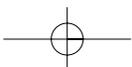
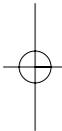
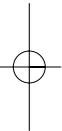


# PART 1

# EXTREME TATTOOING



# BOD MOD TO THE MAX!

## An Introduction to Body Modification as Deviance

As we saw in the Introduction, deviance is a matter of definition. People make sense of the behavior, beliefs, and physical characteristics of others in a variety of ways so that those behaviors, beliefs, and characteristics become social objects; in other words, they are socially constructed. Which kinds of social objects they become, and to whom, will depend to a large extent on social context: In what contexts do these behaviors take place, how are these beliefs expressed, and who possesses these traits or characteristics?

Along similar lines, other kinds of social objects—people's hairdos, their clothes, the makeup they choose to wear, the size of their feet—are all bodily objects, but they become what they are to us through the same process of social definition. Thus, people learn to see heavy eye liner, skinny neckties, beehive hairdos, and polyester leisure suits as appropriate, attractive, silly, fun—or grotesquely outdated—and/or vintage aspects of the ways people can present themselves. In fact, most of us spend a considerable amount of time in any given week changing the ways we look. We might wear a t-shirt or a sweatshirt bearing our favorite team's logo after a win but choose not to after a loss. We rarely wear the same outfit when we go to a job interview as we do when lounging around the living room, watching television. We might wear a baseball cap backwards when we're hanging out with friends but turn it around when we're actually playing baseball. Some professors who wear shoes while teaching will put on flip-flops while barbecuing in the back yard. In fact, most of the ways that people alter their appearances are relatively easy to correct or change if they make the "wrong" impression on others, and we make those changes frequently. Bad haircuts grow back, cold cream will remove makeup without much hassle, and even bright purple hair can be re-dyed to a more suitable color.

One has to invest considerable time, energy, and money to become heavily tattooed and/or pierced, which makes body modification a pretty clear example of a behavior that people choose. People can and do employ a variety of strategies to control information about themselves to make personal characteristics either visible or less visible. People dress to accentuate or hide their physiques; they use makeup (or the lack of it) to change the appearance of their faces; they use different kinds of physical props to look one way or another. Some of these choices make differences less apparent; others make them blatantly obvious. One major difference, however, is that body modification is seen as voluntary and, therefore, worthy of judgment. Not many people would say the same about a person who is missing a limb and uses a

prosthetic leg. Hence, in the case of extreme tattooing, the question many people ask is *Why?* Why would someone do such a thing? Why become heavily tattooed? The articles in this chapter address these questions.

Both the Vail and the Atkinson and Young articles in this section work well together for a variety of reasons, and the Vail personal account illustrates some of the principles in both articles. Vail and Atkinson and Young are intimately familiar with body modification culture; both articles are based on rich qualitative data that give voice to the perspectives of those who live in and contribute to body modification culture, and both of them do a nice job of explaining body modification in terms that make it seem like the understandable choice that, in fact, it represents. While their similarities provide a strength to their inclusion in this collection, their differences are also important, and it is perhaps their differences that make them such a strong match for one another.

As sociologists, we are trained to look for social and collective explanations for behavior where other scholars might look exclusively within the individual. Yet, naturalistic inquiry necessarily lies at the intersection of the individual and the social, which is also where these two articles take divergent paths.

Atkinson and Young take us inside the experience of “neoprimitive” practitioners of body modification. As such, the authors show us why a person would want to become heavily tattooed, pierced, branded, burned, and/or scarred. They explain how these neoprimitives have come to label their bodies and the jewelry, pigment, and scar tissue that have changed their appearance in such a way that their “flesh journeys” represent the personal choices they have made, the aspects of their personal biographies that are important to them, the interpersonal and subcultural connections that they value, and their interpretations of how their modified bodies communicate this information to others, both within and outside their social worlds.

Thus, as you read Atkinson and Young’s article, think about the ways that labeling or social definition works as people define and apply social meanings to themselves and their experiences in life. If you don’t have tattoos or “radical” piercings, what methods do you use to communicate information about yourself to others? Do you wear jewelry? Do you dye your hair? Grow it in distinctive ways? Which parts of your attire communicate important information about you? Do you wear tie-dyed t-shirts? Trendy, color-coordinated outfits? Now, how about your props: Do you carry a water bottle to class? A travel mug? A full knapsack or a tiny pocketbook? What information about you do these choices communicate to other people? How do those other people react to your presentations of yourself? Are you effectively communicating what you want to communicate?

Now, switch gears for a moment. How did you learn to make those choices? How do you know whether you look like a jock or a prep? Who teaches you how to be trendy and whom would you never trust to teach you how to dress? As social actors, we make individual choices throughout the courses of our lives, but those choices do not come out of a vacuum; they follow from social contexts that affect the range of choices we are likely to make, and this is where Vail adds to our understanding of body modification.

Building on David Matza's (1969) model from *Becoming Deviant*, Vail takes us inside the process through which people learn to become collectors of tattoos. This process involves three separate analytical moments, each of which helps the collector make sense of the enterprise of building a tattoo collection, navigating others' reactions to that collection, and defining these reactions and meanings in such a way as to allow these collectors to see their lives as part of the collecting process and vice versa. In order to become a collector, people have to learn to see collecting tattoos as a potentially rewarding activity; they also need to learn properly how to respect their canvasses, thus making sense of their bodies as sites for artistic manipulation and modification. Finally, they also need to learn how to make sense of their identities as "collectors" of art, not just people who have tattoos. Each of these analytical moments involves a learning process. Thus, collecting tattoos and being a collector are individual experiences, but they are also part of a social process that involves making sense of the social connections and interconnections that define tattooing in a variety of positive and not-so-positive ways.

Thus, Vail draws our attention to the intersubjective processes through which people learn how to make the decisions that lead them down the road of collecting, and Atkinson and Young help us understand how those people make sense of those choices. Recall the choices you have made to present a particular version of yourself to others. How did you learn how low your low-rise jeans should be? Who showed you how to style your hair so that it doesn't look styled? Who helps you, even now, to refine your choices? Are all these influences from friends, or do some of them come from people you don't even like? What kinds of reactions to your presentation of self do you find satisfying, and how did you learn to like those reactions?

Neoprimitives and tattoo collectors likely have dramatic kinds of information control that will affect how they get through the day. They have to worry about the consequences that accompany showing body modifications, and you probably don't have those same concerns. But aside from the deviance of extreme body modification, are their methods of communicating who they are to others and themselves really so different from yours? Both say, "I have constructed a physical presentation, both to myself and to others, that symbolically announces: I am a certain kind of person." In this sense, we are all the same. Extreme body modification has both a universal quality (the use of physical symbols to communicate our identities) and a more unusual or specific quality (these physical symbols are deviant from the mainstream); hence, it is fascinating to deviance specialists, to sociologists, and to the general public as well.

# Tattoos Are Like Potato Chips . . . You Can't Have Just One

## The Process of Becoming and Being a Collector

*Angus Vail*

People of all stripes and colors have long enjoyed modifying their bodies. In fact, a July, 2003 Harris Poll indicated that some 40 million Americans, around 16% of the population of the country, have tattoos (Coleman, 2005). In the following pages, I discuss how those who are largely responsible for tattooing's growth become collectors.

### INTRODUCTION

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People learn how to become deviant. How each individual learns his or her particular brand of deviance depends on the kind of deviance in which he or she participates. Professional thieves learn their trade from other professional thieves (Sutherland, 1937), marijuana users learn how to smoke marijuana and how to interpret the drug's effects from other marijuana users (Becker, 1963), and tattoo collectors learn how to interpret tattoos from those who wear them.

That deviance is a learned process is well-documented (e.g., Becker, 1963; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Glaser, 1956; Matza, 1969; Sutherland, 1939; Sutherland & Cressey, 1974). Deviance theories have explained many expressions of deviance (both formal and informal) in many contexts (whether subcultural or individualistic phenomena). One form of deviance not yet examined in the sociological literature, however, is tattoo collecting. While Sanders' (1989) watershed work addresses tattooing, in the following pages, I will

build on that work to discuss how tattoo collectors come to treat getting tattooed as an explicitly artistic endeavor, much in the same way that collectors of other kinds of art collect those media.

In discussing how one becomes a tattoo collector, I will discuss how collectors learn about aesthetics appropriate for their body suits, the motifs that appropriately and accurately convey their ideas, iconographies appropriate for those motifs, and choosing an artist(s) to complete their collections. I will frame this discussion in Matza's (1969) theory of affinity, affiliation, and signification and the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1962, 1967).

### METHODS

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Data for this paper have been collected using a variety of qualitative methods. Most interview data were collected at a recent, four-day tattoo convention in the southeastern United States. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with tattoo collectors and artists at the convention site. I have also conducted formal interviews with artists and collectors in California and Connecticut.

Informal field conversations with tattoo artists and collectors (from Austria, Australia, France, Japan, Switzerland, California, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas), participant observation at tattoo conventions, participation in the tattoo subculture for the past 12 years, and over 150 hours getting tattooed have all provided me with preliminary data on which to base my suppositions. The data taken

from these less formal observational techniques have been recorded in ethnographic field notes over the past four years. I have collected further secondary interview data from videos focusing on prominent fine art tattoo artists from the San Francisco Bay area.

#### SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON TATTOOING

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Tattooing and the people that practice it are burgeoning areas in several scholarly fields. Recent articles and books focusing on dermatographic embellishment have been written by psychologists, sociologists, researchers of marketing practices and theory, and anthropologists. Within these fields, the focus runs the gamut from psychological determinism to postmodernism.

The empirical research in the psychological literature has tended to focus on tattooing as a sign of psychopathology (see Sanders, 1989 for a review), although recent research (Copes & Forsyth, 1993) has examined tattoos as a sign of extroversion. Since extroverts require more social and physical stimulation, according to Copes and Forsyth, they are more likely to engage in behaviors deemed socially unacceptable. As a result, they are often labeled pathological. Hence, tattoos are not indicative of psychopathology. Rather, those who wear them are merely boisterous and likely to be labeled troublemakers.

Those who study tattooing from a marketing perspective have focused primarily on what is attractive about the tattoos themselves. Some marketers, for example, have focused on the freedom and hedonism associated with bikers (a prototypical tattoo community). Hence, marketing researchers have, as have psychologists, tended to look for intrapersonal explanations for becoming tattooed. In both cases, researchers seem to have drawn the conclusion that tattooing provides a way for one to flaunt his or her individuality, sometimes to the

level of assuming a criminal or pseudo-criminal image.

