

# SURVIVING SEXUALITY, WRITING FEMININITY, DOMESTIC WORK, AND ADROCENTRIC

**T**his panel examines the relationship between gender, race, and culture and knowledge, power, and the collective unconscious as an attempt to unmask their intercontingency. Our contemporary moment is often masked as a post-racial and post-gendered moment. As illustrated by our presenter Huyen Vo, perpetuating conversations regarding gender sexuality and the body in the case of female burn victims and the awareness of the body against expectations laid through the cultural unconscious of beauty and normativity is of much significance and remnant of the initial questions raised by psychoanalysts like Franz Fanon in his works on colonial subjectivity. Fanon showed us how race can locate a racialized subject at the genitals. Vo also reminds us that the gaze is violent and the way the gaze works is reciprocal with affects that seem to be more than skin deep. Perhaps we can read the form of re-appropriation set forth in Korean poetry into the bio-sociality of burn victims. Have there been forms of body re-appropriation. Korean poets re-appropriate the female body and its markers utilizing art and poetry as mediums to expand the form that binds our understanding of gender and the possibility to think outside the cultural unconscious. We continue to think through predisposed forms of thinking through Nada Hosking's examination of archeologists that fail to question the patriarchal euro-centric forms of inquiry, reproducing the wheel. As archeologists insist on knowledge production without localized knowledge they seem to fail to conduct intelligent well-informed inference regarding ancient artifacts. These inference would parallel the self-reflexive conclusions we extrapolate from fieldwork in Beirut on migrant workers

rather than give in to the dominate discourse that aims to qualify Arabs or migrant workers as those over there somewhere angry/oppressive or weak/oppressed, as discussed by Fikreselam Habebo. These papers unmask burns on bodies, a healthy body, markers of sexuality, eurcentric embossment of ancient artifacts, and resistant female bodies, providing a medium for us to think with the masks to produce new spaces for discourse.

—Ashwak Hauter, PhD Student  
Anthropology

# EXPLORING YOUNG ADULT FEMALE BURN SURVIVORS AND SEXUAL INTIMACY

## SURF Conference Panel Session 9A

By: Huyen Vo

Mentor: Brian Powers, Lecturer, Sociology

### I. Context

The American Burn Association reports that an estimated 450,000 people receive medical treatments for burn-related injuries annually.<sup>1</sup> Burn injuries can result in severe facial scarring, disfigurement, and loss of function, and can greatly alter one's body image. This disfigurement can also negatively impact one's psychosocial well-being.<sup>2</sup> Burn research experts Lawrence and Doctor illustrated that individuals appreciate or devalue their body based on the overall cultural and societal acceptance of what is beautiful.<sup>3</sup> Given the severity and outcome of their burns, as well as the trauma and social stigmatization that tends to follow, young burn survivors often have a unique self-perception. As these burn survivors grow up and their bodies change, this unique self-perception tends to result in dissatisfaction with their respective body images. Furthermore, according to Dr. Ruth Rimmer and her fellow researchers, body image is "inseparable from sexuality,"<sup>4</sup> and therefore, burn survivors' feelings about themselves may correlate significantly with their sexual comfort level. For example, burn injuries may cause amputation, as well as need for repeated dressing changes, surgeries, and grafting, all of which can demand constant redefinition of body boundaries between burn survivors and their partners.<sup>5</sup> Burn survivors might also feel uncomfortable having their partners touch their injured skin, and so their partners may avoid intimacy for fear of causing pain and discomfort to the injured individuals. Survivors can

---

1 "Burn Incidence and Treatment in the United States: 2012 Fact Sheet." *American Burn Association*. Accessed October 24, 2013. [http://www.ameriburn.org/resources\\_factsheet.php](http://www.ameriburn.org/resources_factsheet.php).

2 Bernstein, Norman R. 1990. "Objective bodily damage: Disfigurement and Dignity." *American Psychological Association*.

3 Lawrence, John W., James A. Fauerbach, Leslie Heinberg, and Marion Doctor. 2004. "THE 2003 CLINICAL RESEARCH AWARD: Visible vs Hidden Scars and Their Relation to Body Esteem." *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 25, no. 1 (January/February): 25-32.

