The Contemporary Canadian Tattoo as Symbolic Adoption and Adaptation
by
Natasha Hanson, BA Hons.

A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
September 18, 2006

© 2006 by Natasha Hanson

Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-18268-0

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-18268-0

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

The focus of this work is contemporary North American tattooing practices. Specifically the phenomenon explored is how individuals personalise the meaning of tattoo images through personal narratives, regardless of the cultural origins of the symbols. A brief history of tattooing is included in order to give context to the current practice and explore those social issues which have affected the practice in the past. Theoretically, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh is used as a foundation in order to further explore current understandings of the body. Original ethnographic material collected, gives *personalised* narratives of tattoo practices, which is then analysed using historical and theoretical understandings.

Keywords: tattooing, body modification, personal narratives, self-identity

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Brian Given for his patience and understanding. I also appreciate Prof. Philip Thurtle for continuing to be my second reader despite the long distance.

I dedicate this to my family and friends who supported me through the experience of writing this piece of work.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>page ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page iii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>page iv</i>
Chapter I: Introduction	page 5
Chapter II: Historical Background of Contemporary Tattooing	page 8
The Roots of Contemporary North American Tattooing	page 8
Tattooing for the Masses	page 11
Deviant Associations	page 14
The Tattoo Renaissance	page 15
Historical Understandings	page 21
Chapter III: Culture of the Body and Self	page 23
The Theoretical Body	page 23
Skin and Textuality	page 31
The Influence of (Post)modernity and Consumerism	page 34
Fashion and Tattoo	page 43
Medical Science, Technology and Legitimacy	page 47
The Group or Subcultural Debate and 'Modern Primitives'	page 51
Understandings of the Contemporary Body	page 61
Chapter IV: The Personal Flesh	page 63
Personal Involvement	page 64
Methodology	page 66
Intimate Understandings	page 69
<i>Personal Narratives</i>	page 85
Conclusion	page 87
Appendix	page 89
Works Cited	page 92

Chapter I – Introduction

When I was a young teenager in the late 1980s the ultimate tough and rebellious guys and girls in my school classes had homemade tattoos. One girl explained to me how she used India ink and a series of needles to put her boyfriend's name on her arm. At the time I remember being in awe of what I thought was clearly the ultimate rebellion, to permanently mark oneself. No parent or authority figure could remove it. These early experiences with tattoos led to a personal fascination with the practice. After leaving high school and travelling across Canada I noticed that tattoos *seemed* to be more prevalent. I wondered whether it was my perception, because I had tattoos at that point or whether there truly were more Canadians participating in the practice. I also found the variety of symbols and styles astounding, these were not the homemade tattoos of my school years. This academic work stems from these personal observations and, more importantly, the need for more Canadian writing on this subject. Most works on body modification¹ focus on the United States.

The focus of this paper is the study of the adoption of symbols, from a variety of cultures, within tattooing and the adaptation of their symbolism. This explores the phenomenon of how individuals personalize the *meaning* of tattoo images, regardless of what cultural origins the symbols may have, through personal narratives. This creation of personal meaning through tattooing is situated historically, culturally and theoretically within this thesis.

Chapter two gives the historical context of the current North American practice of tattooing. The rise in popularity of the practice is a main focus in this chapter, inclusive of the cultural context which has made such an increase possible. This gradual legitimization

¹ Body modification throughout this work will refer to the bodily practices of tattooing, piercing, scarification and branding, except where otherwise stated.

connects to wider societal changes which have taken place in the last century, such as consumerism and medicalization of the body. The imagery used in tattooing relates to the history of exposure to, and building acceptability of, foreign or 'other' cultural aesthetics. This coincides with the increasing North American focus on individualism through consumerism. Chapter three also addresses this commodification of the self² and the body from a theoretical standpoint. This chapter is a broad examination of these subjects designed to give an overview which sheds light on the Canadian cultural understanding of tattooing and the possible meaning(s) involved with this practice. I argue that it is possible for appearance to denote the self/mind. This is despite the body being under cultural and social constraints. Tattooing has, increasingly, become a culturally accepted form of self-expression. The permanency of the practice rebels against the ever-changing fashions of the global consumer market. Chapter three also addresses the symbols used in tattooing. The New Age and 'Neo/Modern Primitive'³ movements increased North American cultural exposure to varying religious symbols and beliefs, inclusive of those regarding the body and individuation. These movements increased the diversity of symbols readily accessible to participants in tattooing.

For an understanding of the process of design choice and personalization of meaning I conducted interviews with tattooed individuals. The content of these interviews make up Chapter four. In my questions I concentrated on the themes of design choice, process and associated meanings. My results revealed that the cultural origins of symbols used in tattoos were not of utmost importance to those choosing them. Informants instead, generally,

² Self in this context refers to the encompassing features of personality and soul; those features that individuate people.

³ Here primitive refers to colonial ideas of simplistic cultures that were considered 'inferior'. The problematic nature of this reference is discussed in Chapter three.

concentrated on placement and personal meaning. These personal narratives on the process of acquiring a tattoo revealed that although a considerable amount of time went toward the choice of imagery used this did not extend to ideas of cultural appropriation.

This is not surprising when the current culture of global consumerism is considered. Symbols and imagery found through such means as the internet do not indicate cultural context. From a Canadian perspective multiculturalism may give a sense of freedom to adopting cultural symbols. All of this does not efface the *personal* meaning which informants clearly associated with their tattoos, regardless of the imagery. This is perhaps one of the most important points to come from this work.

Chapter II - Historical Background of Contemporary Tattooing

Tattoos have become increasingly visible in North America, on the street and through the media. The percentage of people tattooed in North America was estimated, in the late 1980s, early 1990s at 4 to 6 per cent (Sanders 1989; Steward 1990). Atkinson and Young (2001) now estimate the numbers at 15 to 20 per cent. These estimations reflect what we can readily observe in daily life, the increasing numbers of people participating in tattooing. This, I believe, is due to the fact that the practice has continued to adapt to and reflect wider social changes in North America. In this chapter I shall discuss these shifting tattoo practices in relation to the changes in design choices, which have taken place in the last century. I will also link the history of tattooing in North America (as previously mentioned most information pertains to the United States) to societal changes in order to explore the relationship between those large scale changes and changing tattoo practices. My focus is on those social changes related to the body, self and identity.

The Roots of Contemporary North American Tattooing

Contemporary North American tattooing historically has its roots in European cultural practices. There is little academic information on the possible connections between contemporary North American tattooing and those of Native American groups which had established forms of tattooing prior to European contact. In this time, prior to colonisation, “tattoo was also widely distributed in the Americas, usually connected with ethnic identity, social role, or status.” (Rubin 1988:179). It is interesting to note that, “more elaborate and extensive representational body-tattoos for women, reflecting high status, were reported by the earliest visitors to Virginia and Carolina, and so far north as the Ontario Iroquoians.”

(Rubin 1988:179). As discussed later, women tattooed as 'attractions' used the fact that some Native American women were tattooed to give credence to false stories of capture and forcible tattooing (Mifflin 1997).

Native American tattoo traditions had an undoubted impact on contemporary forms, however not to the same extent as European traditions. As Gotch and Scutt (1986) point out, "The relative importance of native tattooing in the development of the American practice, as compared with the Oriental influence imported by a century of sailors is not clear." (Gotch and Scutt 1986:27). However, as they later state in the same work, the Christian church campaigned against the body modification traditions of 'converted' Native Americans during colonization, thus decreasing, if not completely stopping the practices.

Although permanent marking of the skin with ink was present from the fourth millennium BC onwards (Caplan 2000:xi), ornamental practices were thought to have died out in Europe during the Middle Ages "and only flourished again after contact with the Far East and the South Seas." (Brain 1979:52). However, there is evidence of a small subculture of people in the sixteenth and seventeenth century England who willingly participated in a permanent form of marking the skin (Allen Rosecrans 2000). Also, during this period, people traveled to Jerusalem and, while there, received tattoos (mostly of religious significance) before returning to England (Allen Rosecrans 2000; Gotch and Scutt 1986). Despite the Christian church campaigning against tattooing in North America, it seemingly took little action against pilgrimage tattoos (Gotch and Scutt 1986:27). This is of significance because there has long been a popular and false history surrounding tattooing suggesting that Europeans were unfamiliar with such practices until colonisation (Caplan 2000). This is also supported by Mark Gustafson (2000), who states how "only now are the

historical accounts being pieced together that show that the practice was not imported to the West as the symptom of a colonial encounter with 'primitives', but has been a permanent cultural feature of the ancient Mediterranean and of Europe and North America." (Gustafson 2000:17). Popularly conceived of as an exotic practice, despite its European past, tattooing is associated with colonial ideas of 'primitivism', which is further discussed in the next chapter. This refutes the simplistic argument that tattooing was used "in Europe as a means to mark the bodies of criminals, and thus tattooing as a social practice in Western civilization became intertwined with criminality and deviance." (Fisher 2002:93). This is not to say that the use of penal tattoos in Europe (which has an extensive history) was not influential, rather that it was one of many influences on how tattooing was perceived upon its 'rediscovery' through colonialism. Adoption of the term "tattooing" occurred after colonial contact with Polynesia. The Polynesian tradition of tattooing influenced European techniques and designs. As DeMello writes, "It is interesting to note the relative ease with which the British sailors and explorers were willing to acquire Polynesian tattoos and also the apparent enthusiasm of the Hawaiians and the Tahitians to augment their own tattoos with British designs." (DeMello 2000:46). Perhaps this was due to the often-overlooked European history of marking the body. In fact, during the late 16th century tattooed slaves travelled from the New World to Europe for 'exhibition' (Caplan 2000; DeMello 2000). Even more disturbing, is the fact that, up until 1831 Europeans hunted and decapitated the Maori of New Zealand for their *moko* tattoos (Atkinson 2003:32)⁴. This violent interest in the practice of tattooing shows the perceived discrepancy between Europeans who were tattooed and the Maori.

⁴ In fact until the banning of trade in Maori heads, for the prized *moko* facial tattoos, they were traded for guns and ammunition. For this reason the Maori stopped tattooing themselves until the beginning of the twentieth century (Atkinson 2003:32).

Tattooing for the Masses

There was then a radical change in the face of tattooing when in 1891 the electric tattoo machine was developed and patented by the American Samuel O'Reilly; "Tattoos created with the new tattoo machine were less painful, cheaper, and easier and faster to administer, which greatly contributed to the spread of tattooing through the lower classes and to the subsequent abandonment of tattooing by the rich." (DeMello 2000:50). The aristocracy, to separate themselves from the practice, referred to tattoos as 'primitive' or 'uncivilised', despite the fact that there were those among them who had tattoos (DeMello 2000:50). In fact "As early as 1880, *The New York Times* coyly speculated that 'at least 7.5% of fashionable London ladies' were 'tattooed in inaccessible localities,' that is to say, on their arms, legs, and shoulders...Tattooing became vogueish among Europe's upper classes; newspapers even described tattoos worn by German, Danish, English and Greek royalty, and Winston Churchill's mother..." (Mifflin 1997:32, 33)⁵. However, with the advent of the electric tattoo machine, tattoos then became increasingly popular among the North America working class male, especially those in the military (Govenar 2000). It was men such as this that also started practicing tattooing with very little tattoo or drawing background. There was an attraction to the entrepreneurial, independent lifestyle more so than any artistic expression (Rubin 1988:234). Women were also attracted to this lifestyle and the first fully tattooed women (most of their body was covered in them) were making their own living from being an 'attraction' prior to the invention of the tattoo machine (Mifflin 1997:18). Men who were heavily tattooed also became 'attractions' and had 'exotic' stories about their tattoos, but did not possess the occupational longevity of the

⁵ It is questionable, of course, as to how *The New York Times* would have had enough information about tattooing practices of the time to formulate a percentage. Regardless, that the practice was popular enough to be newsworthy is of note, as is the concentration on tattooed women.

women (DeMello 2000:58). The majority of women who became tattooed circus 'attractions' used false stories to explain their involvement in tattooing; "kidnappings constituted the most common tattoo fables, with South Sea savages and Wild West Indians cast as the abductors." (Mifflin 1997:20). Thus the mythology was perpetuated that tattooing was an exotic practice, to be reviled and fascinated by, despite the fact that the tattoo imagery was usually heavily Christian or patriotic. However, it is also important to note that at the beginning of the twentieth century these women were radical in many ways. They showed more of their bodies in public and by their mere existence and visibility challenged the dominant societal ideals of feminine beauty and made an income (Mifflin 1997). These women were at the forefront of the 'women's rights movement'. It is noteworthy that women were involved in North American tattooing from early on, despite the 'freak show' quality. Although very restricted in number, women would have still influenced the aesthetic of tattooing at that point.

Tattoos at the beginning of the twentieth century, up to the 1960s, were in what Arnold Rubin (1988) and others have termed 'International Folk Style', "characterized by agglomerate designs, often executed by many different tattooists on a single client, resulting in a 'collection' of conflicting styles, sizes and images..." (Tucker quoted in Rubin 1988:233). Tattooists in the early twentieth century began to draw sheets of designs, termed 'flash', from which people chose what they wanted tattooed (Rubin 1988). Some tattooists at this time reproduced their designs, selling them to other tattooists. The emphasis for the majority of tattooists was commercial rather than creative; there was little demand for innovation or client education (Sanders 1989:26). Information was shared between friends and an informal network of tattooists; "the industry was organized as an informal guild,

sharing a considerable body of technical and trade secrets." (Rubin 1988:233). This created a general selection of tattoo designs available from most tattooists, which was also fostered by supply firms for tattooists that stressed technical skill and quality over design content (Sanders 1989:26). "Essentially, these tattoo designs constitute a folk art form that is traditional and has been transmitted through the generations by word of mouth and imitation...The traditional tattoo is drawn in a formulaic way, developing variants over time." (Govenar 2000:217). This design selection remained intact with few changes until the nineteen sixties; "The most popular designs were patriotic themes (flags, eagles, American slogans), military emblems (USN, ships, anchors), sea themes (mermaids, dolphins, whales), and 'girlie tattoos' (nude women, hula dancers, harem girls, sailor girls, cow girls, and geisha girls)." (DeMello 2000:64).

Although tattooing was not a part of mainstream culture it did not have strong antisocial connotations until the 1940s and 1950s, the reasons for which will be discussed subsequently. Tattoos were especially popular during times of war. Nevertheless, according to the popular media of the 1920s and 1930s, the military authorities had increasing scepticism about the practice of tattooing (Govenar 2000:219). There was interest in tattooed people outside of the normal social conventions beginning from the nineteenth century. Heavily tattooed people generally made money traveling with the circus or carnival. Tattooists of the time often traveled with these groups as well. By the 1940s tattooing had become common, to the point that "heavily tattooed people were beginning to lose their audience in the circus and carnival..." (Govenar 2000:226). In fact, "By 1920, hundreds of fully tattooed people were said to be traveling in circuses and sideshows across America, making illustrated people common curiosities." (Mifflin 1997:27). From the 1920s

to the 1950s, tattoo shops were opened in Canadian urban centers and port cities; “while little written information exists to document tattooing in Canada during this time, oral histories of tattooing passed among current artists indicate that Canadian tattooing closely paralleled (in membership base and common tattoo imagery) developments in the American figuration.” (Atkinson 2003:37). Few women, outside of carnivals, participated in tattooing at this time and those that did gained reputations as ‘bad girls’ (DeMello 2000:61).

Deviant Associations

After World War II the face of tattooing began to change; “not only were tattooed outlaw bikers emerging as a subcultural group viewed with fear by the middle class in the late forties, but convicts and Chicano gang members, already practicing homemade tattooing moved into the public eye...” (DeMello 2000:67).⁶ At this time there was also a decrease in tattooing of military personnel, as most commanding officers frowned upon it (Govenar 2000). In the conservative and family-based 1950s tattoos became, increasingly, associated with “deviance and the deviant elements of society: hot-rodders, motorcyclists, prostitutes, juvenile delinquents and irresponsible military men.” (Govenar 2000:231). There were movements in some municipalities to ban the practice of tattooing, perhaps based on this perceived association with deviant behaviour, although officially related to health regulation (Govenar 2000:232; Mifflin 1997:38). Some U.S. states developed regulations for tattooing, an example of the most drastic were some counties within New York state and Florida, which banned tattooing completely and restricted tattoo equipment to be used only by medical doctors (Rubin 1988:236). This speaks to the deep-seated negative perceptions

⁶ This thesis only touches upon gang and prison tattooing as it has quite a different history and associations in relation to these subcultural groups. The focus is on tattoo in relation to the general public.

surrounding tattooing during this time and the increasing medicalization of the body.