Interdisciplinary studies of popular culture have examined recent trends in fashion models wearing tattoos, current or passing cultural impressions of tattoos as symbolic of criminality, and analyses of the contexts in which we are exposed to tattoos in the mass media. These analyses have tended to be less judgmental than their psychological and marketing counterparts, but they have largely ignored collectors and trends in fine art tattooing.

The anthropological literature has touched on cross-cultural perspectives and analyses of tattooing in America and abroad, employing ethnographic, descriptive analyses and postmodernist "discourses." Of the anthropologists, DeMello is currently the most prolific. Her *Bodies of Inscription* (2000) examines current changes in the American tattoo community as it expands across class and gender lines, and her discussions of the history of tattooing in America and tattoo publications are informative and insightful.

The sociological literature has, until recently, consisted solely of Sanders' (1989) seminal work on tattooing. Sanders described the interaction strategies used by tattooers and tattooees as they navigated the process of becoming tattooed. Atkinson (2003) has added to Sanders' work by studying the tattoo culture in Canada. My own work has focused on the fine art tattoo world.

Taken en masse, the scholarly literature is rich with analyses of people who wear tattoos, the context in which they wear them, and how non-tattooed people view those tattoos and the people who wear them. Excepting my work to date, researchers in the social sciences have avoided looking at those for whom tattoos have become a master status (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1971). I have, elsewhere, looked at one way that collectors form and solidify their identities as tattooed people (i.e., by attending tattoo conventions). I turn now to the process of becoming and being a collector.

## BECOMING AND BEING A COLLECTOR

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Becoming a tattoo collector is a transformative experience in more ways than one. This transformation is physical (i.e., one actually alters skin pigmentation), psychological, and subcultural. Becoming a collector involves not only changing the way that light reflects off one's skin but also the way that others view that skin and the person inside it. The images one chooses, and the ways she or he combines them say a lot, not only about the person who has chosen them, but also about who has influenced those choices. For example, Chris, an arborist, describes his collection as follows.

For my arm-band, I went out in the woods and cut a piece of branch with bittersweet around it . . . because . . . I climb trees and work outdoors . . . a lot doing tree removals and pruning and shit like that. . . . And this one over here . . . is sort of like . . . a protector. That's my climber line with my protecting dragons on either end. And then the third one [is] my back. . . . That design [a graphic depiction of a bare tree] came from . . . my belt buckle. . . . [My tattoo artist] did both of these pieces [on the lower legs]. This one here, I said, "I want some leaves in it. I want the Polynesian design, [Celtic] design, a band around my calf, but I want leaves in it." What he did was put in unfolding springtime ferns.

In Japanese tattoo iconography, the floral motifs, deities, and mythological characters all carry specific meanings. For example, because of their association with the Japanese card game of *hana-fuda*, peonies tend to be the most masculine of flowers, and cherry blossoms symbolize impermanence. The placement of a design and those surrounding it have significance as well.

Unlike Japanese tattooing, however, American fine art tattooing is, in many respects, a melting pot of motifs and aesthetics. The current tattoo renaissance encompasses such diverse styles as photorealism, cybertech, traditional Japanese

style, neotribalism, and any number of combinations of the above. Artists have also made profound technical advances.

In many respects, the work of fine art tattoo artists like Filip Leu, Bill Salmon, Paul Booth, and Guy Aitchison have brought respectability to tattooing. Fine artists' abilities to use different motifs have allowed tattoo collectors to create individually designed body suits that are truly postmodern in impact. Hence, we see Japanese aesthetics used to create body suits composed entirely of different depictions of Godzilla (Bannatyne, 1992, pp. 22–24) or traditional Polynesian aesthetics used in a tattoo of M. C. Escher's *Metamorphosis*.

Although the meaning of specific tattoos is inherently individual, people learn how to build their collections from other people. It takes a great deal of research for one to become intimately familiar with a particular motif and the iconography appropriate to use within it. It takes still more comparative research to figure out what styles and/or motifs one will employ in building his or her collection. Some do this research using tattoo magazines (DeMello, 2000) and some learn through symbolic interaction with other collectors and artists. In the end, however, collectors learn how to become collectors (Glaser, 1956; Matza, 1969; Sutherland, 1939).

### Learning to Become a Collector: Affinity

Matza (1969) discusses the process of becoming deviant. Although tattoos are less a statement of deviance than they once were, becoming heavily tattooed still stands outside social norms. Becoming a collector requires devotion to a lifestyle that is more marginal than that associated with fraternities or "tasteful" flowers. In short, one must want to become a collector. This desire is what Matza (1969) calls "Affinity." "[Affinity] may be regarded as a natural biographical tendency borne of personal and social circumstance that suggests but hardly compels a

direction of movement” (p. 93). In essence, affinity refers to a person’s desire to become deviant. Comments like Chris’s were common among respondents both in formal interviews and in informal field conversations: “My wife’s been collecting for about 20 years, off and on, small pieces. And I’ve always wanted one, I just, y’know, never came across the right idea or the right person to do it.” Chris is not alone in “always wanting” tattoos. However, not everyone who gets one tattoo becomes a collector.

In order to make the jump from having tattoos to being a collector, one must first have an affinity for being a collector. Here, I mean not only wearing tattoos (often, but not necessarily, many of them), but conceiving of oneself as tattooed.

Several of the people that I talked to discussed becoming collectors in terms of starting with just one tattoo and building their collections from that starting point. The experience of getting several small, bad tattoos as a start seems to be a common one. It is only after they start to conceive of themselves as collectors, however, that they begin to visualize their collections as conceptual and stylistic wholes. This becomes apparent by starting their collections by covering their old, small tattoos. This cover work tends to evolve in either geographic (i.e., specific areas of the body) or conceptual patterns. (Field Notes)

This excerpt from my field notes speaks to how people express themselves differently once they have conceived of themselves as “tattooed” as opposed to wearing tattoos. The tattoos with which they started are pictures in their skin. The collections that they have started to build represent a new self-image: that of the tattoo collector. Part of what allows the collector to fully realize this transition is what Matza (1969) calls “Affiliation.”

### Learning to Become a Collector: Affiliation

“Affiliation describes the process by which the subject is *converted* to conduct novel for him but already established for others” (Matza, 1969, p. 101). This process has also been analyzed by Sutherland

(1937, 1939) as “Differential Association.” According to both Sutherland and Matza, deviance is taught in symbolic interaction with successful deviants. “[Sutherland’s] method of affiliation harbors an idea of conversion. . . . Unless one always was deviant, in which case little illumination is required, *becoming deviant* depends on being converted” (Matza, 1969, pp. 106–107). Thus, the collector learns how to feel good about becoming a collector, as well as learning where to place his or her tattoos. She or he learns how to become a collector from other collectors and tattooers.

As previously mentioned, in order for this conversion to be successful, one must want to be converted. Hence, affinity and affiliation work together in creating both deviance and deviants.

Respondents typically talked about tattooing as a desirable experience, the quality of which affected the perceived quality of the tattoo more than the crispness of lines or the boldness of the shading. In this way, collectors and artists alike see becoming collectors in terms of recruitment. Consider Luke’s comments:

What goes into a great tattoo is, I guess, is the experience, because it’s like a personal album or something. . . . It’s like a montage of your life. That’s why the Japanese said I got tattooed for memories, and he got tattooed for a story. Some stupid fuckin’ Japanese, Oriental story, he got tattooed for, y’know?

The pejorative “some stupid fuckin’ Japanese, Oriental story” shows how Luke views the appropriate way to become tattooed. For Luke, collectors should get tattooed to hold on to their memories. For him, the Japanese notion of getting tattooed for a story is inappropriate.

Other collectors view tattoos as a means to express personal spirituality and thus, a moral enterprise. Sherrill illustrates this point nicely.

For me to do a tattoo on somebody that runs against the grain of my philosophical life, it’s impossible, it’s just not going to happen. Y’know, if somebody

comes to me and says, "I want a tattoo of dismembered babies and whatever" I'm like, "Sorry." Y'know? Wrong guy. Go see [somebody else], y'know what I mean? Don't come to me with this stuff. It's not my life, it's not my style, it's not my belief system. I'm not going to violate that. And by doing that, I've always held close to my beliefs.

In this statement, Sherrill shows how he goes about recruiting select people into his philosophical approach to tattooing. Not only is he concerned with expressing himself artistically, but he is concerned with teaching people that tattoos should be a positive self-expression. By turning away work that he finds indicative of destructive tendencies, he is not only strengthening the resolve of those he tattoos; he is also telling those on whom he refuses to work that their notion of what is acceptable for tattooing is flawed. In essence, he is recruiting "the right kind of people" into the tattoo world.

Sherrill also recruits through means other than tattooing or showing his collection. The following exchange shows how his beliefs about the appropriate reasons for becoming tattooed run counter to common misconceptions about the exhibitionistic tendencies of tattoo collectors. In essence, becoming a collector involves learning how to act like one. Consider Sherrill's response to my asking whether he ever shows his collection publicly:

No. Because they're real personal, my tattoos. I always get asked to take my clothes off, but I never do. And the line that I always give . . . is that when you start taking your clothes off, nobody listens to what you have to say. You lose credibility real fast. This is a culture which does not . . . which has demonized the body. I'm not going to go on a big blabber about American culture's demonization of the body, but I'm writing a book on it, so it's consumed the last five years of my writing on tattooing.

Here, Sherrill shows how recruitment is not just a matter of preaching to the proverbial choir. By appearing in mass media outlets, Sherrill shows both those who are and those who are not tattooed

how to be tattooed and respectable at the same time. In essence, then, he recruits collectors into acting "the right way." He also recruits those who will never become tattooed into a culture that finds tattooing, if not acceptable, at least not reprehensible.

Both tattooers and collectors teach other collectors about appropriate "use of the canvas." Fine art tattoos take into account musculature, size, shape, and texture of a given area of the collector's body. Fine art back pieces, for example, incorporate the breadth of the collector's shoulders and narrowness of his or her waist in the design. Another example is Filip Leu's watershed color portrait of Jimi Hendrix (Bannatyne, 1992, p. 52), done on my right thigh in 1992. Since the thigh is roughly the same size as a face and follows similar outlines (roughly oval), the portrait used all of the canvas and used it appropriately.

Interviewees often spoke of beginning their collections with smaller tattoos that did not incorporate the structure of the body well. As their collections grew, however, they started to learn about appropriate designs for their specific canvases.

