CONTEMPORARY BODY MODIFICATION
AMONG URBAN YOUTH IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

A Thesis
by
ERICA LYNN HAAS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

May 1998

Major Subject: Anthropology
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May 1998
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Body Modification among Urban Youth in Austin, Texas. (May 1998)

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This thesis is based upon field research concerning body art, specifically piercing and tattooing, of urban youth in Austin, Texas. The informants were interviewed on "the Drag," which consists of several blocks of Guadalupe Street next to the University of Texas. These young practitioners of body art incorporate designs and styles from punks and self-defined modern primitives, also referred to as neo-tribalists. These modern primitives, in turn, have been influenced by non-Western societies.

The Austin street youth do not intentionally incorporate or use non-European body art as modern primitives do despite similarity in body art form. The street youth in Austin do not intend to introduce non-Western meanings of tattoos or piercings into their body modification. Rather, the tattoos and piercings of this group in Austin communicate to other punks and street youth that they are a part of their community. To mainstream America they communicate another message: they are not a part of America's ideal society. These practitioners deny the existence of consequences of their permanent alterations. They are living in the present, not considering their future—almost as if none exists for these street youth.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is based upon field research concerning body art, specifically piercing and tattooing, of urban youth that I conducted in Austin, Texas during February and March of 1997. The informants were interviewed on "the Drag," which consists of several blocks of Guadalupe Street next to the University of Texas. These young practitioners of body art incorporate designs and styles from punks and Euro-American self-defined modern primitives, also referred to as neo-tribalists. (These terms will be discussed in detail in Chapter III.) These modern primitives, in turn, have been influenced by non-Western societies.

By interviewing and observing the youth in Austin, I sought to determine if these practitioners of body modification were incorporating only the aesthetic aspects of modern primitivism. Many informants displayed the color and styles of tattoos and placed jewelry in the same body parts as neo-tribalists. Whether or not the Austin street youth intentionally incorporate non-European body art or use body art as modern primitives do cannot be as easily discerned.

In the past few years, body piercing and tattooing have become increasingly popular among certain groups in the United States. Body

This thesis follows the style and format of Journal of American Folklore.
adornment among young adults--from nihilistic and profane punks to sorority sisters--has increased substantially in the last five years (Leo 1995; McShane 1995; Rogers and Crandall 1993). In the mid-1980s, an important movement began among practitioners of body art. Known as the modern primitive or neo-tribal movement, the trend involves Euro-Americans using adaptations of non-European art on their bodies. Participants in this movement use the terms "modern primitive" and "neo-tribalist" interchangeably. This movement influences the current use of body art by American street youth. Additionally, the body art of the youth often retains punk characteristics reflecting an anti-authoritarian or anti-social ethos.

Permanent alteration of human flesh by such techniques as tattooing, piercing, and scarification is a traditional practice in cultures throughout the world. Self-defined neo-tribalists or modern primitives (Myers 1992; Vale and Juno 1989; Wojcik 1995), a subculture of predominately Euro-American adults, borrow forms of body modification from the cultures of Africa to Oceania and apply the art to themselves. Tribal motifs and designs from these traditional societies have influenced flesh alterations of the modern primitive or neo-tribal movement (Berndt 1996). The modern primitives seek out the forms and meanings of non-Western societies and attempt to recreate both. For both tribal and neo-tribal people, body modification frequently serves as a contrived rite of passage combined with aesthetic appreciation.
Many young Americans, especially those under the age of 25, have become active in body adornment, particularly piercing and tattooing (Leo 1995; McShane 1995). This new generation of body modifiers typically alters their skin in a style reflecting neo-tribal and punk aesthetics.

Anti-authoritarian tattoos and society-shocking piercings assert punk ethos. The punk subculture intentionally alienates itself from British and American society (Hebdige 1979; Wojcik 1995). They are outsiders because they break the rules society sets for them. Their deviance in clothing style, work ethic and body modification is defined without their consent. In Becker's discussion of social deviants, he notes that "people are in fact always forcing their rules on others. ...rules are made for young people by their elders" (1963: 17). Punks, unlike compliant youth, revel in aggressive non-conformity to American and European social standards.

Like punks, modern primitives ignore modern society's expectations of the body. Attempting to experience idealized non-Western rituals and adornment, neo-tribalists decorate themselves painfully and permanently. They express commitment to body art through numerous piercings with jewelry specifically designed to fit in various body parts with the least amount of irritation. Modern primitives also wear large, black abstract tattoos representing the natural world.

Many piercings require a properly trained piercer. One prominent piercing company, Gauntlet, initially of San Francisco, sells
body jewelry, provides piercing services, and offers training seminars for piercers in which the proper use of piercing tools, extensive anatomy and risks of piercings are discussed. Often neo-tribal piercings are in places on the body, such as the genitalia, that require professional piercers and their equipment, such as autoclaves and specialized needles and clamps. These painful and care-intensive genital piercings separate neo-tribalists from popular, mainstream piercers.

Neo-tribal tattoos are predominantly black and often based on Oceanic peoples' traditions. American Indian motifs also are becoming popular, especially those from the tribes of the Northwest coast and the Southwest United States.

Vale and Juno (1989:4) assert that modern primitives use body art as a response to their inability to change the world. Their body alterations reveal the only power they do have, power over their own bodies. Kim Hewitt's recent book, Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink, discusses tattooing, piercing, and scarification as adornment, along with bulimia, anorexia, and non-decorative cutting of oneself. Hewitt does not discuss the modern primitive or neo-tribal movement specifically, but she does relate powerlessness to what she refers to as mutilation. Changing one's body by cutting, scarring, or purging demonstrates power over one's body (1997). Although many people feel powerless, modern primitives are unique in Euro-American society by choosing to express personal control though manipulating their bodies. Neo-tribalists strive to "incorporate critical tribal values,
rituals, and aesthetics into our dangerously empty, disposable modern nonculture” (Ward 1996:5).

Rarely do urban American teenagers pierce or tattoo to the extent of modern primitives, although most of the Austin informants had some form of body art that was influenced by modern primitivism. The bold black tattoo designs and body jewelry made accessible and visible by the growing neo-tribal exploration and appropriation of other cultures’ art allows for others not familiar with non-Western cultures to mimic the body art of these exotic cultures without understanding the meaning of the art.

Generally, the street youth do not have the large tattoos that require multiple sessions to complete. Also, they are different from neo-tribalists in that their piercings are often not stretched by insertion of larger and larger ornaments to the same extent as modern primitives. Although a few of my informants had stretched earlobe piercings, most no longer wore the jewelry or had ear plugs in place. This may be due to a lack of desire to alter the body to the extent of neo-tribalists or a lack of access to resources. The punk influence is evident with anti-authority body art and do-it-yourself procedures. For example, one Austin informant wears a self-executed tattoo denying Jesus as a saviour. Others wear anarchy symbols to express their distaste for orderly society.

Punks formed their own subculture in the 1970s in England. Composed predominately of Anglos of working-class families, this movement was a reaction to their frustration with society; they created
their own music, literature, and style of dress expressing their do-it-yourself attitude. They communicate messages to society through body art and clothing. Punks feel discarded and futureless; they are treated like refuse and literally wear this perceived status by using garbage bags for clothing and other debris, such as tampons, for accessories (Hebdige 1979:106-108; Wojcik 1995).

The people surveyed for this thesis are predominately Euro-Americans of both sexes in their mid-teens to early twenties. One male is an Asian-American and one young woman’s father is Afghani. At the time of the interviews, the majority were temporarily living on the streets of Austin, Texas. The informants are transient by choice, moving from city to city. Most of the people I interviewed panhandle, and a couple sell odds-and-ends on the street to make money. Austin is fairly accepting of the street youth and is recognized as a youth and alternative lifestyle city. The warm winter weather makes Austin an ideal location for transient adolescents from cold locales such as Colorado Springs and Minneapolis.

Many of the people I interviewed live on the periphery of society. The street youth refuse to be confined to lives dictated by current social expectations. These practitioners of body art did not have a permanent place of residence, as most were traveling through town and staying from a few days to a couple of months.

In this thesis, I will examine the body art of this subgroup of predominately homeless adolescents in Austin, Texas and compare it to that of the modern primitive, or neo-tribal, movement. I also will
discuss the non-European cultures from which the neo-tribalists borrow forms of body modification. The recent trend in body modification raises the question: do urban youth intentionally or inadvertently incorporate body art from other cultures into their traditions as do the neo-tribalists? The following interviews with and observations of the young practitioners of Austin, Texas will illuminate the reasons for and stylistic influences behind their body art and how they acquire it.
CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGY

Information for this thesis was obtained through interviews with and observations of adolescents and young adults in Austin, Texas, with visible body art as well as through library research. Informal discussions with Bryan, Texas tattoo artist, Michael C., clarified professional piercing and tattooing techniques before I conducted interviews with self-practitioners of body art.

I interviewed approximately twenty adolescents from the ages of 16 to 25 in Austin, Texas in order to understand the motivations and methods of their body art. I approached youth gathered on the streets, particularly the Drag, with publicly displayed body modification, such as facial piercings or tattoos on the arm, for open-ended interviews from February through March 1997. One informant did not have openly observable tattoos and piercings. She shared her body art with me after she overheard me interviewing a friend of hers about his tattoos.

The interviews were audio-taped upon assent or consent, depending on age of the informant. I also took photographs with permission to show style and color of tattoos, size and type of piercings, and placements of adornment. Many informants wished to remain anonymous, as many have had legal entanglements or are engaged in illegal activities. All of the informants were able to maintain their anonymity by giving their street nicknames, first name only, or by omitting their names altogether.
I asked informants to discuss the forms of their body art, where and when it was performed, and by whom. During these confidential, open-ended interviews, informants talked about the personal significance of the piercings or tattoos and why they decided to become permanently decorated. For the most part, these interviews were conducted on the sidewalks along Guadalupe during the day, both weekdays and weekends. Many of the informants were panhandling or selling odds-and-ends, flowers woven from leaves, or telling fortunes.

As a young person with tattoos and piercings myself, I am able to easily understand the procedures and terminology used by the street youth. I was able to establish a fairly trusting relationship with the informants because I am in their age group and share the same forms of body art. In one case, I had a professional piercer and friend in common with a woman I interviewed from Minneapolis.

I was not perceived by my informants as an authority figure foreign to their lifestyle. Because of my own experiences with body art, I did not annoy the informants with obvious questions asked by most observers, such as, “Did that hurt?” The ability to “phrase questions in a manner more comfortable and meaningful to informants” is one advantage of being an insider (Aguilar 1981:18). Informants might not have been so willing to share their body art with a researcher that has little first-hand experiences and knowledge.

Unlike Liebow, a Jewish anthropologist studying African American street corner life (1967), I did not appear as an outsider upon first glance. I am Euro-American, like the majority of the informants and
wear similar clothing--T-shirts and khaki shorts or cut-off overalls and Doc Martens boots--although mine are somewhat cleaner. My tattoos were often visible during the interviews, but never my piercings.

Previous to the field research, I had eyebrow and nasal septum piercings. Unlike the street youth in Austin, I gave into societal pressures and removed them for employment reasons. I briefly entertained the idea of repiercing my face prior to research to facilitate interviews. My loathing of people who pierce or tattoo because it is trendy put a stop to the notion. Piercing to increase rapport does not seem to me any less distasteful than piercing to be in the "in" crowd.

Through casual observation, only the cleanliness of my clothing and presence of a camera bag set me apart from this group. I was obviously an outsider at dusk. In the evening I drove back to my apartment or to the hotel in Austin. Although I have known squatters, I have never lived on the streets and have little first-hand insight. Although I share many traits (age, ethnicity, tattoos, piercings) with the informants, I am not a complete insider. I sleep in a bed and bathe frequently. I also have a job and college degree. Despite these differences, I feel that I have a relatively insider approach (Aguilar 1981: 25).

Despite their piercings and tattoos, I did not attempt to interview several boys that were taunting passers-by with obscenities. Several people that I approached for interviews declined; two stated that they did not want to talk because of recent jail time. One potential male informant declined with, "Fuck no, ma'am," an odd mixture of youthful
disdain and Texas politeness. Other people embraced the opportunity to express themselves. Four times, informants were comfortable enough to ask for or offer drugs, which were declined. When one informant repeatedly asked me for drugs I introduced him to another informant who expressed her need for drugs earlier that day. Although they still did not have any drugs, the male informant felt that I had helped him, enhancing our rapport.

I spent more time with the people that were the most talkative. I assume that the more time I spent with the informants made them more comfortable with me which often led to the casual mention of drug acquisition. Furthermore, people were more responsive to me on days when my tattoos were visible. A combination of informality and mutual forms of body art may have fostered the mistaken idea that I also would share their drug-using lifestyle.

Austin police officers stopped three interviews. In each of these cases, the informants were questioned by the police about panhandling. One individual was arrested in my presence. The officers arrested the individual even though I described what my thesis research was about and that the informant consented to an interview. The interview was interrupted so early that I only noted the woman’s facial piercings. For this reason, she is not included in the research results. The other incident with the police occurred while I was in the process of interviewing a couple. As the police approached, one of these informants told me she had previous warnings to stop panhandling. The officers requested their identification and informed
them that they would be arrested for panhandling if they had any outstanding warrants or previous warnings in Austin. At that time, I interjected that I had been interviewing them for the last 20 minutes and they had not been panhandling while I was with them. The police told me to leave. I left upon the officers' request and do not know if they were arrested, nor have I seen them since the incident.