Thus a negative societal view of tattooing increased as marginal social groups, during the 1960s and 70s, such as hippies and punks participated in the practice. Tattooists then splintered somewhat, catering to the image needs of particular groups. The different subcultures that practiced tattooing had their own styles and content, coinciding with social movements such as the 'sexual revolution' and feminism. For example, when hippies began to get tattoos they introduced such images as mushrooms, marijuana leaves and peace symbols to the practice (DeMello 2000; Rubin 1988). The adoption of tattooing itself was clearly associated with its deviant social connotation. For a group rebelling against society tattoos represented a perfect symbol of that rebellion. Punks in the 1970s and 1980s then adopted the practice. The attitude and aesthetic of punk tattooing was radically different than that of the hippy movement; their tattoos were more comparable to biker and gang tattoos, in their anti-social imagery and homemade aesthetic (Rubin 1988; Wojcik 1995). However, "punks borrowed motifs from Western tattoo tradition, but they were also innovative in developing their own unique designs that expressed their personal and subcultural aesthetics." (Wojcik 1995:18). Outside of these subcultures tattooing was also beginning to appeal to mainstream society.

The Tattoo Renaissance

Mainstream interest in tattooing related to the burgeoning of different styles, designs and images used in the practice. This movement termed by Rubin (1988) as the 'renaissance' of tattooing, seemed to begin with the influence of Japanese style tattooing techniques and images (DeMello 2000:73). "Japanese design triggered the first wave of this expansion and it

continues to inspire experimentation and elaboration. Advanced artists lately have begun to explore a variety of 'tribal' styles as well as imagery from popular and mass media (especially science fiction) and other sources." (Rubin 1988:235). The initial use and adaptation of this Japanese style is attributed to a tattooist named Sailor Jerry Collins who, in the 1960s, gained design and technique information from the tattooist Kazuo Oguri of Japan (Rubin 1988:237). Collins also influenced other popular American tattooists in relation to design, technique and colouring; during the 1960s and 1970s there seemed to have been a relatively small group of tattooists familiar with each other that took up these new designs and styles (DeMello 2000; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1989; Mifflin 1997). In Canada, Cliff Raven visited Vancouver tattooists during this time period (Rubin 1988:238), one of those influential tattooists held in high esteem, suggesting the 'scene' in this country was similar to that of the United States. At this time entertainers and musicians began to have tattoos done, which brought tattooing to the public's attention, as those people held in esteem were participating in the practice (Rubin 1988:254). DeMello (2000) states that it was the introduction of Japanese style that influenced tattooing; creating an aesthetic that appealed to the middle class and hence created their involvement. Rubin (1988) argues that, "This expansion may be read as a dissemination of unconventional, individualistic values, and also as a reflection of better education, enhanced economic security, and openness to a wider range of experiences (including other cultures and subcultures through travel, music, dance, literature, food, dress, adornment, etc)." (Rubin 1988:254).

Obviously during this time many social movements occurred, helping to create this shift; "with peace, gay, and women's liberation movements came new designs that were both more feminine and also appealed to middle-class tastes more than the classic working-class

designs.” (DeMello 2000:77). More women were tattooed; “with the sexual revolution of the late ‘60s...tattoos were rescued from ignominy and resurrected in the counterculture by women who were rethinking womanhood...” (Mifflin 1997:56). The New Age ‘movement’⁷ also played a part in exposing people to ‘other’ cultural concepts surrounding the body, mind and spirit. This combined with commercialization of these ideas surrounding the ‘self’ and its expression have, I believe, influenced body modification, including tattooing, in North America. I will explore these ideas further in the next chapter.

The expansion of tattoo designs and styles continued into the 1980s and is still happening as tattooing becomes increasingly popular. According to Rubin (1988), this tattooing has been innovative and avant-garde, in stark contrast to what he considered the foregoing conservative tattooing. Some of the designs developed during the tattoo ‘renaissance’, besides Japanese or Oriental style, were ‘tribal’ styles. This ‘tribal’ style of tattoo is said to have been popularized by Leo Zulueta, although previous to this Cliff Raven and Ruth Marten had both experimented with it (Mifflin 1997). ‘Tribal’ tattoos consist of designs based on those traditional tattoo designs used by peoples from Polynesia and Micronesia; “Zulueta ... maintains that while it may look like appropriation by the white people wearing these non-Western designs, he sees it as a sign of admiration for a culture that no longer exists.” (DeMello 2000:87)⁸. ‘Tribal’ tattoos have become increasingly popular, along with other tattoos containing non-Western imagery. These non-Western images are reinterpreted, removed from their original context and in the end are Westernized

⁷ This vague religious category is characterised by anti-authoritarian self-spirituality and I will discuss it in further detail in chapter two.

⁸ It is interesting to note that Zulueta feels Polynesian and Micronesian cultures no longer exist, which suggests a harkening back to ‘simpler’ times of the exotic ‘other’. There is a discussion of this theme in the next chapter in reference to ‘Modern Primitives’.

versions of the original (just as much imagery in tattooing is). Discussion in the next chapter includes the cultural connotations of such imagery and its links to ideas of appropriation.

These changes in tattoo styles went hand in hand with an influx of tattooists with an art or design background (Rubin 1988:235). Custom tattoos increased in popularity and today are the norm. Tattooists, or artists working with them, will design tattoos tailored to the specific requests of a client; “Upmarket establishments- and over the past 30 years the number of tattoo establishments has grown rapidly in absolute terms, both in Europe and in America- now offer a great diversity of styles to an increasingly diverse clientele: Japanese, tribal, celtic, photo-realism, fantasy gothic, black and grey work, as well as retro-Americana.” (Benson 2000:240). Some would argue all of these factors have contributed to tattooing being regarded as an art-form, as opposed to its folk art status (Sanders 1989). In fact there have been art exhibits focusing on tattooing, in Canada one such exhibit considered tattoo to be one of its influences, calling the exhibit, *Rococo Tattoo* (Monk 1997); “At the same time, the ‘tattoo community’ became more visible and more organized, with the development of large scale and well-publicized conventions, an expanding number of magazines, books and now websites devoted to tattoo, and- a sure sign of coming of age- publications and museums devoted to the documenting of its own past.” (Benson 2000:240). However as Mifflin (1997) points out, most tattoo media is owned by men and there is low visibility of women tattoo artists in these publications, despite the increasing number of women participating in tattooing (as artists or consumers) (Mifflin 1997:158). However, this change in status does not apply to all tattooing. There are still flash sheets on the walls of most tattoo shops and generally those more expensive tattooists garner the title of artist. The

current hierarchy among tattooists seems to contain an increasing discrepancy based on rate of pay and, the harder to discern, artistic merit. The media has also played an important role in furthering this;

Through media publications that publicly denounce the lower-class tattoo forms and their representatives, through the tattoo organizations and their campaigns to clean up tattooing, and through the discourse and practices of tattooists, the middle-class promoters of modern tattooing are able to separate themselves from a tradition that is seen as negative, yet they are able to retain the symbol itself. (DeMello 2000:135)

This move from folk-art to art began in part by the availability of new designs, due to influential tattooists discussed above, but was also due to tattooing being brought to the attention of mainstream North American culture. Sanders (1989) argues that,

Tattooing is being moved away from its roots as a widely disvalued craft-like practice pursued by producers and consumers who are marginal to mainstream social groups. In turn impelled by the purposive activities of a variety of committed individuals, it is coming to be defined as an art form centered in a 'minor art world', which has a clear, if somewhat conflictual and marginal, relationship to the larger social world that revolves around accepted and valued artistic endeavors. (Sanders 1989:21)

Rubin (1988) and DeMello (2000) also echo the argument that it was specific individual tattooists that pushed for more experimental tattooing styles and designs. These tattooists were interested in exploring the artistic possibilities of tattooing and, increasingly, tattooists have come from an educated and/or art background (Sanders 1989:27). Important to these tattooists was and is the clientele; "this relationship between a changing market and innovation in tattooing is a specific example of what has come to be a general understanding within the sociology of art: art product consumers are not passive receptors but act, both individually and collectively, to shape and constrain the style of art works..." (Sanders 1989:29). The clientele have then been influential in the changes to designs and styles, as previously discussed in relation to subcultural groups over the last century. The clientele

was itself influenced undoubtedly by the media exposure tattooing gained. The tattoo community credits one tattooist in particular, Lyle Tuttle, for bringing media attention to tattooing (DeMello 2000:76). Tuttle opened his shop in San Francisco in 1957 and during the 1960s tattooed many hippies as well as celebrities, at which time he launched a pro-tattooing publicity campaign (DeMello 2000:76). Not all tattooists, especially those who had been in the practice for a number of years and had dealt with government and social restrictions, met this with enthusiasm (DeMello 2000:76). However, most likely this media attention helped to disseminate the changing tattoo practices at that time and began to change perceptions of the practice. Books by tattoo and body modification practitioners have played a role in this dissemination and influenced the aesthetics of such practices. One such work is the book *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989), which is, “credited with popularizing neo-tribal adornment...” (Wojcik 1995:35). This book and the people it describes have influenced what some call the ‘Modern’ or ‘Neo-Primitive’ movement or groups. There is a discussion in the next chapter about these groups with relation to the problematic connotations of the ‘primitive’ in reference to tattooing.

Popular media continues to connect deviant connotations to the practice of tattooing and other forms of body modification. Victoria Pitts (1999) found, after doing a study on newspaper articles that a significant number of them presented body modifications as social problems, raising the issues of self-mutilation in conjunction with mental illness. Further discussion of the perceived social connection between psychological illness and body modification continues in the next chapter in relation to social control and medicalization of the body. Despite continued negative media attention, tattooing has become normalised by society; as evidenced in the 2002 book by Rolling Stone magazine entitled, *Tattoo Nation*:

Portraits of Celebrity Body Art and the earlier, 1999 debut of the Butterfly Art Barbie, with the ‘art’ referring to tattoos on the doll (Mifflin 1997:iii). Commercialisation, as mentioned previously, has played a role in mainstream acceptance of such body modifications as tattooing. One such example of this is the increasing trend over the last two decades of the ‘punk’ aesthetic; “punk body adornment and music, divorced from its authentic anarchistic and apocalyptic ethos, was exploited as the ‘newest fad,’ just another youthful trend welcomed by corporate record companies and entrepreneurial fashion designers...” (Wojcik 1995:21). What has undoubtedly been most influential is that of the commercialization of the body in general, which connects to broad cultural and global change in the next chapter.

Historical Understandings

This brief history of North American tattooing shows the gradual legitimization of tattooing practices and the debate that still surrounds them. Mentioned above are some of the wider societal changes that have influenced shifting tattoo practices, which include the increased commercialization and medicalization of the body. Also the exposure and acceptance of traditionally foreign or ‘other’ cultural aesthetics coincides with an increasing focus within consumerism and society in general on individualism.

The history of contemporary North American tattooing shows that in fact the practice has been part of Western culture for hundreds of years, regardless of its variable popularity. This is important in understanding the myth of exoticism which still surrounds tattooing, how this in turn relates to conceptualization of the ‘other’ and more importantly our ‘selves’. The complicated history of tattooing shows that the practice has not just simply made a leap

over the last decade from the status of marginal craft to that of art. In fact, as mentioned, it was in the nineteenth century revered by aristocrats as 'de rigueur'. When technology, that is the tattoo machine, made the process affordable and easily disseminated it lost its aristocratic appeal. Tattooing is an interesting example of a bodily practice at the whims of society's current formulation of acceptability. Chapter Three explores this acceptability through the conceptualization of the body from a theoretical standpoint.

The current popularity of tattooing as a body modification relates to promotion through the media. As discussed, this coincided with the rise of the counterculture in the 1960s and its usage as a marketing tool for consumerism. Tattooing, I believe, is part of this ongoing consumer connection with counterculture, which I relate to the production of difference in Chapter Three.

Chapter III - Culture of the Body and Self

The history of North American tattooing, as discussed in the previous chapter, needs to be further analysed in terms of major socio-cultural forces. Examination of the current 'trend' of tattooing in Canada must include the large societal influences surrounding (post)modernity, and the changing times that we find ourselves in. This discussion will include overarching cultural constructions of capitalist society such as consumerism, globalization and the medicalization of the body, in relation to the current popularity of tattooing and the designs used in this practice. These large cultural trends have set the stage for the current tolerance of the practice of tattooing; as well, it is my contention that this present atmosphere has also influenced design choices for said tattoos. As an example, globalisation in conjunction with consumerism has allowed for the increased usage of cross cultural imagery. Perception of the body has, and continues to be, affected by these large cultural influences and this will be one of the main foci throughout this chapter. Bodily perception, from a theoretical standpoint, will be connected to the focus of this thesis, that of tattooing. It is important to recognize those cultural forces, which shape bodily perception, and heavily influence this practice.

The Theoretical Body

In the last two decades the body has become an area of increasing interest with scholarly writers (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 1992:145). The majority of academic works written about the body are theoretically oriented (Pitts 2002:362), with one of the major sociological foci being the body as a metaphor for representing social relationships (Turner 1994:viii). There has also been an increasing amount of work focussing on gender (inclusive of issues

surrounding sex and sexuality) and medical issues (Turner 1994:ix,x). However, I will begin by discussing the theoretical notions surrounding the body in general. In the beginning of this chapter, briefly addressed, are those philosophical considerations of the body, in order to understand some of the philosophical assumptions that later theories use. Also in order to argue my own understanding of contemporary tattooing I believe it is important to begin with the broadest theories which conceptualise the body. Initially, I will address the legacy of Descartes' philosophical notion of the body and mind as dualistic, from which much debate about the body has originated (Turner 1994:xi). In terms of the self, "divorced from all context, the Cartesian subject is an external, universal, absolute entity; contained within itself, it is an inside without an outside." (Enns 1994:48). Descartes' theories on the body explicate that the mind, with its basic unit of thoughts, is distinct from that of the material world of the body. Thus in Cartesian understandings the mind and body relate to each other causally, however this is problematic in that how can the immaterial mind affect the body which is of the material world? This problem has plagued Western philosophical understandings of the body.

In order to move beyond this problematic Cartesian division between mind and body I believe the theories of Merleau-Ponty are necessary. The phenomenological concept by Maurice Merleau-Ponty of the flesh gives a different theoretical conception of the mind/body in which mind, body and world are simultaneous phenomena (Merleau-Ponty 1968:250). The phenomenological perspective, which Merleau-Ponty aligned himself with, is a philosophical one that presumes a world preceding knowledge, which comes from an experience of the world and reflection (Enns 1994:41-42). This differs from introspection in its encompassing of "an entire social network of complex human interactions." (Weiss

1999:39). In his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), which was unfinished in 1961 at the time of his death, and published posthumously, Merleau-Ponty tries to "...show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself..." (Merleau-Ponty 1968:140). This notion of flesh, as something other than the combination of the duality of mind and body, is important as a starting point from which to conceptualize this flesh of personage interacting with, what Merleau-Ponty would call the flesh of the world. In this respect we are fully corporeal or 'embedded' within ourselves, but even such a description does not give credence to the inseparability of self/mind and body. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, "we must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit-for then it would be the union of contradictions-but we must think it,...as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being." (1968:147). Critics take exception to his use of the language *flesh* and *chiasmic* in order to describe its structure, because of the association of these terms with Christianity (Evans et al. 2000:1). There is also mention in Merleau-Ponty's work that all individuals are subordinated by flesh to overriding *logos*, which does seemingly have vaguely religious connotations (Evans et al. 2000:1). Although I think it is important to recognize these connotations within his work, to reiterate, Merleau-Ponty never had the chance to fully explicate his notion of the flesh. With this in mind it is possible to build upon his fundamental notion of the inseparability of mind and body while not delving into the philosophical debate surrounding religion. Another criticism is Merleau-Ponty's use of the male body as normative in his discussion of embodiment and did not acknowledge the influence of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age or class (Weiss 1999:20). This is thoroughly problematic and also occurs in many works that address the body. Although Merleau-

Ponty's notion of the flesh is a good beginning point for understanding embodiment, I believe that it would benefit from a restructuring which incorporated those concerns addressed above.

The Western philosophical Cartesian split between mind and body, which Merleau-Ponty addressed, is present in many works that theorize the body, as will be pointed out. Supporting the dualistic Cartesian understanding of the body, even though most works do this unsuspectingly, does not further our understanding of embodiment and how we relate not only to ourselves but the 'other'. With this in mind I think it is useful to discuss a few works from outside Western academia and philosophical traditions on the subject of the body. As with Merleau-Ponty these works offer alternative perspectives to the conception of mind and body as separate. Two Japanese philosophers, Ichikawa Hiroshi and Yuasa Yasuo, influenced by quite different philosophical backgrounds, including that of Buddhism, argue the 'lived body' conception. Using the phenomenological method of Husserl and influenced by Merleau-Ponty, among others, Ichikawa's main thesis is that the body is spirit (Ozawa-De Silva 2002:23). In his theory "the body is spirit: spirit and mind are nothing but two names given to the same reality...When we achieve a certain level of unity...the distinction between spirit and mind disappears." (Ozawa-De Silva 2002:27). Here we can see the influence of Buddhist thought, in that with conscious effort there can be the realization of the sameness of spirit and mind, or body and mind. What I would like to focus on here is that whatever belief there may be about personal development, fundamentally spirit/body and mind is the same reality. Yuasa also sees no distinction between mind and body, and does "move beyond this postulating that mind-body unity is not a natural state, but rather something to be achieved." (Ozawa-De Silva 2002:30). Also interesting is that Ichikawa

suggests “art is not to be seen merely as the production of artefacts, but rather as the organization of bodily forces or energies that are manifest in various concrete dramatic, physical or material forms...” (Ozawa-De Silva 2002:35). With this conception of art, Ichikawa in conjunction with his theories on embodiment suggests not only the integration of mind/body but also life/art (Ozawa-De Silva 2002:36). The connection between conceptions of embodiment and art is an important point for the topic at hand. For art to be in union with life means that tattooing would be a very interesting medium.