Colin [a collector and tattooer] just talked about the transition from large, bright color fantasy work [at the shoulders and chest] into a slightly narrower section of color fantasy and music as represented by the Muppet band [on his stomach], into the smaller black and grey photo-realistic depictions of [rock] musicians directly below. Each of those sections has a particular style appropriate for it, and the concept dictated the style and motif. (Field Notes)

Colin's collection began with smaller tattoos on the arms (now covered), but once he began thinking of himself as a tattoo collector, he began using his canvas to its full advantage. The front torso of Colin's collection is in a "V" shape. The fantasy-style tattoos on the chest caps are bold and striated (much like pectoral musculature); the Muppet band members are round and fuzzy (much like Colin's stomach); and the portraits at the bottom follow, both singularly and collectively, the contours

of his hips and lower abdomen. In talking further about his collection, Colin discussed his back. He talked about how he loves all of his tattoos, but he got a sort of small piece early on, on his shoulder blade, which ruined taking up the entire back with one design. He now realizes, for instance, that the outside of the thigh is roughly half of a back.

We see, therefore, that Colin has learned how to conceptualize the human canvas in terms of what kinds of tattoos best fit where, and he learned this from working in his wife's tattoo shop and from discussing collections with other fine art collectors. Alfred Schutz (1967, pp. 75–78) helps us understand an important point here. While a great deal of this process may appear perfectly logical and in accordance with plans, collectors often assign meanings to their collections in “casting a reflective glance” on the work they already wear.

Another collector, Sadie, learned about appropriate use of the canvas from her husband (a tattoo collector and motorcycle mechanic). Her collection, still in its initial stages, is of gargoyles.

Currently, she has four gargoyles, all of similar size and style. They begin on her left shoulder and descend down the center of her back. Eventually, they will finish on her right hip, connected by vines. She was not ready to get a full back piece, but she had seen other women's backs, tattooed in the same basic shape, in tattoo magazines. As she described it to me, the contours of the string of gargoyles accent her figure. Also, the design leaves two fairly large open canvases. (Field Notes)

Hence, Sadie has learned about appropriate use of the canvas and has shown respect for its shape and possibilities. She learned about use and respect for the canvas from other collectors (her husband and collectors in tattoo-oriented publications) and from her artists.

These interviewees have been recruited, and continue to recruit others, by learning and sharing what makes a tattoo (and/or a tattooer) good.

Although every respondent talked about the artistic ability of his or her tattooer(s), 75% said that technique was less important than rapport. For example, when I asked Sherrill why he chose to visit a particular artist, he responded,

The professional quality of his studio is what struck me the most. The shop he had . . . on Sunset strip, was so clean, and the presentation was so beautiful, I was stunned when I saw it. You could have eaten off the floors in that place, it was so clean. Every bottle was labeled. This was a guy that was working with gloves and protecting himself long before anybody in the vicinity. And his work was way in advance of anybody I have ever seen. . . .

*Talk to me about how you learned what goes into a good tattoo.*

Well, it was just exposure. Most of us learn by experience. After a while, I began to see what was possible with tattooing and the level of quality that could be achieved. . . . For me, after a few bad experiences with personalities, I began to make decisions about getting tattooed from a whole different direction. It has more to do with the person. Even more to do with the person than with technique, actually.

Thus, the rapport between Sherrill and his artist is more important to him than artistic ability. In a sense, his collecting is based more on feeling a connection with an artist than acquiring “fine art.” Now that he sees himself as a collector, he is going to make this self-applied label work for him. This is the final element of Matza's (1969) process of becoming deviant: signification.

### **Learning to Become a Collector: Signification**

After one learns the techniques of being deviant, he or she often reconceptualizes his or her life in terms of that deviance. In discussing “indication,” Matza (1969) elaborates on this notion of identity-building among professional thieves:

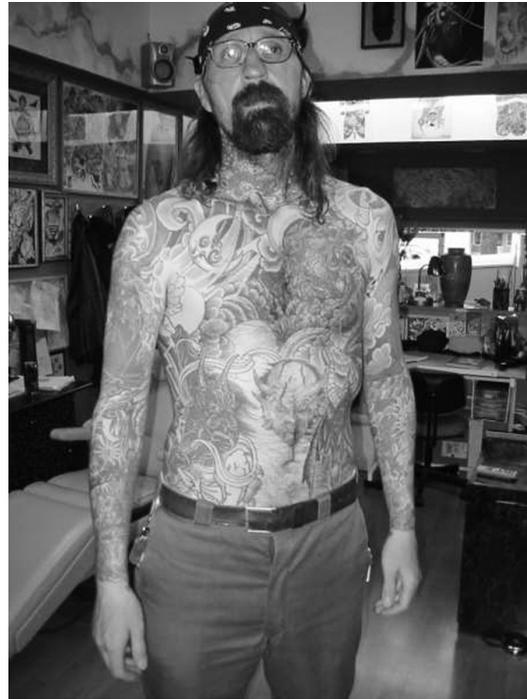
Quite different from consequence, indication points the subject to a consideration of himself; to the question of the unity of meaning of the various things he does and the relation of those things to what he conceivably is. To consider the possibility that the theft was important in the sense of being indicative of him puts the subject well into actively collaborating in the growth of deviant identity by building its very meaning. (p. 165)

In essence, once deviants have internalized their deviant labels, they reconceptualize their actions in terms of being appropriate for people who are “like that.” Tattoo collectors see collecting as appropriate for tattooed people. This can have profound effects on how they view their collections as well as appropriate ways to display them.

As I said in the section on affiliation, once collectors begin to think of themselves as collectors, they often begin to plan how each new tattoo will work within the canvas. An aspect of collecting that exhibits signification is working around public skin (i.e., easily visible skin like the neck, hands, and face). Cody illustrates this point nicely.

Cody is working on a full body suit, accompanied by facial piercings, and satyr horn implants on either side of his widow’s peak at the hairline. The following excerpt from field notes shows how Cody has planned his suit, at various stages, to combine his tattooed identity with one that is acceptable to those outside the subculture.

[Before] he became a full-time tattooer and piercer . . . his crew chief wouldn’t let him work with any . . . tattoos showing. So, he had to get long-sleeved t-shirts to cover the tattoos that went to his elbow. He [has subsequently covered his arms] down to the wrists and is now going on to the tops of his hands. He said that he . . . is thinking about leaving the collar untattooed, and that way, he can take out the facial piercings and put on a hat and go out in public with a long-sleeved shirt and still look somewhat respectable.



**Photo 1.1** Alistair’s Tattoos. Body modification runs the spectrum from one or two small tattoos that can be concealed by clothes to more drastic physical alterations that are publicly observable. Tattoos that cover the neck can be observed, and commented on, by strangers in public, sometimes making the tattooed person an object of derision.

SOURCE: Angus Vail.

Thus, even though Cody is obviously devoted to body modification, he still is concerned with getting along in normative society. By leaving open canvas at the collar, he will be able to “pass” more easily. Other collectors are less concerned with passing than with planning their remaining space (see Photo 1.1).

Luke’s collection has been complete for about 20 years, but in the following excerpt from our interview he recalls when he realized what he had to do to finish the collection.

Well, yeah. You look at yourself and you just, y'know, you see that there are these spaces that just need to be filled up. It's not that you're comparing yourself to someone else, or some kind or image, it's just that those spaces aren't complete. It's like you're on a course and you've gotta finish it. . . . most tattoo suits fit within standard barriers. Some people go above and beyond, but the prescribed cover job is like, a neck band, ankle bands, wrist bands, put a cargo net underneath your nuts and then just fill the rest of it up. So, when it's done, you can tell.

Thus, Luke completed his collection within "standard barriers." He filled his canvas from those barriers into the body of the suit. Other collectors work within a section at a time, while remaining cognizant of how to expand on what is already covered. The following excerpt from an interview with Chris shows how he has collaborated with an artist within the constraints of neotribalism.

And what I learned from [my tattoo artist] is that the pieces he's done on my legs . . . he's left 'em open to continue. 'Cause I . . . was always told when you put an arm band . . . around, that defines an end. But he says "Yeah, that's right, but I always leave an opening so I can move it in a different direction." That's what he did with this, too.

Thus, Chris has left room for expansion, should it be necessary. Yet, the tattoos can stand on their own. He conceived of his back piece, a sparse, solid black depiction of a bare tree, in a similar way.

This was interesting. That design came from [my belt buckle]. My wife gave me this 25 years ago, right after we first got married. I've always liked the design, and I brought it up to [my other artist], and all she did was add on the roots at the bottom, 'cause she said "Without the roots, it's gonna tip over."

*Do you think of yourself as a collector?*

Yeah. A beginning collector, but the pieces I've collected are a hell of a start. . . . The back piece

was . . . that was . . . I mean getting tattooed here was interesting. With the back piece, to me, that was like "I am really getting into this fucking tattoo shit."

*Talk to me about that.*

I mean, this is a tattoo [pointing at his arm]. This [his back], is a tattoo. I mean, it's just so much deeper into the cult, not, well, maybe the cult, but the . . . I keep going back to the industry. I mean, maybe that's not right, but I keep going back to the fact that it's hard core. . . . This was . . . it just crossed the line into the fact that I knew I was gonna get a whole lot more tattoos. We did the outline [of the tree] and I looked at it and I said, "Wow! That's my whole back." It just sunk in.

*Are you working toward a full body suit?*

No. I don't think so. . . . Mainly because a full body suit is too much for me. Too confusing. . . . It's confusing to follow it. . . .

*So, what will you leave out of the body suit?*

If I put . . . the chest piece that I have planned, if I put anything else here, it's gonna fuck it up. You know what I mean? The tree, everybody keeps saying, "Well, why don't you fill it in? Where the fuck are the leaves?" Y'know? I says, "No, that's it." I had originally thought of putting an eyeball in the middle, an owl behind it, y'know? It's just, fuck that. Just leave it simple.

This excerpt shows how Chris conceives of his collection in the future perfect tense (i.e., as a collection that will have been done; Schutz, 1962, 1967) in several ways. He does not want to ruin the impact of his back piece or his yet-to-be-applied chest piece. He also sees his collection as respectful of his canvas. Other collectors, while conscious of their open canvas, are less concerned with what specific designs will fill their remaining space. Rather, they are concerned with saving canvas for specific artists. The following excerpt from field notes describes such a collector:

I just spoke with a tattooer on the floor who said that she bases her choices on who to get work from on personality (although she has work from some wonderful artists, which shows that she is concerned with collecting fine art, too). I asked her what her plans are for future work and she said that she gets mostly small pieces, one or two a year, so that she won't run out of space when someone new that she really likes comes along. She has full sleeves and is working on her legs now.

