

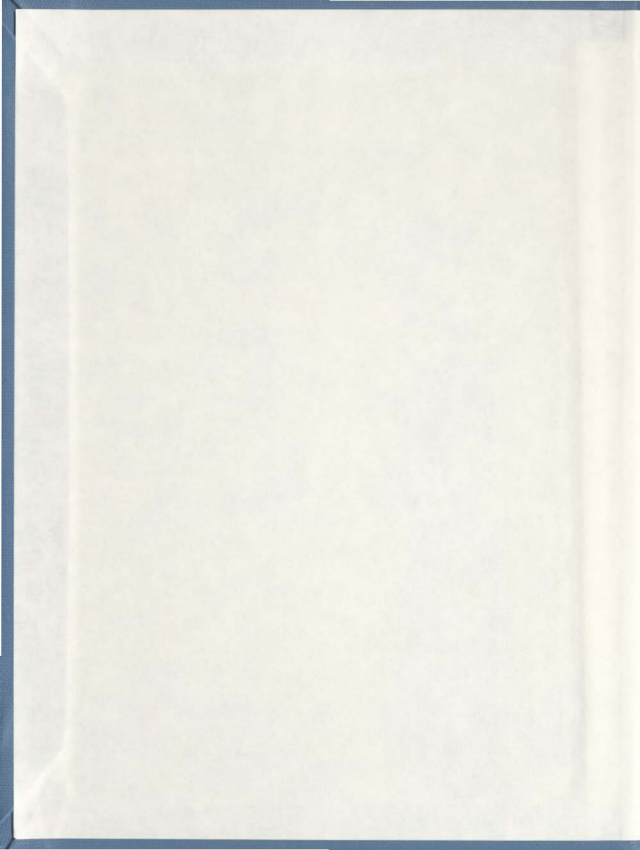
BODY PIERCING AND THE EXPLORATION OF
SPIRITUALITY, SEXUALITY AND FASHION

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Body Piercing and the Exploration of Spirituality, Sexuality and Fashion

by

Hans Rollmann

A thesis submitted to the
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in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis examines body piercing as a modern aesthetic phenomenon in St. John's, Newfoundland, and explores the manner in which body piercing is utilized by some piercees to help construct and reinforce an intimately personalized sense of self-identity. It focuses on the complex symbolic and aesthetic methods in which thirteen local piercees use body piercing in a variety of different ways to give voice to their sense of self-identity. It focuses particularly on the use of body piercing in the context of neopagan spirituality, sexuality and alternative forms of sexuality such as sadomasochism, as well as the creation of idealized, alternative universes. Furthermore it examines the antagonism perceived by some piercees between body piercing as an element of alternative, fringe culture and body piercing's more recent commoditization by the mainstream fashion industry.

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List of Informants

Nancy: An 18-year-old woman, attending university off and on, works a variety of retail jobs.

George: A 19-year old male, briefly attended university but then quit to travel around the country (financially supported by parents). Recently returned to Newfoundland from several months living in British Columbia.

Earl: A 30-year old man, works odd jobs and lives with his mother. He's recently become quite active in the pagan community, and has also recently become extremely fascinated by body piercing. He features prominently in this thesis, as does his girlfriend, Eileen.

Sharon: A 26-year old woman, alternates between attending university and working full time. Originally from Ontario, she moved to Newfoundland about a year ago, after attending university in British Columbia for a brief time. She features very prominently in this thesis, and was suggested to me as an informant by Earl, who was aware of her very active interests in piercing and S&M sexuality.

Eileen: A 24-year old female student, currently attending a local college. Her boyfriend is Earl, and they share interests in piercing, neopagan spirituality, and S&M sexuality.

Anna: A 40-year old mother of two. She's currently a self-employed artist, and developed an interest in piercing from her daughter.

Sonia: A 24-year old woman, works at a variety of jobs. Briefly attended university, then quit to travel around the country. She returned recently to spend some time at home in Newfoundland.

Wally: A 24-year old male from Holyrood, a smaller community not far from St. John's. Currently unemployed, he's also spent a great deal of time travelling around the country, and is very active in the local punk community.

Mike: A 30-year old male, he owns and operates the largest and oldest piercing parlour in Newfoundland (Elektron, which doubles as a hair salon). Originally from Ontario, he received his piercing training in Montreal.

Lisa: A 24-year old woman. she spent some time travelling around the continent and was trained as a piercer in the United States. She returned to Newfoundland and began advertizing piercing services from her home, and then began working as the piercer for Fairwave, a recently-opened piercing and tattoo shop which opened up a mere street above Elektron.

Morgan: A 21-year old female university student. She developed an early interest in piercing through her sisters, and has pierced herself on numerous occasions.

Debbie: A 20-year old female university student, who developed an interest in piercing while spending time in Montreal.

Leisl: A 20-year old female university student, who has been fascinated by piercing since high school.

Introduction

Background

...for myself as an anthropologist, the most interesting fact to have emerged...is that the transformation through art of the human body is a basic need which is universally practised among the peoples of the world...Like body gesture, body decoration is a kind of language or code which is spoken through hairstyles, mutilation, tattooing or painting...In a world becoming grey with fog and cement and conformity, an adventurous approach to our bodies may provide us with a welcome sense of personal freedom, or creative impulse (Robert Brain 1979: 185-186).

When I first approached this project, I was interested in body piercing and body modification very generally in terms of the connection I believed it held with punk subculture; in its ability to serve as a method of group affiliation and expression of commitment to a sense of authenticity related to the punk and subcultural ethos.

Many of my ideas at that stage arose from my own personal experiences growing up among punk, goth, and other 'subcultural' social milieux, and on what I had personally seen of those communities both in Newfoundland and elsewhere in North America and Europe. I had noticed that body piercing seemed to be especially linked to what are often referred to as particular subcultures - i.e. punks - and that it served an important role in conveying social status, commitment, and authenticity within those subcultures. I would not presume these ideas were mine alone; they prevailed in much of the popular literature on body piercing at the time (magazines, underground zines, books, music). These ideas were reinforced in an academic manner by some of the anthropological literature which I

encountered on the topic in university (and which will be raised later under the theoretical discussion). I set out, therefore, to study how this process expressed itself in one local Newfoundland context: the capital city of St. John's.

What I wound up with was something far different in several respects. For one, the types of closely-knit subcultural formations present in larger urban centres were, I discovered, decidedly hard to isolate in Newfoundland, where the capital city has a population of 101,936 (Statistics Canada, 1996). Secondly (and I would not be surprised to discover this has affected the symbolic role of piercing even in the larger population centres) body piercing has undergone a massive shift in popular culture from the point where I first encountered it as a youth, from being an element of radical fringe culture (in the late 1980s and early 1990s locally) to being heavily commercialized and mass marketed by the mainstream culture's fashion industry today. It was no longer so easy to ask the question "So what's this body piercing all about, anyway?"

What I discovered instead was that the individuals with whom I spoke - who came from far too wide a range of social experiences, beliefs and values to lump under arbitrary categories like "subcultures" or "punks" - had developed some extremely elaborate conceptualizations and ideas around their avid interests in body piercing. Rather than using piercing to make them fit into a particular group, they were using piercing to articulate a sense of individuality, of what I came to refer to as a "culture of the original person" (I discuss this more thoroughly in the conclusion). Many of these piercees

wanted to be unique, to stand out from the crowd - in some cases, visibly so, but in other cases, they kept their piercings hidden, and utilized them as an emphatically personal affirmation of individual worth and identity. They were in all cases extremely articulate and thoughtful in their use of body piercing, and consciously drew from a wide range of history, mythology, religion, and social science theory in order to make sense of and order their piercing experiences into a discernable category of meaning. While the particular meanings varied from person to person, the point they seemed to be making was to emphasize the use of body piercing - of inscribing upon their own physical bodies - to articulate symbols and expressions of important personal and individual meaning.

It was this which I came to study: the manner in which body piercing was used by these people to create complex systems of symbolic meaning within the context of creating and affirming a sense of individual identity. Moreover, as in recent years body piercing has increasingly entered the public arena as an "acceptable" branch of the mainstream fashion industry, this has created an additional problem for the types of emphatically individualistic piercees with whom I spoke: how did they respond to the appropriation of their very personal symbolic expressions by a mainstream fashion culture which seeks to mass market and commercialize piercing, and how do they maintain a sense of personal meaning and identity through their piercings in the face of the encroaching trend of piercing as an element of mass market fashion culture?

Although my emphasis is on the variety of symbolic meaning inherent in body piercing practices among the piercees with whom I spoke, I did come to focus on three primary symbolic themes through which my informants seemed to articulate the meanings of their piercings: intellectual 'superstructures' of sorts within which they ordered their personal expression of thoughts and ideals through piercing. The first was spirituality: some of my informants followed neopagan spiritual paths and utilized body piercing as a physical expression of their sense of spirituality. The second was 'tribal primitivism': some of my informants saw their piercing practices as connecting them with a conceptualized 'tribal cultural ancestry', and piercing enabled them to articulate this as a sort of personal aspiration toward what they believed was a utopic tribal cultural past. In both of these two approaches the piercees perceived 'the past' as the source of the ideas and practices which they were bringing into and adapting to effective personal use in the present. It is, as we shall see, important to note that what we are discussing here is the piercees' *perception* of the historical past, and not necessarily an objective reality. The third approach was through sexuality: piercing played an important role in expressing the personal sexual identities of some of the piercees with whom I spoke. Some piercees, moreover, utilized piercing in the context of fetishistic sado-masochistic sexuality, and the connections between body piercing and S&M sexuality is something I also came to focus on in some depth in the writing of this thesis.

Overview of Literature

I feel that the cultural practise of body piercing in contemporary, urban North American culture must be distinguished from the non-western societies which were the focus of much of this century's anthropological studies of body piercing (i.e. Brain 1979, quoted at the beginning). Rather than serving as a direct link with the traditional customs of one's culture group, for many North Americans body piercing represents a perceived *departure* from the puritanical cultural norms of preceding generations. It is by no means a brand new phenomenon; indeed it has been experienced and discussed for much of the past twenty or so years, particularly by anthropologists studying fashion, subcultural groups such as the punk movement, and similar social phenomena (i.e. Hebdige 1979, Wojcik 1995, Fox 1987, and others discussed further on in this introduction). As a result, the youth of today who undertake body piercing practices are neither following the ways of their immediate cultural ancestors, nor are they inventing a new practise out of a cultural vacuum. In attempting to understand the fundamental significance piercing held for my informants, therefore, I found myself compelled to overcome a number of theoretical obstacles or presuppositions which have imposed themselves on the contemporary practice of body piercing.

There has been a distinct tension between the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences on the one hand, and psychology, psychiatry and the medical sciences on the other when it comes to the study of body piercing.

Traditionally, many psychiatrists have dealt with body piercing - and non-

mainstream forms of body modification in general - as a disease, or as a symptom of psychiatric disorder. Psychiatrist Dr. Armando Favazza lumps body piercing and body modification under the rubric of self-mutilation, and describes them as at "best regarded as a morbid form of self-help" (Favazza 1987: 286). Favazza's well-known work on the topic - Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry (1987), which presents scores of clinical cases of "psychiatric disorder" expressed through forms of body mutilation which include piercing - has duly been taken to task by anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes for having "medicalized" cultural forms of body modification (Scheper-Hughes 1993). Favazza does admit, however, that with the popularization of body piercing in recent years, psychiatric disorder can no longer automatically "...be presumed in persons who engage in body piercing, branding, tattoos and so forth, although as a group such persons probably have increased levels of psychopathology" (Favazza 1987: 287). In other words, it appears, he suggests that when something becomes popular it ceases to be a disorder requiring psychiatric treatment. Scheper-Hughes counterattacks, pointing out that although Favazza proclaimed at the beginning of the afore-mentioned study that he intended to acknowledge and investigate the *cultural* aspects and implications of body mutilation, "The failure of the author's bold attempt...has less to do with the validity of his premises than with his own failure to apply it consistently. Instead, Favazza the clinician cannot avoid imposing the alienating language and meanings of psychiatry on the practices of those cutters referred to him and

his therapist colleagues (Scheper-Hughes 1993: 312). Noting that he cannot seem to decide whether body mutilation is therapeutic or symptomatic, he "demonstrates more frequently the "destructive" than the "creative" aspects of religiously engaged self-mutilators...In the final analysis, the bodies in question seem as besieged by psychiatry and psychiatrists as they are by their own hands" (Ibid: 313-315).

Even so, self-help therapy programs abound, such as Karen Contario and Wendy Lader's recently published Bodily Harm (1998), which they describe as a 'healing program for self-injurers'. It begins with an account of a young woman who develops an 'addiction' to piercing herself. They then go on to provide some guidelines for determining whether a piercing passion is dangerous: "Do you feel compulsively drawn to engage in the behavior?" they ask. "Do you get a "high" from the way the activity feels physically..." I was struck as I read their work how many of the piercees I spoke with would easily fall into the categories delineated in the book as requiring counselling and professional 'help'. Certainly none of the piercees I spoke with felt their love of piercing was something which required clinical treatment, and neither would I. Yet as Kim Hewitt observes, forms of body modification like piercing "...have often been defined as pathologically unhealthy, stigmatized as deviant, or imposed upon marginalized members of society" (Hewitt 1997: 1).