My conception is that it is far more useful, in understanding embodiment, to regard the body and mind (or as some refer to it spirit or self) as one. That is not to suggest that the appearance of the body necessarily connotes something of the self, but I believe that this is a possibility. Culture impacts not only bodily appearance but conceptions of the self, the discussion below within the context of sociological and anthropological theories addresses these issues.

It has been argued that Marcel Mauss through his 1935 paper on ‘body techniques’ introduced the topic of the body into modern social sciences (Frank 1991:37). According to Mauss bodily expression is a learned behaviour and there is interdependence between physical, psychosocial and social domains (Lock 1993:135). He also “showed that body techniques, whether used primarily in ritual or in everyday life, correspond to sociocultural mapping of time and space...” (Lock 1993:135).

Mary Douglas took up this emphasis on the body as culturally defined using her semiotic structuralist theoretical approach. In her work entitled, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1996), Douglas argues that there are two bodies: the physical and the social. The social body constrains the physical; “the scope of the body as a medium

of expression is limited by controls exerted from the social system." (Douglas 1996:74). She "developed the idea of the body as a receptor of social meaning and a symbol of society." (Shilling 1993:72). I agree with Douglas' theoretical conception of the body as under cultural constraints; however I find her structuralist approach limiting, especially in terms of studying tattooing which crosses many categorical boundaries. I believe that Douglas' structuralist classification of the body is difficult with the increased globalization and the current Western "loss of coherence in publicly recognized symbolic structures." (Douglas 1996:125). Anthony Synnott (1993) argues that the body can also be divided between the individual and the social; "the body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenologically, and a cultural product; it is personal, and also state property." (Synnott 1993:4). Many academics view the body to be largely a product of culture. This is typified by the argument of Nicole Sault (1994) in which she states the "body itself is a cultural creation. Although the human body has a physical existence, we can perceive it only in terms of a body image, for the act of perception is itself a culturally constructed process." (Sault 1994:14). It is more valuable to conceptualize the body as constituted by social and cultural constraints depending on its specific position within in these contexts. The current trends in theoretical approaches to the body, as with this work, address the social and cultural formation of the body. Trying to theorize about a possible 'natural' body, untouched by cultural forces, in my estimation is futile, due to the inability to delineate such a body. The problem with the conception in popular discourse is that the "'natural' body is presented as a site for improvement, a starting point which is - almost by definition- inadequate and only ever 'potential'." (Brush 1998:29). This idea of self-improvement is

extremely important in North American society today and is a driving force within consumption.

Within social sciences there are theories of the body that concentrate on trying to understand the influence of the currently high level of consumerism in Western societies (Falk 1994, Shilling 1993, Turner 1991, Frank 1991, Featherstone 1982). Chris Shilling in his book, *The Body and Social Theory* (1993), theorises the body as an unfinished entity, both biologically and socially, suggesting that through participation within society there can be limited transformation. This transformation is heavily influenced by the current popular conceptualization of the body as an unfinished project, which should be an expression of individuality (Shilling 1993:200). Another work which concentrates on consumerism to an even further extent is that of Pasi Falk's book entitled, *The Consuming Body* (1994). His whole theme is consumption in contemporary Western societies, linking this to culture, body and the self through an interpretive scheme (Falk 1994:7). These works are important in the recognition of the influence of consumerism in relation to embodiment and the popular conceptualizations of such. Shilling's foundationalist approach to the body is problematic, in that his notion of the biological body as unfinished is reminiscent of ideas surrounding a 'natural' body subject to change. This is subject to the same criticism of how would one delineate this biological body and taking that into consideration is the idea useful? Falk's work is considerably helpful in considering the body in relation to consumption, but I think that this subject needs a broader, perhaps more eclectic approach. The current role of consumerism will be further discussed in the section entitled, "The Influence of (Post)Modernity and Consumerism." Although to continue with a look at general theories of

the body, Western feminists have played an important role in the interest and debate surrounding issues of the body (Turner 1991:20).

The subject of the body is an important topic within feminist literature, which is concerned with the longstanding associations in Western thought between the feminine, the body and nature, and masculinity, culture and the mind (Ahmed et al. 2001:3). As Susan Bordo argues in her book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), historically the body has been denigrated while the mind/self is held in esteem. Hence the connection between the body and women has negative connotations. She also points out the power of racial stereotypes and the connections between non-Westerners and the 'natural' body as very sexualized and conceived of as 'instinctual' (Bordo 1993:9). Feminist writers have recognized the dangers in continuing to conceptualize the body as separate from the mind/self. Diane Enns notes this, in her 1994 work on the embodied subject, and suggests, "The flesh as an element of Being, the meeting point of interactions between the world of objects and other bodies, is a useful concept for feminists attempting to theorize an embodied speaking subject." (Enns 1994:56). It is of concern to all those academics that write about the body that there "is a recognition of the function of social differences in establishing the very boundaries which appear to mark out 'the body'." Otherwise, we are in danger of fetishising 'the body' by assuming that it contains these differences within the singularity of its figure." (Ahmed et al. 2001:3). It is extremely important to recognize that cultural and social differences 'show' themselves on the body or, as we have discussed, through embodiment. The conception of a 'natural' body untouched by these forces, as mentioned above does nothing but essentialise difference. Connected to this idea is the importance of recognizing the inseparability of the mind/self and body.

Skin and Textuality

There have been recent works that concentrate on theorizing specifically about the skin of the body. These works build on the general theoretical perspectives about the body, as outlined above. Ahmed and Stacey (2001) theorize the skin as a point of study in exploring the relationship between the body and socio-historical forces that mark it. Ahmed and Stacey (2001) conceptualize this marking of the skin to be a form of writing; “both are processes that involve materiality and signification, limits and possibilities, thought and affect, difference and identity.” (Ahmed et al. 2001:15). The link or metaphor drawn between markation of the skin and that of the written word is a theme that is present in many works. Claudia Benthien (2002) in her work about skin is critical of this theoretical connection. She argues the “fact that the concept of text is today conceived as universal is a simplification related to the specific Western tradition of knowledge...” (Benthien 2002:12). Yet the skin, although incapable itself of having the intent connected to writing, can be expressive. The use of the metaphor connecting the written word and skin or the body is, as Benthien states, extremely problematic. Although, I do recognize the possibility of tattoos consisting of writing and in this context textuality would be appropriate to consider theoretically. However, overall theoretical discourses or theories about the body and skin which utilize textuality or language as central figurations lack substance, as they neglect the fundamental corporeality of the subject. Although Gail Weiss does make the compelling point that both “perceptually-based images and language-based images are themselves incorporated into and expressed through our body images (and vice-versa).” (Weiss 1999:169).

Steven Connor (2001) in his discussion of the skin uses the premise of textuality but does not critically reflect on it. He merely uses it as an underlying theoretical principle in his argument, which stresses the temporality of the skin. Connor (2001) argues that modifying the skin also modifies its temporality; he draws the comparison between healing of the skin and modifying it through such means as tattooing and piercing. Connor questions why in the last decade there has been respectability and visibility attached to constrictions and modifications of the skin. He concludes that in contemporary Western society there is a desire to explore the erotic through painful or uncomfortable sensations of the skin (Connor 2001:50). "The obscenity of the skin under assault, by contrast, gives us back the scene of suffering and pleasure, gives it somewhere to happen, and someone to happen to, a time and a place for there to be a time and place." (Connor 2001:50); in his reference to 'giving back' this masochistic scene of pleasure relates to harkening to a past in which the skin was 'lived in' or experiential, which Connor implies is missing in contemporary Western society. This theme of body modification and societal criticism also connects to the discussion of the 'Modern Primitive' movement in this chapter. However the issue of textuality and the body must be further discussed, due to the heavy use of this metaphor, as mentioned, in works relating to tattooing and body modification in general. Overall Michael Atkinson (2003), using works of Elias, argues that tattooing should be viewed as textual discourse; "the body transforms into a text through which one is able to represent one's distinction, status, and affective control, Elias...pointed to the ways in which bodies become intertextuated with communicative social symbols." (Atkinson 2003:131). Atkinson however recognises the dangers involved in this perspective, in which limiting the "body experience to a system of signs and signifiers, there is a very real risk of losing sight of the *lived* body amidst a

waterfall of textual images and decodings.” (italics in original Atkinson 2003:253). In discussing the use of the metaphor of inscription, Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (1992) are critical, “even as contemporary discussions of the body call into question the oppositions essential to modern culture – between the natural and the cultural, the feminine and the masculine, the civilized and the primitive, the unmarked and the marked, the signifier and the signified – their use of the metaphor of inscription may simultaneously reinforce the Western notion of the body as unitary and distinct.” (Mascia-Lees et al. 1992:146). Some conceive Western tattoos as a way in which to “literalize this vision of the body as a surface or ground onto which patterns of significance can be inscribed.” (Mascia-Lees et al. 1992:147). Pippa Brush (1998) problematises popular discourse surrounding ideas of inscription upon the body through means of modification; however her definition of body modification is very broad including plastic surgery with the likes of tattooing. This definition is problematic with many historical differences between such practices. Brush is critical of the inscription discourse of the body; “an important aspect of the materiality of bodily alteration which is frequently effaced is the issue of class and economic privilege. To characterize bodily alteration as ludic and postmodern textual play is to ignore the social and economic situations which limit the capacity for that textual play...” (Brush 1998:33). This is an important criticism which links to a later argument by Klesse (1999) that individuation of the self, through means of body modification, is also limited by these often-overlooked material and societal issues.

Margaret Lock also problematises theories of the body in relation to communication; “the problem of the body as one of semiosis, in other words, how the body functions as both a ‘transmitter’ and ‘receiver’ of information, in turn a function of the positioning of the

individual in society. Nevertheless any connection between knowledge and practice remains essentially obscure, as does the problem of individual meanings attributed to cultural symbols and their manipulation, related in turn to relationships of power.” (Lock 1993:136). This statement by Lock is essentially what this work is trying to shed light upon, in reference to the practice of tattooing. Also important is her conceptualization of, “the cultural production of the body as an unstable contested object, the result of ongoing encounters and exchanges between local and global knowledge.” (Lock 1993:145). For this reason I believe it is important to discuss not only the larger cultural constructions that influence bodily practices but also individuals’ conceptualizations of their own practices and attached meanings. These individuated conceptions come to life in the next chapter using ethnographic material.

The Influence of (Post)modernity and Consumerism

Consumerism has become a driving force in today’s society, of which tattooing is a part. Production of systems of needs is largely social and no longer relate solely to the idea of biological need (Baudrillard 1988). Consumption connects these socially constructed needs and the idea of identity construction (Warde 1997). As Featherstone (1991) has argued ascription of identity and persona, based on social hierarchies, has degenerated, instead there is the possibility of creation through consumption;

The post-modern subject no longer accepts the power of the institutions or society’s power to fashion his or her identity, and sometimes believes in the possibility of self-creation, maybe in the form of playing with his or her sexual identity or making out of him or herself a work of art. (Salecl 2001:28)

This creation of self through consumption has many socio-cultural limitations, as mentioned and discussed in the later section, of this chapter, entitled “The Group or Subcultural Debate and ‘Modern Primitives’”. In fact some academics are critical of this rhetoric of choice. Brush's (1998) critical emphasis on the societal construction of the body within consumer society is an important framework to consider as “The body is fragmented and these fragments, along with the body's ‘capacities’, are commodified and the improvement or replacement of those fragments are marketed commercially, presenting the illusion of choice- the ‘free market place’.” (Brush 1998:40). Brush points out an important phenomenon, however, it is dangerous to intimate that people cannot make meaningful choices due to consumerism. Further discussion later in this section deals with this problematic effacement of agency. To begin with it is important to recognize the historical growth of consumerism over the past century and where we find ourselves now.

Initially, with the rise in mass production, mass consumption, in turn became necessary; “in the 1920s the foundations of a consumer culture became established with the new media of motion pictures, tabloid press, mass circulation magazines and radio extolling the leisure lifestyle, and publicising new norms and standards of behaviour.” (Featherstone 1982:172). With the opening of bodily sexuality during the 1960s, as previously discussed in the last chapter, hedonism was extolled and the body became the site for pleasure and self-expression (Featherstone 1982:170). However, this shift from ascetism to hedonism was more in terms of cultural imagery, with people having to be selective in their hedonistic choices (Featherstone 1982:171). The workforce continued to grow and hedonism, or more appropriately hedonistic imagery, became a purchased commodity. With these social changes in the 20th century, came what Turner (1991) calls “the democratization of culture

and morality...” (Turner 1991:19) due to the growth in the service industry that “has been associated with the decline of the traditional working class and with changes in life-style emphasizing consumption and leisure.” (Turner 1991:19).

In relation to the design changes in tattooing during the 1960s and 1970s there was also a change in the direction of consumerism, “baby boomers became a huge niche audience for corporations producing magazines, records, films, foods, and restaurants that appealed to their countercultural sensibilities.” (Glickman 1999:9). This appeal to the counterculture has continued as more consumer items are produced and more markets for these items are sought; “As those writers concerned with the development of a post-modern consumer culture within late capitalism have argued, multi-national corporate enterprises have become involved in the *production of difference* by assisting the proliferation of clothing styles and other consumer goods which can be appropriated as signs of bodily identity by social groups...” (italics in original Shilling 1993:143). The adoption of the image of the ‘rebel’ by business and their advertising in the 1960s (Frank 1997:228), obviously had an effect on the practice of tattooing. In fact, “dissent *is* the system. Capitalism simply does not require hierarchy or cultural hegemony in order to function smoothly.” (italics in original Heath 2001:16). Tattooing has flourished in this trend of the counterculture, due to the practices’ historical connection to deviance in North America and, more broadly, Western countries. This is evident through the example of the 1970s punk ‘style’ which was inclusive of tattooing. As Wojcik argues, “despite the subversive aesthetics of punk body adornment, certain aspects of the style were promptly appropriated by the fashion industry and made palatable for mainstream consumption, once punks’ symbolic vocabulary had become somewhat familiar.” (Wojcik 1995:20).

The tattoo 'renaissance', as discussed in the previous chapter, was the point at which tattooing began to flourish in the consumer market having wider appeal amongst all socio-economic groups. According to Flemming, the tattoo renaissance refers to the social elevation of the practice into a socially sanctioned art form, not to any substantial changes in technique (Flemming 2000:61). Although I would argue that previous to and during this period there was a proliferation of different imagery and styles used in tattoos. As Sanders (1989) argues, generally, new tattoo clientele have more disposable income, emphasize the aesthetic function of the tattoo rather than affiliation and they want creative, unique custom designs (as does the tattoo artist). This, in turn, has furthered the plethora of individualistic images used.

In discussion of the cultural aspects of body modifications Benson (2000:253) points out that the unattainable Western ideals of body and self revolve around permanence, control and autonomy. These ideals are in fact reactions to the reality of the current socio-cultural situation, or as some refer to it, (post)modernity, which includes "fear of fragmentation, anxiety about boundaries and about the relationship between will and self; the body is the battleground in which such anxieties are played out." (Benson 2000:252). Benson states that individuation is central to conversations about contemporary tattooing and piercing. I offer a discussion on the topic of individuation in the next chapter in relation to personal narratives about tattoos. In discussion of the physical process of tattoo and piercing and the capacity for the external to reveal the internal Benson argues, "in their capacity to enact the interiorizing of exteriority and the exteriorizing of interiority- and to *fix* this mediation in the form of corporeal transformation- these are symbolic practices of great power, permitting a rich and complex mediation on issues of agency, autonomy and control." (italics in original Benson

2000:245). However, Bryan Turner in his article, “Body Marks in Cool Societies” (1999), takes a very different point of view on tattoo in contemporary Western societies. He characterizes the current (post)modern world as one with “shifting or thin solidarities and ironic or cool loyalties” (Turner 1999:44) as a result of globalization. He characterizes the world sociologically as one with negotiated loyalties, the variable self, ironic communication and relativistic ideology (Turner 1999:44). In light of this Turner conceptualizes modern tattoo as an ironic consumer expression of individualism, “surface indicators of identity and attachment.” (Turner 1999:49). There is further discussion of this article by Turner in the next section entitled, “Fashion and Tattooing”. However in discussion of the (post)modern world Turner’s article is of importance. He rightly, although generally, characterizes the affects globalization has had on social relations. However, I take contention with his extrapolation to the tattoo because it effaces the importance of any personalised meaning that people may attribute to their markings. This seemingly belies any agency people may have with their own embodiment. I certainly believe that there are tattoos that people have received that are ironic consumer expressions. However, this judgement, I believe, should include listening and seriously considering what people have to say about what their tattoos express; otherwise we characterize our informants as dupes of consumerism, unable to fathom their own motivations. This is why the next chapter is important, as I have allowed people to express their understandings of their own actions. To return to Benson, I do agree with her in the *potential* for the tattoo to be a meaningful symbolic practice in contemporary Western societies. She does, however, rightly caution that corporeal absolutism cannot truly be an escape because it still exists within the wider cultural systems and that we may never be able to achieve the fixity of identity yearning to be achieved (Benson 2000:254).