Library research including both academic literature and popular media informs this thesis as well. Information on body art of non-European cultures was obtained through academic journals and books. The discussion of neo-tribalists and modern primitives is drawn primarily from books and magazines written by and for those participating in body modification. *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989) is highly regarded by those involved in body adornment. Numerous tattooing magazines consulted also contain articles and pictures of piercings. Popular magazines, such as *People, Newsweek,* and *Time,* along with newspaper articles were used to gauge mainstream acceptance and popularity of piercing and tattooing. I also collected Austin newspaper feature stories to understand public perception of the youth on the Drag. A review of the literature of each topic is included in the subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER III
MODERN PRIMITIVE AND MAINSTREAM BODY ART

Modern Primitives

Self-defined neo-tribalists or modern primitives (Myers 1992; Vale and Juno 1989; Ward 1996; Wojcik 1995), borrow forms of body modification from cultures of Africa to Oceania and apply versions of the art to themselves. This subculture is composed of predominately Euro-American adults whose flesh alterations incorporate motifs and designs from traditional tribal societies (Berndt 1996). Many neo-tribalists try to replicate native rituals associated with body art as well.

Review of Literature

Few scholars have written about modern primitives. One of the first, James Myers (1992), wrote an article on non-mainstream body art discussing piercing, tattooing, branding, and scarification. This article focuses more on the sadomasochist community, but includes some information about modern primitives. Although neo-tribalists alter their bodies in ways similar to other cultures, they do not intentionally emulate all aspects of non-European culture. Modern primitives want their bodies to look non-Western. In Myers’ research, he attended various workshops demonstrating body modification techniques during which he interviewed the participants regarding their motivations.
Most of the informants in this study reported practicing body modification for the pain, to build trust and loyalty between dominant and submissive partners, aesthetic or sexual enhancement, or shock value. According to his research, participants that become pierced, branded, or cut for a religious or mystical experience are attempting to mimic what they perceive as tribal.

*Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art* (Wojcik 1995) is an important addition to academic literature on contemporary body art. Wojcik surveys the field of body adornment, encompassing the temporary and permanent, from dress and body painting to tattooing, piercing, and scarification. Unlike most academic material on neo-tribalists and punks, Wojcik provides photographs of the informants to enhance the reader’s understanding of body modification.

Wojcik classifies the punks and neo-tribalists as folk artists who project nihilism, hopelessness, and self-transformation through their dress and body art. Wojcik provides a history of the punk movement and suggests that the incorporation of body art is a fundamental expression of punk ethos through self-inflicted tattoos and piercings representing social rejection. He also explores the subculture movements following the attempts to commercialize punk, from which the neo-tribal movement arises. Wojcik chronicles Perry Farrell’s (the alternative musician of *Jane's Addiction* and *Lollapalooza* fame) evolution from punk to modern primitivism. This in-depth examination of one individual’s body art is a convenient starting point to examine modern primitivism as an entire movement.
The majority of literature on modern primitivism and neo-tribalism comes from popular sources written by and for people idealizing non-European cultures' body art. *Modern Primitives*, by V. Vale and A. Juno, is indispensable among contemporary American body art enthusiasts. The 1989 RE/Search publication is the only comprehensive guide on body modification that examines tattooing, piercing, branding, and scarification. These forms are discussed through interviews with numerous, predominately Euro-American artists and self-proclaimed modern primitives and the interviewees' research on other culture's body art. Vale and Juno define a modern primitive as one who desires a more ideal society. According to Vale and Juno, modern primitives refrain from emulating the oppressive activities, such as clitoridectomies, of tribal societies (1989:4). Jim Ward, a well-known modern primitive, stresses that practicing body modification without complete and informed consent is akin to rape (Vale and Juno 1989:161).

Instead, neo-tribalists use body modification to enhance their lives by adding beauty, spiritual enhancement, or knowledge of bodily boundaries. According to Ward, modern primitives are not stealing culture, but attempting "to incorporate critical tribal values, rituals, and aesthetics into our [Euro-American] dangerously empty, disposable modern non-culture" (Ward 1996:5). Modern primitives perceive American society focused on individualism. The modern primitive or neo-tribalist assumes that he or she has the ability to transcend the American cultural void and understands these profound primitives.
Although Vale and Juno classify clitoridectomies as oppressive, some people that subscribe to *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (PFIQ), which frequently chronicles modern primitive activities, have requested correspondence with others that perform varying degrees of female circumcision (Pin Pals insert 1991; Pin Pals insert 1995). One of the few academic publications dedicated to discussion of female circumcision has been edited by McLean and Graham. Their 1983 report, *Female Circumcision, Excision and Infibulation: Facts and Proposals for Change*, extensively details the different types of circumcision performed on African and Middle Eastern women. Their purpose is to describe in detail the procedures, which illuminate the problems of safety and hygiene. McLean and Graham also advocate a proposal for change—essentially elimination—of these practices.

Popular tattoo and piercing magazines are another venue for neo-tribal aesthetic expression and a source of information for scholars. These magazines contain photographs of readers and artists with tribal tattoos. Although these sources encompass all styles of contemporary Euro-American tattooing and body art, articles or features on modern primitives are frequently included. *International Tattoo Art, Skin and Ink, Skin Art, Tattoo Savage, and Itchin' for Ink* are just a few magazines that present non-Western body art.

Modern primitives freely acknowledge their adoption of body art from tribal cultures. Pictures and essays about exotic cultures in the popular press have inspired enthusiasts. Fakir Musafar, an authority on body art through his research and own body modification, had his
interests in this art form aroused when perusing *National Geographic*. He took his name from a *Ripley's Believe it or Not* note about an Iranian, named Fakir Musafar, who sewed objects to his flesh (Vale and Juno 1989:7-9). Jim Ward, the creator of *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* and the Gauntlet body jewelry store in Los Angeles, was inspired to pierce himself upon reading an article in *Gentleman's Quarterly* about a sailor that acquired piercings in his travels (Vale and Juno 1989:159).

After initially reading about non-European body modification, many enthusiasts begin to look for more information on non-Western body modification. For example, Musafar, Ward, and Leo Zulueta (a well-known tribally influenced tattoo artist) have extensively studied art of other cultures. In *Modern Primitives*, they provide widespread examples of body modification from India, Japan, Southeast Asia, South Pacific, pre-Columbian America, and other cultures (Vale and Juno 1989). Ward has consulted anthropological sources to find out more details on placement of ampallang piercings (horizontally through the penis head) and notes the scholarly inconsistencies (Dear PFIQ 1993:8). In addition, Ward has consulted *Ethnographic Arts Publications* for more body art ideas (Ward 1996:5, Points of Interest 1996:8).

Another piercer from San Francisco, Angelique Llewellyn, traveled to Tanzania to get a first-hand glimpse of Maasai body art. She has even set up a fund to promote conservation of Maasai culture--specifically piercing. Llewellyn will accept donations in order to "teach modern life, and stress the importance of culture retention..."
(Llewellyn 1996:9-11) as she sees fit in the encouragement of traditional Maasai body art practices. The most common forms of non-European body art that modern primitives or neo-tribalists emulate are piercing, tattooing, and scarification. Because Euro-American youth rarely practice scarification, in this thesis tattooing and piercing will be emphasized.

Tattooing

Neo-tribal tattooing has become very popular in recent years. These modern primitives have studied Oceanic tattooing and incorporated and adapted the style and motifs of these cultures. Leo Zulueta, one of the most recognized and talented neo-tribal tattoo artists, has researched and collected the tattoos of Micronesia and as well as the Iban of Borneo (Berndt 1996; Kastle 1996:24-33; Pedro, personal communication; Vale and Juno 1989:96-100; Zulueta 1994). Zulueta's expertise in these patterns has made his tattoo designs highly sought after by primitivists interested in Oceanic art. Zulueta is preserving these tattoos on living archives, as many Micronesians no longer use the traditional motifs of their ancestors (Vale and Juno 1989:99). European, especially missionary, influence has altered Micronesians' aesthetic appreciation of tattoos. European religion has removed much of the magical and religious qualities of the tattoos.

Many American tattoo magazines have features describing exotic tattooing practices. There are varying degrees of scholarly credibility in
these articles. Some provide no sources for the information presented while others include bibliographies. *Itchin' for Ink* has a “Body Modification” section in each issue that describes non-European tattooing customs with bibliographies. For example, Guzman provides a succinct description of Ainu tattooing based on anthropological resources (1992:10-19). Felix Havoc acquaints the reader with Scythian tattoos in the subsequent issue of *Itchin' for Ink* (1992:7).

*International Tattoo Art* also uses citations in its articles on ancient tattooing. This bibliographic information enables one to verify the information and find more tattoo design sources. In an exceptional article by Allen and Gilbert (1996:8-17), tattooing in Polynesia is put into the historical context of the South Pacific. Allen and Gilbert show how migration patterns, colonial policies, and technology have affected motifs, methods, and persistence of traditional Polynesian tattoos.

Previously Allen wrote a chapter on Marquesan tattooing and European explorers’ reaction to this art form in *Tatootime*, a series edited by famous tattoo artist D. Ed Hardy (Allen 1991). She was an anthropology graduate student at the University of Hawaii at the time of publication while she was amassing a large quantity of data for her cross-cultural study of Pacific tattooing. Allen's academic background is evident in her detailed citations and illustration notes.

*Tattoo Savage* has a “Tribal Lore” section that highlights various types of traditional tattooing, both the social and aesthetic implications. Unlike the previous examples, Delio’s article in this section focuses on tattooing of some Euro-American ancestors: Celtic,
Viking, and Hungarian body art is briefly noted (1997:32-35). The reference section does not cite books from which Delio gleaned her information. Rather, it is a list of books of Celtic designs and runes to be used as tattoo design sources.

In addition to editing *Tattoo Savage*, Delio has also written a book, *Tattoo: The Exotic Art of Skin Decoration* (1995), in which she writes about tattooing. In the “Round the World” chapter, she describes mostly tattoos from Pacific islands, including Japan. Delio provides drawings by European explorers of tattooed natives prior to European penetration and modern islanders with ancestral and European-style tattoos. These drawings and other photographs offer designs for modern primitive tattoos. Like her article in *Tattoo Savage*, no references are given. Perhaps the authors that omit their sources on primitive body art do not expect the reader to question the integrity of the reports. Lack of references also makes it more difficult for the interested reader to supplement the material. Delio, like most of the popular press on tattooing, primarily discusses the aesthetic properties of tribal tattoos. *Piercing Fans International* and *Modern Primitives*, and other material written by their contributors, investigate aesthetic and social significance of tattooing.
Piercing

Body piercing, like tattooing, has been adapted from non-Western cultures by neo-tribalists. Jim Ward is considered one of the most active piercers today (Myers 1992:274-275; Vale and Juno 1989:159). Not only did he start the Gauntlet jewelry stores and the magazine, *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*, he also conducts various seminars instructing people proper in piercing procedures, as well as performing them himself (Myers 1992:274-278; Daddy Irwin Gets Pierced 1993:32-33). Ward also gives guest lectures to human sexuality classes at San Francisco State University (Ward 1995:6) and has documented some of his piercing practices on film. He pierced his chest in Fakir Musafar's video, *Dances Sacred and Profane*, in a staged recreation of the Native American sundance ritual for other modern primitives (Vale and Juno 1989:159-160). Ward’s magazine, *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*, also discusses piercing in non-European cultures. For example, one issue contains an essay describing the variations of Dayak ear stretching and includes several photos of the different forms (Oceania 1996:12-15). An article in the same issue teaches one how to properly stretch a piercing with minimal harm. This article begins with a brief synopsis called “The Ethnic Connection” of non-European cultures that practice stretching including the Cuna of Panama, the Kenyah and Kayan of Borneo, and Balinese women (Chance 1996:44).
Piercing and tattooing are frequently used interchangeably for various functions by Euro-Americans. However, traditional practices of non-Europeans are relegated to one form. A tattoo, piercing, or scar is used to signify an event; the forms are not interchangeable based on an individual's aesthetic preference. Many of the following Euro-American examples have been taken from letters to the editor in piercing or tattooing magazines and from the interviews in *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989).

*Aesthetics:* Piercing is often done for personal aesthetic value, either to enhance the entire body or to accentuate the beauty of particular body parts. Some jewelry placements enhance nipple sensitivity, clitoral or urethral stimulation, or add texture to the penis, which is assumed to increase pleasurable sensations during intercourse. Other piercings do not enhance physical perceptions. Facial piercings usually serve as an eye-pleasing accessory. What the wearer of body art considers as aesthetically pleasing will not necessarily agree with mainstream American society. The idea of beauty is often contradictory between the mainstream and neo-tribalists. As neo-tribalists are trying to become what they perceive as primitive or tribal, they are moving away from mass-produced, industrial society.

Many modern primitives, like Leo Zulueta, are impressed by the beauty of Oceanic tattoos. Those that acquire this style of design are often impressed with how the bold, black tattoos visually enhance the...
curves and muscles of the body. Piercings utilize body jewelry to maximize their bodies' beauty. In one case, a woman negates what she perceives as society's repulsion of female genitalia with her labial piercings.

"...I've felt that society wants women to apologize for their cunts - fish jokes, FDS and deodorant tampons, strangers feeling free to ask me if I'm 'on the rag'. Obviously the cunt is held in low esteem in America. My beautiful piercing does a lot to remind me that this is bullshit; that my cunt is a wonderful part of the holy thing my body is." (Dear PFIQ 1993:4)

Sexual Enhancement: Many forms of body art are implemented to enhance sexual satisfaction or sexual appeal. Jim Ward researched the Borneans' ampallang piercings (placed horizontally through the head of the penis) and incorporated this style in his personal body adornment. This piercing enhances pleasurable sensations in his penis during sex (Vale and Juno 1989:161-162).