Certainly, any activity can become dangerous if carried to too far an extreme, and if the individual loses self-control over their participation in the activity. Yet the

delineation of 'extremes' is a highly subjective thing, and relative to a cultural reference point. Perhaps in recognition of this, anthropologists and other social scientists have traditionally been much kinder to the study of body modification.

Hewitt - in contrast to those who identify body piercing mainly as a constitutive element in the context of studies of particular subcultural groups who are known for doing it, i.e. punks - examines body piercing as a practice which

...acts as positive expressions of social custom, individualism, and resourcefulness...they are often symptomatic of crises in identity, religious faith, and modern social structure, and are acts that help resolve those crises...these acts of self-alteration may create private and cultural spaces that fulfil a need for community and cultural inclusion (Ibid: 2-3).

Although Hewitt studies piercing and tattooing alongside of less positive and more compulsive practices like anorexia and bulimia, she presents piercing as a form of spiritual practice indelibly revitalizing a sense of 'body magic' in the contemporary, increasingly secular world. Emphasizing that "body magic" (as she repeatedly describes it) is once again becoming an important foundation for discourse and practice in the post-rationalist, post-enlightenment culture, she prefaces her work by noting that she seeks "...to explore [body modification practices] not as replacements for religion but as actions that attempt to fulfil spiritual needs similar to those fulfilled by organized religions" (Ibid: 3).

To a large degree, the data I collected from my informants strongly supported Hewitt's view of the culture of piercing as often being "symptomatic of crises of identity.

religious faith, and modern social structure, and are acts that help resolve those crises.”

By examining the attitudes and motivations of the piercee informants I spoke with, I attempted to gain a clearer picture of how this process occurs, in the St. John’s context.

Chapter Two deals with the “crises of...religious faith, and modern social structure” Hewitt refers to, by exploring the role piercing plays in the neopagan spirituality and tribal rites of passage embraced by some of those piercees.

Sally Price, who has written extensively on the “imperialistic” appropriation by western cultures of non-western cultural values and practices, argues that non-western art and aesthetics

...have been discovered, seized, commoditized, stripped of their social ties, redefined in new settings, and reconceptualized to fit into the economic, cultural, political, and ideological needs of people from distant societies...From this perspective, our central problem...becomes the dehumanization of Primitive Art and its makers (Price 1989: 5).

While I believe that the above process of discovery and reconceptualization holds true with what I gleaned from my own observations, I argue throughout that rather than “dehumanizing” their makers, what those who adapt non-western practices to their own realities are doing is trying to rehumanize their own lived cultural experience. This is the basis for much of the “neo-tribal” aspect of body piercing; as Daniel Wojcik puts it in his study of neo-tribal body art

Neo-tribalism...tends to emphasize the transformative rather than the destructive aspects of body modification, often expressing a yearning for idealized ways of life imagined to be more fulfilling emotionally.

spiritually, and sexually... (Wojcik 1995: 36).

It seems to be the fashion - by design or otherwise - for scholars examining piercing to eventually wind up drawing connections between piercing and other practices which they feel express a similar cultural inspiration or motivational idea. And whereas Hewitt draws connections between piercing tattooing and fasting anorexia bulimia, the connection I draw in chapters 3 and 4 is between piercing and sado-masochistic sexuality. I found that not only did a surprising number of my informants - particularly those for whom piercing served an important role in establishing their sense of individual identity - practice to a greater or lesser degree forms of sado-masochistic sexuality, but for some of them it served as a natural progression of the same ideas and creative expressions that motivated them to get pierced.

The literature on sado-masochistic sexuality - or S&M as it is referred to more popularly - is too extensive to comprehensively examine here. Nor is my aim in this thesis to focus on S&M sexuality specifically. Rather, the extensive discussion of S&M sexuality contained herein is the product of the role played by piercing in S&M contexts, and the analogous meanings and significance S&M sexuality held for my piercee informants. It is useful to note, however, that as with piercing a tension exists again in the study of S&M sexuality between psychiatric medical disciplines and anthropological social science disciplines. In his survey "Bizarre Behaviours: Boundaries of Psychiatric Disorder" Herschel Prins stereotypes and medicalizes S&M participants as

predominantly "...lonely, isolated men [who] are often depressed. There appears to be no typical family pathology, but often poor family relationships are evident. One explanation proffered is that the person needs to be punished for some early unresolved infantile guilt...Others have seen the behaviour as a suicidal syndrome..." (Prins 1990: 91-92).

By contrast, Hewitt from her sociological perspective believes that pain as experienced in S&M scenarios is something which "...can reaffirm an individual's physical existence and aliveness, and provoke a transcendence of this existence...pain [is] a potent vehicle of power and mastery [and] can obliterate and recreate consciousness" (Hewitt 1997: 31-32). In contrast to psychiatrists like Prins and Favazza who discover S&M is a useful symptom by which to describe their patients' psychiatric disorders, Hewitt probes S&M sexuality for its ability to serve a useful and positive social function.

I should note that while I discovered that my findings paralleled Hewitt's in many respects, I must disagree with her on the fundamental process by which S&M sexuality serves to "reaffirm an individual's physical existence and aliveness." She feels this occurs through a process of "loss of personhood, which is concurrent with the repair of a narcissistic fragmented self and alleviation of the accompanying emotional distress" (Ibid: 32). Indeed, she places a great deal of importance on this notion of the "narcissistic self," and on the potency of the forms of physical contact inherent in S&M and bondage scenarios. I feel by contrast that my informants achieved a sense of reaffirmation not through "loss of personhood" but through the creation of a strongly individualized

identity characterized by their conscious manipulation of relationships of power, expressed through acts of dominance and submission. They were not losing themselves, as Hewitt suggests, but rather were more intent upon finding themselves. Hewitt also sees them as utilizing S&M to reaffirm the boundaries of the body. The notion of boundaries also arose on numerous occasions during the interviews I conducted, however the people I spoke with were less interested in consolidating their physical and mental boundaries, and more interested in pushing those boundaries to ever greater extremes, as a means of defying them: not to "reaffirm" those boundaries, but rather to break them down.

Not all social scientists are equally confident in the ability of S&M to act as a positive cultural force. The work Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties collects writings by a host of women's- and gender-studies scholars in a treatise designed to expose the negative cultural impact of S&M sexuality, particularly in those communities - i.e. gay and lesbian communities - where they feel it is increasingly viewed as an empowering aspect of identity. For example, Jamie Lee Evans argues that the imagery of sadomasochism becomes a social excuse for cultural and racial oppression: "I believe the not-guilty verdict against the batterers of Rodney King was a decision based on racism as well as a product of analysis brought forth via a culture indoctrinated with violence and sadomasochistic beliefs," she writes in the introduction to her essay on "Rodney King, Racism and the SM Culture of America"; she then goes on to focus particularly on the role SM has played in perpetuating a culture

of tolerance toward sexualized and racist violence (in Reti 1993: 74). Irene Reti, in turn, draws compelling analogies between contemporary S&M imagery and practice and the practices employed in Nazi torture camps during World War II in her essay "Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post Nazi Holocaust World." Such writings are but a few examples of the many intellectual and scholarly as well as social and political arguments brought to bear against the notion that S&M sexuality can be imbued with positive social meaning. Pat Califia sums up the battlefield quite well when she notes there are feminist scholars who

...believe that our society has conditioned all of us to accept inequalities in power and hierarchical relationships...some feminists still find S/M roles disturbing because they believe they are derived from genuinely oppressive situations. They accuse sadomasochism of being fascist because of the symbolism employed to create an S/M ambiance..." (Califia 1994: 169).

Califia, by contrast, argues patriarchal hierarchies are based on assigning roles and status, whereas S/M practitioners invent and manipulate roles on a consensual, private, and temporary basis. She argues too that while fascist and violent imagery is utilized, "no symbol has a single meaning," and the conscious manipulation of negative or oppressive imagery can be articulated toward a positive end (Ibid:169).

What does all this have to do with the topic at hand? S&M practitioners like the ones discussed in this thesis are attempting, through a head-long journey of risk and experimentation, to define for themselves a sexual identity which transcends, defies, and

challenges the stereotypic norms of mainstream sexuality. They are trying to invent a sexual identity for themselves: by exerting active, inventive control over their sexuality, they too are attempting to explore the creative power of their own self-identity. Those I spoke with - particularly Sharon who is discussed in depth in Chapter Four - are uniquely relevant because their active participation in this process of creating a sexual identity developed out of an interest in piercing, and for them has become a natural extension of the process of self-exploration and redefinition engendered by their fascination with body modification and piercing. It is their own unique response to the "crises of self-identity" Hewitt refers to above.

Such is a sampling of the complexity of current social and intellectual attitudes toward S&M sexuality. What this also means in relation to the people I spoke with is that, while they may not be active participants in the scholarly debates which help to shape our interpretation of mainstream social attitudes, they nevertheless must come to terms with the resultant consequences of these debates: they are invariably conscious of what the negative and positive sides of the academic debates are saying about what they love to do, and they must ask themselves each time they do it precisely what their actions and sexual attitudes mean to them, as individuals. The confusion, the self-doubt, and the self-affirmation is what we shall wind up encountering in the chapters which follow. Moreover, for those S&M practitioners who see their sexual practices as a natural extension of their other physical and social passions - for instance, body piercing - it turns

into a quest to understand the role all of these elements play in their lives.

The issue is then rendered all the more complicated by the fact that, aside from what academics and court judges have to say about piercing and S&M, at the other spectrum of the discourse is a fashion culture which reaches toward youth with a market industry based on commercializing images of punks with piercings and sexual superheroes adorned in leather and chains. What sense of personal meaning emerges, and in what ways can individuals extract a sense of original, individual identity from this morass of social, academic, and market interests as it applies to body piercing and S&M?

This a fundamental question, and one which applies itself not only to the S&M aspect of piercing but to the entire issue of piercing and self-identity as the piercees I spoke with seemed to perceive it. In the wake of this process of creating, defining, and expressing individuality and self-identity through piercing, the final issue to be dealt with in the chapters which follow is that of the commercialization of body piercing in mainstream fashion.

As in so many things related to piercing, much of the theory behind the antagonism between underground and mainstream fashion is found in the study of the punk movement. While this thesis does not deal with punks per se (with the partial exception of Chapter 5, where I discuss local punks I spoke with about piercing), much of the literature relevant to contemporary North American body piercing is found within the literature on punks. Wojcik, for instance, notes that

The use of body piercing, or what was referred to as "mutilation" by the mass media, had particularly powerful symbolic connotations (deviance, pain, masochism, self-destruction) and seemed to disturb non-punks more than all the other styles - hair, leather jackets, clothing, and tattoos - combined...Punks literally skewered and lacerated themselves with the mundane debris of daily life. The stereotyped image of a punk with a safety pin through a cheek became an icon of deviant youth, a media symbol of the punk folk devil that intensified a sense of moral panic in the wider population (Wojcik 1995: 17-19).

Dick Hebdige's theory of how mainstream culture commodifies and commercializes "threatening" culture elements - i.e. punk fashion, in his 1979 treatise on the subject - so as to remove their threat, render them knowable, and place them in a familiar - and controllable - framework (industrial capitalism, via the fashion industry) is by now infamous and still frequently cited in the literature, both with approval and hostility² (Hebdige 1979).

To remain with the punk theme for a short time, Wojcik notes that

Having little access to dominant means of discourse, punks displayed their disaffiliation and their subcultural identity through such [body] adornment, which was for them an accessible and direct channel of communication. By manipulating the standard codes of adornment in socially objectionable ways, punks challenged the accepted categories of everyday dress and disrupted the codes and conventions of daily life...punk style was subversive not only because it threatened established cultural boundaries, but more importantly because it undermined and exposed the ways in which such cultural classifications and hegemonic discourses are constructed...Punks developed the skills and mastered the techniques necessary to produce forms of adornment that expressed their street-level aesthetic and that reflected their collective experiences and values (Wojcik 1995: 10-11).

Contemporary body piercing among the piercees I spoke with serves an analogous

role in several ways: not necessarily to convey a "street-level aesthetic," but certainly to reflect their "experiences and values," as I shall describe. The notable difference which I observed was the lack of hostility, and of overt aggression. Indeed, in many cases my informants' opposition seemed to be directed *against* others' sense of personal alienation from loss of faith. Where Wojcik writes of punks "threatening boundaries," I see my piercees speaking of "pushing boundaries." Moreover, many of them were not trying to merely "disaffiliate" or "undermine" the process of constructing cultural classifications, but felt they were going beyond them: they were expressing a desire to create something new. Whereas Wojcik describes punk tattoos as serving "to stigmatize the bearer as someone existing outside of societal conventions," the piercees I spoke with did not feel "stigmatized": they invariably felt "proud" of this outsider - or individualized - status.

