget that I sacrificed the carefree adolescent life for rigorous training. Instead of *hanging out* with my friends after school, I was in the gym *working out*. My body was constantly sore from the exhausting hours. I spent numerous hours with a physical therapist and chiropractor. My hands were rough and blistered from the uneven bars. My shins were often taped up to help relieve painful shin splints. There were many times that I thought about quitting the sport. It was as hard mentally as it was physically. Looking at my scars, I tend to forget these negative memories and focus on the fantasy of my life as a strong and motivated gymnast (i.e., a life that was once lived before the scars). Perhaps it is emotionally easier for me to focus on the happy times than dwell within a space of unattained scarred dreams.

Figure 2. Author. (2013). Photograph of my second surgical knee scar.

In the Surfaces

In writing about contemporary artists whose practices relate to the metaphor of the palimpsest, Gerber states, "the idea of looking beyond or beneath the surface and peeling away successive layers is a familiar one" (2003, p. 51). Artists, such as Ted Meyer, explore scars as a way to understand his own and other's life experiences (i.e., he engages in arts-based research). Meyer has a series of artworks titled, *Scarred for Life, Monoprints of Human Scars* that portray significant life-changing events. He creates mono-prints of a person's scar, photographs the person with the scar exposed and painted over (showing the printing process), and conducts an interview with the person about the scar. His artwork titles often summarize the cause of the scar, some of which include: *Open Heart, Lung Removal, Breast Cancer, Mastectomy, Hate Crime, Cochlear Implant, Cut Tendons, Hip Replacement, and Burn on Arm*. Referring to one of his scarred 'subjects,' the artist explains:

> Her scar was not just a marker of her ability but rather a road map of what made her life unique. It wasn't just a scar. It was her scar. Something that no one else had. Not only did it make her physically unique but emotionally [unique]. … Scars can mark entering into or out of a disability. Going from cancer to health, limited mobility to full movement … These mono-prints, taken directly off the skin of my model-subjects are portraits of those events that changed their lives. … My hope is to turn these lasting monuments, often thought of as unsightly, into things of beauty. (2011, para. 3)

Meyer's artworks act as a doorway into these people lives. Viewers are invited to view the powerful images of scars and moving narratives.

This embodied experience of becoming aware of the emotional impact of pain, scarring, and healing, invites viewers to critically think about their own skin, how they perceive other women and men with scars and disabilities, and how they understand and define beauty. The subjects in the photographs convey a sense of ownership and power over the scar as they gaze directly into the eyes of the viewer. Meyer's artwork opens up dialogue about a topic that is often concealed and transforms social perceptions of ugly scars into beauty, exposing the power to overcome tragedy and highlighting the possibility of hope. Similar to Meyer's explanation of his artwork, my scars also mark entering into and out of my dis-ability. During the months after my surgery where I could not walk, I was temporarily physically dis-abled. The morning after the surgery, I remember the doctor trying to physically bend my knee as I cried in pain. I went to physical therapy to re-learn how to walk and gain the strength needed to put the slightest amount of pressure from my body onto my leg. However, now that I can walk and have a relatively pain-free life, I no longer feel dis-abled. Although I have lost some leg sensation due to nerve damage, I can once again walk, jog, bike, and ski. What lingers, as a palimpsest memory scar, is the frightening thought of hurting my knee again. I am reminded of my scarred life when I try to stand after sitting for a long period of time (e.g., when on an airplane or in a car), as my knee muscles are achingly tight. Because we are often afraid of what we do not know (i.e., what is perceived as abnormal and different), and living in a culture that unfortunately carries a negative connotation of dis-abilities, I wonder, are scars a dis-ability? And/or, does it depend on the size, place, cause, and degree of the scar? I acknowledge that my scars may be less obvious than others' and that they were the result of a non-life threatening surgery. However, the marks are still a permanent inscription and reminder on my body. Figure 3 shows a digitally altered photograph of one of my scars. The interplay of layered text and image exposes my personal thoughts, questions, and the visual evidence of scarring.

Public perceptions regarding scars are socially constructed. Throughout history and in contemporary society, the strong, healthy, and powerful individuals are often honored and desired, meanwhile people with atypical characteristics are viewed as weak, inferior, and unwanted (Grosz, 1994). I find myself wondering, do my blemishes cause me to be perceived by others as unwanted and weak? Are my legs less attractive than others' legs that are free of scars? Furthermore, are my female legs expected to be young, beautifully smooth and clear from scars (by me, society, youth culture, men, and/or women)?