The Prince Albert, a piercing that vertically penetrates the head of the penis, provides pleasure for the wearer and his partner. The stimulation of the Prince Albert to the urethra during intercourse was so pleasurable for Todd Bertrang that he bisected the head of his penis to intensify this stimulation (Todd Bertrang 1996:42+). Sherree Rose, a photographer and video artist who specializes in the sexual underground, praises the Prince Albert, "It's like a steel dildo--it's
incredible!” (Vale and Juno 1989:109). Rose also enjoys piercings that her “slave” wears. The rings enable him to show his trust in her, as well as serve as manipulation devices in their sadomasochist roles (Vale and Juno 1989:109-113). Another avid piercer maintains that the jewelry creates a bond with a partner because a secret is shared (Dear PFIQ 1993:8).

**Testing Physical Thresholds:** Piercing the body is also a way that some practitioners test their personal physical thresholds such as how much pain one can tolerate, how far the skin can stretch, or how much weight can hang from the skin before it tears serve as tests. Mr. Liftyo, who travels with the Jim Rose Circus, hangs weights and other objects from various piercings in his body. He can suspend a cinder block from his two nipple piercings. Another trick of his is to hang a full suit of clothes from a hanger dangling from his tongue piercing (Alfredo 1994:5-8).

Unlike Mr. Liftyo, most people test their limits for their own self-satisfaction, rather than an audience. Genesis P-Orridge, British musician and video artist, has a Prince Albert piercing (vertically through the head of the penis, through the urethra) because he was interested in pushing his own thresholds (Vale and Juno 1989:164-174). People that pierce to test their corporeal thresholds may be using the experience to exert power over their own bodies, when so many other situations are not controllable because they involve other people. Vale and Juno suggest that this lack of power instigates the quest for primitivism (1989:4-5).
Rite of Passage: The act of piercing, or jewelry insertion, may mark special occasions or memorable events. Paula P-Orridge, Genesis' wife, used the rings of former-lovers' Prince Albert piercings as love talismans. After removing the jewelry in her labia minora, Paula inserted her lovers' rings into her punctured labia, a single Prince Albert ring in three holes and two in her fourth hole (Vale and Juno 1989:173). Labia piercings have as a token of an important event been recorded by a women who had her labia pierced to celebrate the birth of her child (Dear PFIOQ 1993:4). Sharon, a senior piercer at Gauntlet, believes that piercing is like "the opening of a temple door. The temple is one's own body and the piercing is an opening to gain further insight into that temple..." (Los Angeles 1995:12). The act is a rite in which one learns to understand more about oneself. These rites designed by modern primitives frequently serve to make one distinct from non-pierced or tattooed individuals.

Body Art in Mainstream American Society

Tattooing in America moved primarily from the realm of military personnel or the criminal element to that of trend followers once celebrities such as Cher, Roseanne and Tom Arnold, Drew Barrymore, Johnny Depp, Christy Turlington, and numerous rock stars started to show their tattoos. This acceptance is fad-like in that the popularity of tattooing has appeared suddenly, gained quick acceptance, is fairly novel, and non-utilitarian (Aguirre et al 1993). However, due to the
permanent nature of tattooing, it will not be short-lived as with streaking, citizen band radio, or other fads. Tattoo removal is a high cost, multiple visit and often painful procedure (Hatt and Bell 1995).

Mainstream acquisition of tattoos is not traditional. The tattoos acquired by mainstream Americans are not passed down repeatedly by members of a fixed group (such as sailors, punks, prisoners, or yakuza members). Sudden tattoo fans are not using the traditional designs of sailors or the criminal element. They are not trying to adopt traditional tattooing designs from outside of their culture either. However, they may wear designs of other cultures when the tattooee selects an abstract design in the flash book. A tattooist compiles a flash book for his or her customers to pick tattoos. These stencils are original drawings, copies from tattooing magazines, or other art books. Often, the artist is unsure of the meaning or origin of the design when it is a copy of a design obtained from glossy magazines’ photographs.

Piercing of non-sexual body parts has also become more accepted by celebrities. Singer Joan Osborne wears a gold nostril ring, actor Drew Carey has his nipples pierced, and professional basketball celebrity Dennis Rodman flaunts multiple tattoos and jewelry. Navel rings have become very popular. Super-models Naomi Campbell and Christy Turlington both sported these rings on the runways in 1993, sparking mainstream interest (McShane 1995:D6). The semi-permanence of this body art makes it short-lived, thereby qualifying piercing as a fad. The popularity of tattooing and piercing has introduced the general public
to body piercing, lessening the shock of punk or neo-tribal piercings to non-practitioners.

Popular media frequently report tattoos as a fashion or fad (Kimmelman 1995; Leo 1995; McShane 1995; Rogers and Crandall 1993; Whitley 1993), or as marks of deviation, such as gang membership (Hatt and Bell 1995). Often when athletes have tattoos or piercings, they are represented as spirited rather than as deviants (Nevius 1995). The number of 1996 Summer Olympians with tattoos warranted quantification in a recent *Sports Illustrated* survey (McCallum and Holmes 1996). Charts with style, location, and number of tattoos illuminate athletic tattoo preferences.

Whole articles on tattoo artists, tattooed people, or conventions have begun to appear in Texas newspapers. The *Austin American-Statesman* highlighted a Pasadena artist and describes the process of tattooing (Bernstein 1996). *New Woman* "Modern Manners" segment written by Pamela Des Barres explores the author's tattoo collection and motivations (1995:56-57). Tattoo expos and conventions are occasionally given press coverage in Texas papers. Austin (Barnes 1995), Houston (Johnson 1996), and Huntsville (Koidin 1996) papers have printed reviews of tattoo exhibitions. *The New York Times* sympathetically memorialized Michael Wilson, the Illustrated Man, a carnival sideshow performer upon his death (McKinley 1996).

Tattooing has become so popular that it can sustain books devoted entirely to it, such as *The Total Tattoo Book* (Krakow 1994), *Tattoo: The Exotic Art of Skin Decoration* (Delio 1995), and *The Tattoo

Art books and magazines note and validate body modification as art. *Artweek* has several short articles on tattooing in the May 7, 1992 edition (Cohn; Merrill; Scarsborough). December's *Artforum* in 1992 included an article discussing tattooing and another covering piercing and tattooing (Torgovnick).

In 1992, an exhibit at the Bryce Bannatyne Gallery in Santa Monica focused on tattoos as art (Scarsborough 1992:16). Recently an exhibit of tattoos, both photographs and people in the flesh, was on display at the Houston gallery DiverseWorks (Johnson 1996; Thomas 1996). The book *Street Style* (Polhemus: 1994) was written to accompany the exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London from November, 1994 to February 1995. Several of the different styles described by Polhemus, such as punk (1994:89-93), psychobilly (1994:102), and skinhead (1994:69-71), incorporate forms of body modification, such as tattooing and piercing.

This new trend in body art has not escaped the eye of the legal system. Now that teens are emulating idols with intentionally marred bodies, parents are concerned that the permanent marks (or mutilation) will scar their children for life. Recent legislation in Florida requires a parent to be present for a minor to be pierced. This law also specifies new health regulations and licensing for artists wishing to tattoo or pierce (Branch 1996:6A). Assemblyman George Runner Jr. of Sacramento has introduced a similar bill in California that would make
piercing of a minor without parental consent a misdemeanor (Warren 1997:16A). Texas lawmakers attempted to ban piercing of those under 18 years, but this bill never made it out of committee (Altenbaumer 1997:15A). Some school districts, like those in San Antonio, Texas, have specifically prohibited the wearing of body piercing in public schools (Shannon 1997).

Piercing has also become a common subject for the popular press. Local Texas newspapers repeatedly insert small feature articles on piercing. Often the article briefly lists types of piercings, like lip, nose, navels, and interviews a few locals inquiring why they pierce (Green 1997:D6). Upon the publication of July’s Journal of the American Dental Association, which contained a study of oral piercings, an Associated Press article was run warning of the perils oral jewelry may inflict (Sharp 1997:A7). Most of the articles concluded with a “see a professional who uses sanitized equipment” public service-type message (Green 1997; Sharp 1997:A7).

Many of the informants in Austin do not follow the safety precautions offered in the media. They pierce with safety pins and operate with impractical and often unclean jewelry allowing the youth to flaunt the sterile mainstream that is appropriating the youth’s signature of alienation. Cleanliness is next to conformity. As one informant explained, “They're just stupid house punks. They act all tough, punk, and shit. But when it comes down to it, they fucking go home to shower and have regular food and shit.”
The mainstream practitioners are not attempting to incorporate tribal body art, as most are not even aware of the tribal connections to some forms they mimic. Often the significance of tribal tattoos to the native artists are not presented in the popular press. In contrast, neo-tribalists and modern primitives are dedicated to exploring the significance of body modification among non-Western cultures. Neo-tribal literature is not mass marketed, and one must take a more active role in finding neo-tribal or modern primitive material.
CHAPTER IV
NON-EUROPEAN BODY MODIFICATION

Most societies practice some degree of permanent or semi-
permanent body adornment from cutting off hair to fingers. Piercing,
tattooing, and scarification are the most common forms of altering the
skin. Body modification is prevalent in various forms in most societies
throughout the world, varying from permanent to temporary forms of
ornamentation. It can include the following: changing the shape of
bones, removal of bones, tattooing, scarification, both male and female
circumcisions, piercing, body painting, and changing hair styles and
color. People modify their bodies for aesthetic, ritual, prestige, and
medicinal reasons. A cross-cultural review of the literature pertaining
to body modification practices provides descriptions of these art forms
in non-European societies and illuminates the motives behind these
expressions. The youth interviewed in Austin, in turn, have taken
modern primitive rendering of tribal art and applied it to themselves.

This chapter will be limited to the examination of non-European
modifications of the flesh. Most of these examples are from the
ethnographic present; information is sketchy about the extent to which
these practices exist today. European missionaries, administrators, and
health workers have advocated the cessation of body art based on
European moral, political, and medical beliefs. Their pressure to
eliminate the practices has been so effective that elders in the society
are frequently the only ones to wear the marks of distinction, as with
the Bontok of the Philippines. In other cases, body art is still practiced. For example, the Maasai of Kenya still pierce their ears and wear ear flaps or plugs.

Although there are many different ways to alter the body, similar reasons are often given for changing the self, regardless of the method. People of some non-Western cultures use body manipulation to distinguish themselves from others, affirm group affiliations, show rank or status, make themselves more attractive, or as a marker of a rite of passage. Through changing the body, people can express ideas about the self or the community. An examination of non-Euro-American cultures' body modification illustrates particular forms of alteration and the motivating factors for such modification.

**Review of Literature**

Several recent books are dedicated to the examination of the body as art, varying from academic to popular. Anthropological studies examine the body and the significance of its adornment in non-European cultures. Sociological books that explore expression of the self through the body are also insightful. These books do not emphasize body modification, but examples of the alterations of the body are occasionally given (Shilling 1993; Synott 1993). Books and magazines written by those other than social scientists review "primitive" body art and how it is applied to the Euro-American body as piercings or tattoos.
It appears from a review of the literature that every ten years or so there is a resurgence of scholarly interest in body modification. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there has been a tendency for authors to combine the exotic with Euro-American types of body adornment. For example, Victoria Ebin, of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, published The Body Decorated in 1979. She provides a very detailed study exploring the various forms of body art, looking strictly at non-Western body art and not applying her research to contemporary Euro-American body art. Ebin has an abundant collection of photographs and illustrations to aid the reader in visualizing the extent of the body art she discusses. One peculiarity about the book’s organization is evident in the table of contents. The book is divided into chapters entitled: “The Mark of Cain”, “Symbols of Status”, “Ceremonial Decoration,” and “Tattoo.” This is confusing because tattoos can be used as tribal marks, as well as status symbols and the procedure of tattooing is often surrounded by ceremony. Other types of body art, like scarification or piercing, are not explicitly set apart. This organization makes it difficult to find specific information on body art if the reader does not already know its function.

Anthropologist Robert Brain’s similarly titled The Decorated Body was also published in 1979. Brain explores not only bodies deemed exotic by European standards, but also bodies of Europeans, an entirely different approach from Ebin. The Decorated Body is organized by art form (painted, tattooed, etc.) and the reason for the art (social, religious, etc.). Brain’s discussion of modification by non-Western
practitioners to illuminate why Euro-Americans alter the self is relevant when studying modern primitivism. He incorporates the study of self to make the body modification of non-European cultures seem less strange to European and American readers.

Arnold Rubin edited a diverse selection of body art essays in *Marks of Civilization* (1988). Unlike the previous examples, he has taken a geographical approach. Rubin arranged *Marks of Civilization* on the basis of region (Africa, Asia, Oceania, Native America, and Contemporary Euro-America). Like Brain, Rubin does not differentiate body modification on the basis of "Us" and "Them." This book gives an excellent survey of scarification and tattooing. It also contains two detailed articles on labret piercings, those that are placed between the lower lip and chin. Ebin, Brain, and Rubin's books often do not discuss when the art forms were practiced, how they have changed over time, or if they persist today.

Visible body modification can send messages about the self to the society he or she is a member of, as well as outsiders. In most non-Western societies, people modify the body to express association of the individual within the group. Kinship, status, lineage, or tribal affiliations can be ascertained by specific body marks. Altering the body also distinguishes humans from other humans, as well as humans from animals. For example, the Bafia of Cameroon use scars to symbolically separate themselves from pigs and chimpanzees. Maori women without upper lip and gum tattoos were regarded by their
contemporaries as having the red mouth and white teeth of dogs (Ebin 1979:23).

One of the most common reasons to mark the body is to show that one has completed a rite of passage, such as puberty, a successful hunt, or childbirth. Piercings, tattoos, and scars readily show the progress a person has made through life. Another factor is the aesthetic: to people of the societies that practice them, piercings, tattoos, and scars are pleasing to the eye as well as social markers.

Western scholars have written extensively describing various forms of body modification practiced throughout the world. In order to demonstrate the extent and variation of such practices, some of this scholarship regarding piercing and tattooing is summarized below.