Corporeal absolutism also does not take into account the spiritual or the notion of self which I believe is why Merleau-Ponty's theory of flesh is important, as it encompasses both the mind and body.

Flemming (2000) points out that tattoos are literally, inherently rebellious within the commodity market of the West. With the consideration of tattoos in terms of a type of property it "is at once mobile and inalienable." (Flemming 2000:67) and therefore, "tattoo thus readily connotes a blockage in the free circulation of commodities that is understood to constitute economic health in the West..." (Flemming 2000:67). Tattoos block commodity circulation because they are *items* (ink) applied to the body permanently. They cannot be thrown out for a new version, although they can be tattooed over again or 'covered up', as it is referred to among tattooists. However, this can only be done in a limited manner before the skin is saturated in ink. As well, there is the argument that with laser removal available for tattoos they become another replaceable consumer item. This belies the pain and expense involved in both tattooing and laser removal. Laser removal of tattoos is far more expensive than the initial application of the tattoo and does not necessarily remove all ink. Results are dependant on the consistency of the depth of the ink application and the colours used. I believe the permanency of tattoo plays an extremely important role as to why they are viewed as rebellious with regards to commodity consumerism. Most people have their tattoos for life and also there are a finite number of tattoos which can be 'fit' onto a person or applied. This is contrary to consumerism which is dependent on the disposability of products for further growth. From this point of view, tattoos are a very different form of commodity, which in and of themselves are problematic within consumerism. All of which provides some insight as to possibly why tattooing has become an increasingly popular form

of body modification and how people perceive it to be a rebellious act against consumerism, despite its position within this market system.

In the last chapter tattoos were historically linked to non-mainstream or ‘rebellious’ movements such as that of hippy and punk. Another very influential movement, touched upon in the last chapter that gained popularity during the period of the tattoo Renaissance, during the 1970s and 80s, was that of the New Age movement. In her work DeMello (2000) concentrates on the middle class adoption of tattooing and links this to social movements which began to gain mainstream momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, inclusive of the New Age movement. I agree with DeMello; however I believe that this one in particular has had a large impact on this historical change of demographics participating and the increasing individuality and cultural diversity of tattoos. This movement is important in understanding the focus of this paper, in the increased acceptance and use of a diversity of cultural symbols and the personalization of these symbols. This personalization of symbols reflects contemporary ideas surrounding embodiment which will be further discussed in the conclusion of this chapter. The New Age movement over time has become synonymous with others, such as, ecological, self-help, men’s and women’s spirituality, which DeMello (2000) concentrated on in her work. The term New Age has differing definitions and now commonly refers to a plethora of practices and beliefs, which are not one of the major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism); “in spite of the popularity of the term its actual content remains extremely vague.” (Hanegraaff 1996:1).

The New Age movement, as mentioned above, is a broad category of religious development which has competing definitions. For this thesis the definition of the New Age movement will be those practices or beliefs that “maintain that inner spirituality- embedded

within the self and the natural order as a whole- serves as *the* key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right.” (Heelas 1996:16). In terms of time period it is “*a movement which emerged in the second half of the 1970s, came to full development in the 1980s and is still with us...*” (italics in original Hanegraaff 1996:12). However the roots of this movement emerged out of the European process of autonomization in which the secularization of space and time produced a mechanized world-view (Hanegraaff 1996:386). “Esotericism formed a counter-force against a mechanistic worldview and against a science based on wholly secular principles; its alternative was an ‘organic’ worldview, and a science based on religious assumptions.” (Hanegraaff 1996:388); through nineteenth century esotericism such as Romanticism and Occultism the New Age movement developed, although it did not mature until the latter half of the 1970s (Hanegraaff 1996). There are, of course, differing academic opinions as to the definition of this contemporary movement and its historical origins. However, the above delineation of the New Age movement generally coincides with that used by other academics (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Lau 2000).

The New Age movement is characterized by self-spirituality where, “The ‘individual’ serves as his or her own source of guidance.” (Heelas 1996:23). This coincides with an anti-authoritarian dimension to the New Age movement, for if the self is the nexus of spirituality than the need for authority figures, with regards to spirituality, is nullified (Heelas 1996). In conjunction “***the New Age movement is characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of a secularized esotericism.***” (italics and bold in original Hanegraaff 1996:521). However, consumerism directed at the New Age movement takes advantage of this cultural criticism and the part-time spirituality that has become popular within this movement (Heelas 1996; Lau 2000). Within contemporary

consumerism there has been an ever-growing range of products to complement the New Age movement, which reflects the movement as a major phenomenon (Hanegraaff 1996:1). The question becomes how can this movement be critical of capitalist Western society if, in fact, it contributes to the system of which it is critical? Consumerism has, of course, addressed this, “through the discursive field in which these bodily practices are embedded, personal transformations become political as social and planetary wellness is directly correlated with individual health.” (Lau 2000:4). Therefore individual decisions about bodily practices are taken to be social and political statements despite the fact that consumerism delimits those choices that can be made. I believe this speaks to the above discussion of (post)modernity and conceptions of the body, in which consumerism is thought to be *used* on an individual level to present a commentary of a social, political and/or individual nature. These ideas will be further explored in the discussion on ‘Modern Primitives’ which has elements of the New Age movement and I would suggest developed in conjunction with this movement.

Mifflin (1997) makes the connection between women participating in tattooing and New Age ideals, “Women’s emphasis on tattoo as an expression of personal growth has made it a magnet for self-help and New Age enthusiasts in search of new skin for old ceremonies.” (Mifflin 1997:108). Also, the New Age movement has been connected to the changing clientele of tattooing, the previously discussed shift from working class to that of the middle; “by carefully wrapping the tattooing body project in New Age justifications and rationalizations, many in the middle-class group of tattoo enthusiasts have co-opted the practice as a bourgeois form of identity expression.” (Atkinson 2003:251). This has also changed the cultural status of tattoos, as mentioned in the previous chapter, now that this

practice has achieved the status of art in some prestigious circles. The New Age movement has helped with this transition from craft to art, “tattoo’s claim to effectively represent the interior of the psyche is one of the things that permits its elevation into an art form in the West.” (Flemming 2000:65), as discussed in terms of legitimization of the practice of tattooing later in this chapter. The New Age ideals of self-driven growth and individuation coincide with the ideals of consumerism previously mentioned, that individual identity formation can be achieved through their own consumption. Also, I agree with Featherstone (1982) that, “within consumer culture, which approximately coincides with the culture of narcissism, the new conception of self which has emerged, which we shall refer to as the ‘performing self’ places greater emphasis upon appearance, display and the management of impressions.” (Featherstone 1982:187). However, I believe, as stated previously, that tattoo has the potential to move beyond this narcissistic conception of the self through its fundamental corporeality. That is the permanence and physically painful process of tattoo. This relates to my critique of those academics that theorize tattoo as purely part of fashion.

Fashion and Tattoo

Within the theoretical considerations of the body and skin is that of dressing these forms. As in the United States and Canada, Britain in “the last ten years have also seen the partial incorporation of both forms of body modification [piercing and tattooing] into consumer culture.” (Sweetman 1999:52). This incorporation into consumer culture no doubt benefits from continuing media attention. Sweetman in his article, “Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity.” (1999), addresses those that

have argued that tattooing and piercing is nothing more than a fashion trend (Sweetman 1999:53). He admits that some informants interviewed do regard their tattoos or piercings as accessories to a certain look or as another form of jewellery (Sweetman 1999:55). However, these body modifications were also thought to be 'original' or 'different' by informants and importance was placed on the decision to modify their bodies. Thus from the view of those involved these forms of body modification are more than fashion accessories (Sweetman 1999:57). With increasing redundancy in fashion and such markers in the consumer culture of self, Sweetman argues that tattoo and piercing provide more permanent forms of construction of the self (Sweetman 1999:71). This is an important point, which reiterates the one I made at the end of "The Influence of (Post)modernity and Consumerism" section in this chapter, and is a defining difference between tattoo and fashion.

Turner (1999) contrasts Sweetman, arguing that "tattoos have become a regular aspect of consumer culture, where they add cultural capital to the body's surface", (Turner 1999:40). Turner questions what tattoos socially have to offer in this globalized world where tattoos are repetitive, self-referential and hybrid beyond any question of authenticity (Turner 1999:40). He contrasts Western contemporary body marks (modifications) with that of traditional use of marking within society. Turner finds the social aspects attributed to body marks in 'traditional' societies sadly lacking in contemporary Western practices (Turner 1999:42). He comes to the conclusion that with little loyalty or solidarity in postmodern society body marks are optional decorations without any social merit. "The modern tattoo is an expression of the growing individualism of contemporary society. The tattoo is simply another sign to be read within consumer culture, but these signs are ironic." (Turner 1999:49).

Turner (1999) is not alone in his conception of tattooing as part of fashion or dress. Entwistle (2002) defines dress as not only clothing but also decoration of the body of any kind, inclusive of tattoos (Entwistle 2002:135). She argues that “dress is part of the micro-order of social interaction and intimately connected to our (rather fragile) sense of self, which is, in turn, threatened if we fail to conform to the standards governing a particular social situation.” (Entwistle 2002:140). Despite the fact that I disagree with Entwistle’s contention that tattoos are dress, she points out that dress itself has social meaning, which ironic or not cannot be dismissed as unimportant. Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro (1998) explore this social meaning of dress in relation to the linguistic/psychological model of Lacan; “undeniably, the language of clothes and bodily adornment generally experiments relentlessly with ways of defining and redefining the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside.” (Warwick et al. 1998:xviii). As with Entwistle (2002), I am critical of the idea of body modification as dress, the idea of a language of dress is also problematic, as fundamentally there is a lack of corporeality to such theoretical notions, having been criticised as “rather abstract and disembodied...” (Entwistle 2002:136).

As Sweetman has argued, Turner overstates the impermanence of contemporary body modification and its supposed lack of signification within the social realm (Sweetman 1999:71-72). This critical view of tattoo as fashion is also held by Benson (2000), “to limit interpretation of these practices to a simple story of Western consumerism (as if consumerism were ever simple) would be to miss precisely that which gives these practices their power: their indissoluble link to corporeality and to corporeal absolutism.” (Benson 2000:244). Entwistle (2002) and, Warwick and Cavallaro (1998) are also subject to criticism for not distinguishing between dressing the body and modifying the body itself,

again not addressing the corporeality of such practices as tattooing. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, interviewees form narratives about their tattoos which differ from that of fashion. This is a key difference, touched upon by Sweetman (1999).

The tattoo is corporeal in that it is tangibly part of the physical body. Technically it is material (ink) put beneath the surface of the skin to form a pattern and hence becomes *part* of the body. However I think it is useful to conceptualise the tattoo as becoming *flesh* (to use Merleau-Ponty's term) upon application, that is, of mind and body. The visual nature of the tattoo clearly belies its connection to corporeality; however the intention behind the act connects it to that of the mind.

In his work entitled, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1992), Fred Davis argues that, "in the symbolic realm of dress and appearance, however, 'meanings' in a certain sense tend to be simultaneously both more ambiguous and more differentiated than in other expressive realms." (Davis 1992:9). This material is excellent to explore whether tattooing is theoretically *closer* to that of fashion in terms of communicative ability. This of course, as stated above, does not take into account, however, that tattoos become part of the epidermis and are then 'permanent' without the help of medical procedures. However, in terms of the ability of tattoos to 'communicate' they are more similar to that of fashion than linguistics, "*meaningful* differences among clothing signifiers are not nearly as sharply drawn and standardized as are the spoken sounds employed in a speech community..." (italics in original Davis 1992:13). Davis' (1992) approach to the communicative abilities of fashion is, in my mind, far more useful than the earlier discussed metaphors of textuality and the body used in discussion of body modification.

Medical Science, Technology and Legitimacy

Capitalist consumerism has changed the perception of the body culturally, as well as individually. Within consumer culture the body is presented as an object of transformation (Featherstone 2000:2); “the influential view of the body as a garment, veil or mask, as something which should be changed and modified to become congruent with changes in the self.” (Featherstone 2000:10). This view relates to the fast-paced technological change which has occurred in the past century. The body is increasingly subject to medical technologies as they have advanced and become the Western norm. In an article about ‘Modern Primitives’ Cummings (2001) comes to the conclusion that the rapid change in technologies during the 20th century with which the body may be altered, supplemented and transformed has created anxiety over boundaries of the body (Cummings 2001:312). The body has now become malleable, the subject of increased scrutiny and highly politicized, this “sense of the natural self being overwhelmed by civilization’s invasive instruments is at the heart of Modern Primitivism.” (Cummings 2001:312). I take issue with the concept of a ‘natural’ self, as previously discussed. Although I do believe that technological change, especially in the medical field, has created scrutiny and anxiety, over the body and its boundaries, but not just in ‘Modern Primitives’. There has become a general cultural preoccupation with the body.

Historically, medical discourse on the body has questioned the legitimacy of body modification. Psychology in particular has been critical of body modification practices, deeming them self-mutilation. Although for some such as Armando Favazza, who wrote *Bodies Under Siege: Self-mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry* (1996), defining body modification as self-mutilation does not necessarily imply a negative

connotation (Favazza 1996:xix). However, I would suggest that on a social level self-mutilation does have negative connotations. Favazza, in his brief section on the practice of tattooing, discusses that historically tattooing has been culturally sanctioned (Favazza 1996:150-153). This is in contrast to Nikki Sullivan's survey of psychiatric and/or psychological articles dealing with tattooing. She found, "that psychiatric analyses of the subject in/of tattooing repeat the tendency...to identify somatic differences in terms of normalcy and deviance, and moreover to (re)produce the body of what is "strange" as a source of mastery that must be conquered but never entirely annihilated." (Sullivan 2001:23). As well, the majority of criminological studies of tattooing over the last century connect the practice to social deviance (Sullivan 2001:27-28). This has continued despite the increasing prevalence of body modification, although now some medical articles are investigating individual reasons for these practices and calling for medical professionals to be more sensitive to these (Millner et al. 2001, Stuppy et al. 1998, Wright 1995, Armstrong 1995). The medical professions have had increasing social control over the body; "among its many effects, modernity has facilitated an increase in the degree of control that nation-states in general and medical professions in particular, have been able to exert over the bodies of their citizens." (Shilling 1993:2). However, one must take into account the integration of body modification into mainstream consumer culture, with increased popularity and revenue.

We find ourselves in a time of conflicting opinions about body modification. Mass media has drawn attention to body modification, but not necessarily in a positive light. As mentioned in the last chapter, Pitts (1999) reviewed newspaper articles and found that a significant number of them presented certain types of body modification (in reference to

practices such as tattooing, piercing, scarification and branding) as social problems. Pitts (1999) argues that through framing body modification as mutilation the legitimacy of body modifiers' own accounts is negated through the association of the practices with mental illness, placing body modifiers outside the social sphere. Katherine Irwin (2001), as DeMello's (2000) work supports, argues that middle-class adoption of tattooing and their legitimating techniques are contributing to the moral passage of the practice from deviant to mainstream acceptance. The techniques that Irwin (2001) discusses are on the level of everyday interactions between individuals, which could account for the difference between popular media and the account Irwin gives of her informants' success in legitimating their body modification within social networks. The contrast between the works of Pitts (1999) and Irwin (2001) points out the obvious range to which body modification practices are considered acceptable. However, Irwin's study was solely of tattooing and it is likely that this specific type of body modification is more socially acceptable given peoples historical familiarity with the practice.

Besides the medical community, the academic community has also been critical of body modification. Renata Salecl, in her article, "Cut in the body: From clitoridectomy to body art." (2001), links the absence or disbelief of an over-arching authority or ideal to narcissistic self-admiration within contemporary Western society (Salecl 2001:29). She argues that piercing and tattooing are not universally clinical forms of perversion rather they would clinically be considered neurotic and imitating acts of perversion (Salecl 2001:31). This is clearly a value laden statement which is too general to be of academic use, she also links masochism and sadism to body modification. There are historical links between sadomasochism and body modification practices in North America, as it was groups

participating in sadomasochism which popularized piercing and other body modification acts, before mainstream involvement (DeMello 2000). Salecl argues that marking the body is a form of protest against the contemporary ideology that everything is subject to change, “the use of the body in contemporary art does deal with the contemporary subject’s problem in searching for something real in the form of his or her body.” (Salecl 2001:32). Salecl’s argument as to the motivation behind body modification gives an interesting broad societal context, similar to that of those previously discussed in relation to consumerism. However, intimating that the motivation for body modification is mass neurotic behaviour seems extreme and does not take into account (as many theories do not) the micro-context, that of individual motivations.

