

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2006

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor: Patti See

Dept. Educational Support Services and WMNS

Course Number and Name: WMNS 210: Culture of the 3rd Wave

Semester completed: Summer, 2005

Title of Nominated Work: A Second Wave Chick in a Third Wave Culture

Pick one-
CATEGORY:

Sampson:

- Undergraduate Research Paper
- Undergraduate Project
- Graduate

- See
- Olson
- Kessler
- Turell
- Belter

(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT?** (Attach a separate sheet.)

~~As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach.....~~
to your nomination form.

Submission deadline is February 13, 2006.



University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

105 Garfield Avenue • P.O. Box 4004 • Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004

January 15, 2006

To: Women's History Month Awards Committee

From: Patti See

RE: Nomination of "A Second Wave Chick in a Third Wave Culture"
for Donna Turell Award

I'm pleased to nominate Barb Weisenberger's research paper/narrative "A Second Wave Chick in a Third Wave Culture" for the Donna Turell award.

Barb does a wonderful job of weaving solid research and personal experience in a powerful narrative about getting her first tattoo at age fifty-three. Her chosen design etched in skin represents her ongoing transformation since returning to college after stopping out in 1969. Her research and personal story portray how she came to express pride in all that she's accomplished since returning to school in 2002 as a 51-year-old Theater Arts major.

Her tattoo makes an undeniable feminist statement to the world that she's making her own choices about her body and her life.

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Donna C. Turell Award

“A Second Wave Chick in a Third Wave Culture”

**WMNS 210
Culture of the Third Wave**

Barb Weisenberger / Senior, Theatre Arts

Patti See, Instructor

I returned to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire campus during the Spring semester, 2002, as a 51-year-old Theatre Arts major. It was the most terrifying thing I had ever done in my life, or so I thought. I was not only trying to complete an education left in the dust in 1969, but I was risking my financial well-being for something I wasn't even sure I would be able to do. Understanding all that was involved, I determined that it wouldn't be enough just to take classes. It seemed critical to me that I explore every possible subject to its fullest so that what I received wasn't just an education but a true learning experience. Each time a new belief or theory loomed before me, I put aside my timidity and hesitation and embraced it, discovering what it held that I needed to include in my life. I can't count the number of challenges I've faced since January 2002, and so, when I was challenged in a Women's Studies class to incorporate an "outrageous" or "challenging" act as part of my class grade, I was sure I had explored all possible frontiers and, outside of day-to-day life on campus, there wasn't anything else. Of course, I was wrong and the process I went through in realizing this discovery is probably the most valuable in all the time I've spent on campus thus far.

Actually, I initially came up with an act quite easily – it connected with a topic I have developed an affinity for since my return to campus – the Holocaust. However, it really didn't seem to challenge me and so I set it aside for a few days and gave great thought to who I am, who I hope to be and what is there that would be so challenging that I can't even imagine what it would be. During the second week of class, we were asked to write down three things which would describe us. I wrote down: "student," "mother" and "wife." That's when I realized that none of them are really who I am. I've gotten so

good at adapting to whoever I'm needed to be that I don't really know what I am beyond those definitions.

That same day one of my co-workers, Curt, told me I was soft spoken and that people could very easily believe I could be taken advantage of. I had only known Curt for three weeks at that point, and he told me more about myself in those few words than any of my dearest friends or relatives had told me my entire life. I can't explain how I jumped from this realization to my determination to get a tattoo, but it was immediate and I had no doubt that getting a piece of body art would be the challenge I needed to face in this class.

Being the "anal, over-achiever" my 23-year-old-daughter constantly tells me I am, I set about to put those skills to good use in learning all I could about tattoos. I found my first information in one of our class textbooks, *Body Outlaws: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*. This book contains a selection of essays related in to Third Wave feminism, but one piece in particular especially related to my search: "Marked for Life: Tattoos and the Redefinition of Self." The author, Silja J.A. Talvi made several statements which really spoke to me:

By Western standards, there is nothing ladylike about being tattooed...At worst, the woman who chooses to visibly alter her appearance by having her skin tattooed risks being classified as a freak and treated accordingly. Tattoos in this context can represent a sense of pride in one's ability to survive adverse circumstances; a visible affiliation with a given subculture, and a permanent *fuck you* statement to a larger society that honors beauty only within the parameters of its own rigid definition. (212)

This was good. Well, I didn't want to be unladylike, but I really did want to express my pride in all that I've accomplished – this really fit my situation. Silja continued, "I've come to understand that a young woman's decision to reclaim herself through tattooing is

fundamentally frightening to some women. Tattooing is an undeniably strong statement and, for many, a disconcerting display of trauma and ferocity” (214).