_Piercing_

Piercing can vary from semi-permanent to permanent alteration of the skin. Small jewelry or brief periods of wearing the jewelry can leave little or no lasting marks. Unlike Euro-American habits of small, discrete ear piercing, many tribal societies have a predisposition for larger, more enduring symbols frequently striking Euro-Americans as exotic.

For example, the penis pin of Borneo is one of the best described piercings of male genitalia. Men of the Iban, Kayan, Kenyah, and some Punan groups in Borneo wear penis pins (Brown 1988:5-7, Brown 1993:400). The pin is usually inserted horizontally through the glans
penis, above the urethra. Horizontal piercing through the urethra and vertical placement are some variations of position (Brown 1993:399). Borneans employ natural and manufactured materials in the piercing process. Bones, bamboo, wood, brass, and even shear pins from outboard motors serve as the jewelry. A wood or bamboo clamp is used to drive blood away from the penis, which is believed to desensitize and reduce bleeding. A pointed object, wooden or metallic, is then driven through the penis into pre-drilled holes in the block supporting the penis. The operator then installs the pin (Brown 1993:399).

Ear piercing is a wide-spread practice throughout the world. The practice is prevalent in tribal and European societies. Generally, few variations of ear piercing are accepted in Euro-American culture. Small single holes on each earlobe for females are the traditional standard with a recent increase of cartilage piercings. The jewelry inserted varies from metal skulls and daggers to diamonds and pearls.

Within the last two decades in America, ear piercing has become more popular for men, as well as double-pierced ears for women. Despite the approval of this practice by Euro-Americans, ear plugs and lobe severing by modern primitives are still considered exotic and deviant by the general American public.

There are many examples of facial piercings described both in scholarly and popular literature. In the following instances, it serves as a rite of passage. For example, the Tchikrin of Brazil pierce ears of both male and female infants. However, only the male infant has his lip pierced and a string of beads inserted. As the boy matures, larger and
larger lip plugs are put in place of the beaded string. Changing the lip plugs is part of the ceremonial entrance into manhood. The plugs reach up to four inches in diameter (Brain 1979:179; Sanders 1989:8).

The Tlingit of the North Pacific Coast practiced another form of lip piercing exclusive to females. The Tlingit girls received a labret piercing at menarche (Jonaitis 1988:191). This visibly sets apart women from the girls.

The labret is an insert placed underneath the lower lip, usually in the center. The procedure was performed by the future mother-in-law. Jonaitis suggests that this ceremony served to remind the girl that she was an outsider and the piercer could not only inflict the pain of labret insertion, but also social pain if she dissatisfied her mother-in-law (1988:197-198). Upon introduction of European trade goods, the bone, stone, or wooden labret was replaced with small silver pins (Jonaitis 1988:203). Conversely, exclusively boys of North Alaska used labrets to signify their passage from boyhood to manhood (Driver 1961:449).

Other Native American groups practiced body piercing as well. Both sexes of all age groups of the Carolina Catawba, "wore a silver nose ring, often with a tiny silver heart dangling from it" (Merrell 1989:229). Driver notes that only men among the native tribes of the northwest (like the Tlingit) and southeast (such as the Catawba) North America and the people of Meso-America pierce their septa (1961:140-146).

Portraits of Native Americans are another way to discover North American body art. George Catlin and Randolph Kurz were popular 19th Century painters of Native American life (Utley and Washburn:
1977:174-5). In Catlin's portrait of Tenskwatawa (also known as the Shawnee Prophet or Open Door), he is wearing metal jewelry and feathers in his ears and his septum is pierced. His brother, Tecumseh, also has his septum pierced (Edmunds 1983:116). A painting of Corn Planter, another prominent American Indian, portrays him with a pierced septum. His ears also hold some metal ornaments, and the lobes are cut vertically. He also has large distended holes that do not completely sever the earlobe (Wallace 1972).

Many African societies utilize piercings as well. Leather ear flap earrings (figure 1) were worn by married women of the Maasai in Kenya (Klumpp and Katz 1993:211). These ear ornaments also aid in ethnic identification. Beadwork styles and color of the personal decorations maintained traits distinct to the Maasai (Klumpp and Katz 1993:195-221).

**Tattooing**

Tattooing has been practiced in various cultures for thousands of years and is still widely practiced today. Mummies from Scythia to Peru have provided concrete confirmation of this art's longevity. Archaeological evidence, like these mummies, and ethnographic data provide examples of the various cultures that perform tattooing.
Figure 1. A Maasai woman with beaded ear flaps. Photo taken by Beth Leech, courtesy of Lee Cronk.
The ancient art of tattooing is found in several parts of the world. Egyptian mummies of Hathor provide archaeological evidence of tattooing as old as 2,000 years B.C. Scythian "ice men" of the fifth century B.C. with elaborate animal tattoos have been found (Sanders 1989:9-10). The recent discovery of the 5,200 year old Tyrolean Alps "ice man" in the fall of 1991, revealed that he had tattoos on his back and behind his knees (Shreeve 1992:35), and there is also evidence that he wore an ornament in his ear for a substantial part of his life (Seidler et al 1992:457). Ancient South Americans were accomplished in the art of tattooing as well. Tattooed mummies dating to the first century A.D. have been discovered in Peru (Sanders 1989:9-10).

Unlike the practices of centuries past, ethnographers and other researchers can ask living populations why they alter their bodies and by what means. Tattooing is performed in various Oceanic, Asian, African, and Native American cultures. Some societies use tattoos to initiate new members. Marquesan Islanders needed tattoos to be a functioning part of society. Women could not prepare poipoi (bread) without their lace-like hand tattoos (Ebin 1979:47; Handy 1965:12; Mead 1969:74) and men were exiled if not tattooed (Ebin 1979:47). A person without tattoos in the Marquesas Islands was not culturally a Marquesan.

Moko, the facial tattoo of the New Zealand Maori, was deeply etched into the face to give a relief effect. Moko provided a symbol of rank and a way to enhance attractiveness. Before Maoris adopted written English, they would use the patterns of their facial tattoos as a
signature for European trade transactions. The moko also ensured entry into the afterworld (Brain 1979:58-60). Occasionally, those without the moko were tattooed posthumously (Mead 1969:76). Curving and swirling tattoos around the women’s lips made them look younger. This tattooing was often done just before they were married (Ebin 1979:84; Mead 1969:76). Arches tattooed on the buttocks Tahitian girls marked their pubescent transition (Mead 1969:77).

A blue tattoo over the lip distinguished Ainu women from their Japanese neighbors (Ebin 1979:36,52-53; van Gulik 1982:181-245; Peng and Geiser 1977:312,339). The Ainu are a distinct indigenous people of Japan. In the 8th and 9th centuries they were forced onto the island Hokkaido by the Japanese (DeVos and Wetherall 1983:12-13). The facial tattoo also ensured that the Ainu women would join their ancestors in the afterlife (like the moko) and would attract a mate (Guzman 1992:10).

This painful art was practiced strictly by women; girls were tattooed by their older female relatives. The facial tattoos were started near the onset of puberty when a tattoo was placed over the top lip. Prior to marriage, the entire tattoo circling the mouth had to be completed (van Gulik 1982:211-214). Obsidian tools or a knife was used to cut the flesh, which was then cleaned out with a birch bark solution. Soot was then applied to the wounds for permanent staining and the wound once again treated with the birch bark concoction (van Gulik 1982:188-190; Guzman 1992:10). The Ainu tattooing has diminished as Japanese discrimination and their program of
assimilation have flourished (Discover 1989:12-13; Ebin 1979:52-53; Guzman 1992:19).

Clinton Sanders' 1989 Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing explores the body art of tattooing exclusively. Sanders primarily investigates contemporary Euro-American and Japanese tattooing. Cross-cultural references to body modification in general are provided in the introduction. Sanders explores the well-known Japanese tattoo form, Irezumi, which covers the entire front and back of the torso and down to the knees and is worn by both men and women. The arms of the tattoo suit are like those of a short sleeve shirt. A tattooed Japanese person who has this suit permanently etched into the skin is never naked. The practice of Irezumi, was very popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when sumptuary codes prohibited the commoners from wearing fine clothes. Tattoos provided private raiment when commoners could not wear the same cloth and colors reserved for the elite (Brain 1979:62; van Gulik 1982:83-84). Contemporary Yakuza of Japan still practice Irezumi. Like Japanese women, other Asian women such as the Bontok Filipinos (figure 2), tattoo for the sheer beauty (Vale and Juno 1989:138-140).

Tattoos also have protective or curative properties among some societies. The women of Yemen use tattoos protect themselves from the evil eye and infertility (Sanders 1989:10-11). One Ojibwe woman maintained that crosses tattooed on her cheeks prevented toothaches (Driver 1961:398). Cree women tattooed circles on their cheeks to deter
Figure 2. A Bontok woman with traditional geometric tattoos. Photo by Ty Matejowsky
headaches. The same design, or dots, allegedly stopped rheumatism when placed on the wrist or finger (Light 1972:6).

The Chippewa, a Native American tribe, also known as the Ojibwe or Anishinabe, tattooed to memorialize transitional periods in a boy's life prior to European dissuasion of permanent imprinting. Boys became men during their naming ceremonies, at which time they received tattoos to commemorate the occasion (Light 1972:12).

Native Americans enjoyed tattoos for their aesthetic value. Like the Maori, Cree women used tattoos from their lip to chin to enhance their beauty. The Cree used vertical linear patterns instead of the flowing, curling Moko (Light 1972). A Mohave tattooer chose the design that he felt best enhanced the beauty and suited the client's chin (Taylor and Wallace 1947:4).

Explorers' journals provide descriptions of native populations and their body art. Anthropologists, sociologists, and others in academe regularly describe and discuss forms of altering the body and motivations for doing so. There appears to be a trend among scholars to discuss the exotic and compare our body modification with theirs. This helps to demystify different cultures that practice body alterations that seem so strange to many Euro-Americans. Comparing Western corseting, rhinoplasty, and orthodontia puts body alterations of Africa, Oceania, and North America into perspective for Americans that overlook the worldly connection of our own body modification. Recognizing Euro-American alterations can make other cultures' habits less strange or absurd. Conversely, examining body art of other cultures
validates the study of contemporary Euro-American body modification and gives some insight into contemporary motivation for these practices. Examination of this material can illuminate motivations and styles of the body modification.

The reasons for changing the body vary in as many ways as the forms. Changing the body can distinguish people from each other or from non-humans. It can also be a form of expressing aesthetic values and making oneself more beautiful. Body modification is used commonly in rites of passage. Physically changing the self can show the changes of the social self. Permanent marks show a permanent change in social identity. Through the examination of body modification within its cultural context, one can see how the individual relates to society and what events in the individual's life are considered important. By understanding the purpose for other cultures' alterations of the body, we can try to understand our own.
CHAPTER V

BODY ART OF CONTEMPORARY AUSTIN YOUTH

Most of the interviews for this thesis were conducted on the Drag in Austin, Texas from February 22 to March 28, 1997. I interviewed the two exceptions at the Barton Springs in Austin. Informants, who were predominately Euro-American, are discussed below in the order that they were interviewed. Several of the informants wished to remain anonymous and the others gave either their first name or nickname. References to drug use in these interviews are omitted from this section and presented without the informants' identity in the following Discussion and Conclusion chapter. The style of body alteration, motivations for doing so, and age at initial modification are explained in this section and can be seen in the photographs, which were taken with the informants' permission.

These informants have the same popular identity as those urban nomads in Spradley's study of Skid Road inhabitants continually jailed for public drunkenness. The Austinite street youth are seen by outsiders as failures, unpredictable, criminal, and lacking of self-control (Spradley 1970:66). Society tries to ignore their presence and finds them undesirable because they do not conform to the larger American definition of a normal lifestyle. The street youth visibly reject American norms with their tattoos and piercings, simultaneously asserting fellowship in this street community.
The Drag

The Drag is several blocks of Guadalupe Street across from the University of Texas. It is lined with coffee shops, trendy clothing stores, bookstores, and a pedestrian mall for street vendors. During the day, students, professors, university staff, shoppers, vendors, and homeless youth share this space. Occasionally, a Hari Krishna group marched along the sidewalk, playing the drums and cymbals while handing out peanut butter cookies wrapped in Saran Wrap to the panhandlers and others squatting on the street. Twice while I was on Guadalupe, a van pulled up with free clothing. Before it could properly park, all of the street people made a mad dash to the van for handouts. Within minutes, all of the clothing was gone.

As night falls more homeless people, of all age and ethnic groups, congregate on the Drag. Because this area is poorly lit, I left as soon as the sun went down. I did not feel my safety threatened during the day; however, I felt incredibly wary after dark. For this reason, all of my interviews were initiated during the day. Only once, while spending the afternoon with Nicci and Billy, did I stay through dusk.

Tattooing and Piercing Processes

In order to gain a better insight into the Austin youth’s body modification, some tattooing and piercing terms need to be clarified in advance. Tattooing practices vary from homemade to professionally
acquired. Two items are needed to produce a tattoo: some form of dye and an implement to insert the colorant under the skin. There are numerous variations in equipment, as well as in the procedure, to execute a homemade tattoo.

India ink is the most common medium used to color a tattoo. Other informants reported using ball point pen ink and a mixture of ash, shampoo, and pen ink. These three forms of ink have been successful at least once for the tattooist. However, there have been complaints of tattoos "growing out" or "not taking." This happens when the ink has not been inserted deep enough into the skin, when there is an allergic reaction to the ink, or an infection results in ink blurring.

Needles and stick pins are the most frequently employed ink delivery system. Razor blades and safety pins work, too. There are two different processes used to push the ink into the skin. The first requires thread, fishing line filament, or similar material. The needle is threaded and saturated with ink. Then the operator punctures the skin and pulls the inked thread under and out of the skin. Done properly, the colorant should be left behind. The thread is resaturated and the procedure is repeated until the desired pattern is achieved.