Sheila Jeffreys (2000) offers another valuable perspective, from a feminist point of view, that body modification is harmful and an attack on the body, carried out by socially oppressed groups, such as women, gay men and lesbians, on themselves. Jeffreys’ (2000) characterization of body modification is extremely broad, including plastic surgery with tattooing and piercing. This is problematic, as previously discussed in relation to Brush (1998), in that this definition does not take into account the history of the different practices and public perceptions related to such. Also Jeffreys (2000) does not take into account the increasing mainstream popularity of body modification practices such as tattooing and piercing among non-socially oppressed groups, and also the predominantly male history of tattooing. The analysis of social groups that participate in body modification should discuss the fact that heterosexual males in Western society are subject to increasing social pressures to conform to specific aesthetics and bodily controls, which Jeffreys does not address.

Of course, intertwined with the legitimacy of body modification practices is the historical association of deviance and these practices. As evidenced above, this is still a contested issue. Atkinson (2003) points out the problematic dichotomy of normative versus deviant writing that, “in essence, by casting the practice of tattooing in an ‘either/or’ analytical framework, we ignore the possibility that tattooing is in fact both normative *and* deviant in Canada – therefore, fail to consider how, when, where, and why tattoos are worn by Canadians, and decoded by audiences.” (italics in original Atkinson 2003:57). This is an important point as we now find ourselves in a time of diverse opinions about body modification and, more specifically, tattooing. I agree with Atkinson (2003), in that it is neither helpful nor theoretically sound to view tattooing as either definitively deviant or normative, in a cultural sense. With the increasing numbers of people participating in body modification it is also problematic to generalise about tattooed or body modified people as a cohesive group or subculture. Theoretically viewing tattoo enthusiasts (those that participate in the practice) as a subculture or community does not take into account their individual narratives about the experience and the diversity of those participating. Also it is difficult to distinguish subcultural group membership when the ‘style’ is mass-marketed and adopted into consumerism (Atkinson 2003:103). However, that is not to say that there are *no* groups or subcultures in which tattooing or body modification in general are strongly associated with membership, only that one needs to be cautious in making such statements.

The Group or Subcultural Debate and ‘Modern Primitives’

There are those groups within Canada and the United States who associate themselves strongly with body modification; although as mentioned above sometimes group

cohesion is questionable. A study of one such group is that by D. Angus Vail (1999) in his work investigating heavily tattooed people who refer to themselves as 'collectors' of tattoos. He examines the process by which people become 'collectors' of tattoos and associates it with the gradual acceptance of a deviant identity in social terms. As discussed above with reference to the Pitts' (1999) article obviously body modification, inclusive of tattooing, has to some degree retained its deviant associations. What is interesting within Vail's study is that there is a social aspect, at the individual level, to the process of becoming a tattoo 'collector'; there is what could be loosely termed a subculture. This type of social cohesion amongst body modifiers is not often referred to in the academic literature with the exception of some work written on 'Neo/Modern Primitives' and affiliation tattoos in prisons and gangs.

One such work is that of Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young (2001) who, using their own Canadian ethnographic data, have written an article examining groups of people involved in body modification, which they refer to as 'Neo Primitives', also discussed by other academics under the moniker 'Modern Primitives'. In their article "Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Contemporary Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification." (2001), Atkinson and Young define the subculture of 'Neo Primitives' as "active agents of counter-expression and dissent..." (Atkinson et al. 2001:117), exploring their experiences, practices and ideologies as members of this group. Atkinson and Young argue that it is the underlying use of body modification as social resistance that distinguishes the 'Neo Primitive' subculture (Atkinson et al. 2001:141). This is interesting considering those works which view this 'social resistance' through body modification as a distinguishing characteristic of (post)modern present day Western society not of one singular group or movement. This

resistance is connected to what they refer to as flesh journeys, which is "the process of intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronicle changes in one's identity, relationships, thoughts, or emotions over time..."

(Atkinson et al. 2001:118). This idea of flesh journeys is very similar to the personal narratives that are described in the next chapter entitled, "The Personal Flesh", by individual who did not identify themselves as 'Neo Primitives'. This definition of the group is extremely vague and it seems questionable as to whether they could be theoretically analysed as a community. Perhaps referring to 'Neo or Modern Primitives' as a movement would be more useful. Atkinson and Young trace the beginnings of this 'Neo Primitive' group to the late 1970s interest in artwork and lifestyles considered 'tribal', Vale and Juno documented this in their book *Modern Primitives* (1989). The relevance of this work was discussed in the last chapter, in relation to the tattoo renaissance period. This book has led to the use of such terms as 'Modern/Neo Primitives' to describe certain subcultural body modification groups and credited for disseminating neo-tribal adornment (Wojcik 1995:35).

For Atkinson and Young the term 'Neo Primitives' is one which practitioners adopt themselves and refers to a movement which "incorporates traditions of body modification from various tribal cultures, links these practices and their associated meanings to current social and political concerns, and does this all within the framework of futuristic vision of popular cultural expression." (Atkinson et al. 2001:127). Without doubt, this type of group has contributed to the adoption of non-Western imagery within tattooing. Atkinson and Young use 'Neo Primitive' vocabularies to describe group experience, which includes such familiar New Age ideas as personal status, passage, creativity, individuality, beauty, art, spirituality and physical endurance (Atkinson et al. 2001:128). Irwin (2001), Sweetman

(1999), and Vail (1999) also express these ideas, what is distinct however is the idea that "social commentary is grounded in the NP [Neo Primitive] intent to explore the skin as a means of personal growth, and as a political canvas upon which resistance to certain aspects of mainstream culture can be etched." (Atkinson et al. 2001:141). Although, as previously mentioned, other authors have ascribed this exploration of the skin to mainstream culture in reaction to (post)modernity. For Atkinson and Young, as with Vail (1999), the group/social element is distinct for this movement and similarly membership is a label that the individuals place on themselves, as mentioned. This non-obligatory group membership for Turner (1999) is what makes these subcultures without larger social meaning and therefore without any 'primitive' connections. This is an important criticism of the usage of the term 'primitive' to describe contemporary practices. In a later work, Atkinson (2003) retains the view that 'Neo Primitives' use tattoo as a form of cultural protestation, yet admits that the group is not homogenous; "Rejecting both the traditional Western image of the marked individual as deviant and the often dehumanizing way in which individuals are treated in modern urban life, they intend to capture the spirit of acceptance that tribal cultures exhibit toward tattooing." (Atkinson 2003:100). Atkinson is totally uncritical of the usage of the word 'primitive' or what it is referring to. He does acknowledge that there are limits to body projects, "cultural codes detailing what is more or less acceptable as established body display. These codes are replete with prescriptions confining the individual's range of body choices in regard to their gender, class, sexuality, and religion." (Atkinson 2003:208-209). Despite being uncritical of 'Modern Primitives' Atkinson (2003) does recognize that bodily beauty standards in Western cultures are set by the white majority, putting those non-white in a situation of engaging in body projects, such as cosmetic surgery or hair straightening, to

obtain this (Atkinson 2003:250). Obviously the boundaries of these 'Modern or Neo Primitivist' movements are ill defined. This also comes forth in William Cummings' (2001) article, which has an even more vague description of 'Modern Primitive' and those that are associated with this term.

Cummings (2001) argues that 'Modern Primitives' are those that take part in body modification in order to intentionally embrace nature while rejecting the contrivances of society (Cummings 2001:297). This is similar to the more politicized anti-urban⁹ stance of 'Neo Primitives' according to Atkinson and Young (2001), yet can also be linked to works discussed earlier in relation to broader theoretical considerations of body modification. Cummings states that the "erosion of the border between nature and culture as manifested in the body is...the critical and distinguishing impetus behind the recent explosion of the Modern Primitives movement..." (Cummings 2001:297). He uses Freud's antithesis of nature and civilization as a background to this discussion. Body modification in this article is linked to nature by means of its historical connection to Non-Western societies and the colonial idea that these peoples were somehow closer to nature or a natural lifestyle (Cummings 2001:298). 'Primitive' and 'tribal' are used by 'Modern Primitives' as though these terms signify some single way of life and cling to the imagined contrast of traditional and modern (Cummings 2001:299). This contrast "between a 'traditional' lifestyle marked by simplicity and harmony, and a 'modern' lifestyle characterized by haste and uncertainty." (Cummings 2001:299) is also taken up by Klesse (1999) and will be further discussed. Cummings however comes to the conclusion, as mentioned earlier, that the rapid change in technologies during the 20th century with which the body may be altered, supplemented and transformed has created anxiety over boundaries of the body (Cummings 2001:312). This

⁹ This is ironic considering the predominantly urban base to this movement.

article gives further historical context to the ideas surrounding 'Modern Primitivism' and similar body modification groups. It also is convincing in its reasoning as to the question, why the increases in body modification of this type now? Although it does not fully answer this question it does give a good description of the social context of the body today, reflecting some of the same ideas as other works discussing the broad social context of the body.

Troublesome in this 'Modern or Neo Primitivism' movement are the 'naturalistic' connotations behind the use of words such as 'primitive' or 'tribal' to describe practices taking place in contemporary Western society. Many scholars, although touching on this subject, do not investigate the truly problematic ideas attached to these labels. Some non-Western societies, whose cultures have been subject to the 'borrowings' of this movement, have expressed anger (Cummings 2001:308). In an article by Stephan Pritchard (2001) the idea of cultural property relating to body modification is discussed. However, in his article, "Modern Primitivism: Non-Mainstream Body Modification and Racialized Representation" (1999), Christian Klesse critiques the 'Modern Primitive' movement and the notion of 'primitive' which has remained in culture today. Klesse defines 'Modern Primitivism' similarly to that of Atkinson and Young (2001) but without the political undertones; "in their search for radical corporal, psychic and spiritual experiences and their performance of sexual events and encounters, Modern Primitives seek inspiration by so called 'primitive societies' through adoption of their communal rites and body modification techniques." (Klesse 1999:17). Klesse calls for the deconstruction of the idea of 'primitivism', regarding it as colonial discourse which depends on the cultural construction of the 'other' through dichotomy (Klesse 1999:18-19). He charges that 'Modern Primitives' by reproducing

colonial discourse, despite being well intentioned, play a role in reproducing and justifying racialized stereotypes of people and their sexuality (Klesse 1999: 18). Klesse and Atkinson(2003) point out that although the contemporary body is individualized in an unprecedented manner, this is not true for all people within Western society. Arguing that, "ethnic minority people within these societies...rather have to come to terms with an overdetermination of their identities in the context of this racialization, than with an underdetermination." (Klesse 1999:20). Feminist scholars have long argued that women and minorities are under identity constraints of society, as well and associated with 'nature'. In more general terms, Klesse states that choice, with regards to identity and body, are limited by ethnicity, gender, class, ability and the location of which people are a part (Klesse 1999:20). With regards to 'Modern Primitives' using a 'primitive' context in which to form a critique of the body and sexuality in Western societies is facile, considering they are in fact reinforcing stereotypes. This is without any regard for "history and societal and geographic contexts, groups and societies are lumped together in the category of 'primitives'. The dualism between the 'primitive' societies and the 'West' is maintained." (Klesse 1999:34). Although positioning themselves as opposite to those of mainstream culture 'Modern Primitivists' in fact reinforce the culturally accepted ideas of 'primitivism'. Klesse also points out that theories of the body and its modification have also reproduced "a juxtaposition between modernity (which is assumed to be Western) and traditionalism (mostly imagined as non-Western) in their historical analysis." (Klesse 1999:35). This article by Klesse has important ideas to consider when theorizing the body, articles such as Atkinson and Young (2001) need to be more critical of the romanticized notions of 'primitive' and the construction of the 'other'. In discussion of the links between

'primitivism' and body modification, which puts one outside of the norms of society (although arguably to an increasingly less degree) Benson (2000) argues that from a practitioner view:

The identification with the primitive and the exotic is thus no longer abjected, but is reconfigured as identification with the authentic, the uncommodified, the pure, in opposition to the corruptions of mainstream society; or, in the case of Japanese tattoo, with the refined aesthetic of an 'ancient civilization'. And for many, to inscribe upon the skin the marks of the primitive other is 'anti-repressive', a way of releasing the savage within or of returning to a corporeal authenticity occluded by the disciplines of contemporary conformity. (Benson 2000:242).

However, Pitts in her book, *IN THE FLESH* (2003), is very critical of 'Modern Primitives', in a similar manner to that of the above argument by Klesse (1999),

in the deployment of images of the primitive, for instance, we see an ironic, powerfully symbolic tactic, but also uncertain and problematic political effects. The 'primitive' as described here, despite the stated aims of neotribal body modifiers themselves, remains an image of colonialism: nostalgic and characterized as natural, uncivilized, sexualized, and wholly Other. (Pitts 2003:190)

In this work she also recognizes that the (post)modern bodily rhetoric of choice is part of our Western capitalist consumerism, which "is partly what gives the global stratifications of economies and technologies their means and justification." (Pitts 2003:196). Access to technology is of course a political matter, as discussed, which privileges certain groups while constraining others (Pitts 2003:188); "bodies become territories for technological innovation, for politics and for trafficking goods, and are fought over by social movements as well as medical, cosmetic, fashion, and culture industries, among other interests." (Pitts 2003:188). The body, which is flexible and 'allowed' body projects, is one of privilege but also is constrained through consumer capitalism to buy their own identities (Pitts 2003:197). However, Pitts recognizes the cultural constraints to this supposed flexibility as discussed above in relation to Atkinson (2003) and Klesse's (1999) article; "unless race, class, and

gender stratifications actually disappear, individuals are limited in the ways in which they can imagine themselves and shape their bodies and identities-even within a culture that celebrates such choice and freedom.” (Pitts 2003:186).

In connection with the article by Klesse (1999) is the idea of ‘Modern Primitives’ impinging on the cultural property of other societies. This is addressed in Stephen Pritchard's (2001) article, in which he specifically investigates "the possibility, legitimacy and authenticity of contemporary Maori tattooing (*ta moko*).” (italics in original Pritchard 2001:27). Pritchard argues the idea that appropriation of tattooing takes only the marking "...while failing to observe its multiple connotations and efficacious power, its embeddedness.” (Pritchard 2001:42). In other words, of tattooing, the cultural milieu and specificity cannot be transferred or appropriated. Therefore any attempt at appropriation of such culturally bound practices as *ta moko* "involves a violent reduction or effacement of the singularity of a particular idiom, marking or act.” (Pritchard 2001:42). Pritchard states that in effect taking cultural property is not possible, though by no means necessarily condoning use of tattoo marks from Maori culture by Westerners. Cultural property is given, the marks are but a small part of what signifies the practice (Pritchard 2001:43). This is in direct conflict with the ideas of ‘Modern Primitives’ that such marks will somehow imbue them with connotations of the cultural ‘other’. Pritchard does in fact give credence to Turner's (1999) argument that any identification with ideals surrounding ‘primitivism’ are simulated and ironic.

With body modification practices taken on by growing numbers of people it is theoretically important to account for groups of practitioners that may in fact be subcultures within the larger framework. These subcultures as evidenced by Vail (1999) and to a lesser

degree Atkinson and Young (2001), may indeed have solidarity and loyalty that Turner (1999) finds so lacking in contemporary body modification practices. However, the definition of these subcultures or groups does seem problematic and it would be interesting to study to what degree these groups are cohesive and follow their own criteria. Atkinson and Young's (2001) contention that "NPs reshape iconography from other cultures in order to signify a new spirituality in the West built on a respect for the past and other cultures." (Atkinson et al. 2001:140), is facile when looked at from a colonial historical perspective such as that by Klesse (1999). However this does fit with a New Age movement mentality as discussed previously. Also the notions of cultural appropriation and authenticity brought up by Pritchard (2001) are very important in this time of 'the global village'. This however does not diminish the fact that the 'Neo and Modern Primitive' movement has affected the designs used in tattooing. Non-Western imagery would undoubtedly appeal to such groups and increase tattooing of such designs. As well, it is interesting that these groups use tattooing as a form of rebellion from society, using its historical connections to deviance. Yet by using body modification as a means of expression they are participating in the consumer culture they wish to reject. In reference to the 'adoption' of tattoo imagery Atkinson admits, "an immediately relevant area of investigation becomes the ways in which tattoo styles or images are poached and endlessly reconfigured." (Atkinson 2003:108). Although he does caution, "I am particularly wary of reducing the socio-cultural significance of tattoo styles to the ways in which they are endlessly borrowed or stolen by enthusiasts in the contemporary era." (Atkinson 2003:108). In terms of the flow of symbols, "Simply put, in high-speed, hard-wired, digital, hooked-up, on-line figurations, visual forms of information reign supreme." (Atkinson 2003:136). This is referring to the use of technology

in this age and the large number of people who use information technologies how it has influenced the acceptance and popularity of tattooing, which is a visual practice. Along with this, cultural diversity within Canada and globalization have affected the perception of the body and ‘non-traditional’ (in the Western sense) forms of body modification (Atkinson 2003:144); “globalization processes appear to have (like cultural-pluralism processes in Canada) exposed Canadians to a diversity of body traditions from around the world...” (Atkinson 2003:151). Also playing into the popularity of the practice is that fact that outsidership has become fashionable in pop culture, as discussed in relation to consumerism. Seemingly in contradiction to his earlier statement regarding the importance of symbols, Atkinson argues that getting a tattoo is the inscription of ‘otherness’, which is of greater importance than the symbol itself that is tattooed (Atkinson 2003:178).