Hence, collectors collect pieces (e.g., Chris's collection of arborist tattoos), artists (e.g., above excerpt from field notes), concepts (e.g., Colin's musical and fantasy themes), and/or styles (e.g., Luke's collection within "standard barriers"). Regardless of what they collect, however, collectors work toward a collection as it will be when it is done. They respect their canvases by collecting in "appropriate" ways.

## CONCLUSION

Collecting tattoos is both an individual and collective journey. Collectors must choose their own designs for their own reasons. Yet, they learn how to incorporate those designs into collections from others who have been successful in building collections. Some have attempted to explain what these collections mean. I believe this is a fruitless endeavor. However, studying the tattoo collection process sheds light on several broader sociological and phenomenological issues.

Tattoo collecting incorporates all three of Matza's (1969) stages of becoming deviant (i.e., affinity, affiliation, and signification). Because becoming a collector involves both considerable financial commitment and physical and stigmatic discomfort, it requires devotion to the process. In short, a collector's affinity must be strong.

Collectors must also learn how to become collectors. They must learn how to evaluate tattoos and tattooers. This involves learning how to

evaluate technique and how to build rapport. Collectors must also learn how to best represent the tattoo subculture. This involves learning techniques of passing and consensus building. They learn these things through affiliation with other collectors.

Finally, collectors learn how to mitigate their new master statuses (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1971) as collectors, not as just people with tattoos. They begin to view their collections in the future perfect tense (Schutz, 1962, 1967), as collections that will have been completed. This process of navigating signification from both within and without the tattoo world involves respecting the canvas as it is and as it will be.

In becoming tattooed, the collector learns not only how well-established members of the tattoo world conceive of "proper" use of form and iconography in building a collection, but also how to see himself or herself as a tattooed person. Although some may consider the distinction between those who have tattoos and those who are tattooed a semantic one, semantics, in this case, are important.

In discussing those who have tattoos, the analyst (whether a sociologist, anthropologist, or psychologist) assumes a possessive relationship between the person and the dermographic embellishment that she or he has purchased. In essence, this person's tattoos are no different from the car she or he drives or the hair style she or he sports on any given day. Like these adornments, tattoos represent possessions that can be considered with or without the individual who wears them.

The collector, on the other hand, sees himself or herself *as tattooed*, not just the owner of the pigments residing in the first layer of his or her dermis. The images that adorn the collector's canvas are, as Luke so colorfully stated earlier in this article, his or her memories made physical. To the collector, tattoos are not something one owns. Rather, they are a part of him or her, no less important

than the color of his or her hair or skin, no more easily removed from his or her identity than his or her deepest beliefs, most profound concerns, or his or her idiosyncratic sense of humor. In short, the collector does not see himself as John who *has tattoos* but as John who *is tattooed*.

Since, for the collector, tattoos represent a master status, all of his or her actions, beliefs, fears, and hopes can be seen in his or her collection. How those personal characteristics become part of the collection, only the collector knows. That they are there, however, is irrefutable. The fact that they are there affects not only the ways that collectors see themselves, but also the ways that others see them. In short, their tattoos have profound effects on their interactions with intimates and non-intimates alike.

The recent attention that the news media have paid to tattooing speaks volumes about the relevance of this topic. With tattoo shops being ranked among the six fastest-growing industries in the nation and the recent legalization of tattooing in New York City, we, as sociologists, have a unique opportunity to demystify the processes involved in enacting a cultural phenomenon that is rapidly losing its deviant status.

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# Flesh Journeys

## The Radical Body Modification of Neoprimities

*Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young*

Body decoration takes three forms: body painting, body ornamentation, and body modification. Our focus here is on the third of these forms, body modification, or permanent modes of body decoration. There are virtually endless ways to modify a body in what might be referred to as a “flesh journey,” or the intentional reconstruction of the corporeal to symbolically represent one’s identity, relationships, or thoughts. We would like to look at the more radical contemporary varieties of tattooing, piercing, branding, and scarification, or nonmainstream forms of body modification.

We estimate that roughly 10% to 20% of North Americans have engaged in tattooing or other lasting body modifications. Moreover, body modification cuts across the demographic categories of age, ethnicity, gender, and economic status. Once associated more or less exclusively with society’s fringes—gangs, sailors, prisoners, outlaws, and bikers—a late-twentieth-century rebirth of body modification ushered in a new era of cultural expression and ideological representation. The long-standing argument that in Western society radical body modification and deviance and social stigma tend to go hand in hand maintains credibility, yet this formulation often limits the analysis of such practices as legitimate and viable forms of art and personal expression.

Here, we would like to look at the neoprimities, an emerging strand within the Canadian body modification scene, who represent one of the more outspoken and radical groups of body

modification enthusiasts. Neoprimities challenge the deviant stereotypes associated with tattooed, pierced, branded, scarred bodies; they encourage a reexamination of the cultural meanings of radical body modification. Our discussion is broken down into four main parts. We begin with a review of the literature; then proceed to a discussion of the neoprimite movement, leaning on terms and categories adopted by the participants themselves; and finally discuss six main rationales neoprimities use to explain radical body modification and examine how these understandings are shared within the group.

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### LOOKING AT THE CULTURALLY INSCRIBED BODY

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How and why is culture inscribed upon the physical body? The physical body is like a text, rich in social, cultural, political, and religious significance. The body can emerge in the strictly biological sense, for instance, through illness. Or it can be socially constructed, in the sense that physical changes are voluntarily manufactured as a site for creating and affirming social and cultural meaning.

Chris Shilling (1993) refers to body modification as an intentionally designed “body project,” arguing that such projects help symbolically construct a person’s self and social identity. For Shilling, the body is always in a process of *becoming* because its size, shape, and appearance are subject to reconstruction on an ongoing basis,

often in socially deviant ways. A full array of body projects or “flesh journeys” has been the topic of investigation for sociologists. These include the hyper-muscular body (Monaghan, 2001), the emaciated body (Lupton, 1996), the transgendered body (Segal, 1994), the cosmetically altered body (Davis, 2003), and the cybernetic body (Balsamo, 1996). As both radical and non-radical forms of “body work” (Gimlin, 2004) have blossomed as a means of self-expression, we see a proliferation of social research on how people modify their bodies to achieve social and personal ends.

While at first glance seemingly dissonant, what unifies these and other forms of cultural expression is the conscious attempt to alter the body’s natural parameters in some way, to inscribe upon the body a set of symbols that distinguish it from the mainstream and connect it affiliatively or disaffiliatively with other marked-up bodies and groups. Definitions of deviance are socially constructed—and consciously resisted—by social groups and categories; as a result, we must consider how actors anticipate social reaction to their behaviors, expressions of belief, and physical characteristics. In presenting radical and confrontational styles such as non-mainstream body modification, individuals are often seeking to elicit a negative response from others. Deviance, then, may be instrumental for those interested in resisting social norms and conventions. The deliberate presentation of a profane or marked body is, as Hebdige (1979) writes, offered to be interpreted in a negative way.

Like sport, the body is contested terrain. Just as meanings of sport in our society are disputed, the experience of the body in sport is subject to context-specific definitions and interpretations. For example, pushing the body to its physical limits during a marathon might be lauded by other athletes, coaches, and spectators as emblematic of one’s commitment to excellence, while engaging in the same degree of physical exertion during training runs might be viewed as risky, irrational, or counterproductive. Here, we argue that what

makes the radical body sociologically interesting is the cultural struggle over legitimate ways of using the body.

Until recently, sociologists have been somewhat inattentive to the study of non-mainstream body modification. Sanders’ (1989) work on tattooing represents the most comprehensive analysis of radical body modification in Western society. His book, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, should be a starting point for anyone interested in this area. Sanders points to the changing meaning of tattooing in our culture, specifically a return to alternative body styles, a reinvigorated youth movement, and a boom in tattooing among females.

In contrast, the work of many psychologists has limited our understanding of radical body modification. Theorizing that tattoos are physical indicators of individual pathology, psychologists and sociologists of health have often attempted to correlate tattooing with risk taking, homosexuality, criminal tendencies, and low self-esteem (Ceniceros, 1998; Roberts & Ryan, 2002). Such perceptions have done much to produce an inaccurate picture of the cultural meanings associated with body modification. Further, they do not permit participants to speak for themselves using their own terms and categories.

In sum, while sociological investigations of radical body modification have introduced the subject and laid the groundwork, a full portrait of how the body, particularly the deviant body, is inscribed has just begun to be painted.

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#### NEOPRIMITIVES

We conducted semi-structured interviews with body modification artists (N = 20) and their clients (N = 35). We also observed work conducted at body modification studios and group body modification rituals and ceremonies and attended body modification ceremonies. All

names used are pseudonyms. Our interviews and observations are drawn mainly from two cities in Canada (Toronto and Calgary), with occasional references to the American scene. Perhaps 5% to 8% of all persons in Canada who have been tattooed are affiliated with the neoprimitives.

While non-Western forms of body modification have never stopped being adopted as bridges to the past (New Zealand Maori tattooing is an obvious example), subcultural adoption of so-called primitive styles is a recent phenomenon. Neoprimitive body modification reflects an array of rituals of the flesh. As we indicated above, the four most prevalent forms of body modification are *tattooing*, characteristically done in black and red ink with large designs that resonate with tribal markings whose shapes follow the body's natural contours; *piercing*, most notably stainless steel, wood, or "bone" rings placed in the face, ears, and nipples; *branding* or *burning*, typically done in small patterns located on the limbs or upper back; and *scarification*, the least common form of body modification, involving a small but generally ornate cutting of the flesh.

The neoprimitive movement perhaps began with an interest in tribal lifestyles and artwork that developed in the late 1970s in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Toronto (Rosenblatt, 1997; Vale & Juno, 1989). The tribal tattoo styles of the New Zealand Maori, the Dyak of Borneo, and the Haida of the Pacific Northwest figured prominently at this stage, leading to non-Western body modification practices more generally and a growth in related print sources, such as the magazines *Body Play* and *Modern Primitives* and *Tattoo*



**Photo 1.2** Another dimension of body modification is how much it violates cultural and normative standards of appearance and propriety. Some physical alterations provoke the question in observers: "Why would anyone want to *do* something like that to his body?"

SOURCE: Aaron D. Settipane.

*Savage*, to promote and support an expanding appetite for information about the movement.