4 Rimmer, Ruth Brubaker, Cindy E. Rutter, Collette R. Lessard, Melissa Singer Pressman, Janet Cusick Jost, James Bosch, Kevin N. Foster, and Daniel M. Caruso. 2010. "Burn Care Professionals' Attitudes and Practices Regarding Discussions of Sexuality and Intimacy With Adult Burn Survivors." *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 31, no. 4 (July/August): 579-589.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 588

feel very self-conscious about their burns and be reluctant to allow anyone else to see their scars, resulting in limited intimacy with others.

Many current researchers have discussed the severity of burn injury, its impact on body image, and its effect on quality of sexual life; however, most of these researchers have focused on the overall correlation between body image and sexuality of burn survivors of all genders and ages. Few studies have focused their discussion on the correlation between 18 to 25-year-old female burn survivors' body image and sexual intimacy. This age group is important to assess because female burn survivors are at the beginning of their sexual life as young adults and are likely to encounter their first intimate relationships during this time frame.<sup>6</sup> For a female burn survivor, this developmental stage can be particularly challenging to navigate due to the severity of her injury and its inconsistency with social perceptions of beauty. It has been strongly suggested that "societal influences to conform to stereotypical ideals of physical attractiveness" are more significant for females than for males; females report "greater shame in body appearance."<sup>7</sup> Given their enmeshment in societal norms of sexuality and attractiveness, young female adults with severe burns often struggle with navigating intimate relationships, a huge determinant to quality of life. The purpose of this work is to examine how the injuries of young female adult burn survivors impact their comfort in engaging in intimate and sexual relationships. Specifically, this study investigates the extent, severity, location, and origin of the survivor's burn. Additionally, this work examines the ways her image of her scarred body has impacted her development.

## II. Method

Over a period of six weeks, participant observation and qualitative interviews took place with 15 young adult female burn survivors ages 18–25 who previously attended the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Camp in Fresno. Recruiting for participants took place at the site. After getting permission to interview them from the foundation, I conducted my interviews with burn survivors in person, via Skype, and via telephone. Participants were asked questions about the visibility of their scars, the location of their injuries, their perception of themselves in the mirror, and whether or not they discuss their burn injury with their respective partners before intimate relations. After thorough analysis and interviews, a major theme arose which indicated a correlation between survivors' level of body consciousness and the specific area of the body that was burned.

## III. Results

On the top of the table, you will see "traditionally associated with cultural notion of beauty" and on left part of the table, you will see "easily hidden or not?" These two factors are used to determine the level of body consciousness in the participants. As illustrated in the chart and based on the interview data, female burn survivors with burn scars, whether hidden by clothing and/or readily visible to others, and who are traditionally aware of cultural notions of beauty, tend to be more self-conscious of their bodies. The areas of burns for the participants included

---

<sup>6</sup> Erikson, Erik H. *The life cycle completed: Extended version with new chapters on the ninth stage of development* by Joan M. Erikson. Extended version. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 66-72.

<sup>7</sup> Connell, Kylie Marie, Rosemary Coates, and Fiona Melanie Wood. 2013. "Sexuality Following Burn Injuries: A Preliminary Study". *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 34, no. 5 (September/October): 282-289

their head, face, chest, and/or genitals. When asked, “What areas of your body were injured and which parts of the body in particular (if any) impact your comfort in engaging in sexual relationships?” 6 out of 15 (or 40%) of the interviewees reflected in these particular ways. Nickie responded:

My breast being burnt, like the nipple part being messed up makes me feel really self-conscious. I guess it’s because I compare myself to what is the normal standard of a beautiful breast and what it’s supposed to look like, and well since mine doesn’t look like the normal one that guys usually see, they [are] not as good I guess. I guess I’m worried that I wouldn’t be as attractive to my partner once he sees the burns on my breast.<sup>8</sup>

As for Nina, she stated:

At first I had a hard time dealing with the burn scars that are on my chest. As a female, having breasts is one of the main aspects of being a beautiful female. I mean, isn’t that what society emphasizes? Well, since my chest was burnt, I struggle with self-image and self-confidence because I went through many reconstructive chest surgeries during my adolescent years. It was tough. Even after finishing with 6 operations on my chest, I still feel self-conscious about my burns there, because obviously, my breasts never returned to normal.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, 20-year-old Sarah responded:

Yeah my burn scars are on my genital and this does make me feel self-conscious when having sex with a guy, but I try my best each time to tell myself that if he’s having sex with me then I should be okay. I mean, it’s hard because guys are not used to seeing burns on genital and that does make me feel self-conscious.<sup>10</sup>

Considering that participating female burn survivors’ reflections indicated a strong level of body consciousness due to their burns, specifically on their private female body parts, Richard Shusterman, a pragmatic philosopher, expresses:

As bodies are the clearest expression of human mortality, imperfection, and weakness (including moral frailties), so body consciousness, for most of us, primarily includes feelings of inadequacy, and our falling far short of the reigning ideals of beauty, health, and performance—a point that also indicates that body consciousness is always more than consciousness of one’s own body alone.<sup>11</sup>

These survivors, regardless of how long ago they were injured, are aware that their scars signify imperfection on their bodies (in comparison to the normal bodies) and therefore they feel that

---

8 Nickie. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.

9 Nina. 2013. Interview by author. July 1.

10 Sarah. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.

11 Cunningham, C. A. (2008). *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (review). *Education and Culture*, 24(2), 54-59.

they fall short of the ideal depictions of beauty that are typically accentuated in this society. In addition, the survivors' levels of body consciousness leads them to feel less sexually attractive, which in turn impacts their ultimate comfort in allowing a potential partner to touch or engage in sexual intimacy with them.

For the 3 other survivors, responses were as follows:

20-year-old Elisa responded:

In my life, my burns definitely have a HUGE impact on my comfort in engaging in sexual and intimate relationship. I am more self-conscious about the scars on my face. When you first meet someone, you look at his or her face first. I'm just concerned that guys will not think I'm attractive and therefore wouldn't want to be with me or engage in a sexual relationship with me.<sup>12</sup>

Miriam, who is currently 21 years old, shared:

It's not a regular place where you usually get burned. People are not used to seeing a head without hair, especially a burnt head. Well, I'm basically just worried that my partner wouldn't know how to react to it or will be turned off by it when we engage in sexual intimacy.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Kim, a 22-year-old, stated:

My legs are severely burnt. The scars are all the way up to my butts, which makes me feel really self-conscious when I engage in sexual activity with a guy. In the past, I would make sure the lights were completely off and that he wasn't touching anywhere near my butt. I can't help but feel that way. I mean all you hear in the media these days is how guys like big beautiful butts and all. You can't help but feel self-conscious with your body.<sup>14</sup>

The reflections of the final three participants also illustrate a strong degree of body consciousness even though they were not injured on their private parts. Their burns were located on their face, head, or buttocks; however they still report feeling self-conscious about their bodies since all of these areas are also traditionally associated with the notion of femininity and attractiveness in Western society. For example, Elisa mentions in her interview that due to the scars on her face, she doesn't feel comfortable going out of the house without make-up and that there are days she doesn't want to look at herself in the mirror.<sup>15</sup> Miriam concurs and states that she wouldn't leave the house without a wig on her head. In Miriam's words, "It's just never going to be an option."<sup>16</sup>

Based on these preliminary findings, it can be argued that the location of the burn scars matters when it comes to survivors' degree of body consciousness. It seems to be important in at

---

12 Elisa. 2013. Interview by author. July 10.

13 Miriam. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.

14 Kim. 2013. Interview by author. July 15.

15 Elisa. 2013. Interview by author. July 10.

16 Miriam. Interview by author. July 31.

least two dimensions: First, can the area of the burn be easily hidden, and secondly, is the area of the burn traditionally associated with cultural notions of beauty? Not surprisingly, this research data indicates that the normative cultural perceptions of beauty and physical attractiveness play a role in influencing these young adult female burn survivors' degree of body consciousness and dissatisfaction with their appearance. Burn survivors in this study were more conscious of their scars prior to engaging in sexual intimacy when their scars were located on areas of their body that made them feel "inadequate" compared to the reigning normative, idealized beauty. Another interesting observation was that many participants, despite being injured when very young, are still self-conscious of their scars. They adamantly state that they are not ashamed or uncomfortable with their scars in any way; however, they are uncomfortable with the way others may react to their scars and, as a result, feel that they are viewed as less sexually attractive or feminine.

#### IV. Conclusion

The female burn survivors in this study expressed sexuality and intimacy problems related to their disfigurement regardless of whether their burns were hidden or visible. Certainly many uninjured young women express dissatisfaction with their bodies, so it is not surprising that girls with disfigurements would also have problems with their scars and intimacy. The female burn survivor participants, ages 18–25, continue to experience hesitation and worry when engaging in sexual relationships and expressed that there are negative psychological implications associated with their scars. Female burn survivors in this age group are at the beginning of their sexual life. They are likely beginning to engage in intimate relationships and, as developmental psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has suggested, young adults in this age group may struggle between intimacies versus isolation.<sup>17</sup> Erik Erikson's analysis is supported by the results of the interviews with the young adult burn survivors in this study. Based on their responses, young adult burn survivors want to develop intimate relationships, but they struggle because of their disfigurement and its contradiction with the societal perception of beauty.