Understandings of the Contemporary Body

There is a cultural focus on the body and appearance in contemporary Canada. As perhaps there always has been, yet consumerism and information technologies have played a huge role in disseminating this focus. Academically the body is also receiving increased attention. The Cartesian split between mind and body continues to underlie some theories and this must be addressed. I have put forward the argument that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh is a useful one in order to conceptualize the inseparability of self/mind from the body. Although appearance does not necessarily connote the flesh it is *possible*, in a meaningful way. However, the body is under cultural and social constraints, as are conceptions of the self. In this regards it is a privileged body which is malleable, those who are in a social position to buy individualism through the consumer market.

In the current consumer culture there is rhetoric of choice which effaces the different socio-economic positions of people. These consumer choices are used to construct identity, which is influenced by the corporate construction of difference as individuality. However these consumer choices can have meaning, otherwise agency within embodiment is effaced. Tattooing as a corporeal practice of such permanency can provide an outlet as a symbolic practice. This could explain the increasing pervasiveness of the practice and the popularity of individualised, 'custom' work. Globalisation and its relation to consumerism are also influential in the use of cultural symbols from outside Canada.

I argue that tattooing is not dress nor fashion, yet it is within the category of style. This is the case due to its artistic and visual nature. In terms of symbols used in tattoo I believe that the New Age movement has been influential. This movement has led to an increasing exposure and acceptance of varying religious beliefs, which is inclusive of beliefs surrounding the body and self. The New Age movement also stresses personalization, so it is easy to see how symbols then are subject to this, in the design and meaning. In conjunction with the New Age movement there has been the 'Neo/Modern Primitive' movement which holds many related beliefs. It also emphasizes individuation and the cultural 'other'. However the 'Modern Primitive' movement clearly holds on to colonial dualistic ideals with regards to nature and civilization, as well as mind and body. This movement has undoubtedly increased the diversity of symbols used in tattooing, as has multiculturalism. In order to gain an 'inside' view of tattooing, the process of design choice and personalised meaning, the next chapter will explore ethnographic material.

Chapter IV - The Personal Flesh

The understandings of those that participate in tattooing are an important aspect to consider when studying the subject. In trying to understand contemporary tattooing the history of the practice and its theoretical considerations must be combined with the micro-level of meaning, that of the practitioners. In this chapter, using ethnographic material, a further understanding of tattoos through those words and contemplations of the people themselves that have and apply them is developed. As I have stated in the last chapter, this is necessary in order to understand at the most fundamental level how people conceive of imagery and meaning within tattoos.

This chapter will include my own ethnographic material, which consists of eight open interviews¹⁰ with those tattooed, two of whom are in the tattoo business. Participants were solicited, in Ottawa, Canada, through posters put up at university settings, as well as in tattoo shops. Informants ranged in age from 19 to 30. These interviews show how participants conceptualize their tattoos, through the description of the choice of tattoo and the tattoos themselves. These interviews give a sample of what I believe is the general treatment of tattoo among those who receive them, although statistically they are not representational.¹¹ However ethnographic data such as these interviews is relevant in description of tattoo in a very personalized and in depth manner. I also conducted participant observation research¹² by getting a new tattoo during the course of this research and spending time in tattoo shops; a detailed account of this research is in the Methodology

¹⁰ Open interviews are those with guideline themes, but not a list of specific questions asked of the informant.

¹¹ These interviews are not statistically representational because of the small number of them in comparison to the number of people tattooed in Ottawa as a whole.

¹² Participant observation research is that of embedding oneself in the subject by literally participating in the subject studied and those people involved.

section of this chapter. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I have had tattoos since the age of eighteen and since that time have received others, for a total of four at this time.

Personal Involvement

At this point I think it is important to explore my own participation in tattooing in order to be transparent about how these experiences have shaped my thoughts on the subject. When I got my first tattoo at eighteen, in 1995, I had given years of consideration to what design I wanted tattooed and the placement on my body. I chose to get the tattoo on my sternum so that my parents would not be aware of it until I chose to tell them. Months later I did tell them and although they were not what one could call approving they did respect that I had researched what I wanted and gone to the best tattoo artist available. Most importantly however was the fact that the tattoo was private, that is, it was hidden from sight in all but the most private social settings. At this point I started to contemplate the difference between those tattoos which are essentially private and those on *public* areas of the body. Those interviewed make this distinction and talk about consciously making the choice as to whether a tattoo is private or public. Also interesting is the reaction of my parents that the tattoo was well-done, that is artistic and of a high quality technically speaking (not to mention expensive, relatively speaking). This relates to the trend of valuing tattoo on an artistic level.

My second tattoo, done six months after the first, did not have the years of consideration behind it. It is extremely relevant to my thesis because it consists of a Buddhist Mandala (Fig. 1), which I added a blue background colour to. I got this symbol tattooed because of its meaning as a Mandala that of geometric harmony to be meditated

upon thus bringing 'enlightenment'. It was not until a couple of years ago that I had doubts as to whether tattooing such a sacred symbol was disrespectful, regardless of my good intentions. From these doubts came the initial ideas for this thesis. I knew that I was not the only one to have 'borrowed' from a culture which I had no involvement with, only to personalise the symbol. This is not about making moral judgements as to people's choice of tattoos but instead trying to achieve an understanding about contemporary design choices and the meanings associated with them.

The tattoo that I got as part of my research for this thesis was a design I had considered for many years. The design was based on sketches I had done which the tattoo artist then expanded. In this manner it was different from the others I have in that the original idea was my own, no borrowing whatsoever. There was also no need to adapt any meanings, for they are all my own. It is also the largest tattoo that I have received to date and by most standards I am now a *heavily* tattooed person, with the one tattoo covering a considerable amount of my torso. However, because of the placement of my tattoos, they are not normally visible. All but one are on my torso, the other is on my upper arm, easily concealed under a t-shirt. The process of getting a large tattoo was quite different from my previous tattoo experiences. It was done over the course of months, each section tattooed after the last one had healed. I spent a lot of time with my tattoo artist, more than I had expected, to the point where I consider him a friend. So although tattoos in Canadian culture are not strictly speaking social, there can be elements of sociality involved, especially those people with large tattoos or more than one. The amount of time itself is a commitment, not to mention the physical process and money involved. To regard all these factors, only to

then compare this process to that of buying a shirt is ridiculous. Even those people with few or one tattoo can take great care and consideration in what they get tattooed.

The point of explicating my own involvement in tattooing is to show how my personal understanding of tattooing formed. However, in this study I am not seeking to validate my own practices or that of others, but come to a different and further understanding of the practice on both the macro and micro level. It is the different tattoo conceptions of the individuals I interviewed that are of interest.

Methodology

I conducted participant observation research in the Ottawa area for approximately one year. This research was conducted mainly in the downtown area, although the tattoo shop that I was tattooed in (as described in the section entitled Personal Involvement) was located in the West end of Ottawa. My research consisted of getting my tattoo and discussing with my tattoo artist the local tattoo 'scene' (referring to tattoo shop and tattoo artists). He gave me interesting insights into the reputation of certain tattoo shops and artists, as well as an idea of the gossip which surrounds the industry. I also went to tattoo shops in the Centretown and Market areas of Ottawa, where they are heavily concentrated and asked about their clients in general. At the time of my research I also worked in a drinking establishment frequented by many tattooed people. These patrons would often get into discussions with me about their tattoos after learning my thesis topic.

All of this research led to a further understanding of the importance people placed on their tattoos, as well as the narratives which they formed about them. It also made me realise how private an in depth discussion of tattoos was for a person. Most people I talked

mentioned how frequently people they did not know questioned 'what' their tattoos meant and that this was bothersome. Those kinds of questions could be viewed as intrusive from a privacy perspective. The monetary cost of tattoo work was almost exclusively not talked about, except perhaps to say that an individual was saving money for a new piece. Although some heavily tattooed people did speak about having relationships with certain tattoo artists which allowed them to get reduced prices or go to tattoo conventions to show their tattoo work. This also led to conversations about tattooists and their stylistic specializations.

The above conversations were informal and they form my participant observation research about tattooing in Ottawa, which helped to situate the in depth interviews which I conducted. Soliciting people for more than just informal conversations proved more difficult than I had initially suspected. In order to do so I put up flyers asking people to contact me who wished to discuss their tattoos. I put these flyers up on Carleton University campus, as well as at four tattoo shops in the Market area of Ottawa and one in the West end of Ottawa. I made sure the flyers remained up for nine months. I chose these locations in order to try to get a diverse range of informants. The tattoo shops chosen ranged from those with very good reputations to those that considered standard.

Despite putting up flyers and talking to people about the research I was doing regarding tattooing it was extremely difficult to solicit informants. People who were willing to have informal conversations did not wish to have those conversations recorded verbatim. Also people were unwilling to take time out of their busy schedules to have a detailed discussion. Those people who did respond to the flyers and met with me for interviews make up the section of this chapter entitled *Intimate Understandings*. These interviews consisted of me asking my informants to begin by describing their tattoos and the placement

of them. From that point the informants generally told me a narrative about each tattoo they had. I also asked if each specific tattoo had meaning or if the placement itself had meaning. Another question I made sure was answered was how they chose their tattoos designs, where they found them or if they had them designed or did the design themselves. I also asked informants, when applicable, if they considered the cultural origins of their designs. Generally though the informant seemed eager to tell their stories, so to speak, and I had to ask only a few questions. The narratives that informants told about their tattoos generally contained all the information I wished to know already, without me asking specific questions.

I told my informants at the beginning of the interviews that I myself was tattooed. This was in order to be as open as possible about my research, as well as to give them a sense of my personal perspective. Most informants expressed relief that I too was tattooed and that therefore I would 'understand', it gave me a certain amount of credibility. It seemed to allow my informants to relax; one of them even commented that they had been afraid that I would be judgemental if I did not have tattoos myself.

In retrospect the small amount of interviews that I was able to perform is not so difficult to understand given what a personal topic tattoos are. Informal conversations are one thing, but sitting down with a stranger to discuss what symbols you chose to have tattooed onto your body and why is extremely personal and revealing. From a researchers point of view I think that it is important to be aware of this. It was imperative that I not be judgemental about the symbols used in my informants' tattoos or the quality. I also asked my informants if they would submit a photo of their tattoos for my thesis, many did not wish to, feeling that it would be too revealing; in all cases though my informants generously gave

me very good descriptions of their tattoos. I think that the interviews that follow are very revealing in their personal discussion of tattooing, symbols and meaning.

Intimate Understandings

The themes that I concentrated on in my interviews were design choice, process and associated meanings, if there were any. I also asked why my informants chose tattooing as a means of expression. The concentration in this section will be on how informants talk about their tattoo in describing them and what meaning they may hold. It is interesting to note the detail which many informants go into in these discussions and how much thought they have given their tattoo work. The interviews begin with those that have one or two tattoos and then move on to those that have several. In this way I think it is valuable to note the differences between the two groups. Those with several generally have a plan for more tattoos and consider the body, as well as previous tattoos, in the design of the next. The body as a whole becomes conceptualized as a 'canvas'.

To begin with, Fred's¹³ tattoo is an example of how non-deviant they can be. When I asked him to describe it he said, "Sure, I just have one. Between my shoulder blades on my back it's a red maple leaf with a pair of lacrosse sticks crossed behind it." When I asked about his choice of tattoo he explicated, "Well I thought about it for a long time, I wanted a tattoo for a long time. But I was very hesitant to decide what it was I wanted because it's so permanent. I thought about it for a long time, for a couple of years. I'm very patriotic, I'm proud to be Canadian and I'm completely infatuated with lacrosse so, combination of the two." In terms of the design itself, "...it's a pretty general design, nothing complicated, but I designed it myself I just cut and paste things on my computer. I chose the colours, it's only

¹³ All the names of informants have been changed.

red but I chose what kind of red.” When I asked about any personal meaning attached to the image,

Well like I said it’s nothing really deeper than that. It’s something that I know I’m always going to like, unless my country does something incredibly wrong. I don’t see in any way changing my opinion of the two things, it’s not something that I think is a fad. It’s something that I’ve felt for a very long time. But it’s something that no matter where I go it’s something that I can identify with; my nationality is not going to change. And then it’s just a passion for lacrosse, it helps that it’s the national sport too.

Despite the fact that Fred downplays the meaning of his tattoo it is obviously quite meaningful to him. Especially when one considers that he took years to decide what he wanted and what symbols would have the most longevity to him. Also it is important to note the ownership Fred takes of the design and colouring despite the fact that he describes it as uncomplicated.

I also asked Fred about the placement of the tattoo on his body, which I think is important as it coincides with the decision of design.

I wanted it where I could easily cover it up. I didn’t want it on the face or hand or anything like that. I also didn’t want anything you could see if I dressed casually, so no where below my knees or on my arms or anything like that. So I found this was a good place I could cover up with a t-shirt if I wanted to... I wanted it somewhere where I could easily show it to someone, no where private or anything like that. But that if I don’t want people to see it, if I don’t think it’s appropriate, then I don’t have to worry about what I’m wearing.

It was obviously very important to Fred where he had his tattoo, not only what it depicted.

Other informants reflect this importance as well.

Mary, who is 23 years old, however, did not emphasize where, on her body, she had her tattoos placed. She has two in concealed spots, the shoulder and the ankle. This is interesting considering she works in an office setting. She describes them in the following way,

...the first tattoo I got was on my right shoulder blade it's a dolphin mainly just black and white but it looks tribal, a very nice tribal dolphin. I'm a dolphin freak, love dolphins, so I figured I wanted a dolphin tattoo. It just took me a good five years to figure out which tattoo I wanted to put on me because it's permanent. I don't feel like lasering it off after a while. And the second one was done a week later. It's an Egyptian ankh, symbol of life. I like that and it's rather big, it's really nice. It's mainly black and it's got some purple with some green lines to accent it. It took a few times, the first time I went it hurt so much, my shoulder didn't hurt as much as my ankle. The ankle, well it's because it's right near the bone...He got the outline done and a little bit of the top part in black, but then I just couldn't take it anymore. And then I came back two weeks later, after it healed to do the rest and...it hurt a lot a lot so I was glad that he was done. But I wasn't really happy with the way it looked and then when I went to see him a good six to eight months later, he's like you know I don't like it, can I redo it. And I'm like ok. It's going to hurt again but hey, so I didn't have to pay for it to get it redone...He did it all and because he already had the base and had about a years worth of healing, I got it done all in one shot. It didn't hurt as much, it hurt but it didn't hurt as much as it first hurt. So those are the only two that I have. I haven't figured out what I want as a third one yet.

It is interesting that although Mary had been thinking about getting a tattoo for five years after her first one it was only a week later that she decided to get her second. The painful process was obviously something she was proud to have overcome; it featured prevalently in her interview.

I asked Mary about her process in deciding what symbols she wanted tattooed,

I've had it for about two years now, but for four or five years previous to that, like in high school I always wanted one but I lived in a household that you know, mutilate your body on your own terms, on your own time. So I was looking, I was sort of on and off looking, I wasn't really researching it and all that. And at the time that I was thinking about it about two years ago, I wasn't really researching it that much, and then a friend of my was like you know I'm going to get a tattoo and all gung-ho about it and I'm like ok, want to come with me and I'm like ok, alright sure, no problem. He did all the researching of all the places in Ottawa that he had time to look at. He's like ok this one looks like the best place, I was like alright, I'll take your word for it. So off we go after work and got our tattoos, he drew one and had it put on his shoulder. I looked at what they had on the wall and this particular one grabbed me and I was like hey that looks really nice and I got it done. It didn't take that long so it was great. And then the next one was I had promised to go with a friend to get a tattoo, a different friend. I showed her this one and she was all mad at me so I

said well I guess I'll go with you this time so you can get yourself a tattoo. She found a nice design of an ankh that she wanted and I thought it was so nice and she changed it a little bit and I was like hey can I do that too and I got it done.

Mary's ankh design is slightly different from that of her friend's though, with different colours and having been redone months after the original application. Despite the fact that Mary did not have customized tattoo designs she is passionate about them and feels they reflect her,

...they relate to my passions. I've always been fascinated with dolphins, I don't know, it's one of those things for me, you know just like daisies are for other people. Dolphins are my favourite things mainly because they're playful animals. The second reason is fairly funny, most people chuckle. They're the only other mammals beyond people that enjoy sex. So I always thought that was pretty cool. And I'm also an Egyptian nut. I love Egypt, anything remotely Egyptian or ancient Egyptian, not present day Egyptian. It's just utterly fascinating to me. I figured you know ankh being the symbol of life that would be cool to have permanently on my body.

When I questioned Mary as to whether she thought it was respectful to get a tattoo from a culture, of which she is not a part she responded,

I never really thought of it that way. I always thought of it in like myself, I respect the idea of the symbol, you know like the symbol of infinity. I don't know I'm a symbol person. I guess that's what got me interested about the whole Egypt thing is because of all their symbols, their different gods, everything, just the mythology. It was just flabbergasting. I never really thought of it in the context of being respectful/disrespectful in regards to that particular culture...I was just looking for it for myself. I really love life and I figured I might plaster myself up with symbols that represent life. Who the heck knows?