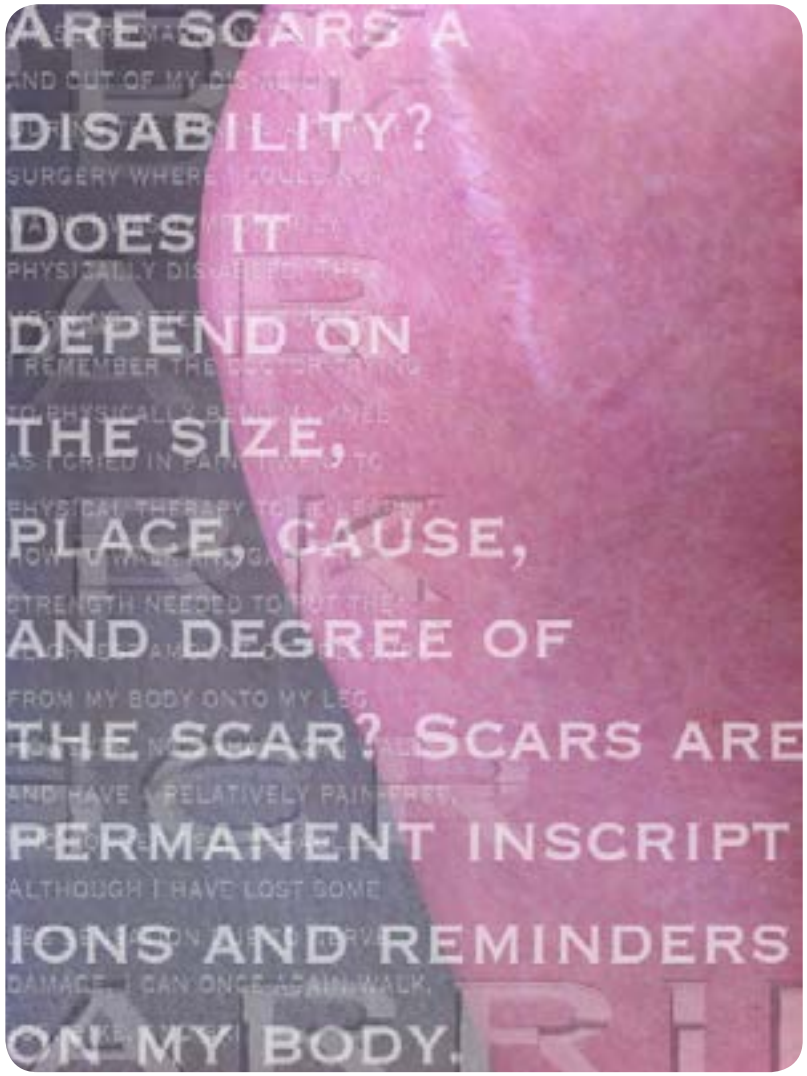

Figure 3. Author. (2013). *Contemplating my Scar.* Digital artwork

Social Surfaces

Beauty expectations provoke interesting gendered discussions about scarred skin. For example, I overheard a group of men talking about battle scars, and they seemed to be proud, almost bragging about their scars. I began to inquire, why don't I hear women bragging about their scars? People don't look at my scars, and respond by saying "cool scars." There seems to be more interest into the permanent discolored surgical marks on my legs and the story behind the scars. And, as I explain the *not-so-proud* background story, they often respond with sympathetic statements such as "I am so sorry." But, why do they feel sorry for me? Is it because my permanent scars are visible to others? Is it because my scarred female leg is imperfect and unattractive? Is it because they are sorry that I had to undergo surgery and/or give up on my youthful dreams? Or, is it the way I tell the story that arouses sympathetic responses? In Figure 4, I visually tell the story of my knee scar in a way that is not intended to arouse sympathy and instead to elicit praise of beauty.

Figure 4. Author. (2006). *My Beautiful Scarred Story*. Digital artwork.