Currently, there are many burn camps and burn conferences that are designed to improve life skills for burn survivors; however, very few programs focus on issues related to sexual and intimate relationships during the crucial period of young adulthood. According to Dr. Rimmer et al., sexuality and intimacy is a difficult and sensitive topic that many burn care professionals feel unequipped to discuss and tackle. Their discomfort in turn makes it challenging to engage in conversation regarding sexuality and intimacy with burn survivors.<sup>18</sup> As Erik Erikson also emphasized, young adults might end up feeling isolated and alone if they don't resolve conflicts regarding sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the development of materials and support programs for young adult female burn survivors that address issues regarding sexuality and intimacy (for example, ways to address their partners about scars prior to sexual intimacy) would be a valuable addition

---

17 Erikson, Erik H. *The life cycle completed: Extended version with new chapters on the ninth stage of development* by Joan M. Erikson. Extended version. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 66-72.

18 Rimmer, Ruth Brubaker, Cindy E. Rutter, Collette R. Lessard, Melissa Singer Pressman, Janet Cusick Jost, James Bosch, Kevin N. Foster, and Daniel M. Caruso. 2010. "Burn Care Professionals' Attitudes and Practices Regarding Discussions of Sexuality and Intimacy With Adult Burn Survivors." *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 31, no. 4 (July/August): 579-589.

19 Erikson, Erik H. *The life cycle completed: Extended version with new chapters on the ninth stage of development* by Joan M. Erikson. Extended version. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 66-72.

to the health care regimen for female survivors of serious burn injuries. Further research reaching out to a larger number of female survivors and including a validated survey designed to establish the intimacy and sexuality-related wants and needs of female burn survivors is merited. This is key, because more and more individuals are surviving serious burns and other disfiguring injuries, resulting in an ever-growing population potentially needing this type of assistance. Moreover, no woman should feel less feminine or attractive because of an accident over which she had no control. However, if she does, there should be adequate resources to help her overcome her discomfort, not only to survive, but to thrive.

## Bibliography

- Bernstein, Norman R. "Objective bodily damage: Disfigurement and dignity." (1990).
- "Burn Incidence and Treatment in the United States: 2012 Fact Sheet," *American Burn Association*. October 24, 13, [http://www.ameriburn.org/resources\\_factsheet.php](http://www.ameriburn.org/resources_factsheet.php)
- Connell, Kylie Marie, Rosemary Coates, and Fiona Melanie Wood. "Sexuality Following Burn Injuries: A Preliminary Study". *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 34, no. 5 (2013): 282-289
- Cunningham, C. A. (2008). Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics (review). *Education and Culture*, 24(2), 54-59.
- Elisa. 2013. Interview by author. July 10.
- Erikson, Erik H. *The life cycle completed: Extended version with new chapters on the ninth stage of development*. Ed . New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Kim. 2013. Interview by author. July 15.
- Lawrence, John W., James A. Fauerbach, Leslie Heinberg, and Marion Doctor. "THE 2003 CLINICAL RESEARCH AWARD: Visible vs Hidden Scars and Their Relation to Body Esteem." *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 25, no. 1 (2004): 25-32.
- Miriam. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.
- Nickie. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.
- Nina. 2013. Interview by author. July 1.
- Rimmer, Ruth Brubaker, Cindy E. Rutter, Collette R. Lessard, Melissa Singer Pressman, Janet Cusick Jost, James Bosch, Kevin N. Foster, and Daniel M. Caruso. "Burn Care Professionals' Attitudes and Practices Regarding Discussions of Sexuality and Intimacy With Adult Burn Survivors." *Journal of Burn Care & Research* 31, no. 4 (2010): 579-589.
- Sarah. 2013. Interview by author. July 31.

**Appendix**

<b>Traditionally Associated with Cultural Notion of Beauty</b>			
		<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<b>Easily Hidden</b>	<i>No</i>	Hands	Face, Head (hair)
<b>Or Not?</b>	<i>Yes</i>	Legs, Arms, and Feet	Chest, Genital, and Buttocks

**Figure 1.** Degree of body consciousness. Burn survivors' reflection of their scars in relation to their degree of body consciousness.