The second method does not weave the dye underneath the skin. Instead, the skin is cut and the colorant is rubbed into the skin. After the skin heals, the desired design should remain. Usually, this entails poking holes very close to each other in the skin with a pin or needle, wiping off the blood and covering the wounds with the ink solution.
Other operators utilize a razor. The skin is sliced and then ink is rubbed into it. One must wait until the wound heals to determine if the tattoo is desirable. Shallow cuts and pokes will not hold ink, leaving no marks behind. Excessively incised cuts will leave scars, possibly too severe to rework the tattoo to form a coherent design. Infections of the tattoo can also lead to unintended scarring.

Professional tattoo equipment is readily available to the public through mail order. All tattoo magazines carry advertisements for electric tattoo guns and specially formulated hygenic ink. Owning and using professional equipment does not make a professional tattooist or tattoo. Professional tattoos are executed for money by a person with training, usually through an apprenticeship. A professional tattooist will have a shop for clients, as opposed to tattooists that work out of their homes.

The terms tattooist and tattoo artist are frequently used interchangeably. However, I use the term tattooist as a person who uses professional equipment and applies the design with a predrawn stencil or flash. A tattoo artist uses the same equipment; however, he or she can create custom designs and needs not depend upon other artists to create the flash. Lately, with the increase in piercing popularity, tattooists and artists provide piercing services as well.

Piercing is relatively easy compared to tattooing for the do-it-yourself inclined. One needs a device to puncture the skin and an ornament to fill the hole, which are readily available. Many use sewing needles and jewelry designed for the ears, often hoops. Several of the
informants in this study purchase or barter for materials designed for body piercing. Some tattoo shops carry the jewelry and needles or one can order the supplies through several mail order outfits.

Body piercing jewelry is usually made of surgical stainless steel or niobium. The hypoallergenic quality of these metals make them an ideal choice. An experienced and well-equipped piercer will use a pennington forceps to pull the flesh taut before the operation. The tips of the pennington forceps are hollow to allow the needle to go through the pulled skin. This facilitates accurately placed piercings.

When another body part is in close proximity, a cork is placed behind the skin to be pierced to prevent damage to other areas. Special needles are manufactured with very sharp points, and most importantly, they are hollow. This allows the piercer to insert the jewelry through the hollow needle while it is still in the flesh. As the needle is pulled out of the skin, the jewelry slides into place. Due to the strength of the metal, the piercer will close the ring with jewelry pliers.

Professional piercing is not as easily defined as tattooing due to the newness of piercing by Euro-Americans. Most piercers have not learned through apprenticeships, as none are readily available. Many must rely on trial and error on their own bodies and those of their friends before modifying a client. I use the term professional to distinguish those piercers that have attended the few seminars available on piercings, use autoclaves for sterilization, and have a place of business. Non professional piercers buy the needles and jewelry and
pierce acquaintances in non sterilized settings. Their equipment does not need to be specifically designed for body piercing.

*The Informants*

Angie is a 22 year-old female that spoke so quietly that she was nearly whispering (Figure 3). She was the first person I interviewed for this thesis. I introduced myself to Angie as she was sitting on the sidewalk of Guadalupe watching passers-by. I approached Angie and explained that I was conducting research on body modification of street youth in Austin. After explaining my goals and assuring her that only her first name would be used, Angie agreed to an interview. She first asked me about my piercing experiences before she divulged any information on her own. Her first piercing was done at age 13 when an acquaintance pierced Angie’s nipple. She did not plan on this piercing; she was drunk at a party and woke up with the jewelry in place. She removed it shortly thereafter because, “It kinda freaked me out.” Her other piercings include her lip, nasal bridge (between the eyes), and tragus (the small bump of cartilage of the ear directly above the lobe) (Figure 3). Angie repierced her lip on three different occasions because she would remove the hoop when the puncture became infected. After healing, Angie repierced her lip herself each time with “cheapie Wal-Mart jewelry” because she could not afford the jewelry made specifically for body piercing. However, Angie did use the services of a tattooist for her tragus. A piercing gun, such as those used by mall ear-
Figure 3. Angie. Note her nasal bridge and lip piercings and skeleton tattooed on her hand.
piercing boutiques, was used for this cartilage piercing by a professional tattooist friend without charge.

Angie wears one tattoo—a skeleton on top of her wrist and hand (Figure 3). She says that her parents have not been too surprised because, "I've [had] so many different colored hair and weird stuff so they're used to it." At one job, the employers required her to remove her piercings at work. Angie does not believe that people discriminate against her due to her piercings. Rather, the adverse reactions are due to the way she dresses in general and that she is homeless. For example, Angie sadly reports that "homeless kids aren't allowed to use the bathroom anywhere." Angie's response to why she started piercing: "I don't know, I just, I like to be neat to look at I guess (laughs)." She acknowledges that it is not as fun anymore since it has become so trendy and it is not as distinguishing as it once was. Despite body art popularity, Angie plans to keep on piercing. "If it's pierceable and I've got the money or the jewelry, I'll get it pierced. And tattoos, I want to be covered in tattoos." Instead of relying on someone else, Angie would like to purchase her own tattoo gun. She believes she has the creative talent for tattooing, and doing herself would be free.

I met Shaheen, a 24 year-old female with double nostril rings (Figure 4), while interviewing Angie. Shaheen approached me while I was interviewing Angie and asked what was happening. After I explained that I was conducting research on body art, she pointed out that she had her nostril pierced twice, at which time I inquired if I
Figure 4. Shaheen wears two nostril rings.
could interview her. Shaheen eagerly agreed and then requested to take pictures of me photographing Angie.

Shaheen spent a couple of years in the Navy stationed in Italy. While there, she wanted to get her nose pierced, but she could not find a piercer. When she returned to the United States, she knew she would be discharged and decided if "I was going to get kicked out [of the Navy] anyway ... I'm just going to get myself pierced." Shortly thereafter she had her nostril double pierced. Shaheen did not elaborate on why she was being discharged from the Navy, and I did not feel that it was appropriate to ask.

In the future, Shaheen would like wear a labret piercing. She has resisted the temptation to pierce it herself and will wait until she can afford to buy jewelry specifically made for this location. The proper jewelry is made with a flat back so as to prevent the ornament from cutting the gums. Shaheen has attempted to tattoo herself with India ink; improper depth of the ink caused it to slowly heal out. Shaheen stated that she recently wanted to tattoo herself but could not find any clean razors. Shaheen is very conscientious about preventing HIV or other disease contamination. She does not "want to die young just for a tattoo." As with the labret piercing, Shaheen would like to get a tattoo when she has the money. "I won't be like one of those people that picks off the wall. It's going to be Arabic. Some good, powerful word that has good karma. It's got to mean something. ...I don't want everyone reading my life story." In the future Shaheen would like to tattoo herself since she is an artist.
Shaheen’s parents have different opinions on her piercings. Her mother, a Euro-American, disapproves, while her Afghani father does not mind. She also has experienced trouble finding work. Shaheen refuses to take the jewelry out for any employer; through military service, Shaheen maintains that she has “already worn a uniform long enough.” This reaction might also be due to her closely cropped hair. Being taken seriously is hampered by her piercings, especially in the South. She reports that in a Virginia Navy town the sailors treated women with tattoos or piercings like trash. Furthermore, “I get called dyke a lot. It’s funny because it is true.” Shaheen further reflects that piercings at one time signified one was a lesbian, “In this society, since it is a patriarchy, you can’t be obvious. So, you need this symbol that says ‘hey, I’m gay’.” Shaheen asserts that the popularity of piercings among sorority girls and the mainstream American culture, in general, has taken the meaning away. When so many people who are not gay wear body piercings, the rings can no longer make a statement on sexual orientation. Shaheen is the only person that associated sexual orientation with piercing. I have not found any other references to nostril rings from gay or straight piercees as an indicator of partner preference. However, it was common in the 1980s to associate a single earring in the right lobe to signify gayness in men.

While walking down Guadalupe on a drizzly February afternoon, I was stopped by a young man in his twenties asking if I had heard of the Zyndike Community, in which they were creating what he described as “a whole new culture” based on a strong sense of community, self-
sufficiency, and cooperation. Raven, a 19 year-old female with a single nostril ring, was also promoting the Zyndike community and literature with this man.

At 16, Raven went to a tattoo shop in Maine and had her nostril pierced. Age was not an issue for her because she had emancipation papers, stating that she was her own guardian. Raven’s concealed, small tattoo was done at the same age. Raven felt rebellious and always wanted body art. She attributes MTV as her motivating source. In the future, Raven would like her eyebrow pierced. Before it is done, she needs to have a big change in her life or the piercing will not signify an important event, rendering it ineffective. She also would like to have a backpiece, a common term for a tattoo that covers a majority of the back. Because Raven lives in the Zyndike Community, the commune-like group near Austin, she will not have to use money for the artwork. Two tattoo artists who reside there will share their talents with other Zyndike members.

Baldy, a 19 year-old male with a pierced nasal septum, was leaning against the wall of a record store when I approached him. Unlike other informants, Baldy is not homeless. Although he was interviewed in Austin, he lives in College Station, Texas, where he is a Blinn College student. Despite his choice of nickname, Baldy has black, nearly shoulder length hair. Last year, Baldy had his septum pierced at Ink Street, a short-lived tattoo shop in Bryan, Texas.. Because he was 17, Baldy altered his driving permit to reflect that he was 18 years old. He may have been clever enough to change his birthdate, but Baldy had
more difficulty in understanding me and conveying his answers than any other informant.

Baldy chose Ink Street because he heard it was cheaper than other tattooing and body piercing places in the Bryan/College Station area. Although he previously wanted a piercing, Baldy went through with it on this particular day because he was in a bad mood. He assumed that the piercing process would make him feel better. Baldy paid $30 for the piercing that he hoped would "cure my bad mood."

Neither his parents nor his high school authorities asked Baldy to remove the jewelry, although they did not care for it. When he worked at a Subway Sandwich Shop, Baldy replaced the ring with a "I don't know, some kind of u-thing type of metal." This horse-shoe shaped piece of jewelry he described is called a retainer. Once the jewelry is inserted through the hole in the septum, the retainer is rotated so that the ends point up, into the nasal passage, hiding it from view. I thought it unusual that Baldy did not know the name of this piece of piercing equipment, especially when he purchased and now utilizes it. I expect a person to be more knowledgeable about semi-permanent alterations to their body. At the time of our interview, Baldy was just hired to work at a library on the Texas A&M campus. Baldy believes that he can wear his standard ring there, although he did not have the ring inserted during the interview with the library staff. Incidentally, I saw him at the library several months later and he was not wearing any visible jewelry. At the time of the interview, he had no plans for further body art.
Troll (Figures 5, 6) was the most animated person I interviewed. He gestured wildly at passers-by when asking for money and would increase the magnitude when reaching the climax of his story. I introduced myself to Troll while he was panhandling on the street outside of a video arcade. He is 25 years old with a safety pin pierced through his nostril (Figure 5). Troll was squatting in his filthy tartan patched pants and camouflage fatigue hat when I approached him (Figure 6). He excited easily when relating how people treated him, peppering his speech with obscenities as his glassy, blood-shot eyes scanned the crowd. Troll was very amiable and asked me as many questions as I asked him.

He previously pierced his cheek, nipple, side of his lip, and navel. Troll was 14 when he shoved a safety pin through his cheek. He enjoys the pain of piercing as well as the jewelry. "It's beautification, like an art." Troll utilizes piercing as a sexual enhancement. A former girlfriend in San Francisco performed his current nostril piercing. "This girl is fucking wild. She's pierced me, fuck, just for the act of piercing. She was a bad-ass chick. Fucking wild domination. Fucking craziest nymph, but she was cool though. I fucking liked her, but she would get out of hand like with nipple clamps."

Troll's other piercings were taken out by the police when he spent several weeks in jail for assault and battery. With his navel, nipple, and lip rings removed, Troll reflected that the only thing the police cannot take is ink work. Like Angie, he has faced discrimination based on his dress and piercings. Recently, he was not admitted to a free seminar
Figure 5. Troll pierced his nostril with a safety pin and temporarily tattooed "LICK THIS" on his fingers.

Figure 6. Troll and James discuss panhandling success.
open to the public on the University of Texas campus. The security personnel would not offer a reason for prohibiting Troll from attending; he believes the security personnel did not like his looks. He also feels that police assume he is likely to cause trouble based on his looks.

Troll has made arrangements with a friend with a tattoo gun. She will tattoo a spider web on his neck in exchange for “five bucks and a bunch of beer.” Troll planned on being tattooed on the street and invited me to watch the event, which was to occur the next day. I declined because I had not planned to be in Austin the following day, and I did not want to encourage him to permanently mark an area he would have a hard time hiding later. Furthermore, the high possibly of Troll acquiring an infection from the procedure made me uneasy.

Troll expects to have more piercings done, but he is waiting for money and sterilized equipment. “I always wanted to have my ears done all the way up, but jewelry is expensive and all. Unless you find other friends or go to fucking shops or whatever and make an arrangement. And, fucking, you get some good piercings with good fucking sterile work and a choice if you’re lucky.” Although Troll loves the ladies with piercings, he does find the eyebrow piercing to be “tacky, it just doesn’t look right.” In subsequent visits to Austin, I always located Troll for conversation.

Once, Troll invited me to a party the following night. I declined the invitation with the weak excuse, “I’ve got to go to work.” “Fuck work, fuck that shit. You should hang out, man. It would be all scientific and shit for you,” was Troll’s predictable answer. Truly, work
was not a problem—I had the weekends free—my insecurity was the problem. I was afraid to be at a keg party after dark with any man I met on the street. Driving home for two hours after a party did not seem safe either. Elliot Liebow was able to go to parties and drink with his informants in his study *Tally’s Corner* (1967: 232, 247). In hindsight, I wish I had followed his methodology. It would have given me a better understanding of the social interactions among the street youth. The several times that I saw him since the initial interview, Troll was without the spider web tattoo that he intended to receive and repeatedly told me what a “fucking kick-ass party” I missed.