Western society promotes the desire for clear smooth skin. Always in search of perfection, society often ostracizes or 'others' physical imperfections. Browse through current magazines such as *People* and *Glamour*, and you will see this perpetuated through the media. Images of young, thin, light-colored women with smooth shiny skin saturate the pages. When I met with doctors, nurses, and physical therapists after my surgery, they recommended that I rub cocoa butter cream on my scar to help with the healing and scar removal process. They also suggested that I refrain from exposing my scars to sunlight, and to apply sun block directly to the scars as needed. The subtext of their recommendations supports the notion of skin scarring as bad and ugly.

Kenway and Bullen (2010) investigate skin in relation to femininity and consumerism. They theorize what they refer to as *pedagogies of consuming skin*, which examines what the skin teaches about discourses of beauty. The skin care industry and consumer-media culture rely on processes of subjection and abjection, which, they argue, erase female life stories that the skin narrates. They explain:

> The commercial skin industry has created imperfect skin as abject and a social taboo, and casts itself as the agent of remedy. It promotes the skin as a surface with only one texture, free from hair, lines, wrinkles, creases, lumps, bumps, scars, and any sort of flaking, cracking, or roughness. … The skin must not reveal the biographical time of the working-class woman's labors of cleaning, scrubbing, washing, let alone the failures of past beauty—the age spots and uneven pigmentation created by youthful sunbathing or the burn, scar, broken capillary, ingrown hair, or the result of inept cosmetic interventions. (p. 163)

They theorize that perfect skin has no memory, and suggest that the skin industry conceals life experiences. Skin free of marks fails to show the struggles and successes of life, and the hiding of scars attempts to erase difference. Standardizing conceptions of the perfect skin creates a fictitious beauty; the unique individual with stories to tell is morphed into a monotonous figure who looks like everyone else and who is void of lived, or scarred, experience. Stripped of her/his power of being, the

scarred body is hidden and marginalized.

Similarly, Prosser points out, "given the function of skin as visual surface to record, it is ironic that the cultural ideal of skin should be skin that forgets. 'Good skin' is skin unmarked by the passage of time. 'Bad skin' means skin marked both by memory and as memorable; we do not forget bad skin" (2001, p. 54). Although I am almost ashamed to admit this, I actually refer to my legs as the "good leg" (i.e., the right leg) and the "bad leg" (i.e., the scarred left leg). For example, the other night after sitting in a movie theater for over two hours, I stood up and experienced some unexpected pain in my right knee. I caught myself saying, "My knee hurts, but in my good leg." Once the words came out of my mouth, I stopped and immediately reflected upon the hidden meaning behind what I said. I commonly refer to my right leg as "good" because it is unmarked, smooth, and natural, whereas my left leg is "bad" since it is scarred, experiences muscle stiffness (caused by the surgery), contains two metal screws, and reminds me of a wounded past. Had I unknowingly been perpetuating this cultural notion of good and bad skin for years? In contradiction, the concept of the palimpsest goes against the social norms and explores scarred skin as *good skin* as it is useful for meaning making, history, and storing memories. Furthermore, based on Prosser's writing, I find myself wondering: If I choose to have plastic surgery to conceal the scars and succumb to society's standards of beauty, would the surgery reestablish my skin as 'good skin' again, or would it produce further scars adding to my palimpsest of memories?

Examining Surfaces

The relationship between skin as *good* or *bad* and its potential strengths and weaknesses is not true only of humans, but also animals and plants. For example, when I buy produce at a grocery store, I look for the fruit without bruises and blemishes on its surface. I want the fruit with *perfect skin*, assuming that it will last longer and taste better. We base many assumptions of what lies under the surface by evaluating the surface.

Examining my "imperfect" skin surfaces provides insight into identity(ies). In the skin's "colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies" (Prosser, 2001, p. 52). When I look at my scars, I remember how gymnastics was a large part of my adolescent life. Although it was not an inexpensive sport, my parents supported my athletic endeavor. I know my middle-class family made sacrifices for me; my mother went back to nursing on a full-time basis. My little sister never lets me forget how she was forced into helping me walk around the neighborhood to sell and deliver fundraising candy and gift wrap around the holidays. She even says that she was not allowed to do gymnastics (or other costly sports) because we could not afford it; my sister felt a financial strain and believed that I (along with my two older sisters who were in college at the time) had financial priority. My scars remind me how lucky I was to have parents with jobs that provided health benefits, which enabled me to see the top regional orthopedic surgeon and have the costly surgery and minimal scarring on my female leg. Remembering stories of class, leisure, and family through scarred skin helps me to reconstruct my self(ves). Similarly, I can also examine the role gender has played in living and understanding my life.