Boy, that was right – the thought of getting a tattoo was terrifying – I am absolutely paralyzed by needles. If I could follow through with getting a tattoo, I would definitely be making a very strong statement. Finally, Silja wrote:

Many women seek out tattoos for altogether joyful reasons – to celebrate ethnic, spiritual or cultural heritages; to mark exciting life transitions or to display a lifelong beautification. To dismiss tattoos as a form of self-oppression is to miss out on the fascinating complexity behind each woman’s decision to adorn her body with one or more permanent designs. Much of the time, tattoos on a woman truly say something about her character, her life and her spirit. (214)

As I read this paragraph I almost wanted to yell out, “Right On!!” This really was what I hoped to do. Getting a tattoo was definitely the right thing for me to do, and I was filled with excitement and nervous anticipation (and also a good helping of “scared-to-death,” “knee-knocking” fear).

I had quite a few decisions to make, and they needed to be made in a relatively short period of time. I didn’t intend to let this new opportunity slip through my grasp. I made two stops on my way home that day – one at the University library and the other at the local public library. I gathered all the books I could find on tattoos and once I got home I poured over them, searching for answers to so many questions. How is a tattoo done? Where should I have it placed? What design should I select? Is there a danger of disease? How much is it going to hurt? What reactions will I face from family and friends? How is this going to say anything about who I really am? How does this fit into Third Wave feminism?

I had to know the worst first, so I jumped right into the process of getting a tattoo. In Samuel Steward's *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos, A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors and Street-Corner Punks 1950-1965*, Steward very carefully details the application of a tattoo:

Once the outline is on the skin, the artist traces it with what is called an outliner. The needles in this are like a fine writing point; there are from three to five bunched together and soldered to a needle-bar, which moves rapidly up and down between two and three thousand times a minute. Frequent dippings into the color supply are necessary. The needles are not hollow like hypodermics. The ink merely lies between them; the adhesion is a natural one. The fewer needles used, the finer the outline, and the less spreading of ink occurs later. A group of five, tightly bunched, usually gives the most pleasing and permanent results. (161)

Steward goes on to debunk some misinformation about tattoos, such as removing tattoos, legendary tattoos, and how to care for a new tattoo. Most of Steward's book seemed to deal with exactly what his title claimed, so I put aside his notions of gangs, sailors and street-corner punks in favor of a book by Clinton R. Sanders, *Customizing the Body, The Art and Culture of Tattooing*.

Sanders takes a much more social approach to tattooing. So much of what Sanders wrote in this book applied to my situation and as a result I spent hours reading and re-reading his explanations and interpretations. For instance, Sanders writes, "Becoming a tattooed is a highly social act. The decision to acquire a tattoo is motivated by how the recipient defines him or herself. The tattoo becomes an item in the tattooee's personal identity-kit and, in turn, it is used by those with whom the individual interacts to place him or her into a particular, interaction-shaping social category" (40). He followed a few pages later with, "The tattoo event frequently involves a ritual commemoration of a significant transition in the life of the recipient" (43).

Performing a challenging act is a fearful thing and it really did make me feel much more comfortable reading about the very things I had hoped to accomplish. Sanders continued on with a short discussion about the placement of a tattoo, mentioning that men usually choose the arm while women choose the breast, hip, lower abdomen, back or shoulder (48). It was at this point that I realized placement of my own tattoo would say as much about what I was doing as the design itself. Basically I had two choices: I could place my tattoo where everyone would see it easily, or tuck it away. I honestly believe that if I were younger, this would not have been an issue. There are most definitely fewer chances that I will regret having a tattoo in plain view, and fewer still chances that it will clash with a change in the way I dress or that an employer will find fault with me because of it. Also, if I am trying to convey to others that there is more to me than what they may initially see, it becomes almost necessary that the tattoo is not hidden but displayed with pride and confidence.