Jude Davies disagrees with Hebdige's analysis of the "absorption" of the punk "threat" by mainstream fashion. He notes, first of all, that Hebdige's writings on punks sees them as more or less rebelling blindly, as striking out in a desperate desire to rebel, and not really being fully conscious or in control of the rebellious processes which they initiate - i.e. shocking punk fashion. Therefore this, in part, is what made it so easy for mainstream fashion to absorb or conquer it. Davies critically notes that this denies the punks any level of "self-consciousness" in the process, and that true rebellion can only proceed from a self-conscious recognition of the means of rebellion which one pursues. As a result, Davies decided to "...give up the notion that punk's political significance is

constituted by its resistance to a dominant culture outside or against which it is conceived of as existing, and will focus instead on its subversiveness within that culture..." .Davies 1996: 4). In doing so, however, Davies observes that this entire debate "...can and has been mapped on to a global economy in which a multi-market capitalism delivers all possible identities to us in the form of commodities" (Ibid: 5). He provides a telling example:

Female punks' porno-clothes attempted to subvert the reduction of women to sex objects. By exaggerating the pale complexion and dark eyes of the sexual woman, by wearing short skirts and fishnets, but stained and torn, with heavy Doctor Marten boots ("D.M.s"), female punks attempted to short-circuit the mechanism of appropriation...But this look was itself absorbed into fashion with disturbing speed; even, eventually, the D.M.s (Ibid: 23).

Relevant to this point are Sarah Thornton's theories of "subcultural capital." Thornton draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and adapts notions of cultural capital to non-mainstream subcultures. She examines - particularly in the context of rave culture - how things like drug use, fashion, music, and so forth are used to accumulate subcultural capital and prove authenticity and commitment to particular subcultures. Piercing initially felt piercing could serve much the same social function. Moreover, Thornton emphasizes how a dialectical relationship exists between the mainstream and non-mainstream: when an element of subcultural capital becomes accepted by the mainstream, by becoming an element of cultural capital it loses its value as subcultural capital (Thornton 1996). This crisis of meaning, faced by many piercees who questioned the significance of body

piercing as it becomes commercialized and mass marketed by the fashion industry, was one I frequently encountered during my interviews.

Thus we have seen some of the ways other researchers have attempted to deal with the issue of oppositional fashion elements being appropriated and commercialized by the mainstream fashion culture. And useful though they are to consider, there are also problems in applying them to the study of body piercing as I encountered it. Above all, I am dealing with body piercing, not punk fashion in its metaphorical entirety. Kathryn Joan Fox notes that

...punks constituted a counterculture in that they shared a specific normative system. Certain behaviors were considered punk, while others were not. Indeed, style was the message and the means of expression...Within the groups of punks I studied, the degree of commitment to the counterculture lifestyle was the variable that determined placement within the hierarchy of the local scene (Fox 1987: 345).

She then goes on to delineate and analyze the membership categories which she perceives within the punk community, determined and distinguished from each other on the basis of their varying levels of commitment and perceived authenticity to the normative, oppositional, behavior system.

However, I do not believe body piercing can be described as a counterculture; while varying levels of commitment to an aesthetic exist within piercing, the important point which my informants repeatedly emphasized to me was that there was no normative behaviour system, not even an oppositional one. Granted, there was indeed often a great

deal of opposition taking place, but it in no way constituted a normative system. They did not see themselves as a solid group opposing a particular set of issues or ideas. Rather, and although their statements express clearly the potential for piercing as an oppositional act, opposition meant a very great manner of different things to different people. When body piercing was used to oppose, it was not a group-based, nor even a counter-cultural opposition: it was very emphatically an opposition embedded firmly in the individual. Commitment to any unifying behaviour system was firmly avoided: the development or construction of any perceived set of behavioural norms around piercing - as we shall see in the discussion of commercial fashion in the final chapter - was emphatically frowned upon. If there was a level of authenticity to be judged by the piercees, it was above all an authenticity to the self, where one simple, unobtrusive piercing of personal significance was held in far greater esteem than ten or even twenty piercings of immense radical shock value. Normative behaviour was eschewed, and the ability to avoid it respected.

In one of their studies on punk membership categories, Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt write that

Social comparisons are therefore frequently the means through which members of one group display discrimination against others. The crucial theoretical variable in these studies is social identification: the acceptance and internalisation of an externally imposed social self-categorisation. That is, individuals' need for positive social identity and therefore a positive self-concept or esteem provides the motivating force for making social comparisons (Widdicombe & Wooffitt 1990: 258).

Again, the variable for my informants was not social identification, it was self-

identification. The "acceptance and internalisation of an externally imposed social self-categorisation" is precisely what was being fought against. And whereas Davies (quoted above) criticized Hebdige for denying the punks "self-consciousness" in their so-called rebellion against mainstream society, "self-consciousness" was precisely the predominant, emphatic foundation upon which my informants based their piercing practices. And this thesis is a testimony to the extremely "self-conscious" creativity and individuality which my informants brought to bear to distinguish and define themselves as meaningful, individual beings.

Methodology

Over a period of six months - particularly from September 1998 through February 1999 - I spoke to a number of people who had been pierced or who pierced others (see below for specifics). I began in the summer of 1998 with a group of half a dozen piercing friends and acquaintances. Starting with these friends and acquaintances, I made inquiries and was soon introduced to many of their piercing friends and acquaintances in a rapid snow-balling process. While initially I myself sought out people to talk to on the subject, I did not have to exert myself as hard as I had expected, for very rapidly people I did not even know began contacting me or even approaching me on the street, informing me of their interest in body piercing and their desire to be a part of my study. I even received phone calls from people I had never met inviting me to come watch them get pierced. Not only was my interest in the subject there, but it seems that the interest of the individuals

in the piercing community was piqued as well.

After talking to a variety of people, in bars, coffee-shops, and personal homes, I also approached the two main commercial body piercers in town, who were equally eager to speak about their experiences, and discuss my own findings as well (that is in addition to the people I spoke with who do piercings privately and non-commercially).

I decided very early on to focus specifically on body piercing; while some of the piercees I spoke with practised tattooing as well, and while some of the literature on tattooing was useful in a theoretical manner, I felt that tattooing would render the study too general to be manageable. Even in western cultures, tattooing has a much lengthier history than body piercing, and also has many more varied sets of social significance (among, for instance, sailors, prisoners, soldiers, bikers, and so forth). Moreover, for the purposes of this study I focused on what until recently would be described as the more "radical" types of body piercing: i.e. nipples, bellybuttons, genitals, faces, and other non-traditional piercing areas. By non-traditional I am referring to areas other than the ears. However, even here I make exceptions: some piercees utilize the ears to produce non-standard types of piercings, i.e. a full set of piercings entirely surrounding the ear, or piercings designed to deliberately enlarge the earlobe, or piercings through the cartilage of the ear, rather than just the lobe. Most of the piercings I refer to have only come to be seen on a widespread basis in large urban North American centres in the past two decades.

By the end of this initial fieldwork period, I had conducted formal interviews with twenty-eight people. These consisted of tape-recorded interviews of between one and six hours per individual, sometimes meeting with particular individuals on multiple occasions. I had also observed a few private commercial piercings, including ear cartilage, septum, and tongue piercings. The ages of people I spoke with ranged between eighteen and forty, with the average age being twenty-four. Of the people I spoke with, fifty-six percent were female, and forty-four percent male. They encompassed a wide range of occupations, from student to gas jockey, chef to musician, unemployed to grandmother, and also encompassed a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, although the majority came from essentially middle-class working backgrounds.

These interviews continued with more numerous sessions for about half of the group. I was truly surprised with the complexity of the resulting interviews. By far the majority of the people I spoke with had developed elaborate theoretical constructions, rationalizing to themselves the significance piercing played for them, as well as the role it held in society. Some of them confessed to me that they too one day intended to write an anthropological treatise on the subject.

In the end, I decided to focus on thirteen of the piercees with whom I spoke, and examine their motivations and ideas in depth as a means of exploring how body piercing is used to create meaning and identity in people's lives. They are the ones who appear predominantly throughout this thesis.

The identities of each of the informants - as well as other parties they referred to while speaking with me - are protected by pseudonyms, as are the names of all shops and commercial establishments within the city. Each informant was fully aware of the fact their interviews were being utilized in the production of this thesis, and that regardless of whether they wanted it or not their identities would be disguised by pseudonyms.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One of this thesis introduces the body piercing 'scene' in St. John's. It focuses primarily on body piercing as a commercial enterprise, introducing the two primary piercing salons and - at the time the fieldwork was conducted - the two main advertising commercial piercers in town. It also introduces the role piercing can play in establishing a sense of personal identity, by looking at the tension which sometimes arises between piercees and the growing commercialism of body piercing as fashion.

Chapter Two examines the connections between body piercing and spirituality. Similar to the thesis proposed by Hewitt above, some of the piercees I spoke with adopted an extremely spiritual outlook to their piercing, strongly analogous to the emphasis she places upon 'body magic' as a potent expression of individual and social identity. I look at three main mechanisms by which my informants utilize piercing to draw upon the historical and mythical past in finding meaning and symbol for use in their contemporary social lives. Those mechanisms include spirituality, tribalism, and the invention of personalized rites of passage. All three contribute to the significance piercing

can hold as a marker of individual identity.

Chapters Three and Four move from spirituality to the role piercing plays in sexuality. I believe spirituality and sexuality serve similar functions for different individuals, in terms of creating a framework in which piercing operates to physically express a sense of commitment, authenticity, and identity. Chapter Three examines piercing and sexuality in a more general manner, from piercing's use in obtaining sexual pleasure to the more complex manner in which connections are drawn between pleasure and pain. Chapter Four takes this topic further, delving into the role piercing can play in sadomasochistic sexuality, and how it is used to delineate and "push the boundaries" (as one of my informants repeatedly put it) between body and mind, and pain and pleasure. Much of Chapter Four deals with a case study of one informant in particular, a woman who takes her piercing and S&M interests further than most in establishing a line of progression between these forms of identity and physical-mental experimentation.

Chapter Five attempts to draw these links together, by returning to the tension which exists between those piercees who see their piercing interests as serving an integral role in establishing their sense of individual identity, and their consternation at the increasing fashionability and commercialism of the growing piercing industry. It examines their attempts to deal with the increasingly complex challenge of maintaining piercing as a mechanism for establishing unique individual identity in the face of its growing use by mainstream culture as a means by which to express fashion conformity.

Chapter Two

Body Piercing in St. John's: Technical and Theoretical Considerations

Leisl and I waited nervously for the piercer.

All about us were the signs one would expect of a busy, successful, hip and high-end hair salon. Abstract art adorned the walls, fashion magazines were strewn about, trendy music vibrated from an unduly elaborate stereo system, and close to a half-dozen taddishly clothed hairdressers bustled about, politely joking and small-talking with the predominantly female clientele.

We were seated on a sofa located intimidatingly in the centre of all this activity. As phones rang and hairdressers strutted about, Mike, the piercer, suddenly appeared from a door behind us

"Sorry for the wait," he apologized. "Follow me."

We followed him out of yuppie-dom through a narrow, dark stairway, down a flight of stairs to a dimly lit chamber. I looked about, not quite knowing what to expect. Loud, rhythmic beats pounded through the speakers, an appropriate fusing of tribal chanting with cutting edge elektronika, in the style preferred by avant-garde minimalists. Several large framed pictures of African and Australian aboriginals, of the sort famous for decorating the covers of National Geographic magazines in the earlier part of the century, were hung from the far wall, while the room's back wall displayed a vibrant, colourful mural of punks and other heavily pierced characters dancing and posing. The

wall nearest the stairs was composed of a large mirror, which reflected the whole scene and gave the impression of an even larger mural and more heavily decorated chamber. In stark contrast to the tribal portraits on the far wall, the cabinet beneath it sported a shiny steel autoclave (for sterilizing equipment), an assortment of fearful looking, yet proudly sparkling needles, and white medical gloves. The centre of the room was taken up by a large, barber-shop style chair, in which Leisl sat.

"Can't forget this," Mike said, and handed her a lengthy consent form, as he studied his needles intently. She signed it, and sat back to prepare herself.

This was my first experience watching somebody get a piercing at Elektron, one of the two principal commercial piercing salons in St. John's (described in greater detail below). Elektron was not entirely what I had imagined it would be. Whereas the piercing salons I was familiar with in other cities were often much 'seedier' (but only in a deliberate fashion image sense; they were still largely immaculately clean and sterile) and simpler (focusing exclusively on piercing), Elektron was a much 'trendier', cutting-edge-fashion type establishment. This was no doubt owing in large part to its dual function as both piercing and hair salon. Indeed, the spatial and aesthetic decorative separation of these two aspects of its business - the trendy hair salon upstairs, and the more tribal-decorated piercing salon in the basement - helped emphasize this double aesthetic.

This chapter means to serve as an introduction of sorts to the current state of body piercing in St. John's. I shall begin by describing the background and nature of the

commercial body piercing establishments in St. John's, and some of the difficulties - and support - which they encounter. The aim is to give the reader some idea of how body piercing operates as a fledgling industry, particularly in the city of St. John's. Toward the end of the chapter I shall begin to introduce some of the perceived antagonisms between the aesthetic ideologies of some local piercees, and the struggle both piercers and piercees face in trying to reconcile what has until recently been an aesthetically "underground" form of body expression with its growing popularity as a commercially-viable mainstream fashion industry. This will set the stage for some of the more complex and problematic cultural issues which I shall explore in the following chapters.