Gendered Surfaces

As the third child of four, my mother and father raised my three sisters and me with the belief that we could achieve anything (regardless of gender, class, etc). Perhaps because I had no brothers, I never really compared myself to or felt inferior to boys—I never felt pressured by gender roles. At the young age of seven, I began gymnastic classes to keep busy and expend energy (i.e., my parents said I was constantly climbing and jumping around the house). Although the sport of gymnastics was historically a male sport, my classes were composed all of young girls. As years passed, only a few of us continued with our classes. Gymnastics moved from a fun activity and became a serious competitive sport. As I got older, my body slowly transformed into a tight physical body with amazing muscular strength and focused mental capabilities.

I was never really aware of my atypical physical strength until I took the school-wide required Presidential Physical Fitness test in my

elementary physical education class. Engaging in activities such as pull-ups, sit-ups, running, and V-sit reach, I soon realized that I out-performed all my classmates—including the boys. Reflecting on my young life experiences, I begin to see how my perceptions of femininity and masculinity have always been blurred. Although boys were often socially viewed as the physically *stronger* gender, my body disrupted this notion (as my muscles worked alongside my pony-tails and dresses). I lived in my own unique privileged space without any perceived boundaries.

However, after my surgery, my self-perception and identity was forced to shift. I was no longer this physically strong female athletes. My scarred body became weak as my muscles fatigued. My mother had to help me walk and stand—I was dependent on her and others. For the ten years before the surgery, I (and others) defined myself as a strong, athletic, self-reliant, and dedicated gymnast, teammate, daughter, sister, student, and friend. I struggled to make sense of who I was and what the future would now have in store. In this sense, my gender is/was performative (Butler, 1990, 2003)—my gendered identity(ies) is /was constantly changing as performed in different times, contexts, and places. My definition of what it means to be a strong, independent, and capable being/woman was being challenged, and my surgical scars were the constant reminder. Figure 5 explores my uncertain identity morphing with a new awareness of socially constricting gender inscriptions of physically strong, independent masculinity and dis-abled dependent femininity.

Under the Surfaces

Pulling back the layers of my skin, I begin to explore the underneath. Although I was not conscious of the surgeon who cut into my skin, physically pulled back my skin layers, operated on my knee, cut out my hamstring tendon, moved it to replace my damaged ligament, screwed it to my bones, and stapled my open skin back together, I am aware that these actions happened. Technology allows me to see the hidden interiors; the X-rays show two screws in my leg. As I run my fingers over

Figure 5. Author. (2006). *Identity*. Digital artwork

my scars, apply moisturizing cream, or shave my legs, I feel the screws under my skin. This is/was the site of disruption (Shildrick, 2001). The two foreign objects are now part of my body. Although I have lost some feeling in my left leg from the incision and cutting of nerve endings, I have gained other sensations. The surgery and screws help me to run, walk, swim, dance, and play, even though the scars constantly remind me of this disruption to mobility and what I experienced as a traumatic event.

Although I wanted to have the surgery, I am still, eighteen years later, not sure how I feel about having two metal screws inside the body. I was always under the assumption that tools were supposed to be used by the body, not placed in the body. I now rely on human made tools, the two screws, to function in everyday life. My body has been altered and invaded. I have a mechanical knee that is held together with tools and screws.

Dwelling Between Surfaces

Having personally struggled with uncertain feelings about having screws under my skin and how it affects my identity(ies), I never considered it an accepted space of inquiry until I discovered the writings of Castañeda (2001), Garoian and Gaudelius (2001), and Haraway (1991) in a graduate class about feminist visual culture. I was surprised to learn that others have theoretically explored skin and how humans are changing and understanding themselves (and others) along with technological developments. I began to feel not as alone.

Questioning the skin and the nature of touch in order to investigate the boundaries of the human-ness of the body, Castañeda writes, "human nature as it is investigated, generated and lived, is said to be undergoing a transformation that explicitly breaches the human/non-human divide" (2001, p. 223). I have personally experienced this transformation. Although I am a living human being, the scars and *unnatural* screws in my body remind me that I am no longer completely human. The notion of the *natural body* can no longer be applied to many of today's humans since such a large part of the population in the United States relies on technology everyday, using pacemakers, hearing devices, and prosthetic body parts, the natural body has transformed into a cyborg body (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2001). I imagine that I live in an in-between space, suspended between the natural and unnatural; human and non-human. My body is not entirely natural, yet it is not completely human-made; I am a cyborg body.