An early statement of extreme body modification, Vale and Juno's *Modern Primitives* (1989), stressed the significance body art has played in human history and explored a number of directions such practices could lead, including body encumberments (neck encasements), body compression (bondage), body burning (branding), body suspension (through the use of hooks penetrating the flesh), and body penetrating (piercing, tattooing, and scarring). Vale and Juno argue that North American society is at a crossroads of body modification, in that there exists a desire here to return to the primitive meanings behind body modification (see Photo 1.2).

Part of the neoprimitive return to primitive sensibilities about radical body modification has included a re-conceptualization of how the modified body is displayed to others. Neoprimitive group members do not hide or "pass" their

physical differences, but rather relish in the exhibition of their modified bodies. Tattoos are placed in normally exposed areas, such as hands, face, arms, neck, and legs. Piercings made from stainless steel, plastic, or bone (in the form of rings, barbells, screws, and plugs) are inserted into various parts of the body. Generally, these include body protrusions (such as ears, nose, nipples, or genitalia) or places where the skin can be stretched or manipulated to accommodate a piercing (such as eyebrows, lips, cheeks, or the neck). Branding involves burning a forged metal design into the skin, and scarification involves cutting a pattern or design into the skin with a sharp, normally metal, implement. As the practices can be quite painful, can heal with less than artistically pleasing results, and do not have long-standing traditions in North America, the use of branding and scarification by neoprimitives can present disruptive images of the body. This seems especially true where gender codes are concerned. In a culture still deeply stratified along gender lines, publicly displayed multiple tattoos and piercings represent a direct affront to traditional notions of femininity.

Another central characteristic of the neoprimitive group is the diversity of its members. Neoprimitives come from a cross-section of social backgrounds representing variations in age, ethnicity, occupation, and sexual orientation. Their commonality is a preference for urban life. According to our respondents, what defines an individual as a neoprimitive is both an identification with a set of focal concerns expressed by the group—including the alienation and isolation originating out of the experience of urban culture—and the active participation in alternative social activities, such as body modification, that arise distinctly in urban culture. As a social movement, then, neoprimitivism incorporates traditions of body modification from various tribal cultures, links these practices and their associated meanings to current social and political concerns, and does all this within the framework of a futuristic vision

of popular cultural expression. In the words of Jane, one of our respondents, “We are not interested in the return *to* the primitive; we are interested in the return *of* the primitive.”

#### BODY MODIFICATION: INTERPRETATIONS AND MEANINGS

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The rationales of neoprimitives for participating in what we call flesh journeys are grounded in diverse cultural philosophies and ideologies, but are linked in the sense that they attempt to align modern forms of body modification with historically meaningful practices. Neoprimitives would argue that while the technology used for performing body modification is markedly different from tools used in the past, the purposes behind doing it remain strikingly similar. For neoprimitives, the flesh is simultaneously an accessible canvas to be manipulated in a deeply personal, private way and a billboard to be displayed socially. Our interviews suggest that these experiences and intended outcomes may be classified into six main areas: subcultural membership and resistance, personal status passage, creativity and individuality, physical endurance and pain thresholds, beauty and art, and spirituality. We did not impose these categories on our respondents' accounts; rather, they arose from the insider vocabularies our respondents used.

#### Subcultural Membership and Resistance

Many group members bond together in a manner perceived by the majority as deviant; that membership is regarded as an attempt to oppose, transform, or undermine the dominant order. Group members of some deviant collectivities seek to resist feelings of social disenfranchisement. In this sense, collectivized body modification celebrates tribal styles that help members cohere through a sense of problem sharing and solving.

During the interviews, neoprimitives frequently spoke of their personal dissatisfaction with contemporary urban life. Their physically marked bodies are literally designed to be socially disruptive markers of discontent. Adopting a voluntary social stigma by acquiring and displaying profane or defiling body marks, individuals establish bonds with others who are not only irreverent with respect to such social stigma, but even relish the aura of being socially distinct. In the words of Phil, one of our interviewees,

No matter how much disdain people show me for my tattoos and brandings, I find solace in the fact that I know so many others who share my experiences in life; we cling to one another in times [of] doubt and pain. There's a great sense of community that emanates out of this studio . . . something you don't experience if you go to Smoky Joe's tattoo shop and get "Number 23" [a standard design or "flash"] and never speak to anyone there again. There's a family of members here that know things about me, and I know personal details about them as well. That's what these [points to tattoos] stand for.

While body modification itself is not the only practice or value members collectively share, it serves the fundamental purpose of designating membership both to insiders and to nonmembers.

The concept of *bricolage* is central to understanding how neoprimitives create a common set of symbols that are meaningful to one another. Bricolage refers to the process of creating new and often socially deviant uses and meanings for cultural objects. Drawing heavily on the body modification imagery and styles of Polynesians, Melanesians, the Dyak of Borneo, North American Native cultures such as the Haida, the Aztec, and various African tribes, neoprimitive body modification obviously reflects eclectic influences and gives new meaning and rationale for wearing the designs. The use of primitive body modification styles and techniques attempts to recapture the collective sense of community and belonging the

neoprimitives believe was achieved through tribal uses of body modification. In the words of Renata, one of our respondents,

In other cultures, getting a tattoo means that you're "one of us." It's a mark of pride, a coming of age that no one can take away from you after it's over. I love that about my tattoos; I feel as if I'm a member of a tribe, one of the pack.

Many modern subcultural groups, such as the Goths, Skaters, Club Kids, Psychobillies, Ravers, Straightedgers, and Skinheads, also use radical body modification as an integral aspect of group membership and disaffiliation with other groups and with mainstream society generally. Clearly, body modification is not utilized universally or with the same rationale or intent across groups. Also key here is that group members experience and understand body modification in an *intersubjective* sense. Still, even though flesh journeys are deeply personalized and unique, group members explore the expressive capabilities of the modified body by sharing their experiences with others similarly committed to body modification. Thus, the meaning behind the modification of the body both reflects personal biographies and is ultimately crystallized and understood within a group context (see Photo 1.3).

### Personal Status Passage

Neoprimitives use radical body modification for personal catharsis. As Shilling (1993) comments, North Americans' body projects are often highly individualized, reflecting an individual's private search for a new self, a new identity. Some members of the neoprimitive movement claim that for people who have endured emotional pain—such as illness and sexual or physical abuse—body modification rituals help to resolve such experiences and purge the associated trauma. For some female respondents, for example, this involved coming to terms

with an experience of sexual assault. Jenny puts the matter in these words:

I can't believe it, even now when I'm sitting here talking to you [about the assault]. I was out of my body for almost two years. I can't really find any other way of explaining this to you [other] than by saying I felt numb. I tried not to think about my body because I felt dirty, ashamed, and, like, you know, I wanted to crawl out of myself. . . . Then I met the people at [the neoprimitive studio]. I went in one day with a friend of mine who was getting a tattoo to commemorate the passing of her dad, and after speaking with a couple of the receptionists and one of the artists, I started thinking about getting a tattoo. I thought a tattoo might help me reclaim my body, bring it back to my control, you know. I lost my body when I was raped; I was a stranger in my own skin. . . . I cried the whole time I was being tattooed; all of the fear, and hate, and sorrow came to the surface, and every time the needles struck me I relived the pain of the rape. I don't think any amount of talk, with whoever, could have forced me to get back in touch with my body like that. . . . I consider that day my second birthday, the day I really started moving on with my life.

For some gay male respondents, radically modifying the flesh along tribal themes served as a marker of their coming out and as a part of the declaration of their gay identity. Buddy puts it this way:

I finally mustered up the courage to come out to my family and friends about three years ago, after almost 15 years of hiding who I am. I'd just entered into a serious relationship with a man I met in the United States, and after several months of enduring a



**Photo 1.3** Tattoo by Shad at Diamond Club, San Francisco. In some traditional cultures, body modification is obligatory; the society demands that members undergo scarification, tattooing, or even the amputation of digits. In contemporary Western society, body modification is nearly always freely chosen, although usually emblematic of group membership.

SOURCE: Angus Vail. Tattoo by Shad, at Diamond Club, San Francisco.

long-distance affair, he moved to Canada with me. I love Carl and want to be with him the rest of my life. . . . My tattoo [of a Gay Pride flag/banner] symbolizes the commitment I have made to Carl and to myself. This is me; this is who I am and I want people to know that I'm not living in shadows anymore.

In these ways, a vital part of the body modification process for many members of the neoprimitive movement is the ritual cleansing of a previously damaged body and self-identity.

In brief, neoprimitive flesh journeys represent personal status passages that involve the ritualistic purging of painful emotional experiences. Marking the skin becomes a text to chronicle the passage from one point in a person's life to another. A status passage can be kept private and hidden and be shared by only a few intimates, or it may be openly displayed as a means of encouraging others to

explore the possibility of personal growth associated with the practices. In either situation, body modification is both an inward and outward symbol that the person has made a conscious life choice that binds himself or herself to a desire to move beyond a former identity or experience.

### **Creativity and Individuality**

For neoprimitive members, radically modifying the body often represents a political statement against limitations to personal expression and creativity. Feeling that they are prisoners of social conformity, members claim that many people feel limited in the potential range of personal or bodily expression available, given the mores of mainstream culture. As the sense of community is in decline in the modern urban metropolis and people are being dehumanized through technology, computers, e-mail, PINs, credit cards, and driver's licenses, neoprimitives claim they are searching for a method of injecting individuality into mainstream culture. Brian puts the matter this way:

See, all of this, this is about me and nobody else. This is like, like another way of introducing myself, another name I have. No one else will look like this, ever, because the designs I have done are custom; that's what we believe in. . . . [It's] like another signature or thumb print; it's all about me.

For this reason, the standard forms of body modification neoprimitives adopt are predominantly custom work. Tattoos, brandings, and piercings are typically designed for and sometimes by the individual, taking into consideration the idiosyncratic biography of the person, the contours and shape of his or her body, and artist-client negotiated ideas of the aesthetic appearance of the prospective work. As noted by Aaron, a 29-year-old artist,

Every person that walks through the door comes in because they're searching for something. My job is to lead them down the path of discovery. I have to

get to know them, to become friends so I can get into their heads and help them become who they want to be. So, I think an artist needs to be a shaman, a healer, and a soothsayer that guides a mystic journey. . . . The mark that remains in the skin is only the end of the process, man; it remains when the journey is over, or to mark that [the journey] has only begun. That's why I don't tattoo designs off the wall, and it's why we sit down together and draw out something for every soul who walks in here.