Setting the Scene: Body Piercing in St. John's

About midway down Water Street - the heart of St. John's bustling downtown core - stands Elektron, the spacious and trendy hair salon which was the site of the first experience I had with body piercing, described above. Adjoining it are the touristy, often expensive shops and high-rise offices of well-to-do young professionals and entrepreneurs; across from it are the bars and clubs which attract the city's students and youths; and in the streets outside an assortment of young people stroll, skateboard, or simply hang out, their outfits, makeup, and hairstyles reflecting virtually every subculture and fashion you can imagine. It is no accident that Elektron is situated at the juncture of these often contrasting worlds. As a high-fashion hair salon, and the city's oldest operating body piercing shop, its regular clientele includes all of these characters.

Elektron is owned and operated by Mike, a fashionable and energetic 26-year old. Born in England, he was raised there as well as in Toronto and Montreal, and has lived in Newfoundland on and off for the past several years. In April of 1996 he opened his now well-known hair salon, and two months later began advertising body piercing services - which he performed himself - as well.

In many ways, the opening of Elektron publicly affirmed the presence of body piercing, which for many years had slowly been trickling into Newfoundland. In the early 1990s Newfoundland Leather - a leather and sex store - opened up and offered body piercing, the first commercial venture in Newfoundland to do so. Before that, piercees had to either use word-of-mouth to locate people trained and willing to pierce out of their homes, or pierce themselves. When Newfoundland Leather folded, there was no commercial shop which offered body piercing, besides the ear piercing which cosmetic shops and hair salons have been offering for decades. For those who wanted something more radical, they had three options: find the private, non-advertising piercers, pierce themselves, or wait for their vacations on the mainland.

The rapid success of Elektron - both its hairdressing and piercing sides - brought commercial body piercing to Newfoundland to stay. Today there are other competitors for the piercing business (as well as at least one piercing salon in a smaller Newfoundland town), but Elektron has had the longer advantage in establishing its reputation.

Mike estimates that body piercing comprises about twenty percent of his shop's

overall business, and consumes about forty percent of his personal weekly duties (he employs an array of hairdressers to assist his non-piercing customers). Out of his many duties - as hairdresser, piercer, and owner of his shop - piercing is the work he loves to do best. And he is pleased at the response he has encountered.

"It's giant. It's huge." Mike enthused about his piercing business, as he pulled his long blond ringlets out of his face and sipped a coffee in the cafe across from his shop. "Compared to what it was. There's still lots of room for more, there's still lots of room to get more involved...I mean, it's here in St. John's to stay."

Today Mike and Elektron have competition in the piercing business. A year and a half ago Fairwave - a large tattoo and body piercing shop - opened up a mere street above Elektron. While Elektron and Fairwave are the largest and most visible body piercing establishments, the interest in commercial body piercing in Newfoundland is growing. Posters around town advertize entrepreneurs willing to pierce in their homes for low rates, and smaller, often seedier hair salons about town occasionally experiment in offering facial or belly-button piercing, sometimes with painfully disastrous results (as we shall see). In the face of all this, Mike struggles to emphasize his experience and professionalism, as he voices what he often repeated is his main concern. "It's [piercing] going to get bigger. Hopefully it stays reputable."

Body Piercing: Social and Commercial Legitimacy

It is certainly by no means necessary for a piercee to seek out a piercer.

commercial or otherwise. Many of the piercees I encountered during my fieldwork had pierced themselves. Yet many do frequent commercial piercing shops. The proliferation of these shops has increasingly rendered it both convenient and in many cases much safer for a piercee to get pierced by a commercial third-party. The commercial piercers often have considerable expertise at the task gained through years of experience, and also have access to clean, sterilized, state-of-the-art equipment.

Commercial piercers vary in the range of services they provide. In addition to conducting the piercing itself, they often carry a wide selection of jewellery with which to decorate the piercing after it has healed, and are usually able to obtain other types of jewellery if desired. Additionally, a degree of after-care is often provided. If a piercing becomes infected, or is rejected by the body shortly after the piercing takes place, piercers will often treat the affected individual, removing infected piercings (unless they deem it to require medical attention), and re-piercing when the body is ready.³ Defective jewellery is also sometimes replaced.

The types of piercing services offered by a piercer vary as well. Some piercers will limit themselves to those piercings they have been thoroughly trained in performing, while others are willing to experiment a little, or in some cases a lot.

In the absence of institutionalized standard training procedures in the piercing industry,⁴ "professional" commercial piercers have developed their own mechanisms by which to distinguish themselves from less experienced, and often times less safe, piercing

operations. These mechanisms are not always easily discernable to the novice piercee who walks in off the street, and a certain amount of "shopping around" is necessary to ascertain which piercing establishments offer a higher degree of standards in their work. Word of mouth becomes an important mechanism, and a shop's credibility and reputation as it develops over the years becomes an important source both of customers as well as self-pride.

"Professionalism" in the industry - especially in St. John's - is reflected by two principal mechanisms. The first is the use of specialized, sanitary equipment. Mike observes that this is a carry-over from the tattoo industry, which has faced a similar crisis in promoting higher standard services over more crude, so-called "backroom" operations.

Mike: When tattoo shops tried to diversify and tried to separate themselves from other tattoo shops, instead of like a good marketing campaign, they used sterilization as their...[way] to separate themselves. Some shops said, well you know we use and look for new needles every time, look for an autoclave, look for an ultrasonic machine, you know things like that to separate us from the other shops. So that helped them be more credible, helped them get more business.

Proper, sterilized equipment costs a great deal. Mike estimates when he began piercing commercially the equipment alone cost him between two and three thousand dollars.

There is however - in the eyes of local self-proclaimed "professional" piercers - more to being a piercer than simply having the proper equipment. Training, too, is often

used as an indication of standard. Like so much that is associated with piercing, there is no enforceable, regulated method of training for piercers. While there are courses and workshops - of varying standards - offered in larger cities, there is no common standard by which to judge a piercer's training: no diploma, or certificate, which can be recognized by a potential customer as an assurance of good service. Rather, the method of training for many piercers involves apprenticeship to another, more experienced and well-established body piercer. Apprenticeships can last for days, months, or even years, depending on the trainer and the apprentice. It generally entails an enormous financial commitment on the part of the trainee, who in many cases has to purchase their own equipment, and then work for their trainer for free, often for several months. They pay for their apprenticeship through the free work they provide at their trainer's shop for the duration of their apprenticeship, although in some cases an additional training fee is also charged, often to determine the level of commitment of the trainee. One woman I spoke with had inquired into the possibility of apprenticing with a tattoo and piercing artist on the mainland. He had agreed, but she had to back out when she realized the apprenticeship would, all told, cost her close to ten thousand dollars over the next two years, as well as require her full-time attention.

In an industry where word of mouth and reputation determines whether a piercer will flourish or fall, some apprenticeships will result in more prestige than others. In larger cities - those with dozens or even hundreds of piercing establishments -

apprenticeship and trainer-apprentice relationships can lead to the creation of very intricate networks of affiliation between webs of piercers and their respective former apprentices. In St. John's, however, the matter of training is less complex, as local customers often do not know anything about the piercer's training beyond what the piercers tell them, and therefore can not, for example, judge the work and skill of a particular piercer's trainer (local piercers - up till now - were usually trained outside of the province or even the country).

Lisa, for example - who for a time was the piercer at Fairwave when it first opened - was trained over several months in the United States. Originally from Newfoundland, she spent several years travelling outside of the province before returning. Unemployed and looking for something to do with herself, and having always held a borderline interest in piercing, she started hanging out at the local piercing parlours in the American town she ended up in, and then eventually began volunteering. When she decided to seriously start training in piercing, what followed was an intensive, six-month training period, and a supervised apprenticeship in the parlours she volunteered at (this was standard procedure in the town she was trained in). Commencing an apprenticeship was, she explained, for her primarily a fiscal decision: being unemployed, she figured it was a chance to make a career out of something she enjoyed. She was very adamant on the importance of in-depth training. She still refuses, for instance, to perform genital piercings: even though she likes them, she feels she requires more practical training in

that area.

Mike, by contrast, demonstrates the other end of the spectrum: his main training period lasted a week. He was apprenticed to a long-established partner of his, Philippe, in Montreal.

Mike: I was piercing like friends, and then when I worked in a hair salon I got into it a little bit more, and then in Montreal hooked up with Philippe and apprenticed with him. And then from there he just basically said 'Okay, you know, this is how you do it, this is where you do it, this is why you don't do that, this is how you keep it clean. Now go learn for yourself.' And then he like talked me through. I'd be on the phone just before I'm about to do a piercing - not here, but before - I'd be 'Okay, I'm about to do this genital piercing.' He'd say 'Okay: just don't do this, do that,' and then I'd go downstairs and do the piercing. So yeah, it was just trial and error. I never fucked anybody up though. It's not complicated, you know. The only thing is being clean. The rest of it...you have to be a complete and utter idiot to screw somebody up. And a lot of people are. There's a lot of people out there who just are complete and utter idiots and they're screwing people up.

Of course, once a piercer has achieved a certain - and again, deliberately vague - level of expertise, they themselves begin to take on apprentices, if they so desire. The taking on of an apprentice was discussed by Lisa and Mike with an air suggesting it entailed a great deal of work on the piercer's part. Indeed, for a piercer to ensure their apprentice achieves a level of training and expertise which will reflect favourably upon the trainer (the apprentice's ability therefore either adds - or detracts - from the reputation the piercer has developed on their own), requires a commitment lasting anywhere from weeks to years. Consequently, the taking on of an apprentice is not something to be taken

lightly. Mike estimates that since he opened up shop, he has trained two people (one of whom was still training), and turned away at least ten. However, the proliferation and explosive popularity of piercing in mainstream culture in recent years has in some senses strained the process of apprenticeship as it has defined and contributed to piercing's at times painstakingly careful self-regulatory mechanisms. While talking to Mike one day, he outlined to me a conundrum he faced regarding a woman who wanted him to train her as an apprentice.

Mike: Okay, the case today was this woman called me and she's about to fly this guy in from Halifax. And he's never done a tongue piercing before. He's done a nipple, not on a person, but on a. I don't know what he used, a piece of meat or something. Flying here to train her. And I'm like, you know there's a big difference between doing it on a person! I mean in theory yes, you could do it, right, but you got to know how to deal with people, for one, you got to know, like what happens if somebody passes out while you're in the middle of a tongue piercing? Right? How do you deal with that? Or sterilization? You don't have to worry about that dead piece of meat getting infected. There's some things, but she's, like 'Well I really want to learn it, and this guy's going to fly in,' so I'm like, oh shit! What do I do, right? Do I let her go ahead and get trained by this guy, at a cheap price, like he's charging a couple of hundred bucks, he says it takes four hours to learn how to be a piercer. Like, right. You're going to get ripped off. And if you think you're trained, and you start piercing with that, you're going to give piercing...a bad reputation in the city. You know? And I said that's what I want to avoid, right?...so I'm thinking, like, should I just train this girl, should I bite the bullet, train her, let her at least get it done right...I don't know, I don't know what to do with that, right?

The incident demonstrates the considerable personal issues the piercer must debate in considering her request (it also indicates the fast-growing popularity of piercing

- as career as well as fashion). Piercing - and training a new piercer - costs time, effort, and money. How sincere is she? If he begins to invest the time training her, will she be committed to stick with it? If he takes her on, in a sense he will be held accountable for what happens once she starts piercing on her own. Her commitment and skill will reflect indirectly upon him, and if she injures people, he might - in the customers' eyes - be held accountable having supposedly trained her.

Yet there is also his overriding concern: "Hopefully it [piercing] stays reputable." If he does not train her, and if somebody else trains her incompetently, she will very likely wind up injuring people. And that could damage the delicate reputation of body piercing in the public eye, which would also affect his business.

Yet an increasing number of local establishments - eager to cash in on the commercial fashionability of body piercing - are offering piercing services without even the minimum of training Mike had. Lisa, for example, paints a worrisome picture of what can happen in the absence of regulation and common standards.

Lisa: I have a client of mine, who before I met her she had her navel done with a gun, and ended up in the hospital having it cut out and having three stitches put in. Because the ear piercing studs, I mean they're really short. And they're pointy and they just dig in and they're really really nasty. And they just can't get them in deep enough in the navel, so it won't reject. And so what happened with her is the back was on really tight to the stud, where they did this with a gun, and they couldn't get the back off. She went to the hospital, and the hospital couldn't pry the back off. And they had to cut an incision, they gave her some localized anaesthetic, cut an incision in her stomach, and took the ring out, and gave her three stitches.

She was lucky she only had three stitches.

With a growing customer base seeking body piercings, many hair salons which traditionally offered standard ear piercing services are attempting to expand the range of piercings they offer. However, many of the employees are trained only in ear piercings, and there is a considerable difference between piercing ears and piercing other parts of the body. Moreover, their instrument of choice is often the "piercing gun" which is used for ear piercings, but which, as Lisa notes, can have dire results when utilized for other body piercings.

As a piercer, Lisa often encounters unfortunate customers who sought cheaper, less experienced services prior to expending the extra time and money to approach a "professional" [apprenticed] piercer. She therefore comes across many tales which vividly demonstrate the result of the lack of standardized regulation in the industry.

Lisa: ...another case, who had her nose done and had to get that cut out of her nose. At the hospital. They had to, with a pair of wire cutters. She actually had a nostril screw put in...but when it went in, it pierced her septum on the inside as well, and her nose swelled. And she couldn't get it out. So they had to go to the hospital and they took the wire cutters and snipped it out of her nose. Gave her a tetanus shot and sent her home. She was kind of fortunate that she didn't have to get her whole nose cut open. Like very dangerous. But there's quite a few places around that are doing navels, especially with guns, and it's just awful. So barbaric.