I find the idea of being a cyborg body personally unsettling. Although some critics would argue that we are all cyborgs since technologies such as pencils, cell phones, and computers are extensions of our bodies, the fact that the screws are a permanent part inside my body with which I cannot choose to separate, I feel I can not change cyborg status. Furthermore, the idea of the cyborg seems to conflict with my perceptions of beauty and femininity. For me, the word cyborg conjures up images of robot-like masculine, unemotional creatures with metal-like body structures. Fictional characters such as Darth Vader in the Star Wars (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977) movies perpetuate similar perceptions in society and visual culture. Perhaps this helps to explain why I am reluctant to characterize myself as a cyborg. Figure 6 shows how I struggle to perceive my reconstructed scarred knee/body as a cyborg.

Figure 6. Author. (2013). *My Scarred Cyborg Being*. Digital artwork.

Acknowledging the Surfaces

My skin is marked by the events of my life. As I am engaged in the process of becoming, I look at my body and see evidence and markers of where I have been. But at the same time, my scars call attention to my skin, showing my imperfections. Living in a society that seems to value perfection of the body over the mind, plastic and cosmetic surgery is very prevalent (Covino, 2001). In exploring cyborg pedagogy, Garoian and Gaudelius (2001) investigate performance artists who "critique the inscriptions of digital culture on their bodies and identities" (p. 333). One such artist is Orlan, a contemporary French artist, who created a series of performance artworks titled, *The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan*. In the series, she transformed her body through extensive plastic surgery by using elements from famous historical sculptures and paintings of women who idealized conceptions of beauty. For example, she had cosmetic surgery to acquire the androgynous forehead and eyebrows of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the lips of François Boucher's Europa, and the chin of Botticelli's *Venus*, a symbol of creativity and fertility. Although these body parts are commonly accepted as beautiful, when they are combined together they create something almost grotesque. Orlan engages in living research, complicating the way in which the body makes and conveys meaning. The shifting identity(ies) of her cyborg body welcomes and challenges cultural notions in relation to masculinity/femininity, beauty, masterpiece, and plastic surgery. Her *palimpsestual* body is not only her artistic canvas, but also the medium through which she makes meaning of herself and the world, and invites others to dwell in the overlapping layers of medical technologies, art, gender, stereotypes, and the body. Orlan aims to never let the spectator forget that the ideal of beauty is illusionary (Kauffman, 2005) and challenges the viewer to question the status of the body in society. Although magazines, television shows, and movies are overflowing with beautiful supermodels with perfect, flawless skin, we must recognize that what we see is not reality; technology enables images of bodies to be airbrushed and altered, which misinforms and misleads consumers of these images.

As a woman, I will not surrender to the male gaze nor be turned into an object (Anderson, 1973; Berger, 2003; Bordo, 2003). I will not be persuaded to erase my past; I want to celebrate my disruptions, as I am proud of my skin, my markings/scars. My past experiences are woven on, in, and under my skin, and although I permitted the surgeon to fix my insides, I do not need him to fix my outsides. My skin is the screen that exhibits my life onto the world, yet simultaneously takes in the world. My skin is not a fixed and rigid boundary, but rather a multi-layered site of the known and unknown. With each passing day, I get older and my skin constantly changes— new storied scars (along with wrinkles, discoloration, and blemishes) appear and fade away. I continually negotiate my scarred identity(ies), moving between layers of lived experiences, memories, technology, and society. I accept the scars that have shaped my life (and body) thus far, but am uncertain how my relationship to skin changes and scars will unfold. What scars will I encounter in the future and what meanings and stories will they hold (for myself and others)? I am (reluctantly) ready for aging skin and unforeseen accidents that will create new scars as my life continues to reveal itself.