I continued on with Sanders and came across some information I wanted to read, but I really didn't want to know about:

Pain is another factor shaping the tattooee's decision. The tattoo machine contains needle groups that superficially pierce the skin at high speed, leaving small amounts of pigment in the tiny punctures. Obviously this process will cause more or less pain depending on the sensitivity of the area being tattooed. In general, tattooing arms or legs generates less pain than marking body areas with a higher concentration of nerve endings or parts of the body where the bones are not cushioned with muscle tissue. (48)

Now I was confused. Sanders was intimating that tattooing the arms or legs isn't as painful, but many of my friends said that anything near a bone was more painful. As I struggled with the concept of pain, I came to the realization that a tattoo was going to hurt – that was the bottom line. And it really didn't matter who was telling me about the pain,

because all they could do was base it on their own experience and ultimately, their own tolerance of pain. Being the wise woman that I am, I decided not to consider this particular area any further. The pain would be over as soon as I did the deed, and until then it did no good to worry about it.

So, next up had to be the choice of the design. This was going to be a permanent part of me, and I needed to make sure I “covered all the bases.” Margo DeMello writes in *Bodies of Inscription, A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, “A tattoo is more than a painting on skin; its meaning and reverberations cannot be comprehended without a knowledge of the history and mythology of its bearer. Thus it is a true poetic creation, and is always more than meets the eye. As a tattoo is grounded on living skin, so its essence emotes a poignancy unique to the mortal human condition” (1).

I really took this to heart. I wanted my design to be extremely simple because its purpose was simple. I wanted my design to speak of how I have changed and grown during the past years, and I also hoped to find a design which would allow me, in some small way, to honor those who suffered so horribly during the years of the Holocaust. Another of the volumes I had brought home in preparation for my “informed decision” proved to be tremendously helpful in making my final design choice. I paged through *The Tattoo Encyclopedia, A Guide to Choosing Your Tattoo* by Terisa Green and came upon a design that was simple and unbelievably met all my requirements. Green writes, “The butterfly is far and away the most-used insect image in all of tattoo. . . In Western culture, butterflies are also seen as symbols of freedom” (36).

And, of course, I realized immediately that the one symbol which stands out through all the literature, art and stories of the Holocaust is the butterfly (including one of

my favorite Holocaust movies of all times, *The Last Butterfly*). This would be the perfect design for me – another barrier crossed.

I returned to DeMello's book, partly because I was too excited about this project to set it aside, but also because I wondered about some of the historical aspects of tattooing. According to DeMello, Christians had been receiving tattoos as souvenirs of their faith on pilgrimages to the Holy Land as far back as the early 1600s and the Celts had practiced tattooing prior to the Roman conquest. I'm not exactly sure how the "chain of command" worked, but somehow tattooing became popular in the Pacific islands and eventually found its way to North America. Originally, it was limited to sailors and servicemen. The first known professional tattoo artist in the United States was Martin Hildebrandt, who set up a permanent shop in New York City in 1846. DeMello states that the period between the two World Wars saw tattooing at its most popular and was commonly known as the Golden Age of Tattooing (10-67).

After World War II, there was a decrease in tattooing until marginal groups began to wear tattoos (including hippies in the 1960s and punks in the 1970s and 80s). Tattoos became the mark of marginality, a form of rebellion. DeMello goes on to say, "By the end of the 60s, tattooing in the United States had fragmented into different forms that corresponded to different social groups: servicemen, gang members, convicts, bikers and working-class men and women" (70).

Probably the biggest changes in tattooing since the 1970s were the increasing number of middle-class clients, the professionalization of tattooing, and the new reliance on non-Western images and styles. So, like so many other parts of our society, tattooing

went through a “growing-up” process and today is fairly well received as a means of body decoration.

Besides the strict history, I uncovered some fascinating facts:

1. Clinton Sanders reports that tattoos appeared to be less prevalent among hospitalized mental patients than among the general population (79).