Normally, neoprimitives are well-acquainted with the artist performing their work, and it is not uncommon for modifications to take place after several consultations. Even though the markings are unique to the individual, the general pattern or structure of the neoprimitive style is generic enough that members of the group are able to recognize, read, and decode the symbols. This is partly achieved through a collective knowledge of primitive—that is, tribal—art and the personal relationships fostered between and among many neoprimitives.

### **Physical Endurance and Pain Thresholds**

One of the most obvious possibilities open to radical body modification practitioners is to allow participants to engage in group and individual pain rituals (Vale & Juno, 1989). Body modification experiences, especially the more radical forms, provide participants with contexts to learn how to understand pain as a sensory experience open to social construction and interpretation. As a marker of physical toughness and the ability to endure painful ordeals, radical body modification carries social messages about the wearer's ability to experience and relish practices for which many people exhibit and express a personal distaste. As Rosenblatt (1997) points out, North American neoprimitives share this orientation toward body pain as a cultural rite of passage with tribal cultures around the globe. In this way, rituals of the flesh can be used to challenge Western

notions of the female body's ability to endure pain, separate from and independent of childbirth. And, these rituals accent the desire to experience and embrace physical pain as a means of personal growth. Neoprimitives see the experience of physical pain as a vehicle to conjure altered physical and mental states. They regard the experience as something not to be feared and avoided, but rather collectively respected as an austere illustration of personal integrity and growth. Sue, one of our interviewees, puts the matter in the following words: "We [members of Western society] revel in the discussion of emotional pain but treat the topic of physical pain like it's fucking deviant, right?" In contrast, she says, "I want everyone I talk to to understand that when you feel that steel slip through your skin, you have to embrace it and understand what you will be after it's over—changed for life."

The process of accepting and using the pain associated with body modification is another facet of the group affiliation process. Just as the tattooed image or piece of surgical stainless steel inserted under the skin can be read by audiences, so can the implicit experience of pain behind the marks. Members of the neoprimitive movement read, appreciate, and even hierarchize each others' experiences, understanding in an instant the kind and level of pain implied by particular markings. Again, these deconstructions are used as an integral part of forming a collectivity of individuals who coalesce around intersubjective understandings of the body.

Neoprimitive members seek to turn on its head the mainstream cultural understanding of pain and injury as entirely negative by participating in painful flesh journeys that are widely believed to help individuals actually expand the capability of their bodies and selves. Jay puts the matter in the following words:

Every time I'm pierced there's a rush of adrenaline. I'm so jacked up because the feel of the cold needle is like a drug; it hurts but it's sweet. Some people get

on roller coasters and some jump out of airplanes to feel it, and that's cool, but you don't have anything more than a memory after you do it. My body is a living testimony to my desire to push the envelope. I've got 17 piercings and I've been tattooed 10 times. . . . I don't *think* I'm stronger and more confident as a person; I *know* it! You know, when I look down at myself and see what I have created, I like it.

Rather than passively accepting dominant social constructions about how bodily pain is to be avoided or hidden, neoprimitive rituals are intended to be brought to the forefront. They are discussed almost as a black eye or a lacerated face is to be displayed, as a badge of honor to some. The pain associated with a piercing or a tattoo is less an unfortunate consequence of the body modification process than one of the core reasons for participation. Mike, a neoprimitive, explains it this way:

I have a t-shirt that simply says, "Yes, it does hurt." I don't mind if people ask if a tattoo hurts; in fact, I had to get used to it about five years ago when I first started [as a tattoo artist] 'cause it's the first [question] out of most people's mouths. My perspective is that it sets me apart from people who are afraid, and I suppose if it didn't hurt, everyone would have one, and a tattoo wouldn't mean as much.

Often shunned as repugnant self-mutilation, painful forms of radical body modification are not viewed by neoprimitives as acts that symbolically destroy the self, but rather a means of constructing physically stronger bodies and emotionally empowered social selves. Although other forms of body modification intended to empower the individual, such as plastic surgery, may also be physically painful, the outcome of that practice—the thinner thigh, the enlarged breast—tends to be the catalyst to increase esteem, not the pain process itself. In contrast, neoprimitives overturn this definition and deal with pain as a positive experience, actively seeking it out.

## Beauty and Art

Perhaps the most-cited rationale neoprimitive members provide for engaging in forms of body modification is their desire to provide alternative definitions of beauty and art. Says Peter,

There's an elegance but [also] a raw, primal lure that invigorates every hormone racing through my body. I think [piercings are] more beautiful than anything you'll ever see in *Vogue*. It's exactly what the stale brand of beauty we revere desperately needs . . . a good shaking up.

Collectively rejecting mainstream notions of what is aesthetically pleasing as banal and uninspired, neoprimitives consider deviant forms of body expression and appearance to be appealing. Attempting to break free from what they see as repressive Western conceptualizations of beauty and art, neoprimitives stress the importance of taking personal control over the body in a culture that ultimately seeks to regulate, restrict, and prohibit the completely free pursuit of sensuality. Erin says,

When I was a kid, I always used to draw on my jeans. All the kids did it. Remember that? I bet you did it. But my mom would tear a strip off me when I came home after school and she found pen [marks] all over me. She said it made me look like trash or something. . . . And when I got to be older and I started to wear a pound of makeup every day, and people had problems with that, calling me a tramp or a whore. . . . All my life I've wanted to color myself, design my body into art work, you know? But every time I tried people hassled me, saying it wasn't appropriate or it looked tacky. Like people have the right to make me toe the line with what *they* think is beautiful. So after I had my first tribal tattoo finished, I said to myself, "This is beautiful, this is me, and it ain't coming off no matter how much people complain." All of my life I've wanted this, to be a piece of art, and now I am.

According to Erin and her peers, the body modification of neoprimitives consciously symbolizes a

form of resistance against the Puritan ethos of the body that members feel stifles human expression and individuality.

In this pursuit, neoprimitive members are adamant about how their practices of body modification challenge gender codes regarding appropriate femininities and masculinities. As the body is the main canvas upon which normative cultural expectations of gender are inscribed, neoprimitives utilize the radical modification of the flesh to undermine constraining codes of bodily idiom and conventional ways of being masculine and feminine. Women in the neoprimitive movement are the key in this social drama by adopting extravagant forms of body modification that explicitly subvert Western conceptualizations of the beautiful body. In the words of Renata,

I'm so encouraged that more and more women are turning to body mod as a way of flexing their feminine muscles. There's a new understanding that [we] have about what a woman can be, and I hope that we [at the studio] are playing a role in educating women that "our bodies our selves" is more than a catchy feminist slogan. . . . I think women who are painted [tattooed] are beautiful because the tattoo just exudes confidence. So it's beautiful, but not in the traditional way that women were tattooed as biker molls [a person who has been roughly handled and is damaged] or circus freaks, and certainly not in any bubble-gum, Betty Boop, "I'm a helpless bitch" way.

Emphasizing tribal rituals behind neoprimitive body modification, replete with notions of femininity and female sexuality, female members are quick to underscore that cultural expressions of beauty and the female body are historically varied. For example, neoprimitives point out that women have participated equally with men in all forms of body modification around the world. In ancient Egypt, men were not allowed to be tattooed; only women engaged in the practice and used the tattoos as emblems of fertility and sexuality. In the Mayan culture, women were widespread users of tattooing,

piercing, and scarification to aesthetically enhance the body. Women in Borneo tattoo designs on their body as indicators of their social lineage. Nubian women scar themselves to represent their fertility to males. And Tiv women endure painful scarification to proclaim individual qualities such as strength, courage, and fearlessness. In these ways, Pitts (1998) suggests that the contemporary renaissance in tattooing, piercing, and branding practices confront notions of docile femininity by appearing at least playfully theatrical or even provocatively grotesque when compared to traditional gender expectations.

Similarly, male neoprimitive members stress that body modification can be used as a means of exploring a variety of masculine styles and identities. Queer theory has repositioned the study of the male body by focusing on how dominant or hegemonic definitions of masculinity typically marginalize certain types of male bodies. Through the use of body modification, neoprimitives demonstrate that the male body is a cultural site, and codes of acceptable masculinity are as equally contested as codes of appropriate femininity. Thus, for neoprimitives, modifying the male body can also represent a deliberate attempt to overturn hegemonic notions of power, sexuality, and masculinity. According to Cole,

People already think because I'm gay, I'm less of a man. They think I'm not classically macho because I've chosen a lifestyle that runs contra to what we consider to be manly. But I think I appreciate the male body and being masculine more than others because I truly love the male body in all its forms. That's why I admire male bodies that are marked [tattooed] in ways that question what we consider to be manly and point out that gay men possess qualities of strength and courage that straight men egotistically claim ownership over. . . . People need to know that gay men are strong but don't have to be overbearing and aggressive to prove it.

For neoprimitives, body modification becomes a conscious attempt to resist oppressive cultural ideology regarding what counts as beautiful and artistic.

## Spirituality

The neoprimitive quest for meaning is grounded in an attempt to collectively overcome difficulties associated with the fragmentation of life in the late modern urban setting while providing members with a set of practices that promotes personal growth. In an increasingly secular society, neoprimitive members give kudos to the rediscovery of a particular kind of spirituality. Numerous commentators argue that because of this fragmentation and secularization, many members of contemporary society find alternative forms of religious and spiritual expression appealing. In order to reclaim the spiritual purpose of our tribal ancestors, body modification is used by neoprimitives to mark the important individual and group events in their lives and symbolically tie the individual to something greater than the present-centered individual self. According to Joanna,

We connect to each other and to the history of our planet through body marking. The spirits of our ancestors are swirling around us in the breeze, and if we ignore them we are ignoring ourselves. . . . So we do what they did, explore ourselves by exploring the past and how our ancestors fought to make something uniquely human out of life.

Neoprimitives draw on a diverse set of religious and philosophical doctrines to create a New Age spirituality that reflects contemporary concerns. Neoprimitive perspectives on the body, culture, and art are developed from a pastiche of historical influences that imply a postmodern spirituality. Neoprimitives question the criticisms that such borrowing disrespects the very cultural traditions members venerate. Says David,

I've heard the complaint a million times, and I've run through an entire gamut of emotion about the accusations. I don't know if it's jealousy over the attention people in the community have given us, or

whether they just can't understand that we have so much respect for people all over the world. I have a degree in cultural anthropology, so I know that [tribal] designs and customs have evolved over centuries, and I defy anyone to find a culture that hasn't taken inspiration from others. . . . I've heard so much about raping and pillaging of cultures that neoprimitives do, but that makes me sick to think that people have such misconceptions of body art. It's particularly disconcerting and professionally deflating when it comes from other body artists.