I think it is important to note that Mary makes the distinction that she is using the ankh symbol in a personal and respectful way, as though this personal interest would not have an effect on a culture. It is almost as though the easy access to information on cultures, such as that of Ancient Egypt, precludes any thought about ramifications of use of cultural symbols.

This will be further explored in other informants' interviews on this subject. However my interview with Mary ended on what I think is a very important point, "I'm a visual person, so if it appeals to me visually it's all good." We live in a very visual culture and I think it is important to recognize this and the corresponding appeal of tattoo as a personalized and intimate visual art. This is also reflected in my interview with Patrick, among others.

Patrick is a twenty year old student, who has two tattoos and is currently in the process of getting his third done,

Ok I have on my left leg, on the side of my left lower leg; from my ankle to my knee I have this piece. It was just an idea I had, sitting in class drawing one day. It starts at the bottom with some fire and then has some Japanese water with some cherry blossoms and stuff. And above that there's a treble clef with Japanese rays, I don't even know if they're Japanese but there's sun rays coming off of it and then a lotus flower at the top. The theme of it is kind of music is heaven because it kind of goes hell, earth and heaven. It's a pretty simple idea but that's the one I have on my left leg, it's all in colour and stuff it's actually three tattoos in one, just put together. And on my right leg, on the back of my calf I have, it's kind of a spin off of that traditional dagger through the roses tattoo. Instead, it's got all the traditional stuff, it's got a couple swallows and nautical stars and instead of a dagger it has an old fashion fountain pen and a banner that says truth. I kind of got the idea when I was in journalism class last year, just it's not exactly a journalism tattoo but it's inspired by that, kind of trying to be honest in my writing and stuff. And I just thought it was a cool idea because I always wanted a traditional piece. I didn't really want it to be cliché traditional you see a lot of those daggers and things, so that was the idea behind that. And then on my lower back I'm actually just starting working on this one right now, it's three big roses, there's a big red one, it's going to be a red one in the middle with two medium sized, smaller roses, flanking it on either side with all the greenery and thorns and stuff and there's a little skull emerging from the middle of the rose which is cool because that was actually the artists idea. I didn't have any plans for that he just kind of drew it in and then around it at the top it says heed no one, heed priority. I got the idea looking at a lot of straightedge tattoos but I'm not straightedge or anything but I kind of wanted something to keep me in line. I like that kind of...It's kind of a new school traditional piece too I really like that style anyway so. That's it for my tattoos actually.

Patrick talks about 'traditional' style tattooing, he describes it as, "It's that American style, it's like that Sailor Jerry kind of style with really bold outlining with the shading and the

really vibrant colours in there. Traditional Americana kind of stuff like roses and different kind of spider webs and stuff like that, that's traditional to me." He found this style of tattooing appealed to him through extensive reading and an interest not just in tattooing but also its history,

I don't know if it was actually me doing research but I was always looking at magazines and seeing what was out there. I guess during the time I was working in the shopping mall with that guy, who was a tattooist. We talked a lot about tattooing and he told me a lot about the history and stuff. And then I, I'm really fascinated with the whole culture not just getting tattooed, so I read up a lot about it on the internet and stuff. Just it wasn't that I was researching for my own tattoo or for my own purposes it was just getting into it and like figuring out what was out there and from there realizing ok this is traditional. So when I'm describing it to the artist I can kind of tell him I'd like a traditional swallow, that kind of stuff. Just learning stuff like that so I guess it was research but it wasn't research specifically for my tattoo.

In terms of meaning, personal or otherwise, Patrick had an interesting perspective,

I like to put my own meaning because it's a lot easier. It's almost, like a good tattoo for me is a good tattoo but with a little personal meaning it's often a lot easier to explain or justify it to other people, who might not understand or it's easier to explain in general and it's always cool if you have a little spin. I don't think I put as much emphasis on personal meaning as a lot of other people who get tattooed do, like some people get really small certain symbols but they carry a huge amount of meaning to them. But it's the opposite to me, I like the art form, I like how it looks and I like the aesthetic about it and like a personal meaning does play a role I'm not just going to go out and get something. But yeah, I'll get something that has meaning to me but it's not the biggest emphasis I think.

Again the idea of the importance of the visual aesthetic of the tattoo comes to the forefront, yet Patrick obviously has put quite a bit of thought into the meaning of his tattoos. This is evident from his initial description of them. Yet he does point out that it is easier to justify his actions when they are wrapped in some sort of meaningful context, which I believe speaks to the very psychological and New Age general understanding of body modification.

That is, actions such as tattooing are socially acceptable when they are thought to further individuate a person.

As a Canadian with Korean heritage I asked Patrick whether it was an issue as to what culture the images came from for his tattoos, considering his were mostly Japanese and Americana inspired.

I don't think it's an issue. It's really important to understand the symbols. I don't mind getting American tattoos or Japanese tattoos as long as I know for certain what the symbols, or what kind of connotations the symbol can carry because it's really easy to see something that looks really cool and get it and realize in the end that the symbol is something that you completely don't want to have on your body. I've seen people with *moko* tattooing on their faces at conventions and I think it's really cool. I don't think there is anything wrong, as long as they didn't get it just because of the aesthetic thing, that's a really strong cultural thing. A lot of those guys if you're going to get tattooed on their face you know for certain they put their time into researching it. I don't think it's a really big issue as long as you understand what that symbol carries.

In terms of placement Patrick thought it an important consideration,

Well my first couple of tattoos, I was living at home and didn't think it would be cool with my parents, but at the same time I wanted to be able to show them off and I also thought about, I always have career stuff in my head. Like I don't know, I think I'm free spirited but not to the point that I'm just going to go and start getting covered in ink all over the place. So that was the reason I got them on my legs and back. They're easy to show off and they're easy to conceal. But at the same time there is also the fact that I am, if I do get bigger pieces by really, really skilled artists I'd like them in the prime real estate areas you know. Like on my arms and on my chest and stuff, so it's not just the fact that I'm worried about having tattoos that I can't conceal but I want to save some of the better spots for some of my more elaborate or expensive pieces.

Interestingly Patrick, like Fred, has concerns about concealment yet future tattoo projects figure more prominently in terms of placement. Most likely this is especially the case since he no longer lives with his parents and is now thinking about further and larger tattoo projects.

Anne has several tattoos all with varying thought and meaning behind them. She is a twenty-two year old student who started getting tattoos at eighteen after having several piercings.

Well, my back piece is on my lower back. And I got for Christmas after I turned eighteen; it's got a bluish-purple heart with a dove embracing it. The dove has a crown on its head and if you look really close it looks like two people holding hands. Behind the heart are flames and in the flames you'll see these green cat eyes. And in the center at the top of the peak you'll see a blue star. The eye of the dove has tears running down its back so it kind of drips and this is all being held in the palm of a hand so you see fingertips and the droplets are dripping between the fingers and just dropping down my tailbone. (Fig. 2)

Anne's first tattoo was an amalgamation of designs she had done and then got a tattoo artist to refine. She describes the motivation behind this tattoo and its meaning,

I was depressed for like three or four years, and I didn't know how to express myself so I started drawing and got crayons and all and I started drawing my heart with purple and blue and not very much red. And flames behind it like describing that emotion, how I felt. So my heart and passion behind it and whatever else, then I also drew another one where a heart was melting kind of and dripping through fingers like it was being held in the palm of a hand and it was melting so it was kind of sad. The other one I drew was when I was with my last boyfriend...I was still really depressed. I ended up carving into my ankle...was the heart with the flames behind it with the dove, basically my longing for my heart to have peace, to kind of settle down. So basically I threw that all together and everything. You know that Irish ring with the hands and the heart and the crown? The crown meaning loyalty to the Queen or something like that. But the people inside of it I made loyalty and unity. So my heart represented basically my heart, or love or whatever you want to say your heart is. The fire is passion, the dove is peace, wrapping my heart, the crown is loyalty and unity, and the tears represented sincerity. I always had this thing with cat eyes, about them being mysterious, but eyes are honest you can see the truth or something like that. So that's where they eyes come from, honesty and truth cat eyes, still keep the mystery and the star was infinite possibilities. So that yeah, I really thought that one out.

Quite obviously Anne's first tattoo was extremely meaningful, as she stated later in the interview with regards to the permanency, "All those things mean something to me that I

better damn well still believe in and feel strongly about later on in life, sincerity, truth, honesty, you know peace, love, passion is important, infinite possibilities. You know, you just want to make sure you like all this stuff that makes life juicy.”

Anne fully admits her second tattoo, done two years after the first, was not as thought out. In fact her second tattoo was really a series of six tattoos, stars tattooed across her chest. “Well my stars don’t really have that much meaning, at all. It wasn’t really thought out. I like them but they weren’t really thought out. I kind of thought that my breasts were boring, so this kind of livens them up a little. Of course I’m going to be holding on to that statement when I’m eighty!” Obviously the aesthetic of the tattoo was of importance and, I think, so is her sense of humour about them.

She had just recently received her third and fourth tattoo (Fig. 3 and 4) when I interviewed her; she had come up with the design and then had gotten a tattoo artist to draw them out for her.

I just got these other two tattooed on my hip bones. One of them is a red rose, with curvy lines, with green leaves and what kind of looks like thorns but I don’t think their supposed to be thorns and a blue droplet dripping off of the petals. And on the other hip I’ve got a blue rose with kind of more straight and jagged lines. Looks not exactly shrivelled up but kind of cold with dying leaves that are kind of brown with thorns, jagged thorns and red spider webs between some of the leaves and a red droplet dripping from one of the petals, kind of like the other one but in a different kind of way.

When I asked Anne about the meaning of these two tattoos she made some interesting remarks about body modification in general.

I think that some of the reasons why people get body modification is some people do it for fashion and then some people do it to change their body and that makes them happier with their body. You know, whether it be more entertaining. Honestly, like I accept my body but I find for example with my stars I was like hey my boobs are kind of boring a little bit of colour will make them more exciting...But yeah I think the red rose with the blue drop represents more thriving life and the drop of water is the life. And the other

side is kind of more the dark side of life, not really the dark side but I made up some stupid line like 'red rose blue life blue rose full of strife' with like a blood droplet dripping off of it and thorns and whatever else. It's kind of a menacing rose with shrivelled leaves yeah so it was kind of an idea. It doesn't have the close significance that my back did.

Later in the interview when I asked Anne about the placement of her tattoos she followed up on some of her statements about body modification in general.

Yeah I could go out in a tank top and have them all covered if I wanted. Or I can go out in a shorter tank top that shows a bit more cleavage and show them if I wanted to show them off. It's kind of good thing because they're fun as a surprise too. Your body's a blank canvas, decorate it as you will. It's a way to be an individual by doing what everybody else is doing. As long as you're not copying things out of a book then you're unique. And if it's expressing who you are, if it expresses a part of you then it expresses part of you...Some people just do it for fashion and then fashion goes out of style so like that kind of sucks for them. I mean if I just wanted to get stuff done on my fingers I would probably regret that later. Like I see people on the bus and they'll have like you know a sleeve done and a t-shirt. What am I going to do? Go up to him and take off my shirt and show him my tattoos. To show them I'm just as macho as they are. I'm just as tough baby, you know. Some guy has his whole arm done down to his wrist or something; I'll be like oh yeah. Not that I'm going to say that makes anybody macho...there's that perception. I think some people look at body modification as some of it being dirty or a certain class.

Anne, just as Fred and Patrick, was concerned with the placement of her tattoos in relation to whether they could be seen by others or I think more to the point whether she has control over who sees her tattoos. Interestingly though Anne notes that there is still a connotation of masculinity associated with heavily tattooed people. I get the impression she feels she is subverting this by being heavily tattooed, but in a private way and also by being a woman. Anne makes the important point that negative attitudes are still prevalent towards those people with body modifications, which she expanded on later in the interview. She went on to say that she thinks it is the older generation that continues to hold on to these prejudicial attitudes. However, "...there are more people getting it [body modification] in their twenties

and thirties it's that group who's becoming the dominant group in society, they're growing up and they're carrying with it their acceptance." This statement is quite interesting in its connection to my discussion last chapter about legitimation and Irwin's (2001) article about just such a process.

Robin, age 26, and a graduate student, got one of her tattoos in reaction to prejudice. However she got her first tattoo at eighteen fascinated by them and attracted to the rebelliousness of the act. "The first one I got was a dragon, on my left shoulder and yeah I had sort of been searching and trying to draw my own dragons. I felt a connection with dragons and finally found some flash that I thought was pretty interesting, this was in Berlin where I was living..." (Fig. 5). The situation surrounding her first tattoo was quite interesting,

So it was a really weird situation because I ah, it was kind of funny in the fact that I ended up smoking up with my tattoo artist who was doing it, before hand. And I think I possibly went out drinking the night before, didn't really have that much to eat that day and so I was really, really fucked up. I couldn't really stand up properly without fainting. And my tattoo artist got really freaked out and was like maybe you should go and get something to eat and come back in an hour. So I came back and I was just stoned out of my mind but I got it done.

Although this took place in Berlin, I think it speaks to the still evident 'deviant' aspects surrounding the practice of tattooing. I asked Robin what it was that attracted her to the flash she got tattooed, "Um, it was, it was very unique you know I'd been to a lot of tattoo shops in the city and looked at a lot of what they had there. At that point I didn't really think of having somebody actually design the tattoo for me. I think I was pretty anxious to get a tattoo so, it was just a really interesting design, unique, yeah." In regards to the symbol of the dragon itself Robin explained, "...I felt like I had a connection with dragons in regards to, it was sort of seen in my eyes as like a pretty strong kind of creature. It was really unique

but at the same time in my mind was kind of was strong yet uh pretty subdued, powerful.”

The unique elements of the design were obviously very important to Robin so it is not surprising that the rest of her tattoos were custom designs.

I got my second tattoo when I was nineteen, in university and that was rage tattooed on my lower back. And that was kind of, a bit of a tattoo on a whim. I went in, I was in Toronto for a weekend with some friends and wanted to get a barcode tattooed on my wrist, but they wouldn't...I wanted it pretty small and they wouldn't do it that small and so, but I really wanted to get tattooed so half an hour later I was like this is an idea. Very spur of the moment. I mean rage for me is, I mean it has been a pretty important tattoo and rage for me has always been a very important word in regards to like feeling. Like I have a lot of anger in like my head and body but rage to me sort of implies that it's kind of bottled up or whatever kind of without an outlet. Sort of bursting at the seams kind of anger and a lot of that anger I think stemmed/started, I think I started noticing things that learning more and experiencing more in regards to like sexism and homophobia. Once leaving my home and kind of getting out there and understanding kind of what stuff I went through in high school, you know dealing with women's issues and stuff in the real world.

It is interesting that, for a very 'spur of the moment' tattoo, it has significant meaning attached to it. I believe that this points to accumulated meaning over time, although Robin may or may not have had the meaning worked out beforehand it has now become such. This is an important point; meaning of a tattoo may change or even become more significant with time.

After this second tattoo Robin got her first one redone, by a different artist.

So after that one I actually got the dragon redone, by a different artist in Toronto. And I think that was more about kind of reclaiming that experience because it was kind of a fucked up experience, being really stoned and really young and pretty uncomfortable with the shop that I was in. And so I basically got the background done, a background kind of design put in so yeah, that was all freehand. It was more like I knew that artist and that I wanted it, that I wanted to do it and he has a very unique style and kind of there is a very weird connection with him that when I got my first tattoo, when I got my dragon first done the shop had some Canadian tattoo artist who had just finished being a guest artist there and so I had no idea who that was but for some reason I was really drawn to his...and for some reason I

was really drawn to his style. And I don't know how I found him eventually but I went there and he was like where did you get this done and I was like I got this done in B52 in Berlin and he was like oh wow I did a guest thing there and I was like holy fuck that's nuts. So that was pretty weird. It was more I knew the style and knew that I, it's a really beautiful kind of like detailed, delicate kind of style and so it was more making the dragon more mine you know. And then the third tattoo was my chest piece [Fig. 6] and that was, that was kind of the first, the first tattoo that was kind of, was the beginning of the concept I want to work on with my body which is kind of like sort of, I feel like I'm building armour. And actually no my cuttings [scarification] were probably the first thing that kind of started that. But the chest piece was the first tattoo that...I knew that there was definitely going to be stuff added on to it. That it's going to connect with everything else so, I had a lot of designs. I got my friends to design a whole lot of ideas and brought them in to the artist who is also in Toronto and was basically like this is what I want, the kind of feel that I want with the piece and then he went ahead and designed it and it turned out looking dramatically different than anything that I gave to him but after reworking a lot of stuff it worked out really, really well.

Robin also has a fourth tattoo (Fig. 7), which is not part of her ideas for a full body aesthetic.

Yeah I got a, it's like a little sort of skull face on the side of my ribs. Right underneath my armpit and that's kind of just a, it's kind of just a small tattoo that I...that's not really part of a big plan but was something important that I kind of wanted to recognize in my life and it's actually from the liner notes of a band that I really like. From one of their albums, Smog, I don't know if you know them...I've been pretty obsessed with Smog for about five or six or seven years. And there's one sort of verse in particular that I felt kind of like really hit me somewhere and struck an interesting chord in regards to emotional states as well as combining flesh and emotion. Physical feeling and emotional feeling. Which is important to me in regards to a lot of the body marks, like why I do body modification is to test my own limits and to like physically and emotionally test my limits basically.