James, (Figures 6, 7) from Oklahoma City, is 25. He is a friend of Troll that I interviewed after Troll introduced us. In contrast to Troll, James is quiet. The only personal topic he brought up, outside his tattooing and piercing, was his daughter. He mentioned how beautiful and smart she is. James’ daughter was not present at the interview, nor do I know where she was or her age.

James has nine tattoos that are predominately black and grey and one septum piercing. Some of his tattoos include (Figure 7): a grey hand coming out of the earth with the word “RISE” in red on his right upper arm; a moon with a menacing face is directly above the hand. Below the hand tattoo, James has the outline of flames tattooed on his forearm. On his left arm, there is a tattoo with the anarchy symbol and “RAGE ON” printed in it. James mentioned that he had a tattoo that had his daughter’s name incorporated into it. He did not indicate which tattoo this was or her name. When I asked where it was, he
Figure 7. James has both professional and homemade tattoos. Note the sun design executed by a pin and India ink.
smiled and said "on my body." Below his elbow, there is a black tattoo of crooked lines which is the most likely one to hide his daughter's name.

He has another tattoo on his arm composed of geometrical shapes positioned underneath the possible name tattoo. James has two tattoos on his chest: An anarchy symbol is fading, probably due to its homemade nature. Another black tattoo is centered on his chest.

James was 15 years old when he tattooed an individual anarchy sign on his arm. At first, James did it to be "cool," as most of his friends have tattoos. Later, beautification became a motivating factor. Tattoos and piercing help James to deal with annoying and troublesome experiences. "The act of tattooing is just being tattooed. Nothing else is going on, just tattooing." James stated that the most special tattoo is his child's name. Half of his tattoos have been done by professionals, the rest were inked by friends. While in Oklahoma City, James relied on his friends' talents because tattooing is illegal there. He did consult a professional piercer for his septum. James would like to have a professional perform a Prince Albert piercing as well.

The first anonymous female that I interviewed was 17. Originally from Washington D.C., this girl had her nipple pierced eight months ago. She was sitting with Troll and his friends when she volunteered this information. She was quite chatty and was very anxious to let me know that, like those around her, she had some form of body art as well. I would have never thought to inquire if she had piercings or tattoos since none were visible.
The procedure was done while she was "kind of drunk" at a tattoo studio for $40 by her boyfriend. Because of their relationship, he temporarily dispensed with the law prohibiting piercing of a minor. This adolescent seemed quite proud that she was involved with an older man, with piercing skills to boot. The informant emphasized that experiencing the thrill was the main motivating factor for the piercing; she also thought piercings "I don't know, I guess it looked neat."

The informant did not plan to tell her parents about her nipple piercing. While visiting her family doctor, the informant's mother inadvertently found out when the doctor, in the presence of her mother, asked the informant if her nipple piercing hurt. This shocked her mother greatly. The informant plans to have a labret and septum piercings done next. She has already purchased the jewelry. It has not been inserted because she needs to sterilize the jewelry first and, I assume, the needle.

Felix is a 21 year-old woman from New York and Boston. She has long dyed, feasibly natural red hair wrapped in a sparkly scarf. She had a brown dog leashed at her side while she was reading a book as well as asking for food with her friend, Chris, on Guadalupe (Figure 8). They sat near a restaurant and asked patrons for their leftovers. Felix previously visited Austin while playing in a band. After a falling out with the band, she returned to Austin because she liked the atmosphere and it appeared to be a tolerant city. Her recent relocation left Felix waiting for a shipment of her belongings, including clothing. Due to the lack of clean clothes, Felix looked somewhat rumpled. Despite this
Figure 8. Heavily tattooed Felix and Chris ask people leaving restaurants for their leftovers.

Figure 9. Felix. Note the unusual placement of a piercing through a star tattoo.
appearance, Felix was one of the most well-spoken and contemplative informants. She also was one of the few cheerful ones.

Felix has many tattoos and piercings on her body and face. A nipple, horizontal clitoral prepuce, modified labret, and two lip rings further adorn her (Figure 9). Three years ago Felix attempted to stretch the holes in her earlobe. Because she tried to stretch the hole too quickly, they had to heal and slowly be re-stretched to the size of a pinkie. Some of Felix’s tattoos include: numerous stars on her arms, hands, and face, (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11), a colorful, abstract flame on her upper right arm (Figure 9), a black dragon that stretches from her chest to knee (Figure 10), multi-color flowers on the inside of her right upper arm, a safety pin that looks as if it is puncturing her forearm (Figure 12), a sunburst on her left bicep, and various geometrical designs on her arms (Figure 10).

At 13, Felix started piercing and tattooing herself. She is a self-taught body modification artist; all but Felix’s ears were pierced by herself. Stars were the subject of her first tattoo. A favorite pillowcase of a starry Peter Max painting provided the design. Felix’s step-father’s friend told her how people tattoo themselves. She followed this procedure using a safety pin and thread. She saturated the thread with India ink and then pushed it under the skin with the pin, similar to quilting. When she was 14, Felix and a friend made their own electric tattoo gun with an electric razor, wire, a pen tube, and a paper clip. Felix attributes her curiosity to her young start in body art. Tattoos have interested her since she was very young and she was “always a
Figure 10. Felix has both mono and polychrome tattoos.

Figure 11. A black dragon begins on Felix’s chest, curves over her hip and circles her thigh.
Figure 12. Felix's unique tattoo of a piercing.
little different" than the other children by wearing colorful, homemade clothing. She does not feel stigmatized due to her obvious body modification and believes she would not encounter any difficulty in finding employment wherever she chooses. I seriously doubt Felix would want to work at any job with stringent dress-codes. Any job that would require employees to be body-art-free would not be a job Felix would like; therefore, she would not suffer from discrimination.

Felix pierces friends as well as herself. She makes her own jewelry and needles which she purchases from welding supply shops. She learned how to pierce from a friend that had been trained. Felix read the "Piercing with a Pro" article found in *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* to learn how to execute her own horizontal clitoral prepuce (frequently referred to as horizontal clit hood) piercing. Felix enjoys piercing and tattooing others. Occasionally she goes to Montreal to pierce. This is a good market for Felix because established piercers charge very high prices. Friends receive tattoos by trading or sometimes Felix does them for free. Although she enjoys tattooing and piercing as a hobby, Felix does not want to become a professional tattoo artist or piercer. She prefers to work on friends so that she knows the significance and the meaning of the tattoo. Felix does not want to have to pierce or tattoo designs that she thinks are ugly or offensive.

Chris, (Figure 8) Felix's companion from Oklahoma, has spent three months in Austin. He is 23, and like Felix, was quite amiable. Chris first tattooed himself at age seventeen. He designed a symbol representing the punk music style called Oklahoma Hardcore, which his
friends soon duplicated. Chris stated that he pressed this tattoo into his skin because he was drunk, he always wanted a tattoo, and that he is proud of Oklahoma. He always wanted a professional tattoo, but money and artists have been scarce. As James previously mentioned, tattooing is illegal in Oklahoma. When Chris was 22, a tattooist friend in Lawrence, Kansas tattooed a design with Alice (of Alice in Wonderland) standing over and shooting the rabbit (Figure 13). The rabbit is void of color, but Alice’s dress is blue and her hair blonde (or yellow). Chris would like to get a sleeve tattoo incorporating wheat, barley, hops, and grapes—the ingredients for various alcoholic beverages. He plans on having a friend do it for free. While I was taking photographs after interviewing Felix and Chris, Felix asked if I could take a photo of them together. They were the first people that had an address to which I could send copies.

Mayhem is a 22 year-old self-employed dominatrix from New York who would like to open a dungeon, where she would continue to subjugate men to sexual degradation, in Austin. Mayhem was sitting on the sidewalk selling roses she and her husband were weaving from some sort of leaves. The lack of dungeon facilities prohibit her from supporting herself as a dominatrix in Austin. Mayhem has her navel, nostril, and septum pierced. She also wears two rings in her lower lip and six rings in her right ear. Mayhem’s eyebrow was pierced, but was accidentally torn out while hopping a train. She has three tattoos of colorful monster-like designs on her right arm, one on the left and another on her back.
Figure 13. Chris' Alice in Wonderland tattoo.
Mayhem was 14 when a friend pierced her navel while she was sitting on a toilet in a coffee house. The friend used a safety pin and placed a ring designed for ears in Mayhem’s new wound. Her first tattoo was done when she was fifteen. A friend’s father working at a tattoo shop etched the tattoo on her back so it would be easily hidden from her parents. In response to my question “why,” Mayhem shrugs, “I don’t know. Same as everyone else, I guess. They seem like a good idea at the time.” She also added that each of her tattoos have meaning and she likes the way they feel.

Her husband, who was present at the interview, added that Mayhem does it because he likes her tattoos (his only form of body art displayed is an earring). He plans on tattooing her with a guitar string as the ink insertion device. This operation is expected to be completed by Christmas. Mayhem is confident in her husband’s tattooing skills (despite lack of experience) because, according to her, he is a great artist. In addition to this tattoo, they both plan to have ‘wedding rings’ tattooed on their fingers.

Mayhem has designed a backpiece that she would like done in the future. It features “a punk blowing off a pig’s head,” as she vehemently dislikes police officers. In addition, she wants a tattoo of a syringe injected into her arm. She is waiting to find a friend willing to do the work for free. Mayhem did not have a specific friend in mind and for some undisclosed reason, will not have her husband do it.

Mayhem has tattooed herself, but all of her piercings have been done by friends for free or trade. Most of her friends make their own
jewelry as well. Mayhem also performs temporary piercing on some of her clients with 20 gauge hypodermic needle plugs. She learned the procedure from a co-worker in a traveling freak show. The woman would pierce herself in front of an audience. Incidentally, Mayhem ate worms to support herself in this side show.

An 18 year-old female with both piercings and tattoos wished to remain anonymous, although she allowed me to take photographs. She has a black and grey dragon tattooed on her upper right arm (Figure 14) and an outline of what appeared to be another dragon on her upper left arm. This informant also had several facial piercings. Her eyebrow, nostril, septum, lip, and tongue all had jewelry in place (Figure 14). She also indicated that her nipple, navel, and an unspecified part of her genitalia were pierced. When I asked what kind of genital piercing, she kept pointing to her crotch and said, “down there.” I do not know why she would tell me that she has an unspecified vulval piercing. Perhaps she was unfamiliar with the name of the piercing or body part and did not want to look foolish or was embarrassed to say the name out loud.

This smug woman was first tattooed at age eleven. With impatient sighs and “uh, yeah,” she claims that she did it, and her other tattoos, by herself. If this is the case, she must be ambidextrous since both upper arms have tattoos. She first practiced on oranges and bananas before trying to permanently embellish her own body. As with tattooing, she also has done her own piercings. She first pierced her nostril with a piercing needle when she was 12; she would not elaborate on how she acquired professional equipment at such a young age. She
Figure 14. Anonymous woman has her tongue, nasal septum, eyebrow and lower lip pierced. Also note the all-black tattoo on her arm.
will also pierce friends in exchange for jewelry in her own piercings. This informant says she does not know why she altered her body, she just felt like it.

The parents of this woman allegedly were not bothered by the piercings, but were upset with the tattoos due to their permanence. Former employers would request that she remove her jewelry. Particularly while passing through small towns, this girl noticed that people would look at her in disgust. Despite these negative reactions, she plans to have future piercings and tattoos. She would like her other nipple pierced and more tattoos. She was very vague about what designs or styles she desired and replied, "I don't know, whatever kind." Throughout the interview she seemed very self-absorbed and superior, playing with her jewelry and raising her eyebrow and grunting to her boyfriend during the interview. Only after the interview when I stood up did she notice that I had a tattoo. Then she spoke to me without her condescending tone.

A third anonymous 20 year-old female with a nasal septum piercing was walking along Guadalupe carrying a army style knapsack. She wore a pair of khaki pants cut into shorts and a dingy T-shirt, making her look quite scruffy. She had her eyebrow pierced previously, but no longer wears the jewelry, "You know, it [the eyebrow piercing] was just stupid shit you did when you were 13." A friend did this piercing for her with a new piercing needle ("Safety pins are gross!"). As with the previous anonymous informants, I am not sure how a 13 year-old obtained a piercing needle. The informant recalled that she was
drunk and kind of wanted the piercing. She stressed that she was drinking with friends and they encouraged her. The informant believes that most people have piercings because they just want them done, for no particular reason. This woman gave the impression that her piercings were not intended to be long-lasting. She is considering removing her septum ring. When asked why, she replied, “I don’t know, just tired of it, I guess.”

The next two informants, Beth and Jason, were together when I interviewed them (Figure 15). At one point, a Hare Krishna group singing, drumming, and passing out peanut butter cookies to people on the street interrupted Beth’s interview. Later, the interview was cut short when Austin police arrived and asked for identification of Beth and Jason. If they had any previous citations issued by Austin police (which Beth did), they would be arrested for panhandling. When the police accused them of panhandling, I told the police that they had not been asking for money in the previous 20 minutes in which I was interviewing them. The police instructed me to pack up and leave, which I did. I assume that Beth was arrested since she said she was in for trouble as the police approached.

The homeless men in You Owe Yourself a Drunk were arrested for public drunkenness in order to clean up the streets, regardless of whether or not they were actually intoxicated (Spradley 1970: 252). Like these men on the street, the police in Austin remove the homeless youth from public view with the general charge of panhandling.
Figure 15. Beth and Jason ask passers-by for food.