Why to pierce? Contrasting - and conflicting - motivations

Piercers find themselves compelled to don a variety of social roles; sometimes

simultaneously, other times very selectively. Some roles are actively sought, others actively resisted, and some passively assumed. For many people, there is more to being a piercer than simply piercing. Piercers, like anyone who provides a service central to the juncture at which several forms of cultural expression intersect, exist at the centre of a complex web of social roles, some of which are complementary and unassuming, others which are not. The purpose of this section is to examine some of these interwoven roles, and to attempt to extricate an overview of the complex social position of the commercial piercer in the world of body piercing and body modification.

Body piercing is, all told, a glamorous profession. At present, it is both cutting-edge, and at the height of fashion; depending on the piercer, it can be either or both. Furthermore, it is strongly centred in youth culture, and the admiration of piercers' youthful clients is carried out of the piercing room and into other arenas of local youth activity. Donna, a seventeen year old girl who first started becoming interested in piercing in high school, told me early on that one of her co-workers, another avid piercee, boasts regularly and is very proud of his 'friendship' with Mike, even though she did not seem to think it was a very deep friendship. Lisa also described the more socially lucrative side of body piercing.

Lisa: The younger clients that I have, if I ever run into them in the mall...I get dragged off to like "This is Lisa, the girl who pierced my whatever, you know? Oh, she's so brilliant, she's so nice, she's so excellent, you know?"

In a way she had come to expect the instant respect her ability to give people piercings endowed her with, having become used to it in the American town she was trained in.

Lisa: I found that being a piercer gives you a certain social status that you just don't get here. Yeah. Like everyone wants to be your friend. Because this is what you do. And that it is so popular that yeah, it's like you have this social status that's almost like being one of the rich and famous. Everyone knows who you are.

Popular and glamorous though piercers may be for many people, I encountered a very different reaction as well. It first appeared while talking with Morgan, a 21-year old woman who speaks with the self-assurance of someone who got her first piercing in her early teens. She had had two of her many piercings performed by Mike, and I asked her what she thought of him. Her response surprised me.

Morgan: I think he's also one of these people who's jumping on the bandwagon. 'Oh, this is popular all of the sudden, so I'll be one of the first people to be a piercer and make my money off of it.' I don't think he's really, I mean he might be into it as well himself, but I don't think he really is, as much. Hmm, I don't know how to say this. I just don't think it's as much a fascination to him, as it is to people like me who want to cover my body in piercings...yeah, he's in it for the money. He is.

She later used even stronger language in her condemnation, and her comments surprised me not so much in their intensity but in their hostility toward him. It was a stark contrast to the many people I myself had seen run up to Mike in the downtown clubs with sparkles of adoration in their eyes. Why, then, was Morgan so vehemently hostile when she spoke of him?

It was not his ability to pierce that she was attacking. He had quite competently pierced her: I encountered her a few hours after one such piercing and she was imminently pleased with it. "I want to tell him to...get out of town, you can't pierce!" she said, but she did not mean he was an incompetent piercer. Rather, she was referring to something very different from technical expertise, as she indicates in the next sentence. "...this is popular all of the sudden, so I'll be one of the first people to be a piercer and make my money off of it." It is his *attitude* she has a problem with. She thinks "he's in it for the money," and this bothers her. "I just don't think it's as much a fascination to him, as it is to people like me." She wants something more than a good piercing from Mike. She wants an attitude, a sense of commitment. But commitment to what?

The more I spoke with people, the more I came to encounter a similar disillusionment on the part of some people with commercial piercers. Sonia, another veteran piercee, echoed Morgan's attitude when we discussed Elektron.

Sonia: Right now, it's [piercing] very trendy, and there are a lot of people are just plain doing the fashion thing, you know. Because the major body piercing place in town right now is a hair salon. A very trendy one at that. And I don't even know what I think of that place any more, considering some of the stuff I've heard. I know Mike's good, but...it's where all the models go, maybe I'll avoid that, right?...yeah, I don't like what Mike's up to...I'm not going to go to him.

Sonia, like Morgan, expresses a hostile attitude toward Mike, even though she readily admits that "I know Mike's good" in the sense that he is a well-trained piercer.

But, like Morgan, what bothers her is the fact that "I don't like that kind of an attitude. Real fucking fashion zone, right?"

The fashionability of piercing - and what she sees as Mike's fashionable shop and attitude - annoys Sonia. She dislikes seeing piercing as "very trendy" and as a "real fucking fashion zone." It is the attitude of fashionability which she is hostile toward, not Mike himself. Her requirements from a piercer do not consist merely of technical skill: she makes ideological demands too. She too wants an *attitude*: she too wants *commitment*, not just fashion. But commitment to what? What constitutes an acceptable attitude for people like Sonia and Morgan?

Some insight on the matter came from Morgan, who before she went to Elektron for her recent piercings, had often pierced herself.

Morgan: I like to do my own piercings. If I had the equipment, I'd do all my own piercings. I wouldn't let anyone else touch me. And I wouldn't really want to pierce other people. I'd rather teach people how to pierce themselves, yeah, because it's more of a personal thing. I think people should - if you want something done, you should do it yourself, so, it just makes more sense. It's more intimate that way. It's more personal that way. When you bring other people into it it gets more, just kind of mechanical.

Morgan's idealized view of piercing is that "it's more of a personal thing...It's more intimate that way. It's more personal that way." She appreciates with special feeling the piercings she performed on herself, and while she likes the piercings she got at Elektron *as piercings*, her hostility toward Mike arises from the absence of personal

meaning the Elektron piercings hold for her. "When you bring other people into it it gets more, just kind of mechanical." And that sense of piercing as being "mechanical" is what people like Sonia and Morgan dislike about "fashion zone" commercial piercing.

Mike too recognizes the importance of personal meaning in piercing. The tribal art in his studio is not just there as fashion, whatever Morgan and Sonia might think. He spoke to me with fondness of the strong culture surrounding more radical body modification - like scarification and branding - which he has encountered on the mainland. He mused about how he would like to immerse himself in that kind of culture, and learn the more radical body modifications. "It'd be great to have more of that [ritualistic] stuff, but I'm just kind of cut off here, you know," he commented sadly.

Mike has a higher appreciation for some of his customers than others. He gets a sense, after a while, of people's personal motivations for getting a piercing. He occasionally finds himself talking people out of piercings he does not think they really want, and finds it frustrating when some of them become insistent. He likens these situations to what he believes many tattoo artists encounter.

Mike: I mean, I used to think that, going in tattoo shops and getting tattoos, the tattoo artists were assholes. I'd always swore that they were assholes. Until I had, like, a few tattoos. And I noticed that their attitude towards me totally changed. Because, you know, I mean I wasn't just that fucking guy coming because I had fifty bucks in my pocket...Like if a guy comes in and he wants fucking Mickey Mouse on his arm, they're like "You got to do that?" And you feel like you're a prostitute, right? Because this guy's a fucking schmo, and you know it's, you're an artist!...Because

this guy's got eighty bucks in his pocket, they got to do that. And the same thing with piercing. Because there's people that will come in, and you know they just want to piss off their mom, or they want to look like a wierdo on a bus. And they want to look like a freak. Like I've had people say that, right? That's totally insulting. Because, you know, I don't feel like a freak, nor do most people.

Mike recalls when he used to be in the same situation Sonia and Morgan find themselves in, on the receiving end of body modification; in his youth, it was tattoos. He remembers how he despised the attitude of tattoo artists when he sought them out, and felt they were "assholes." After he had a few tattoos, however, the tattoo artists realized he was not just doing it for a laugh, or other superficially simplistic reasons. He came to be more genuine in their eyes; more *authentic* a tattooee. He was into it not just because he had some extra cash in his pocket, but because he had a personal "fascination" (as Morgan put it) with tattooing. And in so doing, he earned their respect.

Like Sonia and Morgan, Mike feels there are 'right' motivations for getting a piercing, and not so right ones. He compares himself to an artist, aspiring toward a pure form of his "art." Yet as a commercial piercer, he can not always afford to discriminate arbitrarily on the basis of what he sees as pure or proper motivations, however much he would like to. His piercing business is, ultimately, a business. While he does cater his attitude to his customers - his manner with forty year old women, for instance, would be different from the way he acts around twenty year old women - he cannot exude the "proper" attitude for everybody, given the impossibility of determining what the "proper"

attitude is for any one piercee. Not to mention "staying true" to his own view toward piercing.

He made a remarkably astute analogy while we were discussing this matter one night. He likened the whole atmosphere around body piercing to "clubbing" (frequenting dance clubs).

Mike: I remember going to clubs and it being like a really small club, and it being the best time because you felt like you were part of a smaller community. You felt like more of an individual because you weren't part of the mainstream. And then all of the sudden all these people start rushing in and you're, like, the original person. And you're thinking, like, shit, you know, they're, they're invading into my culture. And you're thinking, fuck, I've got to get out of this and find something new.

Here, I believe, he hits on the key points. The thing which makes piercing "the best time" is its ability to make people feel "like you were part of a smaller community." In other words, it allows people - when it is "their" club - to feel like they are distinguishing themselves in some way: "You felt like more of an individual because you weren't part of the mainstream." The problem, however, is that "all of the sudden all these people start rushing in and you're, like, the original person. And you're thinking, like, shit, you know, they're, they're invading into my culture."

Piercing's strength lies in its ability to convey a sense of personal meaning: in its ability to give people a sense that they are "the original person." This sense is challenged, however, when "all these people start rushing in...invading into my culture." When a

piercee sees piercing as "their culture," the appropriation by people outside of "their culture" - or, mainstream mass fashion culture - may indeed seem like an invasion; moreover, it is an invasion which threatens their ability to feel like "the original person."

The situation is further complicated by the fact that there is not necessarily a set of criteria by which to distinguish "the original person." Almost all the piercees I spoke with - from Mike to Morgan - very much rejected fashion or ideological dogma with especial emphasis. Just what is constituted by "my culture" lies very much in the perception of each "original person," and just what constitutes an "invasion" of that "culture" also lies in the boundaries perceived and created by the individual.

It is these two points which I believe are key to understanding the very unique outlook and sense of personal meaning conveyed by body piercing to the many individuals with whom I spoke. The creation of a sense of "my culture" in which to situate body piercing is an intricate creation and expression of an individualized sense of personal meaning, which is situated in and expressed through the mechanism and cultural accoutrements of body piercing.

This individualized sense of personal meaning as expressed through body piercing, however, is threatened. Or rather, some piercees perceive it to be threatened. It is threatened by the "invasion" of "all these people [who] start rushing in." When something which is held dear to the individual - and in which the individual so firmly situates the social expression of themselves as individuals - is appropriated by others and

used in a manner which conflicts with that which is created and perceived by the individual, the ability of body piercing to express individual meaning becomes threatened and confused. How can it be used to express the individual, when it is suddenly perceived as being used by mainstream culture to express fashion conformity?

The following chapters explore the manner in which some of the piercees I spoke with attempt to deal with this situation. These chapters examine some of the many ways in which body piercing is used by individuals to create a sense of personal meaning, often filling what is perceived to be a void in contemporary western culture. And they also examine the manner in which body piercing's ability to do this is challenged through its appropriation by mainstream fashion culture, and how some of these piercees are currently attempting to deal with that challenge and still maintain a sense of "my culture" – a culture of "the original person" – in body piercing.

Chapter Three

Neopagan Spirituality, Modern Tribalism and Body Piercing

I knocked gingerly on the door of Anna's house, a quaint traditional wooden structure in the heart of downtown St. John's. I had heard a great deal about her - this 38-year old native Newfoundland artist and grandmother - and been pointed her way by a number of people I had talked with, so I was not at all sure what to expect.

Anna opened the door with a smile and ushered me in expansively, where I was immediately set upon by her small but feisty dog. Knowing from experience the significance which a dog's reaction to a stranger holds to the true pet-lover, I applied myself with perhaps a ridiculous amount of effort to endearing myself to the loud and suspicious little canine. She assured me his suspicion was quite normal, and began boiling us some coffee. An artist of various mediums, her large kitchen doubled as a sort of studio, and as I entered she told me to choose a seat. This I did with more effort than was perhaps necessary, owing no doubt to my own nervousness. I finally settled upon the smaller chair, a rocker which backed onto her garden window. I noted approvingly that this choice would allow me to simultaneously jot notes, reach the ashtray, maintain eye contact, and unobtrusively monitor my tape recorder for possible technical difficulties. I felt imminently proud of my choice.

Joining me with coffees in hand, she immediately turned my world upside down by ordering me into what I had considered the larger, more commanding position at the

kitchen table. I quickly realized the arrogance of my choice, as she settled comfortably into what was most obviously her favourite chair, informing me that she would "play the grandmother:" a role which, I quickly realized, made me feel more like the subject under interrogation.