Presenting the Surfaces through Digitized Sound Art

As an artist, researcher, and teacher (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), I believe in the power of the arts. How a work is presented, whether it is a work of visual art or literary text, translates what is/was valued at the historical time of its creation. Printed text, since the invention of the printing press, has been the main source of knowledge. But in the last few decades, we have witnessed a shift from the print culture to digital culture. Many literary works and journals are now available online or in an electronic/digital format. As a participant in the digital shift, I am aware of the impact computers have had not only on society, but also on the field of art. Unfortunately, much of the public is not aware of (or too apathetic to care about) the unequal relationship between art and text (Meskimmon, 2002). For many people, text is viewed as academic, objective, strong, and masculine, while art is mis-viewed as recreational, subjective, weak, and feminine.

In choosing to disrupt these views, I present this knowledge as a work of sound art. I transformed this body of textual work into a fleshy *body work*. It is not only to be read, but also listened to, looked at, and experienced. In order to further complicate the palimpsest metaphor, I converted the written words from this paper into a computer-generated audio rendering. Such an arts-based exploration opens up a discussion between body and technology. Not only does the artwork communicate the layered stories of my scars (through the content of the paper), but similar to how current technologies such as x-ray photography can decipher and "read" historical palimpsests, the computer through complex coding and computing language reads my personal written words (i.e., technology re-writes my scarred skin through the absence of my body, thus inscribing new meanings).

Figure 7. Author. (2013). *Skin Scarring as a Palimpsest*. (Sound/Audio Art. MP3. 47 minutes.) Click on the square  to listen to the artwork, which is a computer generated female voice reading this essay aloud.

As the computer-generated female voice speaks the words of the paper, which I wrote in the first person narrative, it challenges the audience members to examine the relationship between human and computers. How should the audience perceive this voice? Should they understand it as my voice or the computer's voice? How does the context and content change when the words are read aloud by the computer instead of by me? The computer-generated voice encourages the listeners to examine the spaces of meaning making. The sound of the words being formed by an "other" nonhuman voice raises questions surrounding the object/subject of the artist/author. The focus shifts from the differences and similarities of the binaries, to how the text/art and human/nonhuman comes together and what happens when they do (Meskimmon, 2002), and opens a new space for the viewers to subjectively conceptualize their own experience(s). As the audience members listen to my personal stories being retold by the computer, it stimulates questions regarding comfort, space, autobiography, and technology. For example, how do the computer-generated words recreate the space of an autobiographical inquiry of scarring? Providing the audience members with the opportunity of listening to the computer-generated words acts as a reminder that we are all cyborg bodies. The audience must rely on both themselves (e.g., their comprehension and sense of hearing) and technology to experience the work of art. In describing Ann Hamilton's contemporary art installations, Simon argues that there is a focus on "the way a body of knowl-edge is generated, contained, perceived, absorbed" (as cited in Meskimmon, 2002, p. 155). I often find myself concentrating on similar aspects of the art making process. As I created this piece of digital spoken textual art, I wanted to assemble a new surface as a way of understanding my scarred skin, to convey my thought processes, and stimulate audience members to personally experience and engage in the critical examination of the scarred work.

Reflecting upon the Surfaces

Looking on, in, and under my scars, I attempted to make meaning(s) of my scarred skin surface. Reflecting on my personal embodied experiences as a way to understand one's self and others, I am continually engaged in a process of becoming through arts-based research. Narrative writing and artmaking provided me with the flexibility and opportunity to dwell in the multi-layered scarred space of knowing.

As I have shown, living skin is much more than a physical and biological element to a body (i.e., thin layer of tissue separating the body's inside and outside); it is "the fleshy interface between bodies and worlds" (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001, p. 1). This relationality between inside and outside, and self and others allow us to negotiate between complex layers of a skin scarring. Discourse on the skin holds potential for people living with scars and for the general public to become aware of how they perceive people with scars and how their views are influenced by culture. Although I met with surgical doctors to perform the surgery and monitor my post-surgery status, and routinely visited a physical therapist to help me gain back physical strength, no professional spoke to me about what it means to live with scars. Arts-based research allowed me to dwell in a space of being-with scars and begin to understand my live(d) scars and

scarred identity(ies). I believe that as researchers/educators/artists/learners engage in studies of the skin through arts-based inquiry, they will become more aware and accepting of their selves and others. Scarring on and in the skin proves to be a space of critical discussion, and it is my hope that by continuing to examine and question our assumptions and experiences of scarred skin, new ways to understand and engage with the palimpsestual body will be created.

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