2. “In 1956, the Marlboro cigarette manufacturer was seeking to expand its market from its mostly female target audience to a male consumer base. Advertisers created the Marlboro Man, a tough-guy type with a tattoo on the back of his hand. The campaign was so successful that Marlboro received hundreds of letters from tattooed men who not only smoked Marlboros but also asked to pose for future ads!” (DeMello, 13).

3. Samuel Steward writes in his account of tattooing in the fifties, “When I finally discovered the trouble that always surrounded the tattooing of women, I established a policy of refusing to tattoo a women unless she were twenty-one, married and accompanied by her husband, with documentary proof to show their marriage. The only exception to this was the lesbians, and they had to be over twenty-one and prove it” (Steward, 61).

4. Identity tattoos were popular for a time. First, in 1932, after the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped, many worried parents had their children tattooed; next, in 1936, after the first Social Security card was issued, men and women flocked to tattoo shops to have their number tattooed on them; and finally in 1955, the assistant secretary of defense suggested that all U.S. citizens have their blood type tattooed onto their bodies in anticipation of a military attack on the United States – unbelievably many citizens evidently complied (DeMello, 65).

5. According to DeMello, many of the “scientific” tattoo studies linked tattoos with deviance (Briggs 1958, Goldstein 1979; Taylor 1970; Newman 1982) (DeMello, 67).

I’m not exactly sure why something so harmless as a painted design has extracted so many strong reactions, but perhaps Silja Talvi has it right when she said, “Tattooing is an undeniably strong statement and, for many, a disconcerting display of trauma and ferocity” (214). It does seem ferocious to have a design permanently etched into human skin – it also seems primitive and uncontrolled.

But to return to the purpose of this story, with my research completed and my fear relegated to the netherland of my mind, I forged ahead and received my tattoo. First, and foremost, it hurt – not nearly as much as childbirth, that’s very true – but it was good, considerable pain, nonetheless.

I was also very glad I had done so many varied types of research. It gave my liberating act an historical flavor and put many things into perspective for me. For instance, I had struggled for a time with how to relate my act to Third Wave feminism – one of the goals for my class assignment. It was very obvious to me now that my tattoo incorporated who I am as a Second Wave feminist from way back in the 60s in that it shows “in your face” rebellion – my tattoo is there for everyone to see and that is so much who I am. But the most beautiful part is that my tattoo is my individual expression of who I am, and I have used an art form accepted by the Third Wave generation to accomplish that. I may never completely understand Third Wave feminism but I have found that by respecting and understanding who I am, I have achieved some definite Third Wave goals.

My tattoo has been received by others in a variety of ways. My husband, John, tolerates it as he has so often tolerated my “journeys” of self-enlightenment. My daughter is thrilled and instead of wanting a tattoo herself is considering the idea of becoming a tattoo artist herself. My brothers tease me, but don’t offer any other comments – they are used to a big sister who does strange things from time to time and I’m sure they believe that, “...this too shall pass.” Now that I have this special tattoo, it really doesn’t matter to me what anyone thinks. Sure, I get a little riled when I am faced with a closed mind, but that would be the same with or without the tattoo. More important than what anyone thinks of my tattoo, I am very pleased and content myself with what I have accomplished. I faced something which terrified me, and I turned it around to mean something very special and honorable to me.

Of course, I will continue to challenge myself through the next year or so as I complete my degree. But, I will also begin to develop challenges for my husband and my daughter and my son to help them realize what wondrous possibilities lie within each of us. Returning to complete my degree is the one dream I have had ever since I dropped out in 1969 (even then I knew it was the wrong thing to do, but I was far too immature to handle a college education at that time). I’m living my dream now and it’s almost impossible to put into words how much that means to me. Once I reach my goal, and for all the years that follow, all I will have to do is see my tattoo to remember these experiences and remind myself of who I really am: a Second Wave chick in a Third Wave culture.

Works Cited

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- Talvi, Silja J.A. "Marked for Life: Tattoos and the Redefinition of Self." *Body Outlaws, Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*. Ophira Edut, ed. New York: Seal Press, 2000.