She then launched into a three-hour speech on a variety of subjects, which barely left me room to get a word in edgewise. The implications of her commanding choice of seating - as well as her chosen role of grandmother and interrogator - were quickly driven home, as she lectured me on the fact that

...the brothers got to get on the wagon, man! Like you're sitting back there and saying, oh, we don't have to do anything now! The women can go out to work, they can raise the families, they can be the breadwinners, and I want my toe jam licked and I want my underwear washed. Fuck off! You know? Because really when I walk down the street, brother, you know what? When I walk down the street you should get down on your knees in front of me and say, oh worthy sister, thank you for just being! And that's how I feel about it! It's time for women to be worshipped that way by their brothers!

As she spoke, friends, relatives, and acquaintances came and went, some listening with interest to her lecture, others apparently on missions of their own. She introduced me to one inquisitive young woman who sat with us for a time with the explanation

He's going to be a social anthropologist! And we're going to help him get a very good paper written up to blow the myth that only young people get pierced right out of the water!

Her comments, however, reflected not only her vitriolic pro-woman attitudes, but

also her thoughts on body piercing and spirituality. Her words were charged with references to various aspects of contemporary goddess-oriented forms of spirituality: forms she seemed intimately enraptured by. She was, I came to realize, a deeply spiritual woman, a woman who connected her own sense of spirituality with a yearning for an idealized, collective future which stripped the layers of patriarchal oppression away to a simpler, more instinctive, utopic social existence. It was one she equated, perhaps for lack of any contemporary example, with an idealized "tribal" past.

The more I reflected on what she told me, and added it to what I was told by other piercees, I more I came to feel this was an unexpectedly important topic. Anna - a grandmother who has managed to eke out a survival for herself and her family through a life of hardships and turmoil - sees a number of problems with the world. This is evidenced, for instance, by her quote above, where she began to lecture me on why "the brothers got to get on the bandwagon," and why I should "get down on your knees" in front of her and worship her "for just being." Many of the problems Anna perceives in the world seemed to be connected to the hard life she had experienced. Other piercees described their problems for me as well, from emotional relationships, to difficult and suicidal adolescences, to family scandals and traumas: I intend to examine some of these cases in this chapter and the chapters that follow. In this chapter specifically, I intend to show how some of those piercees, in an attempt to understand these problems, see them as products of a North American culture which is lacking a great many things. It lacks.

they told me, social cohesion, challenge, morals, structure: the list went on and on.

In order to deal with what they saw as lacking in their own lives - and blamed on their own culture - they drew on a variety of sources to supplement these perceived deficiencies. In my view, these sources seemed to fall into three main categories: a) spirituality; b) tribalism; and c) rites of passage.

I will first of all examine the element of spirituality through two of my informants, Earl and Eileen. Both of them consider themselves 'neopagan', and have developed an intricately personal form of spirituality which is expressed through the types and ritualisation of body piercing which they practice, both individually and together.

The second mechanism is the appeal to the notion of 'tribalism.' A few of my informants took on, instead of spirituality, the problem of society in general, applying it to their contemporary culture. Using the ideas provided them by that culture - university courses, books, television documentaries - they developed a fascination with other cultures: societies they referred to as "tribal." They felt the "tribal" lifestyle comprised many of the things they believed their own culture lacked and needed, such as forms of social and community cohesion, rites of passage, and so on. To this end I will look closely at the perspectives of both Earl and Anna, who offered exemplary examples of this notion.

Thirdly, I shall look at the role piercing plays as it is used by a few of my

informants as a "rite of passage," a notion which they often connect with this idea of the "tribe." Anna and Morgan both offered me a fascinating glimpse into the manner body piercing can be utilized in this fashion.

Whether their interest lay in "neopagan spirituality," modern "tribalism," or "rites of passage," each of these points of view had in common the fact that body piercing played an important role in physically expressing the ideas and concepts central to the lifestyles they had chosen.

Those piercees are the subject of this chapter. Through them I will explore how body piercing is used to express ideas of utopia both 'primitive' and 'modern,' and how it serves its piercees on a more spiritual level which might at first glance seem at odds with its very material nature.

Earl: Body Piercing as Sacrament

Earl: If you've defined yourself by what you've done to your body, if this is your sacrament, your worship, right, you don't need to add anything to it except for reasons that are completely your own. Right? If you're adding to it because you've seen somebody else with the same thing, you're adding to it for the wrong reasons.

For those who frequent downtown St. John's, Earl is either a familiar - for those who know him - or a foreboding - for those who do not - character. A massively-built thirty-year-old male, with piercing eyes and a fierce dark curly beard which matches his short-cut hair, he resembles in a fashion the tall and mighty old buildings which make up the downtown core which he loves so much. I had been acquainted with him for a number

of years: an incredibly sociable and talkative individual. Earl's sociability brought him into a number of varied circles in town. Whether he was practising martial arts and medieval sword fighting, sitting in the coffee shops and pubs which comprised so much of his day, or boisterously interpreting an art exhibit of which he may have been a part at a local gallery, there were few occasions where he could not identify somebody who was happy to talk with him.

Based on rumours I had gleaned from speaking with his friends, I had been thinking of at some point approaching him and explaining my project to him, to see if he would be interested in participating. I did not get the chance. In the bustle of a downtown convenience store on a sunny spring morning, he strutted in to pick up a few items. Noticing me in the line at the cash register, he immediately strode up and, in front of the many customers and employees, informed me he had heard about my project, and then proceeded to tell me in his loud and powerful voice all about the genital piercings which had become his most recent fascination and activity. I was torn between interest in his piercings, and equal interest in the reactions of the customers all about us, which ranged throughout the entire spectrum of amusement to shock.

I did pay closer attention to him when we first talked in depth about his piercings, some weeks later.

Earl: Body modification period I've considered doing for quite some years, and the idea of a piercing really appealed to me...until I finally sort of settled on one...I went out and got my left nipple pierced, and I got a top

side frenum piercing done. I got two of them done at the same time - one right after the other.

The aesthetic of it, I've always found appealing...this is something that appealed to me over the years. I really liked the idea of a nipple piercing, and I really enjoyed the reports of enhanced sensation after it was done. The other piercing I got, the top-side frenum piercing, causes virtually no sensational enhancement in sensation, or anything else, but that one I did more or less for just aesthetics. Because I'd seen a top-side frenum ladder done, which is a series of bars running up the top of the shaft, and so what you end up having is you have two lines of silver beads being exposed, running down on either side of [the shaft], and that's something that appealed to me. And I now have two frenum piercings done, and I'm seriously considering working my way up to a frenum ladder over the next few years, bit by bit.

Beginning with these first two piercings, Earl has been pierced a total of five times. Unlike some piercees, who often start with more conventional piercings - ears and facial - and then work their way down to more complex piercings - i.e. nipples and genitals - Earl dived headfirst into a world where the meaning and symbolism he attributes to his piercings are as complex and experimental as the methods and types of piercings he acquires. The initial nipple and frenum piercing he had obtained about a year before I spoke with him. Another genital piercing he obtained tore out not too long after he got it, and then he decided to try giving himself a genital piercing - under the supervision of a local piercer. His most recent series of piercings was even more complex: one night he got together with his girlfriend and a local piercer: he pierced the piercer's tongue, then his girlfriend gave him a genital frenum piercing, and then he gave his girlfriend a clitoral hood piercing, all in the same night. While their mutual genital

piercings were done under the supervision of a piercer - just in case anything went wrong - it was conducted more as a private ritual between him and his girlfriend.

I asked Earl what kind of reactions he received when he told his friends about his first piercings. "From odd to shocked to amused giggles to a couple of very bawdy women wondering what it would be like having an extra ridge that sort of bounces along," he told me. "I'm being very open here for the interests of research."

This was an understatement; he was one of the most 'open' people I spoke with during my fieldwork. While many of the piercees I spoke with did eventually tell me in more or less detail about the specifics of their piercings, none exhibited the openness displayed by Earl the day he strode up in the middle of the convenience store to announce very loudly his love of genital piercings.

One person he was not open about his piercings with, however, was his mother. Earl has a very close relationship with his mother, with whom he lives. Despite his close relationship with her, however, and his extremely open nature, he has restricted the knowledge she has of his body piercings. When I asked whether he told her about them, he explained to me that "Well, she's very liberal, albeit she only knows about one of my piercings...about my nipple piercing. She does not know about the other ones." I asked him how she reacted to this first piercing of his when he told her about it.

Earl: Disapproval. Well, mild disapproval, and my mother...has a thing against body modification, okay? The only reason my mother got her ears pierced was because when I was seven or eight I said "Mommy, why don't

you have any holes in your ears like everybody else's mommy?" And I bought her a pair of earrings. She went out and got her ears pierced. So she's not a big fan of body modification.

He would not elaborate on what his mother had against piercing, but it was not the first time I had encountered this kind of situation among piercees and their parents. His genital piercings were not the only thing he kept from his mother, however. Another aspect of his personality which he hid from her until recently was his religious attitudes and spirituality. Earl's chosen spiritual path is that of neopaganism, whereas his mother is a practising Christian. It was this which made him hesitate in exposing before her his own spiritual ideas, until an incident earlier in the year. He came home one evening and his mother was reading a book. They wound up talking about spirituality, and while he was treading carefully in what he said, all of the sudden his mother said to him that he struck her as being spiritually rather like a Druid. This was indeed one of the spiritual paths he felt closely connected with, and he was floored not only by her correctly guessing this, but also by her calm reaction. He asked her how she came to realize this, and she told him a story from his childhood about the time he and his parents visited Stonehenge. She had been deeply impressed at the almost instinctively spiritual way he acted while there. As he explained, "...when I was there, at age five, my mother saw a spiritual experience take place in me...so all my fretting and worrying about this over the years has been completely forgot."

These two things which he hid from his mother - his body piercings, and his

spirituality - came to intersect a number of times as we spoke. His neopaganism, which embraces Native American shamanic traditions as well as elements of Celtic neopaganism and Wicca, led him one day to a sweatlodge at an aboriginal community in Newfoundland. While there, it led him to an interesting encounter with a Native American who had had his own experience with body piercing.

Earl: ...the man's in his early fifties, early to mid fifties, and when we're getting ready to go in the sweatlodge that I was going into, he looked at my chest and saw my nipple piercings. He sort of looked at it, and looked sort of quizzically for a couple of seconds, and then went "Hmm, I've been pierced too." And then points at his chest. And it was quite dark out, and I hadn't noticed this, because it was at night, and he had four loonie-sized scars on his upper pectoral region. And after we came out of the sweat he was talking a little about the Sundance that he's taken part in, and he did it once - a Reed Sundancer. Which is, you have these orange spikes driven through your pectoral muscles. These are then tied to a post or to a tree and you are to dance around that tree for four days and three nights, and you don't have enough give on the cord to lie down or sit down and you have to be constantly in motion, dancing for that time. And you do this from sunrise to sunset, at which point you're taken off the tree and put into a sweatlodge for the duration of the night, and then you're back out on the tree again doing the same thing and during this time you're given no food or water. And that's a phenomenal feat of endurance...you have to completely mentally detach yourself from your body in order to be able to survive the experience, and speaking from the spiritual sense the results of that could be phenomenal...that's like an extreme form of temporary piercing.

The Sundance ritual he described enthralled Earl because of the way in which it combined physical and mental endurance in the pursuit of a spiritual goal. He saw in it a sense of victory over one's physical body, coupled with an almost spiritual and visionary

ecstasy, due in no small part to the ritual's rigorous demands upon the body. It is an attractive ritual, especially for those - like Earl - who seek the same kind of achievement in body piercing, where physical and mental endurance combine to achieve a state of - for Earl at least - spiritual euphoria. The harsh physical and mental demands of the types of piercings he pursues are endowed with the spiritual meaning he brings to them. They are an act of authenticity, and of spiritual commitment: a 'sacrament,' as he puts it, performed upon the body.

Earl is fascinated by the sense of physical and mental endurance suggested by the ritual, and it underscores the need he feels for a sense of authenticity in spiritual questing, a level of which is offered by body piercing and the use and control of the pain with which it is associated. What is more, Earl drew on his own research and experience in western neopagan traditions to help him contextualize the man's ordeal in terms more immediate to Earl's own western spirituality, into which he tied this traditional Native American ritual.

Earl: That's [the elements of the Sundance ritual] a tradition that holds true for a lot of cultures. The Celts, the Germanic peoples, most of the European pagan traditions had a tradition - it was generally a sacrificing tradition - if the land was in a truly hard shape, the king of the land would be sacrificed or the prince or someone who stood in his place, and how would he be sacrificed? He hung on a tree for three days and three nights. And if they died they died. And this was without food or water. Hung in the same way that Christ was hung...but if they survived the three days and whatever, or four days and three nights, they're taken down off the tree and revered.

Regardless of the cultural and historical accuracy of those practices which Earl - and others in this chapter - relate, they form an important part of his spiritual paradigm. What matters here is the role these views play in Earl's spiritual life. Earl is of European descent, and - aided by a hodge-podge of college history and anthropology texts, combined with neopagan literature - draws for himself a connection between his own sense of spirituality and his cultural heritage, in order to give it meaning and historical context. The spiritual implications of the rather extreme form of body piercing described in his meeting with a native American at the sweatlodge fit into this worldview perfectly. And, as our discussions progressed, he elaborated on the closely related spiritual implications of his own body piercings.