Figure 16. Beth wears a safety pin through her eyebrow and has her lip, nasal bridge, and septum pierced.
I stopped to talk with Beth (Figures 15, 16, 17) as she and her companion, Jason, were asking passers-by for food. I happened to have some apples in my backpack and offered them to Beth and Jason. I then explained that I was conducting research on body modification for my thesis and asked if I could interview them; both agreed. Beth is a 17 year-old originally from Minneapolis. Beth was quiet and seemed tired (Figure 16). After we realized that she knew my piercer in Minneapolis, she became more animated.

Beth began piercing at 12 and received her only tattoo when she was sixteen. Beth has her tongue, septum, nasal bridge, lips, eyebrow, nipple, navel, and ears pierced. At one time, she had the holes in her ears stretched. Beth has inserted all of her piercings with the exception of the bridge of her nose. She has used both piercing and sewing needles and occasionally safety pins for her own procedures. Beth has a beautiful tattoo of a sea horse on her shoulder blade colored black with green accents. She would like to get a tattoo of a dragon circling her arm. Beth's current financial situation prohibits her from collecting more jewelry or tattoos.

Beth maintains that her parents are fairly indifferent concerning her body art. She is treated differently by the general public, but she says she does not mind. She enjoys the piercing and tattooing for the pain and Beth likes the way they look.

Jason (Figures 15, 17), Beth's 19 year-old travel companion, was adorned with several piercings and tattoos. Currently, his only facial piercings are in his septum (Figure 15) and tongue. He has taken out
Figure 17. Jason has professionally applied tattoos on his left arm and self-executed on his right.
jewelry from his lip, eyebrow, and nasal bridge. Jason also wears a nipple and navel ring. His tattoos of skulls, crosses, and some words are predominately black with a few red accents (Figure 17). Two of his tattoos on his inner left forearm are skull design done by biker-type artists in a tattoo shop in Minneapolis. Tattoos on the inside of his right arm are self-made. These designs are constructed of simple, short lines.

Jason pierced his eyebrow when he was fourteen. He had seen someone else with the piercing and liked the way it looked. Out of boredom, he pierced his own eyebrow with a safety pin that he preheated to sanitize. Jason's first tattoo was done in a professional setting. He went to a tattoo shop and paid “somewhere around 15 or 20 bucks” for a skeleton pattern off the wall. Jason was only 15, but the artist did not require identification.

The only hindrance due to body alterations noticed by Jason is his inability to sell plasma. Most plasma centers and blood mobiles refuse donors with tattoos and piercings because they fear blood contamination. This will not stop Jason from acquiring more piercings and tattoos. Although he does not have the money now, he would like to get sleeves (an assemblage of tattoos that covers the entire arm). He currently thinks a tattoo resembling the bone structure of the arm would look good on his arm. Jason added that when he sees something else he likes, he will have it done if he has the means.

Ben, a smart-alecky 21 year-old from Colorado Springs, has a septum ring, a labret barbell, and his ear stretched (Figures 18 and 19).
Figure 18. Ben has a labret piercing and a nasal septum ring.

Figure 19. Ben, selling odds-and-ends, extends his labret barbell.
Ben was sitting on the sidewalk with a group of friends selling odds-and-ends, such as an electric razor and beads. When Ben was 16, he had a friend pierce his nostril with a safety pin. Ben was curious to see what it felt like. This was a spontaneous decision in which Ben neglected to sterilize the pin or jewelry. Ben has performed the rest of his piercings and stretching by himself. These piercings were done for their aesthetic appeal.

Ben reports that his parents did not react strongly to his self-inflicted body alteration. They are "kinda okay with it." One common reaction to his facial jewelry is people asking if it hurt, which he says becomes tiresome. Ben does not have any tattoos, but would like some in the future. He plans to have friends do the needlework for him. Ben wants a tribal design to circle his ankle. He also wants the very unconventional location beneath his eyes tattooed. Ben will wait until he owns a home before this is done to eliminate any trouble in finding housing. I found it interesting that Ben is comfortable living on the streets without the facial tattoo, but wants to have a secure place to live with the tattoos. Ben did not elaborate on his desired housing arrangements.

Casper had his first tattoo inked 12 years ago at age of seven. This fidgety Fresno, California native with four tattoos was selling fortunes near a bus stop on Guadalupe. His first tattoo, an eight ball on his forearm, was done by his father with professional equipment at his mother's suggestion. Casper's parents belong to the 8 Ball Biker Club and this tattoo shows that he is also a member. People who recognize
this symbol do not give him any trouble, especially those that know his father. A friend that tattoos out of his Dallas home gave Casper a multi-colored swirl tattoo of a mushroom. This was done because “I love ‘shrooms. I love to do “shrooms”. A skull design decorates each of his upper arms. One he received while he was drunk in New Orleans. The other was done by a fellow inmate in the Texas Department of Corrections. The T. D. C. skull was done with smuggled needles and a professional gun. This illustration cost Casper 40 candy bars (tobacco was also an acceptable form of currency). This particular tattoo shows his affiliation with a group of skaters.

Since Casper's parents suggested he become tattooed in the first place, negative feedback has only come from the general public. When his tattoos show, he does not procure as much money panhandling. He perceives old people looking at him and thinking, “you're nothing but a fag.” These attitudes do not deter him. By the time Casper dies, he plans to have his entire body covered.

This summer he would like to complete an entire sleeve on his right arm of different sorts of mushrooms to complement the one he has now. Casper also wants to incorporate his eight ball into a rack of all the billiard balls. On the other arm, Casper envisions some sort of American Indian inspired design and a mural surrounding his name. Casper includes his face as part of his canvas. Asian art will be applied to his chin to form a goatee-like image. He will add a teardrop to his face to let the world know that he has served time in prison. When
asked why he wants to tattoo his face in particular, Casper replied, "art is part of life, and body art is my life."

Freebird (Figure 20, 21, 22) was cleaning her navel ring with a antiseptic towelette while I interviewed her. She approached Casper and me while we were talking about his tattoos. Freebird struck me as somewhat immature. Freebird used a baby-talk voice when discussing her sexiness. She is a self-absorbed 17 year-old girl with purple tresses from Chicago. Freebird is severely thin and wore a tie-dyed sports bra and a long, floral skirt. Despite wearing the odd combination of clothing, she was concerned about her appearance. It was obvious she had recently shaved her abdomen; possibly to enhance her "sexy" stomach.

In addition to her piercing, Freebird also has four tattoos. Her first tattoo on the upper right side of her chest is a stylized letter A (Figure 21). At age 16, it marked Freebird as a member of the Ambrose gang in Chicago. Her "medicine bundle", crystal necklace, peace-symbol ring, and tie-dyed top, typical of neo-hippies, seem to contradict Freebird's former gang persona when she "hung out on the streets of Chicago with my gang. You know, causing trouble and shit." Shortly thereafter, her husband tattooed "Baby Loves Joker" in large black letters on her ankle while Freebird was passed out. She is Baby and her husband Joker. Her reaction when she awoke was, "It better be marker", hoping that this statement was erasable. Unfortunately, it is permanent. Freebird has a small flaming heart on her pelvis (Figure 22). She had it done to please her boyfriend. She went to a professional tattooist for this design for
Figure 20. Only Freebird's navel piercing is exposed to the public.

Figure 21. This "A" shows Freebird's association with the Ambrose gang.
Figure 22. Freebird’s flaming heart tattoo and infected navel ring.
which she “traded a quarter bag of pot.” When Freebird was in jail for undisclosed reasons, she tattooed her ankle. She inserted a mixture of shampoo, ashes, and pen ink under her skin in form of the letters FB over the letters SW. This tattoo forever memorializes her relationship with her current boyfriend (whose initials are S.W.) who is presently incarcerated.

Like many of her tattoos, her navel piercing (Figures 20 and 22) was done for a partner. Freebird just recently pierced her navel for her current boyfriend. He will be released from jail shortly and she wants to look extra sexy for this event. Freebird emphasized that her boyfriend loves her stomach, and she also finds her stomach sexy. Freebird wants to add further sex appeal via tattoos. A flaming bee on the web of her hand, between her thumb and index finger, and a heart in flames on her shoulder are some potential tattoos for Freebird. She likes flames because they show that she is “hot to trot” and makes her feel sexy.

I conducted my final two interviews at the Barton Springs swimming area in Austin. Earlier, I was sitting outside of the arcade on the Drag talking with Troll and Art about mundane things, such as Texas weather and ideal places to live. Unlike his friends, Art does not have any body modification because he feels he would later regret permanently marking his body. Billy stopped by Troll, Art, and me to ask us if we wanted to come with him and Nicci to Barton Springs to swim, as Nicci needed to bathe. After assessing the situation and my safety (we would be in public, it was light, I had previous contact with one of the swimmers, and another female was going) Billy agreed to an
interview and I to a swim. I spent the afternoon with Billy and Nicci, both with tattoos and piercings, and Art, adornment free, at the local swimming hole. During the interviews some teenagers with dyed hair and piercings stopped to swim. Billy and Nicci disdainfully referred to them as "stupid house punks" (those that lived at home, but tried to look street-wise). As I was tape recording Billy, one asked if I wanted to see "a real live piercing." I strongly declined; I wanted in no way to encourage these kids to pierce in an unsanitary environment. One of the boys still insisted that he would pierce the tongue of one of the girls for me—with a safety pin. Nicci and Billy both made disparaging remarks concerning the lack of proper equipment (a piercing needle, jewelry, and pennington forceps) along with the fact that the kids used piercing in an attempt to put on a shock show. When it was evident that I had no interest in this show, the kids did not proceed with the piercing.

Nicci is quite vivacious and in her early twenties. She has numerous piercings and tattoos. Nicci currently wears jewelry placed through the skin on the bridge of her nose, nasal septum, nipples, lip, ears, and tongue (twice) (Figure 23). Prior to incarceration, she had more piercings. Also at that time, Nicci's ear piercings were stretched to a one-inch diameter. In accordance with incarceration procedures, her ear plugs and other jewelry were removed. Rings for a notebook binder dangled from her left ear during the interview (Figure 23). Nicci's first attempt at body art was piercing the web of skin between her thumb and index finger when she was 11; the unsuccessful attempt left a scar.
Figure 23. Nicci's double tongue, ears, nasal bridge, and septum piercings. Note the notebook binder rings in her ears.
She has executed all of her piercings herself with the exception of one of barbells placed through her tongue. A friend completed this piercing, but to Nicci’s dissatisfaction.

Nicci started tattooing at about the same time as piercing. She began with her legs when she obtained a tattoo gun. A friend wanted Nicci to give him a tattoo so she tested it on herself first. I could not make out the designs on her legs. They were predominately short thin lines; it looked as if part of these tattoos has faded. Nicci wanted a large, strictly black tattoo on her back. She chose a spinal outline tattoo over her spine (Figure 24). This art was inked for a hundred dollars by a professional tattooist friend. After a scuffle with police, part of the outline was damaged and had to be reworked by another artist.

Nicci asserts that she enjoys doing weird things to shock people. When she started tattooing and piercing it was pretty uncommon. Despite the recent popularity of body art, her permanent art still pleases her. Nicci always wanted her nipples pierced. She was provoked while piercing a friend’s nipple and he began to cry. “He cried so much, I just had to know that he’s a pussy.” Nicci also refers to herself “a total pain freak.” She cites pain as half the reason to pierce or tattoo and a combination of shock and aesthetic as the other impetus.

Nicci believes that her parents have not really minded her body modification as long as she does not act disrespectfully towards her parents. The only negative experiences have been with police assumptions that she is more likely to cause trouble. Despite the
Figure 24. Nicci's professional, time-intensive spine tattoo.
unpleasant responses, Nicci desires more decorations. She would like to cover up the tattoos that she did on her legs if there is no money involved. Nicci stated that most of these were done out of boredom and have no significant meaning, nor are they aesthetically pleasing to her. She also wants to have her backpiece finished, filling in the outline. Nicci is very fond of tribal style tattoos, she would like to have her arms covered with black work. She stresses the importance of avoiding names and initials, as she would most likely later regret those sorts of tattoos.

Billy, like Nicci, is in his early twenties. He exudes calmness, but is very funny and amiable at the same time. Billy is fairly tall and has closely cropped blonde hair. He has a patch of a beard on his lower chin and a shadow of a mustache. Billy has a plethora of tattoos, including facial. He has a skull on his chest, a picture of a punk on his right arm, “FUCK RACISM” and another skull on his left arm (Figure 25), a dot on his forehead, a biomechanical piece on his jaw, and vertical lines under his eyes (Figure 26). He presently does not wear any body jewelry, although Billy did have his nasal septum pierced at one time. He removed it because it instigated too many fights with other youth, causing him to dislike piercings.

Billy executed his first tattoo himself. He sketched the anarchy symbol (the letter A in a circle) onto himself when he was sixteen. Billy also tattooed “Jesus died for his own sins, not mine” on his arm, which is now partially faded. His leg tattoos, which he did not expose or describe, were done by himself, too. One skull on his chest was done by
Figure 25. Billy and Art. Note Billy’s professionally inked Drunx tattoo and homemade “FUCK RACISM.”
Figure 26. Billy's friend tattooed the biomechanical design on jaw with a tattoo gun, another friend pressed the lines beneath his eyes with a needle and thread. Note the abscess on his jaw.
a professional working in Tucson. His friend Todd in Minneapolis
executed the biomechanical design on his right jaw (Figure 26). The
same artist also did some unspecified illustrations on his arms. The
vertical lines under Billy's eyes (Figure 26) were done in San Francisco
the old-fashioned way: prick by prick with a needle and thread. Some
of his other self-made tattoos were done this way or with safety pin,
ocasionally taken directly from his clothing.