In spite of such criticism, neoprimitives reshape iconography from other cultures in order to signify new spirituality in the West built on a respect for the past and for other cultures. As part of a collective search for identity in an increasingly mass-marketed, commodified, and fragmented world, neoprimitives articulate this respect by conducting voyages of spiritual, personal, and social discovery through their body markings.

## CONCLUSION

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Like most sociological researchers on tattooing and other body modification, we have sought to situate neoprimitivism within the deviance literature. But of equal importance to us is looking at skin modification as a "body project" (Shilling, 1993) and a form of "identity work" (Pitts, 1998). In combining both approaches—viewing the body both as an evocative social text and a vehicle of social resistance—we have traced recent developments in meaning and form within the neoprimitive subculture.

As members of the larger body modification scene, neoprimitives have created a renaissance of innovative and flamboyant marking practices. Members stress the spiritual, emotional, and practical rewards of modification for persons entrenched within and ultimately oppressed by hegemonic boundaries of physical expression in the modern metropolis. Such boundaries relate especially to codes of beauty, gender, sexuality, and personal creativity. Radical and creative flesh

journeys tend to be met with disdain and distrust. Whether we reduce radical body modification practices to naïve individualism, the impetuosity and egocentrism of youth, or the passing fancies of hyper-commercialism, Western society seems clearly ambivalent about the meaning and implications of altering the surface of the skin. At the same time, body modification, including the more profane forms we've looked at, seems to be growing in appeal.

In experimenting with tribal expressions, the neoprimitives have expanded the potential uses of the body for persons interested in using the skin as a personal journey and a symbol of something larger. Body alteration practitioners develop and share understandings of their respective flesh journeys. The practices are carefully scripted joint activities replete with agreed-upon meanings and goals. Radical body modification is constructed to express an intersubjectively shared social commentary, signified by the specific styles prevalent in the scene. This commentary is grounded in the neoprimitive intent to explore the skin as a means of personal growth and as a political canvas upon which resistance to certain aspects of mainstream culture can be etched.

Neoprimitive behavior indicates that bodies are always involved in a process of becoming. Using the body as a site of identity work, neoprimitives mark significant events in their lives by developing the flesh. As the individual unfolds over the life course, the body is used to chronicle the maturing self and the varied triumphs and tragedies. In this sense, the self and the flesh that acts as its marker grow conjointly rather than being separated. The conjoining of social experience and the flesh has, of course, characterized a range of other categories, such as gang members, sailors, and prisoners. However, it may be that their flamboyant tribal use of body modification is not only more inclusive across a wider diversity of social groups, it is also at least as politically charged and subject to suspicious audience reading. Will the more widespread adoption of neoprimitive styles dilute and co-opt the

movement's authenticity and more radical goals? If the neoprimitives are committed to changing cultural perceptions regarding uses of the flesh and what those uses imply about gender, sexuality, beauty, strength, and other issues, a mass turn to body modification and to a primitive style might be instrumental in realizing the group's goals.

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## Personal Account of a Tattoo Collector

*Angus Vail*

Retail establishments, like nursing homes and hospitals, have code words that the employees use to call security's attention to potential trouble. At my father's nursing home, an announcement that “Mr. Green” was in a particular hall indicated that a resident with dementia was wandering there. At the Safeway near my apartment in Portland, it was “Johnny.” I know this because I heard many a call for “Johnny” to come to my aisle as I was shopping during the summer, and every time it was followed by a security guard standing, very conspicuously, at the end of the aisle, watching me. During the school year, Johnny became unnecessary. Why the seasonal change? During the school

year, I used to stop into Safeway on my way home from teaching, usually wearing jeans with a shirt and tie. During the summer, though, I walked to Safeway from my apartment, usually wearing shorts and a tank top. Shorts and tank tops don't do an especially effective job at covering close to 100 hours' worth of tattoos. Without visible tattoos, I was innocuous, no “trouble” at all; when my tattoos showed, I was dangerous—a “trouble” maker.

Like most people who go on to become fairly extensively covered in tattoos, I have found them fascinating for almost as long as I can remember—sometimes beautiful, sometimes scary, sometimes pathetic, but very rarely unworthy of attention.

Perhaps unlike many of my colleagues in the rainbow tribe, however, I have a very firm recollection of the first time tattoos made a serious impact on me. Where I grew up, in Bedford, NY, if there were any tattooed people—and there must have been—they weren't out of the proverbial closet, so my exposure to tattooing when I was young was severely limited, but I had bad allergies that required shots every two weeks or so for a period of years. My allergies brought me into New York City with my mother, where I ran into all manner of interesting people whom one was not likely to encounter in Bedford. On one allergy shot trip, my mother and I were walking down the sidewalk, hand in hand, when I noticed a biker and his "old lady" walking toward us. He was a tall and burly man, dressed in jeans and a leather vest with no shirt on underneath. What really caught my eye, though, was the dramatic effect of his set of full sleeves and the extensive work on his chest. Because he was a biker, and this was in the early 1970s, the work was all black and gray, and with the beard, the leather, and the denim, he cut an imposing figure. I tugged on my mother's arm and said, "Wow, Mom, look!" She responded, "Wow, Angus, don't" and moved me over to her other side. It was all over from that point on—I had discovered something that would elicit that kind of reaction in my parents. While I wasn't inclined toward rebellion quite yet, that thought remained with me.

I came from fairly affluent roots. Kids at my grade school didn't even really contemplate going to the public high school. Instead, the only real questions were which boarding school you would attend and whether you were going to go beginning in 9th grade or 10th. I opted for 9th and went to Brooks School in North Andover, MA. Before they accepted girls, Brooks was the place you went if you got kicked out of Andover, a top of the line prep school, but now that it was accepting girls, its star was rising. It was a small school—300 students—that provided all manner of academic advantages, like one-on-one writing courses and courses in Latin and Ancient Greek. There are

disadvantages to being in a setting like that, though, primary among which, as far as I was concerned, was that it was very difficult not to get caught when breaking rules. To make matters worse, I never really favored wearing khakis and pastel Izod shirts or Topsiders, and especially not without socks. I was more the Black-Sabbath-tour-shirt-with-torn-jeans-and-long-hair type. We were few and far enough between that we were exceptionally visible, and when we smelled like we had been smoking grass, we didn't get away with it.

I learned many a painful lesson about the power of labels in my first two years at Brooks, especially when my advisor voted to have me kicked out of school in my third disciplinary committee meeting. Fortunately for me, the head of the music department came to my defense and I was given one more chance. Soon after returning from my week-long unscheduled vacation, I met a beautiful girl and we fell in love. She didn't tolerate my chewing tobacco or smoking; she didn't want me to get kicked out of school, so she kept me from drinking and smoking grass on campus. She never quite got me away from t-shirts, but I moved more in the direction of tie-dye and away from Black Sabbath. Thanks largely to her influence, I earned a new-found respectability and was actually elected a school prefect in my senior year, which meant I had to serve on and vote in disciplinary committee meetings.

Of course, once we got off campus, the rules lifted and I went back to being young and experimental. On one train trip home for vacation, as we always did, the Brooks students took over the last car on the train and christened it "The Roach Coach." We came on with our cases of beer, bottles of booze, and other recreational substances and, of course, boom boxes and guitars. On this trip, I was introduced to two albums that would change my life in profound ways: Jorma Kaukonen's *Quah* and Hot Tuna's self-titled live acoustic album. This was guitar as I had never heard it played before—subtle, complex, rhythmically astounding, and precise. As I tend to do with most things that grab my attention

this way, I collected everything I could that had Jorma playing on it, and I started looking for opportunities to see him play live.

Around this time, he was experimenting with solo electric work along with his standard acoustic repertoire, and I attended every show I could, taping a few of them for posterity. When I saw him in Boston, the crowd was a bit preppy for my taste, but his almost-shaved head, combined with the gold tooth and the tattoos covering his upper arms, made him look like a Nordic marauder, and that made things more interesting. When I saw him for the first time at the Lone Star Café in New York, however, everything changed. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that fully half the people in the bar for any of his sets were fairly heavily, and quite visibly, tattooed, and these were not your standard tattoos like panthers and Warner Brothers cartoon characters. These were incredibly intricate designs in what I would later realize was the Japanese style. Each image in the design merged into another, and all of them were connected with waves crashing behind them, wind sweeping through them, and fire enveloping them. This was a whole realm of artistic expression that I had never even considered possible. And, just to make it all that much more appealing, I thought it would terrify my parents.

I toyed around with the idea of getting tattooed for a couple years, but I didn't really have any way to get into the tattoo world, other than attending Jorma shows and Hot Tuna concerts. Then, in my freshman year at Denison University, my girlfriend at the time was given an assignment for her acting class; she was to do something she had never done before with someone she knew well. With a devilish look on her face, she popped in the door of the room we shared and suggested that we go get me my first tattoo. I broke out the Yellow Pages and we selected Marty Holcomb's shop in Columbus, Ohio. His advertisement had a cooler dragon than Jan's (i.e., the other tattoo shop in Columbus), so we picked up a six-pack of beer, thinking that you were supposed to get drunk to deal with the pain

of the tattooing process, and headed into Columbus. Much to our chagrin, his shop was not open on Mondays, but we resolved to go back on another day, and we stuck to our word.

When I showed up with my beer, Marty told me that he wouldn't tattoo me if I drank even one, and thus began my education. He asked why we had come to him as he was drawing up a sketch of the black rose that I wanted put on my hip. I responded that his ad was cooler than Jan's and he told me that, unlike Jan, he was not a "stencil man." Every tattoo that Marty did was freehand and unique. When he showed me the sketch I agreed, we settled on a price, and I sat down in the barber's chair. About 35 minutes later, I realized that tattoos really don't hurt that much after all and left with a grin on my face and instructions for proper healing of a new tattoo.