Earl: Well it's like, personally, the piercings I've gotten done, there was some level of spiritualism involved in me getting a piercing done the way I did. And there's some I've actually considered - specifically for the purposes of symbolism, getting other piercings done. Like my initial nipple piercing is unusual in that it's a vertical nipple piercing as opposed to a horizontal nipple piercing. And I've been meaning to put a bar in there, but I've just never gotten around to it. And it's on the left side, which was chosen because, I chose it because it was over my heart. And the other thing, there's what's referred to as a cross-piercing, which is a double nipple piercing where you have one bar going vertically and one bar going horizontally, and for me personally, there's a certain component that really says I want to get that done. And then on my right nipple, I want to get a horizontal ring put in - as opposed to a vertical ring - which would give the two symbols of the Wotan Cross, which is an early Celtic symbol for unity and sexual unity. And the Celtic cross with this plain, even cross in the circle, is a primitive Celtic symbol for union. And so I would have the circle, which is representative of the female, off one side - my right side, which is actually my dominant side - and the symbol for male on my left

side - which is my non-dominant side - which for me is a symbol of me seeking balance between the two. Oh yeah! You can physically leave that kind of meaning in you!...in a body modified you are decorating your temple. You are placing upon the temple of your body the symbols of your faith, reliance, and self-perception.

Where some might simply see a few assorted metal bars and rings on his body,

Earl draws a rich and intricate web of meaning upon himself. He inscribes each element of his piercings with individual - and sometimes multiple - points of significance, uniting and symbolically expressing elements of gender, sexuality, physical ability, unity, union, spiritual balance, and more. While he does appreciate the aesthetics of body piercing, for him that is not the main point: he seeks to make manifest upon his body his sense of questing for spiritual balance.

The spiritual utility of his piercings, and the set of meanings he draws from them, is not created out of a vacuum. He inscribes these meanings in reaction to his surroundings as well, and in the following excerpt he uses the example of a local Catholic church scandal of a few years ago to contextualize the import of his experiences on a distinctively local and Newfoundland level.

Earl: In Newfoundland, with the entire Mount Cashel and everything else, the symbols that we have held as sacred have been taken, [and] profaned...and especially in the young subculture, the questing culture, that is akin to the tribal youth questing for womanhood or manhood to prove themselves to be a reliable part of society, they've taken on a quest to find new symbols. Which nation-wide is why you have such a radical change in the pagan movement. Because those are people looking for a symbol not of the unitarian masculine god, but looking for a symbol of

equality. The duality of a god and a goddess, a male and a female, right? Looking for a sense of unity and balance. Instead of trying to take and put unity into a male symbol. Which is what no matter how hard we try, that's what Christianity has become, it's become a symbol of maleness...When you have a god and a goddess, when you have a mother figure, a nurturing figure, and you have a male figure, you have a protector figure, you have a guiding figure, and a figure that...embraces his violent nature but focuses it towards the purpose of protection and change within society, without falling back on aggression. Violence without aggression.

Earl bases his quest for a new set of spiritual symbols on the negative experience he has had with those symbols he was raised with. Mount Cashel - a local orphanage run by Christian priests who in the late 1980s were revealed to have been physically and sexually abusing the boys in their care for decades - epitomizes this negative symbolism. For many Newfoundlanders it has become a symbol of the tarnished reputation of Christianity, which was all the more devastating given the strong influence of the Christian churches in Newfoundland, and Earl is no different. He is dissatisfied with what his Christian upbringing has come to represent, and he embarks on a quest for new symbols. He sees this 'quest,' as he puts it, to be part of his social duty. As a young man, he must travel forth into the cultural wilderness around him and find meaning within it; he sees it as a sort of contemporary shamanic vision quest - a kind of rite of passage. For him Christianity is irrevocably linked with the masculine, and he finds redemptive value in constructing symbols which unite both masculine and feminine in an individualized sense of spirituality. For Earl the symbols are perhaps the most important aspect of spirituality. Rituals and other forms of expressing spiritual commitment involve more

than anything the manipulation and expression of symbols, and Earl seeks a set of symbols upon which to construct a spirituality which fits in harmoniously with his experience and outlook of the world about him.

In this pursuit of new symbols upon which to construct a sense of spirituality, body piercing can play an important role both as an expression of symbolism as well as a ritual which uses those symbols as tools for that expression. While Earl is a good example of this, this of course should not be taken as a categorical, empirically representative sample of religiosity among local piercees. However, the similarity in the forms of deeply personal spirituality I encountered among many of those I spoke with struck me as extremely intriguing. It led me to wonder how and on what level body piercing helped these "neopagans" by affirming and acting as a marker of their faith.

The first issue which I would like to address is that of intention and motivation. Earl states that there is a level of spirituality in the various piercings he has received. However, that was not the only reason he decided to acquire them. His nipple piercing was performed to increase sensation and stimulation; his frenum piercing for aesthetics. How do they then tie into his spirituality?

Earl's piercings perform a variety of roles, wherein function, aesthetics, and spiritual symbolism intersect with each other. The nipple piercings - both those he has and those he aims to eventually obtain - form symbols of unity, union, and sexual unity, in his view. They form the Wotan cross, which he states is a significant symbol in his

neopagan spirituality. Moreover, he seeks to inscribe - through piercings - the female symbol on his dominant side, and the male symbol on his non-dominant side - not because he feels that this reflects his sexual nature and identity, but rather because it represents the balance between the two which Earl - who on first sight conveys the impression of an extremely masculine character - seeks and strives toward achieving.

It is an elaborate network of intersecting symbols and multiple meanings which Earl sees when he looks at the piercings upon his body. It is not, in all likelihood, a set of symbols easily discernable to the standard observer without the benefit of Earl's own interpretation. Unlike tattooing, which would allow Earl to choose from a wide variety of easily recognizable designs and drawings, his piercings act more as markers for elaborate symbolic sets of meaning which he has created for himself. The symbolism is in a sense invisible to the unenlightened eye, not only because it is normally covered by his clothes, but also because it is so deeply personal an interpretation of these bars and rings of steel on his body that it really only takes on meaning when he chooses to give it.

Earl's network of piercings are deeply spiritual because he has chosen to make them and to see them as spiritual. Other people have the same types of piercings, in the same types of places. However, his gain meaning in their aspect as markers which reinforce his own sense of spirituality. Moreover, his sense of spirituality itself is reinforced by the presence of material, physical symbols. They represent his spirituality and ideology made manifest. In this sense, they serve too as an important method of

personal authentication. Since his spirituality is in many ways one which he has created through his own personal process of spiritual discovery and of blending different spiritual traditions and elements together - as indicated, for instance, in the way he combines Native American as well as traditional Celtic and European interpretations of the Sundance ritual - the only really authentic physical symbols which allow him to express a spiritual paradigm which is ultimately his own self-fashioned one are those physical material symbols which gain meaning only when he gives them meaning. In the same manner by which an heirloom gains meaning through the acquisition of experiences and ordeals which makes an otherwise purely functional or aesthetic object one which is endowed with deep personal meaning, so do Earl's piercings serve as personal spiritual markers only through the acquisition of a set of meanings put together through his own personal reflection. They are in this sense truly authentic symbols: devoid of meaning - but not of function or aesthetics - until that meaning is shared.

The significance of Earl's statements on symbolism and symbolic value are important to note, as he raises some important issues. The first deals with the value and nature of symbols in the contemporary world; more specifically, in the Newfoundland context.

Earl expresses a dissatisfaction with the sets of symbols his cultural experience and heritage has given him. He sees them as tainted, and as reflecting ideological or spiritual tenets which he feels they have either betrayed, or which he feels are not relevant

to him as an individual. He feels Christian symbols are irrevocably misogynistic, and do not allow for an acknowledgement of the natural world. So, just as he set aside the Christian faith he was brought up with, so does he set aside the set of symbols which accompanied that faith.

Earl's quest for a meaningful set of symbols is therefore derived in part from his critique of his own localized culture. When he spoke he used local scandals and examples of symbols "profaned" - for instance, the Mount Cashel references - to illustrate the need he feels to fill their gap with other symbols, symbols which not only resonate personally with his own belief system, but which counter and in a sense act directly upon the issues he feels necessary to heal and to purify the symbols "profaned" by events in Newfoundland's recent past.

His new set of symbols does not consist, however, of another faith's talismans or markers. Rather, they consist of steel bars and rings, functional and aesthetic, yet symbolically blank slates until he imbibes them with meaning. It is interesting that he draws a contrast between "man-made" symbols and "natural" symbols. In a sense, his piercings are unique in that they are both and neither. The steel rings and bars are intrinsically man-made. Yet they do not reflect man-made symbols; rather, he inscribes upon these man-made substances spiritual and ideological references which exist in a realm which ultimately straddles both worlds.

Symbolism of this sort serves an important role when it comes to body piercing.

as piercing provides a visual arena in which to recreate and express symbolic values which can be intricately personal, and convey one's personally created web of meaning. Earl demonstrated, through an examination of those piercings he already has and those he desires to get in future, how this is done. It is a process which, fittingly enough given the tendency demonstrated by other neopagans with whom I spoke to encourage people to discover meaning in those acts and symbols which are already a part of their day to day lives, develops a sense of purpose where such a purpose was, perhaps, not even initially recognized or sought. The discussions I held with Earl suggested that there exists a connection between the physical act of body piercing and the expression of personal spirituality. What, however, is the nature of that connection? What does Earl mean when he says that there was a level of spiritualism involved in the way he gets his piercings done?

The most obvious connection between his spirituality and his body piercings lies in their symbolic value. In the same way that wearing a cross or talisman, or carrying a rosary can help both to express the spiritual affiliation of an individual and also double as a personal affirmation of that spirituality, so can body piercing serve as a physical, symbolic marker of one's faith and spirituality.

Yet beyond the level of the physical, how does body piercing intersect with spirituality? Is there a deeper, ideological level upon which body piercing helps to affirm or complement the practice of a chosen spiritual path?

I believe an important connection lies in Earl's juxtaposing his spiritual attitudes with his view on body piercing. He interprets body piercing as a "sacrament," wherein you "define yourself by what you've done to your body," and wherein you place "upon the temple of your body the symbols of your faith, reliance and self-perception." Defining yourself is an act of authenticity: of asking who you are, and of answering: the answer, in Earl's case, he inscribes upon his own body in physical and material form.

There are a number of interesting and analogous connecting threads between neopagan practice and contemporary North American body piercing, which might do well to help illuminate the attraction both would hold toward neopagan piercees who adopt a spiritual outlook to their body modification practices. Like neopaganism, contemporary North American body piercing - especially "tribalist" piercing - operates through a process of selecting choice elements from traditional cultural practices around the world, and adapting their meaning, interpretive symbolism, and practice to potent social realities of every day existence. Whether they are expressing a symbolic response to those realities, or attempting to achieve a quasi-physical sense of transcendence, the connection between ancient and modern, and the process of weaving a uniquely symbolic connecting thread between the two, is an integral element in seeking to understand the spiritual side of body piercing.

Yet how do these phenomena and processes manifest themselves in day-to-day life? To demonstrate this, and the linkage between body piercing and spirituality, we shall

look at the manner in which a sense of personal spirituality is created and re-created, a process in which piercing is an integral tool and plays an important role in giving physical life to new and creative forms of invented traditions. The notion of invented traditions, used in a host of recent studies to refer to the documented construction of an assortment of social traditions, is of importance to this thesis and is a useful aid in analysing the construction and evolution of symbolism in contemporary body piercing (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983).

Piercing and Neopagan Spirituality

Earl's 24-year old girlfriend, Eileen, who he has been seeing for several months, is also a self-professed neopagan. She is currently attending a local art school, and is almost as frequent a stalwart of the downtown arts community as is Earl. She also shares his fascination with body piercing. For several months after they had started seeing each other, they had discussed their mutual fascination with body piercing, but neither had taken the first step and actually obtained a piercing. Finally, one day Earl came to visit her at her apartment, and she surprised him by announcing she had just had her nipple pierced. With the ice thus broken, he went out shortly thereafter and got his first two piercings as well. Since then, they have continued to pursue their piercing interests, and have even pierced each other on occasion.

The day I first spoke in depth with Earl about his piercing interests, he was very late showing up at the coffee shop we had arranged to meet at. As I was almost ready to

give up on him, he came barreling in, and apologized, explaining he had been helping Eileen move to a new apartment. Furthermore, as he told me in the course of the discussion which followed, they had had an interesting spiritual experience in the course of moving. They had both recognized, he explained, in the course of getting to know each other that they each held an affinity toward neopagan belief systems, but had not really involved themselves very deeply in elaborate pagan rituals (although, they informed me in the following months as this thesis was being written, they have both been initiated into a local coven, or 'circle' as they describe it). However (he told me with a mixture of awe and excitement) as they were moving a variety of items from a corner of her apartment - he did not specify what items, other than that they were personal items which had taken on meaning to each other in the course of their relationship - they realized they were acting with an unusual degree of care and reverence. And then it struck them both that the items they were moving and the space in which those items lay constituted what was in essence an altar or sacred space - not one they had intentionally put together, but one which had evolved and acquired the sort of spiritual significance for both of them that it had become a sacred space or - as he phrased it - an altar.