As well as testing her emotional and physical limits, she discussed how aesthetics were important considering her growing amount of work.

I know that when I got my first tattoo, I knew I was going to get more, it's kind of always been one of those things that I'll continue getting tattoos. But I think that designing more of like a full body concept or incorporating tattoos together has only sort of come up recently. Just you know years of thinking about what to decorate my body with, that it's all started piecing together. That's become more important to me, once I realized I want to get a substantial amount of body tattoos, coordinating things is important.

I also asked Robin whether she still consciously thought about the meaning of her tattoos, “I definitely think about the meanings of my tattoos on a regular basis, so there’re almost self reminders, of different important events in my life.”

Mike, a 30 year old student, regards the meaning of his tattoos quite differently than Robin, “It’s a reflection of my belief system, and I think it’s also a reflection of a certain psychological makeup... I’ve got a lot of sort of gargoyle/guardian motif thing going down in different spots. I don’t know maybe it’s a reflection of my crappy childhood, have some father kind of thing. Deep down there’s probably a psychological connection.” Although Mike does state that “Personally, for myself at least, I get tattoos for artistic not symbolic reasons...”, yet obviously there is meaning attached as he stated previously. I think though that it is “...the artistic representation of an idea...” that is most important to Mike. As he stated at the end of the interview, “...another reason to get a more symbolic piece of work is because it’s so personal, I don’t want anyone else walking around with the same tattoo, that’s just really shitty.”

Mike has several tattoos although my interview centered around two tattoos of his in particular. Each of his lower legs has a “...Chinese temple guardian...guardian of sacred space...male and female the balance of heaven and earth.” In regards to having tattoos that are not related to his own cultural background he did not feel it was problematic but thought it was important to know the origins and meaning behind the symbols. “...you can’t go around acting like an idiot especially when you’ve got something that isn’t your own, know what I mean. I feel somewhat conscious when I’m around Asians now... really conscious and while I’ve gotten positive comments, in the back of my mind it’s still ‘hey whitey what

are you doing with that?” Mike is quite unique in that he obviously is quite conscious of having cultural symbols on his body and has given quite a bit of thought to the matter.

As previously mentioned I interviewed two people in the tattoo business. Thomas is the manager of a small tattoo shop in Ottawa and is not currently a tattooist. My interview with him concentrated mainly on the business aspects of the tattoo industry. At nineteen, Thomas is one of the youngest people working in the industry that he knows of and has been working in it for two years. He also had started getting tattooed when he was fifteen. “I started out as a like you do apprenticeship stuff. I started doing, I used to do sterilization...our other location down the street. Basically just learning. Basically in order to start in this business what you gotta learn is about sterilization and cross contamination and everything about that.” Thomas stressed the need to learn about disease transmission and prevention. The tattoo industry has become quite medicalized. Although as Thomas brought up there are still shops and tattoo artists that “ruin” it for others. When I asked if he thought there was still a bad reputation associated with tattooing he said, “I think that there still is for sure. Like everybody’s got a horror story about somewhere, about somewhere they got butchered up.” He was also very critical of shops or tattooists that tattooed people under the age of consent, which in Ontario is eighteen.

...we’re like really strict, like you know how I was saying a lot of places have ruined it for other people. A lot of places aren’t very strict. Like I’m not going to name any names but there’s a shop in Ottawa who will do anything on anybody...Well it just makes, in general it makes tattooing look bad. They portray tattoo artists, people working in places, like all scumbags. They want the money stuff like that, but all of us we’re very different...All the guys here are pretty normal you know what I mean like and that’s one thing that Ottawa like we realize. With Ottawa, if you go to Montreal and look at the tattoo scene down there it’s a lot more extreme. If you go to a tattoo shop the people from Montreal are expecting it to be like the guy with tattoos on his face and the guys with the big weird implants. Here Ottawa’s not quite ready for that and we try and cater to that. Very conservative, all

the guys here like if you threw long sleeve jackets on us you know you would have no idea.

I found it interesting though that while Thomas said this, there was a tattoo artist for the shop listening in who clearly had a tattoo which partially showed on his lower neck. Although it is clear that Thomas is catering to those people who are more conservative. When we talked about clientele he had noted changes. "Clientele has changed a lot. It used to be just like you know bikers and people like that who got tattoos but now you'd be surprised like older gentleman, older ladies, like soccer moms for sure..." In terms of designs I asked what he thought was popular.

...now the big thing for guys, the kind of jock guys, they are big into the arm bands and the old English writing, stuff like that you know. Girls it's going to be the lower back piece, in the black tribal or flowery design, butterflies stuff like that. Chinese symbols are big, they're popular...They're cool. Most people get Chinese symbols as their first tattoo because they're so small, they're not expensive and I think they're something most people could live with.

I think it is relevant that Chinese symbols are popular as tattoo designs, despite the fact that many people would have to take the tattoo artist's word on what it signified. Thomas also made the point that while they do custom designs and have flash on the walls, they also use the internet to search for designs. "If we can't find it in here we're actually lucky we have an internet café next door. So you just either go there and find it or print off a few ideas, so we'll say do you like any of this and they'll say like yeah I like this one and this one and we'll draw the two together. Or straight up take what they've got on paper and trace it and there we go." This is an example of how technology today makes symbols easily accessed, as discussed in the last chapter.

I also interviewed a tattooist in Ottawa named Dirk, who is 28. He started getting tattooed when he was eighteen and started his apprenticeship as a tattooist at 23. When

asked Dirk stated that "...the clientele has changed..." people that you wouldn't think of as tattooed are and like it. He estimated the average age of those getting tattoos as 36 or 37, far higher than I would have expected. As for tattoo designs Dirk said that everyone wants a design that is unique to them. Custom designs are approximately seventy-five percent of his work, which has lead to longer waits for tattoos. This has also increased the work load for tattooists, designing and researching. Although he did say that customers themselves are doing more research on designs.

Personal Narratives

These interviews give a glimpse into the personal considerations that go into getting a tattoo. The narratives given showed that extensive consideration went into most tattoos, although for some this consideration was purely aesthetic. Clearly the artistic nature of tattoos has become important, as has the uniqueness of the design. For quite a few informants the meaning associated with the design was highly personalised and extremely important. Although it was not outright stated for some informants tattoos were clearly part of an individuation process.

In terms of where designs were taken from little thought was given to original cultural contexts. I found it surprising that this was the general attitude among informants. I believed that this qualitative research would shed some light onto people's considerations in this matter. What it showed was that there were many considerations made when getting a tattoo, including the placement and personalization of the imagery, but this did not generally extend to the origins of said imagery. Some informants like Patrick and Mike, gave quite a

bit of consideration to the cultural context of their imagery and felt that if it was acceptable if done respectfully.

When considering the cultural atmosphere surrounding the body and the practice of tattooing within Canada perhaps I should have expected my findings. The historical analysis of contemporary Canadian tattooing shows that design adoption and adaptation from different cultures was most likely a key element in its rise to the current popularity that it has. The tattoo 'renaissance' was based on custom designed tattoos and using 'unique' styles and designs found in 'other' cultures. Within Canadian culture this was acceptable due to the changing considerations of not only the body but also relations between cultures of the world. Globalisation has led to the conception of the world as an open market, so to speak. Although this conception may not be realistic it gives the impression that people can all 'borrow' from different cultures. Technologies such as the internet do not contextualise symbols. Also, there is such easy access to symbols that when asked informants found it surprising to consider how the cultural 'other' would perceive their actions. The personalization of the symbols into designs, as well as meanings also lends itself to informants feeling that it is now theirs. Although it is quite evident that all those informants who had culturally 'other' symbols were in no way trying to be disrespectful. As they say, imitation is a form of flattery.

Conclusion

This work began with an emphasis on the symbols used in tattooing and how culturally they related to the participants. The adaptation of the meaning of these symbols was also of interest. In the writing of this work I realised that the emphasis for those with tattoos was in fact the personalisation of both symbols and their meaning. Informants gave little thought to the origins of the symbols used, only the transformation into *personal* symbols. Information technologies available in North America make it possible to find symbols from around the globe. This availability and access allows for unprecedented usage of culturally 'other' symbols. The majority of the informants from the last chapter believed that the symbols were used respectfully and that this was not problematic. The personalised nature of the process of tattooing and the meaning through personal narratives seems to dissociate the symbols from their original context.

The current North American culture surrounding the body, as discussed, has made this possible, as well as the particular history of tattooing. Individuation and the creation of meaning through the flesh has become the norm in consumer society. Within what some call the rhetoric of choice available to us through consumerism there must be agency. I believe that the corporeality of tattooing is attractive in Canada today because there is such a glut of consumer items with which to buy and construct one's identity. However these items are not permanent, will break down and need replacement. Tattoos' permanency is appealing and rebellious within a consumer context.

Personal narratives of tattoo experiences are important because not only do they show the level of meaning involved but also show that embodiment can change those around them, as well as one's self. This is because of the personalised nature of the tattoo in

relation to the flesh there is no one 'correct' reading of a tattoo within a social context.

This is where Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment and the flesh is extremely helpful. In so much as there is the possibility (even if remotely) that personal workings and re-workings of cultural and social contexts through the flesh can in fact impact them (that is tattoos having a cultural impact).

This thesis has shown how it is currently culturally acceptable to find and place personal meaning in the practice of tattooing. I have argued that it is also possible to express the self through tattooing. I believe that the personal narratives formed about tattoos represent an important way for individuals to create meaning.

Appendix

Figure 1
© Jacques Branch 2004

Figure 2
© Ashley MacLellan 2004

Figure 3 © Ashley MacLellan 2004

Figure 4
©Ashley MacLellan 2004

Figure 5 © Rachel McBride 2004

Figure 6 © Rachel McBride 2004

Figure 7 © Rachel McBride 2004

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara and Jackie Stacey

2001 "Introduction: dermographies." Pp.1-17 in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Thinking Through the Skin*. London: Routledge, New York: PALGRAVE, 2001

Allen Rosecrans, Jennifer

2000 "Wearing the Universe: Symbolic Markings in Early Modern England" Pp. 46-60 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Armstrong, Myrna L.

1995 "Adolescent Tattoos: Educating vs. Pontificating." *Pediatric Nursing* 21(6):561-564

Atkinson, Michael

2003 *Tattooed: the sociogenesis of a body art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Atkinson, Michael and Kevin Young

2001 "Flesh Journeys: Neo Primitives and the Contemporary Rediscovery of Radical Body Modification." *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 22:117-146

Baudrillard, Jean

1988 "Consumer Society." Pp. 29-56 in Mark Poster (ed.), *Selected Writings* Stanford: Stanford University Press

Benson, Susan

2000 "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America." Pp. 234-254 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Benthien, Claudia

2002 *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*. New York: Columbia University Press

Bordo, Susan

1993 *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Brain, Robert

1979 *The Decorated Body*. New York: Harper&Row

Brush, Pippa

1998 "Metaphors of Inscription: Discipline, Plasticity and the Rhetoric of Choice." *Feminist Review* 58(Spring):22-43

Caplan, Jane

2000 "Introduction" Pp. xi-1 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Connor, Steven

2001 "Mortification." Pp. 36-51 in Ahmed, Sara and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Thinking Through the Skin*. London: Routledge, 2001

Cummings, William

2001 "Modern Primitivism: The Recent History of Civilization's Discontents." *Critical Studies* 15:297-316

Davis, Fred

1992 *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

DeMello, Margo

2000 *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. Durham: Duke University Press

Douglas, Mary

1996 *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London; New York: Routledge

Enns, Diane

1994 "Speaking an Embodied Subject: A Phenomenological Ontology of the Flesh." MA Thesis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University

Entwistle, Joanne

2002 "The Dressed Body." Pp. 133-150 in Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (eds.), *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*

Evans, Fred and Leonard Lawlor

2000 "The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate." Pp. 1-20 in F. Evans and L. Lawlor (eds.), *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. New York: State University of New York Press

Falk, Pasi

1994 *The Consuming Body*. London: Sage Publications

Favazza, Armando R.

1996 *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

Featherstone, Mike

2000 "Body Modification: An Introduction." Pp. 1-13 in Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Body Modification*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2000

1991 *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage

1982 "The Body in Consumer Culture." Pp. 170-196 in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage Publications, 1991

Fisher, Jill A.

2002 "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture." *Body & Society* 8(4): 91-107

Flemming, Juliet

2000 "The Renaissance Tattoo." Pp.61-82 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Frank, Arthur W.

1991 "For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review." Pp. 36-102 in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage Publications, 1991

Frank, Thomas

1997 *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Glickman, Lawrence B.

1999 "Introduction." Pp. 1-14 in Lawrence Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Govenar, Alan

2000 "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966." Pp. 212-233 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Gustafson, Mark

2000 "The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond." Pp. 17-31 in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000

Hanegraaf, Wouter J.

1996 *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill

Heath, Joseph

2001 "The structure of hip consumerism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27(6):1-17

Heelas, Paul

1996 *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

Irwin, Katherine

2001 "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction." *Symbolic Interaction* 24 (1):49-73

Jeffreys, Sheila

2000 "'Body Art' and Social Status: Cutting, Tattooing and Piercing from a Feminist Perspective." *Feminism & Psychology* 10(4):409-429

Juno, Andrea and V. Vale (eds.)

1989 *Modern Primitives*. San Francisco:Re/Search Pubs.

Klesse, Christian

1999 "'Modern Primitivism': Non-Mainstream Body Modification and Racialized Representation." *Body & Society* 5 (2-3):15-38

Lau, Kimberly J.

2000 *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Lock, Margaret

1993 "Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 133-155

Mascia-Lees, Frances E. and Patricia Sharpe

1992 "The Marked and the Un(re)Marked: Tattoo and Gender in Theory and Narrative." Pp. 145-169 in Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe (eds.), *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*. Albany: State University of New York Press

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice

1968 *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*. Claude Lefort (ed.) and translated by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press

Mifflin, Margot

1997 *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*. New York: Juno Books

Millner, Vaughn S. and Bernard H. Eichold, II

2001 "Body Piercing and Tattooing Perspectives." *Clinical Nursing Research* 10(4): 424-441

Monk, Philip

1998 *Rococo Tattoo; The Ornamental Impulse in Toronto Art*. Toronto: Power Plant

Ozawa-De Silva, Chikako

2002 "Beyond the Body/Mind? Japanese Contemporary Thinkers on Alternative Sociologies of the Body." *Body & Society* 8(2): 21-38

Pitts, Victoria

2003 *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

2002 "Review Essay: Reading the Body Through a Cultural Lens." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31 (3):361-372

1999 "Body Modification, Self-Mutilation and Agency in Media Accounts of a Subculture." *Body & Society* 5 (2-3):291-303

Pritchard, Stephan

2001 "An Essential Marking: Maori Tattooing and the Properties of Identity." *Theory, Culture & Society* 18 (4):27-45

Ritz, David

2002 *Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art*. Boston: Bulfinch Press Book/AOL Time Warner Book Group

Rubin, Arnold

1988 "The Tattoo Renaissance" Pp. 233-265 in Rubin Arnold (ed.), *Marks of Civilization*. Los Angeles: University of California Press

Salecl, Renata

2001 "Cut in the body: From clitoridectomy to body art." Pp. 21-35 in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Thinking Through the Skin*. London: Routledge

Sanders, Clinton

1989 *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Sault, Nicole

1994 "Introduction" in Nicole Sault (ed.), *Many Mirrors: Body Image and Social Relations*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press

Scutt, R. W. B. and Christopher Gotch

1986 *Art, Sex, and Symbol: The Mystery of Tattooing*. New York: Cornwall Books

Shilling, Chris

1993 *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage Publications

Steward, Samuel M.

1990 *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: a social history of the tattoo with gangs, sailors, and street-corner punks, 1950-1965*. New York: Haworth Press

Stuppy, Dorothy J.; Myrna L. Armstrong and Christina Casals-Ariet

1998 "Attitudes of health care providers and students towards tattooed people." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 27:1165-1170

Sullivan, Nikki

2001 *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure*. Connecticut: Praeger

Sweetman, Paul

1999 "Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity." *Body & Society* 5 (2-3):51-76

Synnott, Anthony

1993 *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. London; New York: Routledge

Turner, Bryan S.

1999 "The Possibility of Primitiveness: Towards a Sociology of Body Marks in Cool Societies." *Body & Society* 5 (2-3):39-50

1994 "Preface." Pp. vii-xvii in Pasi Falk, *The Consuming Body*. London: Sage Publications

1991 "Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body." Pp. 1-35 in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage Publications, 1991

Vail, D. Angus

1999 "Tattoos Are Like Potato Chips...You Can't Have Just One: the Process of Becoming and Being a Collector." *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20:253-273

Warde, Alan

1997 *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antimonies and Commodity Culture*. London: Sage

Warwick, Alexandra and Dani Cavallaro

1998 *Fashioning The Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body*. Oxford: Berg

Weiss, Gail

1999 *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge

Wojcik, Daniel

1995 *Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi

Wright, Jane

1995 "Modifying the body: piercing and tattoos." *Nursing Standard* 10(11):27-30