Billy decided to tattoo his face “just for the fuck of it. I just
wanted a tattoo on my face.” He simply liked the way the dot between
his eyes and the lines underneath looked. Billy selected the
biomechanical pattern because of its uniqueness. Money has never been
an object when acquiring these tattoos because he is “cool enough to get
free tattoos.” Billy knows the “right people.”

Billy's tattoos have caused some trouble. He was living in a group
home when he obtained his first tattoo. After his artwork became
known, he was dropped from the home. In addition, the police also
give him a hard time due to his obvious tattooing. One benefit of these
hassles is that Billy makes an extra effort to avoid illegal activities to
avoid further entanglements. Regardless of these deterrents, Billy would
like to have a similarly designed tattoo on his left jaw. He would also
like to further embellish his eyes with tattooing.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The youth in Austin that I interviewed displayed both neo-tribal and punk-influenced body art. These styles are not exclusive; both punk and tribal forms were simultaneously incorporated by individuals. However, very few informants gave reasons similar to modern primitive rationale for modifying the body. I was very disappointed that the most common answer to “why do you tattoo/pierce?” was, “I don’t know” or a similar vague reply--such as a shrug of the shoulders. Occasionally, after some consideration, an informant could provide more factors of motivation such as appealing looks or because their friends do.

Tattoos and piercings provide a distinctive marker to this group. Often, they are readily visible to everyone. Their peers see that they have gone through the painful--assuming one was not too high or drunk--transformation from unmarked to enhanced skin. American mainstream society sees the modifications and recognizes the street youth as social deviants. The body art symbolizes the wearers’ otherness only because society as a whole understands the meaning of tattoos and piercings as rejecting social norms (Schneider 1993: 59). This distinctness of the street youth subculture is apparent through the contrast between the street youth and mainstream America. This
distinction and definition through comparison is similar to Barth's definition of ethnic groups (1969: 10-11).

These are homeless young people, so many of the informants appeared disheveled, undereducated, street-wise, and on the fringe of society with their well-worn clothes, many with cropped and dyed hair, and language peppered with obscenities and grammatically poor English. In my presence, about one-third of the street youth referred to the use of drugs, ranging from marijuana to heroin. This may inaccurately reflect the frequency of drug use in this group, as I assume few would risk the legal ramifications. I was startled the first time an informant told me, a stranger with a tape recorder and camera, that he smokes marijuana on a regular basis. Furthermore, informants shocked me when they asked for drugs. I was most disturbed when one youth asked me if I would care to join in on shooting up heroin. After politely declining, I immediately extricated myself from the situation.

I am uncertain why people would tell a researcher who is photographing and documenting their permanent body alterations about their illegal habits. It would be understandable if one were high, as one would lose rational thought. However, none of the informants appeared to be using drugs at the time of the interview. When the potential informants intimated that they had illegal paraphernalia, I was more interested in leaving the youth than in inquiring why they were possibly incriminating themselves.

Perhaps these individuals were attempting to shock a stranger with drugs as they do with body art. All but one of the times that an
informant brought up drug use my body art was visible. The informants were much more talkative and open on the days when my tattoos or piercings were visible. Perhaps the individual assumed that I might indulge in similar activities if we both enjoy body art. Or, maybe those that discussed their illicit propensities do not care if they are arrested, as several have been.

The lack of awareness of or concern about the consequences of their actions could explain the open drug use and may contribute to their tattooing and piercing. Most of my informants did not identify a specific or deliberate reason for undergoing bodily transformations. It seems as if the person did not seriously consider how highly visible tattoos and piercings could affect them. Only Billy was concerned with the negative repercussions of facial piercings, although he was not worried about his facial tattoos.

Neo-Tribal Influence

In most cases, the Austin youth that I interviewed incorporated neo-tribal technology into their piercing practices: surgical stainless steel or niobium rings and barbells, pennington forceps (which pull the flesh tight and have a hole for the piercing needle to pass through), needles made specifically for body piercing, retainers, ear plugs, and eyelets. Vale and Juno assert that modern primitives modify their bodies because they have little control over any thing else in the world (1989:4). The youth in Austin, like neo-tribalists, have little control in
society, but none intimated that they alter their bodies because it is the only thing they can exert any power over. Body modification by the Austin youth may be a response to powerlessness; however, none of them expressed this verbally or indirectly to me.

This type of body jewelry and accessories was first made available to the public when Gauntlet opened in 1975 (Vale and Juno 1989:163). In 1977 Jim Ward produced the first Piercing Fans International Quarterly (Ward 1997:6) to reach a wider audience of body modification enthusiasts. Within the last ten years, advertisements from newly established body jewelry manufacturers have appeared in tattoo magazines along with the standard ads for tattooing guns, ink, and stencils. Now, there are a plethora of sites on the World Wide Web providing access to companies peddling piercing items from needles, autoclaves, various metal jewelry, to the newest advancement: colored acrylic jewelry.

The mass marketing of this equipment allows easy purchasing. The cost of the jewelry has gone down considerably since the late 1980s and early 90s. Tanamachi reports that the cost of a body piercing, including the jewelry, has decreased from $65 in 1987 to $45 in 1997 (1997:A1). The price of piercing depends upon the type of jewelry placed and the degree of expertise for the body area pierced. For example, Prince Albert piercing, which is a very delicate procedure puncturing the urethra, is more costly than a fairly simple navel piercing. Furthermore, gold jewelry is much more expensive than surgical stainless or niobium. Although Tanamachi does not specify
what type of piercing she is tracking, one can assume from the price that it is probably a common, simpler piercing with a surgical stainless steel ring.

Punk Influence

The punk ethos of social alienation and anti-authoritarianism is displayed by many of the urban youth interviewed in Austin. Several of the informants referred to themselves and their acquaintances as punks. Typical attire of the punks include: T-shirts with punk band logos, ripped and crudely patched pants sewn with dental floss, vibrantly dyed hair, leather accessories (dog collars, studded cuffs), and the ever-present safety pin piercing through the nose or eyebrow.

Following the do-it-yourself creed of punks, all but two of the individuals in this study have pierced themselves or enlisted an untrained friend to carry out the procedure. Some of the informants have taken the self-sufficiency attitude further by designing and welding their own jewelry. A number of the youth also tattooed themselves in the same fashion. Unlike the piercings, the home tattoos immediately appear cruder than those executed by a professional or at least with professional tattooing gear. As many of the informants are homeless and panhandlers, it makes economic sense to perform the piercings and tattoos themselves, assuming that infections or other physical trauma do not occur and cost more in money, time, and health.
Although many of the informants consider themselves punks or dress or behave according to the stereotype of a punk, they take advantage of the advancements in piercing technology and new tribal designs. These changes in body art were first introduced to Americans by the neo-tribal and modern primitive movement. Without their passionate dedication to creating the best jewelry and research for tribal designs from far corners of the earth, these street youth would not have the resources to modify their bodies in the current fashion.

Conclusion

Body piercing and tattooing have become increasingly popular among urban youth as noted in the press and by my personal observation. I have ascertained in researching this thesis that the street youth of Austin inadvertently and casually incorporate body art from other cultures into their traditions, unlike the neo-tribalists that consciously and deliberately mimic non-Europeans. The ideas and reasons for their participation in the body modification movement were elucidated through interviews, although many could not immediately verbalize why they do what they do.

In retrospect, I wish that I had taken a more aggressive approach to this research. Now, I believe that I could have obtained a better understanding of the Austin street youth’s life and could have improved my ability to decipher their body art motives had I not been so concerned with my safety. I probably subconsciously perceived that I
was in an unsafe position with these people living on the fringe of society. My physical well-being was never even threatened during my research. Many other researchers have become heavily involved in their informants' lives without physical repercussions (Liebow 1967; Spradley 1970; Williams 1996), which, in hindsight, would probably be true for me in this research.

I admire the Austin street youth's ability to disregard social expectations and modify their bodies as they see fit. Despite this, I was unwilling to take risks that might cause me legal entanglements. Having first-hand experience with being manhandled by police, I do not wish to relive it. Furthermore, I do not have the financial resources to post bail if I were arrested for various infractions of the law through my association with those breaking the law. My incident with the police over panhandling steered me clear of drinking minors, drugs, and parties. Unlike Terry Williams who studied the New York cocaine users subculture, I do not have the same clout (1996: 27-32). He is a sociologist at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, whereas I am a graduate student. I imagine police officers would be more likely to quickly recognize him as a researcher than I. Although I always carried my IRB approval form, it would not mean much if I was arrested with people shooting heroin.

The urban youth in Austin are active in piercing and tattooing, but do not practice scarification or other extreme forms of body modification. This contemporary group of body artists occasionally alters their skin in a style reflecting neo-tribal preferences, but they do
not make a conscious effort to be neo-tribal. Modern primitives
typically wear numerous piercings, many of which require a properly
trained piercer for potentially hazardous procedures; specially designed
jewelry traditionally of surgical stainless steel and equipment; and large,
black tattoos. But the homeless Austin youth do not have the financial
resources to secure professional equipment or time-intensive tattoos.

Rarely do urban youth in Austin pierce or tattoo to the extent of
modern primitives. Neo-tribal or modern primitive influence is
manifested in this group through stretched earlobe piercings, proper
body jewelry--that which does not frequently lead to skin irritation, and
occasionally large, black tattoos. None of the informants were able to
specify what, if any, tribal group also practices the form of body art or
style of tattoos. Only one was able to narrow down the description of a
proposed tribal tattoo from India.

Despite the shocking appearance of the street youth squatting on
the Drag, their exotic look is not really so exotic. They do not aspire to
mimic non-European or ancient cultures' styles and motifs. They are
content with covering themselves in tattoos and piercings that look
appealing to themselves rather than searching for meaning, as neo-
tribalists do. The street youth in Austin have no intention, whatsoever,
to introduce non-Western meanings of tattoos or piercings into their
body modification. Most of the informants could not even explain why
they tattoo or pierce. Not only are they denying a specific meaning to
their art, they are denying the existence of consequences. They are
living in the present, not considering their future--almost as if none exists for these street youth.

Their threatening facade, with profane tattoos and wires and rings criss-crossing their faces, shocks passers-by into scurrying away. Keeping outsiders away allows the street youth to continue their current lifestyle with as little interference and change as possible. They may be accosted by police, but they are not permanently removed from the area or forced to change their living habits. The tattoos and piercings of this group in Austin communicate to other punks and street youth that they are a part of their community. To mainstream America they communicate another message: they are not a part of America's ideal society.
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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Texas A&M University
Form I
Summary Cover Sheet
Protocol for Human Subjects in Research

Please check off or provide details on the following (enter N/A if not applicable):

Exemption Requested

See Page 2

Principal Investigator Name
Erica Haas
Faculty
Graduate Student

College/Dept
Liberal Arts/Anthropology
Mail Stop
4352
Phone
862-8462

Project Title
Contemporary Body Modification among Urban Youth in Austin, TX

Subjective Estimate of Risk to Subject:
Low
Moderate
High
No

Gender of subjects:
Male
Female
Both
Age(s):
15-20
Total Participants (est.):
25

Source of Subjects:
Psychology Subject Pool
Other TAMU Students
Community
Posted Notices
Prisons
Other (Please specify)

Compensation
Yes
No

Deception
Yes
No

Location of Experiment:
Augspur, TX

Invasive or Sensitive Procedures:
Blood Samples
Urine Samples
Physical Measurements
(electrodes, etc.)
Psychological Inventory
rDNA

Subject Recruitment:
Direct Parent/Participant Communication
Other (Please specify)

Sensitive Subject Matter:
Alcohol, Drugs, Sex
Depression/Suicide
Learning Disability
Other (Specify)

Use of Video or Audio Tapes
(please indicate)

Provisions for Confidentiality/Anonymity

Retained
Yes
No

Retained/Length of Time
1 year

Destroy/Erase
Yes
No

Other (explain)

Use specified in consent form?
Yes
No

Use/Access to tapes:
Ercrea Haas

Exact Location Where Signed Consent Forms Will Be Filed:
oral consent

(Must be kept on file for 3 years after the completion of the project).

* Must include signature of committee chair on protocol
** Please attach
*** Please attach conditions, schedule of payment.
† If yes, attach a debriefing form
REQUEST FOR EXEMPTION from full IRB review

Some research projects involving human subjects are exempt from full review by the IRB. See the attached sheet on research categories exempt from full IRB review.

Basis for Exemption [Please refer to attached "Categories Exempt From Full IRB Review."]

_____ Established Educational Settings/Normal Educational Practices (a letter of approval from a school official must be obtained before the study can be conducted; send copy to the IRB)

_____ Use of educational anonymous tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, advancement; attach copy).

_____ Survey or interview procedures, [unless subjects might be identified, put at legal or personal risk, and unless survey or procedures deal with sensitive matters of personal behavior]

_____ Observations of public behavior [unless subjects might be identified, put at legal or personal risk, and unless observations deal with sensitive matters of personal behavior]

_____ Anonymous collection or study of existing documents, records, pathological or diagnostic specimens.

______ Taste and food quality evaluation, food-cultural acceptance studies.

The U.S. population is becoming increasingly culturally, linguistically, economically, and ethnically diverse. The research needs to make a concerted effort to ensure that research subjects reflect the population demographically, including these groups who have been traditionally underrepresented. However, it is recognized that the available pool of subjects may preclude having a balanced population. If you cannot use a diverse population in your research, you must justify why not.

_________________________ 11/20/96
Principal Investigator Signature and Date

_________________________ 11/20/96
Graduate Committee Chair Signature and Date

_________________________ 11/20/96
Department Head Signature and Date

_________________________ 7/29/96
Institutional Review Board Signature and Date

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VITA

Erica Lynn Haas majored in American Indian Studies and Anthropology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. In 1993, she participated in an exchange program at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Minnesota in July 1994. She also has attended an archaeology field school at the Cerros site in Belize. Ms. Haas can be reached at N11052 Sugarbush Road, Birnamwood WI 54414.