Over the course of the next year or so, I must have dropped my trousers at least once a week, on average, to show off my tattoo. One such time was at a Jorma show in Columbus at a nightclub called Stache's. Jorma played his two sets and then I waited for him to come out and get his equipment. When he came back out, I went up to the stage and introduced myself. I told him that I had gotten a tattoo and, before he could protest, I peeled my pants down and my boxers up to show him my black rose. He looked at it for a moment, actually paying it more attention than I thought he would, and said, "That's nice. Don't worry, you'll get more." At first I didn't believe him, but as time passed the temptation to get another one increased. Then, one vacation, I saw an advertisement for Jorma Kaukonen playing with his brother Peter at the Lone Star Café. I was not going to miss this opportunity because I loved Peter's album *Black Kangaroo* and had never had the chance to see him before. Those shows were a lot of fun because both brothers played well alone and together, and I started thinking that it would be a lot of fun to get one or both of them to play at Denison. I knew from reading an interview with Peter in *Relix* magazine that he lived in Des

Moines, so I called Information and asked for his number. The long shot paid off, and I contacted him and set up the first of three concerts of his that I would produce and promote at Denison.

Peter, it turned out, was also heavily tattooed, wearing work by some of the genuine mavericks and forerunners in the artistic explosion that began in the 1970s that fine art tattoo collectors call “the tattoo renaissance.” When Peter came to Denison, we talked tattoos and he educated me about what makes a good tattoo good and what makes a bad one bad. He had one of the first portrait tattoos—Jimi Hendrix on his bicep—and a variety of other beautiful black and gray work, much of it done by the late Greg Irons. When I asked him to whom I should go, he recommended either Henry Goldfield or Bill Salmon in San Francisco. Since Greg worked for Henry with Bill, I started off with Henry, who put a Gypsy on my leg. About two years had elapsed between tattoos.

During those two years, I had met another woman and we had fallen in love with one another and the music of Joni Mitchell at the same time, and now I started thinking about getting a portrait of Joni. I checked a few references and set up an appointment with Shotsie Gorman in New Jersey. He had a policy of refusing to do “Traditional Americana” designs like panthers, which indicated his serious commitment to tattooing as an art form. It also turned out that he was a big Joni Mitchell fan, so I paid him a visit and, while listening to *Court and Spark*, I got my first portrait. This time, only a year had passed between tattoos, and I was starting to realize what people meant when they said that “tattoos are like potato chips; you can’t have just one.”

More designs followed and they came more frequently with each piece. They also got bigger and eventually they started getting more visible. As my commitment to artistic tattooing increased, I started to think of myself as a collector. I developed close relationships with a number of world-class tattoo artists, most of whom worked on me at one time or another, and I began to conceive of tattoos in a different light. No longer were these fun

ways to scare parents or strangers on the street; they had become bookmarks in my life. I began remembering things in relation to which work I was getting at the time, and I began planning the rest of my body. What would be the back piece and when would I get it? What would go on my ribs? Would I “finish” my sleeves, or would I stay with short sleeves ending above the elbows? My artist friends helped me work these questions out. They helped me plan and they helped me design.

I guess the height of my activity as a collector was probably in 1992 or thereabouts. This was right around the time that, at Bill Salmon’s suggestion, the Swiss wunderkind, Filip Leu, tattooed a life-size portrait of Jimi Hendrix’s face on the back of my right thigh. Photos of that portrait, both in its unfinished black and gray and full-color incarnations, made their way onto the pages of newly-launched tattoo magazines *Skin Art* and *Tattoo Review*.

This portrait was the first of its size and it was the first color portrait, which makes it a really very important tattoo in the tattoo world. As word about it spread, one of my artists approached me about being in a book of custom tattoos. The photos that would ultimately be in the book would also be in an art gallery exhibit called *Forever Yes*. I posed for the photos and looked forward to seeing the book, even if it was unlikely that I’d be able to make the opening. I remember thinking that this was all very exciting, but also very normal, somehow. Tattooing and my involvement in it had become a standard, taken-for-granted part of my life.

Not long after that, Filip returned to San Francisco from Lausanne and put a blue portrait of John Coltrane next to Jimi. A couple days after finishing the Trane portrait—it still hadn’t healed completely—I drove a group of tattoo artists down to Hollywood for the first annual Inkslinger’s Ball. While there, I served as a gofer for the artists working in our booth. I answered questions for the people waiting in line to get work, I went out for coffee, and I hung around and tried not to get in the way. I also entered two competitions for most realistic tattoo and best portrait, both of which I won.

Now, I found myself featured in a variety of magazines for a fair amount of time, and I also became fairly active on the convention circuit.

As my commitment to tattooing grew, my commitment to my “day job” at Tower Records slid, and I was eventually fired for closing the store five minutes early and playing unapproved music in the store. Not really wanting to do much else at this point, I approached a friend of mine who had done a considerable amount of work on me about the possibility of his apprenticing me to become a tattoo artist. We toyed around with the idea for a while and I eventually gave it a try. The apprenticeship didn’t last long because it was interfering with our friendship, so I began a half-hearted search for employment, which really amounted to my hanging out at the shop, getting work done, and just passing time.

This period lasted close to a year, and somewhere along the line I had a memorable, if brief, conversation with my mother. Since I was spending all my time in tattoo shops, I broached the topic with my parents every now and then, but we had never really discussed my involvement in tattooing. Eventually, my mother asked me whether I had a tattoo. I toyed around with the idea of saying something like, “Well, it all depends on how you count,” but I wasn’t quite in the mood for picking a fight or freaking my parents out. The fact is that I had been trying to figure out a way to introduce them to the art form, figuring that if they saw it as legitimate art, maybe it wouldn’t bother them. As all this was rolling around in my mind, I opted for a potentially dangerous answer. “I’ll answer that question, and any other question you ever have about tattooing, if you understand that the answer that I will give will be complete and honest.” Return of serve, successful! The ball was back in her court. She thanked me for my candor and dropped the topic. I guess, much to my chagrin, tattooing really hadn’t become more acceptable, even though my right thigh was famous in the United States and Europe.

My parents were, by all accounts, relieved when, following a year of unemployment and hanging

out in tattoo shops, I asked whether I might return to live with them while I learned some marketable skills. We established rules of the house and I started learning typing and basic computer literacy. While I was living with my parents, a friend of mine got married in Bedford and had the reception at her mother’s house. They had a great band that played a combination of swing, blues, and rock and was immensely successful at getting everyone in attendance dancing. When they were taking one of their breaks, I approached their singer and asked, while pulling up the leg of my shorts, whether they knew any John Coltrane. He gasped and said, “No way! You’re the guy who wears that tattoo? This is the last place I would have expected to see that!” We talked tattoos for a while, and I began thinking that maybe tattooing had become more acceptable.

The next year, I headed up to Storrs, Connecticut for graduate school and to study with Clint Sanders, who had written the book on tattooing: *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. A couple years into graduate school, I met a woman at a friend’s Halloween party. Inhibitions relaxed by a few beers, I was convinced to show a group of people my tattoo collection, and she was intrigued. One thing led to another, and we began seeing quite a bit of each other. One day at the mall, however, she would not allow me to get close to her. If I approached whatever she was browsing, she would move on to something else, and her responses to my attempts at conversation were curt and dismissive. I tried not to be put off by her antisocial behavior and occupied myself with browsing and people watching, which can often be quite amusing when you’re heavily tattooed and it’s hot outside. After our shopping was done, I asked her what was wrong, and she told me she was horrified that I would go out in public wearing cut-off shorts and a tank top with all my tattoos showing. I tried to talk it out with her, but she did not change her perspective; she had been humiliated by being seen with a heavily tattooed man, even if, as far as I could tell, we hadn’t made much of a spectacle at all.

About a month later, we had tickets to see Deborah Voigt sing a Wagner program with the New York Philharmonic, including the famous *Liebestod* (or “love/death”) from *Tristan und Isolde*. I called the day before the show to settle our plans for the following day and was hit with an unexpected “dear John” tone of voice. “You’re not going to like to hear this, but I can’t go and I don’t think we should see each other any more. I just can’t stop thinking about what our neighbors would say seeing you mowing the lawn with all your tattoos showing.” It’s hard to argue with that logic. Clearly, despite my best intentions and attempts at educating her, tattoos may have been fine with the lights out and in private, but they were not okay in public. I moved on with my life and continued writing my dissertation; I presented papers and wrote articles about the ways that people become elitists in art worlds by looking at tattoo collectors and artists, and I figured that next time I encountered that kind of labeling I would not allow it to hurt me.

The next time, the labeling was a little different and, while it didn’t really hurt, it didn’t feel especially good either. I was presenting a paper on tattoo collecting at a small conference. When it came time for questions, my first question was from a person who wanted me to take my clothes off. When I told her that people stop listening to what you have to say when you get naked, everyone

laughed and we moved on. As the conference continued, though, I was asked repeatedly to show my tattoos. When I finally gave in at a post-conference party, a large semi-circle formed around me as people gasped, pointed, and offered compliments. Along with the compliments came the standard barrage of questions that make collectors shudder. “Didn’t that hurt?” “What are you going to do when you get older?” “What did your mom say?” “Do you regret any of them?” And, the worst of them all, “How much did that cost?” Well-meaning curiosity reminds me from time to time that I’m really glad that I can keep my tattoos covered.

It’s been a while since I’ve written anything new about tattooing—I’ve moved on to other topics for the time being—but I still encounter these issues once a year. In my deviance class, we have a segment on body modification and my students usually ask to see my tattoos. I bring in books of tattoos and tell them that they’re welcome to figure out which ones are me. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they don’t, but I doubt they’re likely to stop asking. In the meantime, it’s nice to maintain a little mystery, and again, I thank goodness that I’ve kept away from tattooing public skin. As the preceding pages show, judgments and labels come from the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times; it sure is nice to have some modicum of control over the topic.

### Discussion Questions

1. Tattoo collectors and modern primitives share some practices and differ in others. If you were explaining the world of “extreme tattooing” to someone who knows nothing about it, how would you explain the differences between two different segments of what seems like a unified world? Your answer should include a discussion of labeling the self and identity work.
2. Choose a clearly conformist social world or segment of the population. How is becoming heavily tattooed similar to it? What kinds of social activities and issues of definition of the situation and the self make these two worlds sociologically the same?

3. Some in the tattoo world think that tattoos should “just be tattoos.” How are modern primitives likely to respond to such a claim? How about tattoo collectors? Is one side more easily justified than the other? What does such a debate tell us about the processes through which we justify any realm of social activity?
4. Sociologically speaking, what makes a good tattoo good? Your answer should include a discussion of negotiated definitions of the situation and the social construction of beauty.
5. A modern primitive, a tattoo collector, and Edwin Lemert have decided that they are going to do a sociological analysis of your class. How would they do it? What features of your school make it similar to the world of “extreme tattooing”? What kind of definitions of legitimacy do you face in your class, and how do you negotiate those definitions? How do they affect your identities as a student, an individual, and/or a member of a family?