The importance of this kind of impromptu, non-institutionalized spiritual experience is frequently stressed in literature on neopaganism,⁴ and arose a number of times when the topic was broached by those I spoke with. Eileen, like Earl, had been raised a Christian, before discovering she held a closer affinity with neopagan belief

systems. She did not go into tremendous detail on her conversion process, other than to say it happened gradually over time. This was the pattern I encountered with the majority of other young neopagans I spoke with - a growing fascination with neopagan literature and symbolism, until one day they realized that they felt their spiritual calling lay therein and began to refer to themselves as such. Unlike Christianity, there is no baptism or similar sacrament for many contemporary neopagan paths to use to delineate the point at which it becomes an individual's dominant faith. Indeed, this allows some neopagans to even refer to themselves as pagan and Christian simultaneously. As well, many neopagans I spoke with felt uneasy with categorically labelling themselves, preferring instead to say that their spiritual interests lie in neopaganism, rather than that they are neopagans. The difference seems to arise from a desire to differentiate this spiritual tradition from organized and institutionalized religions, and therefore affiliating oneself with a label is shunned in favour of affiliating oneself with an eclectic set of ideas. During one of our discussions, Eileen helped to elaborate on this aspect of the role played by symbolic and spiritual elements in contemporary neopaganism.

Eileen: As far as I'm concerned, there is no existing record of what people did before Christianity came along and dominated religion. But what we've done is looked into the past and looked at what they seemed to hold sacred. And we've developed a way of living around that. And we saw that they were people who lived off the land, who had to live within the cycle of the earth, and the cycle of the moon, and the sun, and the seasons, and they were so intertwined with that cycle that of course it became part of their religion. And of course there were mysteries, of course it was sacred

to them, because that was how they lived. That was how they survived. They had to understand, they had to pay attention to the cycle of the earth or else they couldn't survive...the modern pagan movement has become popular because of, I guess, essentially a lack of something that they identified with. A lack of accountability within the Christian church, or within whatever church they came from. So it was a going back to something, going back to their roots, going back to something they felt was more real, something that was more, something that applied to them personally, you know. So we've embraced it again as something that's good and something that we feel comfortable with.

Earl too reiterated this rough sketch of neopagan belief many times in conversations with me. Moreover, he spoke with admiration of the many "piercing traditions" which he believed had existed, in tandem with this - perhaps idealized - pagan cultural past, in many different cultures. He seemed to blame the fact that contemporary Western culture does not - in his view - have such a "piercing tradition" on the fact that he believed that tradition, along with earlier Western pagan spiritual traditions, was "obliterated" by Christianity.

Earl: ...the Caucasians I'm pretty sure are one of the few people who don't have their own in-depth piercing tradition. The spawn of Christianity pretty much obliterated that tradition...the Malaysians and the Filipinos have their own piercing traditions, and just about every other culture except for the Christian culture has a piercing tradition component to it...we are essentially the spawn of the Roman Empire. Of a hedonistic culture that defined man - not humanity - man as the divine. And who as opposed to worshipping the balances and aspects of nature, named his gods for the emotions of war, love, violence, he named the gods in his image as opposed to worshipping his environment and interacting in oneness with his environment. He placed himself above it and tried to subjugate it.

Earl, growing up in North America with a European heritage, argues that the "Caucasians" - as he distinguishes his culture and heritage - do not have a "piercing tradition." He does not really explain why, but the common denominator upon which he blames this is Christianity; the religion which he, Eileen, and many other neopagans blame for repressing their ancestors' pagan practices and cultural institutions, like body piercing. He links this with the argument that the "hedonistic" culture from which he is descended defined "man" - as opposed to the natural world, of which humanity is a part - as the divine. In all of this he sees the marginalization of the natural world, and of humanity's connection to the world about them; the importance placed in the harmony of humanity and nature in neopagan belief was described quite poetically by Eileen earlier. Earl sees this cultural heritage as a static, hedonistic one; he sees in it a lack of reverence for the natural world, and also laments a lack - in his view - of rich cultural practices like "piercing traditions." He blames this on Christianity.

As pointed out earlier, this is of course a very selective interpretation of his cultural heritage. And the pagan spirituality he creates in response to this interpretation of things is a selective one as well. Not even Roman paganism gets off the hook: he argues they contributed to the whole problem as well, by creating deities based on human emotions, rather than the "balances and aspects of nature." What he is denigrating in both Christianity and Roman paganism is their androcentric view of the world and of spirituality. Both Eileen and Earl, therefore, see themselves as attempting to recapture a

sense of harmony between the human and the natural world. This is the project which they have undertaken, and when they bring body piercing into it, they see themselves as drawing from pre(and non)-Christian, even non-"Caucasian" cultural practices in an attempt to establish what they can accept as an integrated, harmonious paradigm which is at once physically real to them, as well as spiritually and symbolically expressive of what they are seeking.

The neopagan spirituality described by Eileen above is, like Earl's, a very self-created one. She argues that very little is actually empirically known about pre-Christian religious practices, and that the neopaganism she espouses is based on what is known about their lives and cultures. It is a web drawn from varied strings of culture and meaning, some related, some not, in the same way Earl weaves together his perception of varied elements of Native American and pre-Christian European spirituality to express a spirituality which makes sense to him in the contemporary world.

This process of creating and inventing spiritual meaning parallels very deeply the process by which the piercings these two have obtained acquire and express meaning as well. Just as Eileen states "there is no existing record of what people did before...", so are the varied sets of meaning which may have been expressed by body piercing in various cultures and time periods secondary to the meaning which these piercees choose to give them. Indeed, the very vagueness and ambiguity of the rise of body piercing as a practice in contemporary North American society - until its recent foray into mainstream fashion -

contributes to its own malleability. Piercings are not chosen because they have, over time, come to express certain meanings. Rather, the meanings themselves are chosen, and the piercings obtained or interpreted after the fact in the light of those chosen meanings (remember, for instance, Earl's elaborate interpretation of the piercings on his body). A steel bar stuck into one's body is a potent symbol; but just what it is a symbol of is up to the bearer.

So far we have looked at body piercing from a very personal, individualized perspective, examining how it reflects, expresses, and reinforces the spiritual ideology of the wearer, and how that ideology reinforces the meaning of their piercings. However, the symbolic meaning of a piercing need not be exclusively personal, any more than a chosen spirituality need be exclusively personal, even though it may have been adjusted and fashioned by the individual to fit their own specific needs. Both piercing and spirituality, however personal and specifically fashioned to the needs of the individual, can also be shared in social experience. But how can that sense of invented personal meaning be shared? How can personal authenticity be connected and tied into the larger social world, or at least a larger social world? How can body piercings and spirituality reflect a sense of deeply personal authenticity, and yet also tie one into a larger social group?

Creating a Tribe

Recently a great deal of hype has surrounded the explosion of new, easily accessible sources of "information" and "knowledge." The "information economy," the

"information revolution," and other such catch-phrases are all used to highlight the growing recognition that exchange of knowledge is being conducted in new and widespread ways. The disciplines of the social sciences have not been unaffected by this process. From popularized documentaries on television, to university graduates forming punk bands, knowledge is increasingly flowing from particular social classes and sectors of the population to others. Body piercing is itself partially a product of this: Fakir Musafar, a well-known pioneer of modern body piercing and body modification in North America, has described in various writings how he developed an interest in piercing himself by seeing the piercings used among other cultures in National Geographic magazines as a youth, and copying them on his own body.⁶ Likewise, in his study of "post-punk body adornment" Daniel Wojcik quotes punk music star and body art aficionado Perry Ferrell as describing his early interests in piercing: "One day, I was looking at National Geographic pictures of people with rings in their noses, and I really thought they were beautiful. So I took an earring, and I put it into my nose, and I said, 'God, you know, I really like that.'" (Wojcik 1995: 31)

What I am interested in exploring in the following section, however, is how one particular source of inspiration has permeated the practice of body piercing - especially as it is practised by those, like Earl, Eileen, and others who see their piercing in a particularly spiritual light. That concept is the notion of the "tribe." In the same way that Fakir Musafar saw himself as strangely connected with the cultures he saw piercing

themselves in National Geographic magazines, and in the same way that Earl links the contemporary practice of the Sundance ritual with his pre-Christian European pagan practice of sacrificing kings to revitalize the land, so do some of the piercees with whom I spoke see the manner in which they approach body piercing to encapsulate a "tribal" way of living in the modern world. Just what that entails will be explored in the sections which follow, looking at how tribal tradition is first invented, and then used in the individual's pursuit of meaning in one's life.

Rites of Passage

Anna: I mean, people are crying for their tribes. I don't even think it - I know it, I see it. In the big cities, I see it everywhere, in the little countryside, family units blown to bits. You know? I mean it has to stop somewhere. When we were in the Neanderthal, you know, we had better sense. We'd take care of the tribe, the tribe was key, and everybody in it was a player and a participant and important to the survival of the tribe. And now with unemployment and things like that, people don't feel they're important, or they don't feel any self-worth...we are at a time right now where the tribes are crying. They're gathering, all over the world, you go to the cities and you see them.

Anna could hardly be more explicit about her use of the notion when she proclaims that "people are crying for their tribes." She sees the people around her, those she cares for, as desperately seeking...something. And that something, she has decided, is a "tribe." When she describes the situations above she is referring, above all, to Newfoundland oriented situations. When she speaks of "little countryside," she is referring to Newfoundland's small communities. The "family units blown to bits" are the

ones torn apart above all by sexual scandals, often connected with the extremely important Christian Churches - like the Mount Cashel situation described by Earl. But she is also referring to situations of family abuse and incest she has seen in her years here. Unemployment, people's feeling of self-worth...these are problems she sees as intricately connected with a rupture in Newfoundland's traditional culture and lifestyle. It is not the details of that lifestyle rupture which she is concerned so much about - the shift of industries, legislative changes, and so forth - but more the attitude: the loss of a sense of social cohesion, camaraderie, mutual support. Newfoundland's tourism industry has long played on the stereotype of Newfoundlanders as being friendly people who are eager to help each other survive in their harsh land. Anna, on the other hand, bewails what she sees as a growing situation of social anomie whose living reality stands in stark contrast to the perceived stereotypes of traditional culture. The "big cities" she refers to are St. John's - her home, which she still sees hope for - and on the other end of the spectrum Toronto, where she also lived for a time, and which she sees as the example of a city which is almost irrevocably "lost": she frequently referred to Toronto as "the gates of Babylonia's cunt."

The problems she sees as facing Newfoundland - and elsewhere, although her immediate concern is with Newfoundland - are due to the loss of a sense of "tribe," and that is also what she sees as a major step toward a solution: revitalizing this concept of tribe, to make it paramount in her life and the lives of those around her. When she uses

the term, of course, she is not referring to the sort of historical or cultural specifics which an anthropological treatise might refer to when discussing "tribe." Rather, she is very selectively pulling elements of historical and cultural social organization and inserting them as the constitutive elements of *her* tribe. She is quite clear about this. Her tribe does not refer to a particular cultural group, it refers to ideas: "we'd take care of the tribe...everybody in it was a player and a participant and important..."

The "tribe" was a useful concept for Anna: it surfaced repeatedly during our discussions about body piercing, and helped her explain her thoughts and feelings. I asked her a number of times to elaborate on different ideas she seemed to be using this particular notion of tribe to refer to, and this helped me to gain a more holistic picture of the kind of inspired social utopia she was building. I asked, for instance, what she meant when she told me "the tribes are going to take over."

Anna: The tribes know how to join together to be like an even bigger tribe, because when you go to a lot of these like tribal concerts and things like that - the things that go on like the fringe festivals and things like that - the tribes they come: they're called and they come as tribes. You see them camped in their tribes. Like, and yet everybody mingles in and out of each other's tribe and there's harmony. Harmony! You know? 'Wow, that's really interesting, and so what's your tribe about?' 'Oh, well we're about this.' 'And what's your tribe about?' 'Oh, well we're about that.' 'Hey, you know, pretty similar, isn't it?' 'Yeah!' 'Well let's rock.'

Anna, who has children and grandchildren, follows the traditional Newfoundland practice of keeping a fairly open house: friends are welcome to come and go and do what they like. Living downtown, therefore, she winds up spending a lot of time talking with

youths of her childrens' age. Many of the things she refers to above - fringe festivals, music concerts, and so forth - reflect the popularization of the notion of tribe among youth and non-mainstream culture (as described earlier, in connection with the local punk bands), and reflect above all the ideas which she has derived from that popularization. She sees people "crying for their tribes," but has also reflected on this and asked herself what is meant by this "tribe" she sees them crying for.

Anna: Like I said, they're all running tribal, and they're not even sure what a tribe is. Okay, so you have to say, what is a tribe? What to me is a tribe? All right? A tribe is to me when...I can phone Katie [a young college student who happened to have wandered in and was listening to us], who we just met probably over the summer, we don't know each other very long, and I can phone Katie and I know she's one of my tribe, and say, hey, Katie, I'm feeling kinda low today, and it'd be really great to see your smile. And she'll say 'you know what? I'm gonna happen to be by your house in a little while, and I'm going to come in and smile with you'...like, a tribe is a bigger extension of family. And we've got to go right back to the nucleus...this particular island [Newfoundland] has only survived because of its tribal instincts, you go out around the bay and everybody in the community comes forth. Someone's house burns down and within three days that house is levelled and rebuilt. By everybody in the community. And nobody says 'that's not my responsibility.' They do it because you do it. And that's that. And this is the kind of ethics we need to bring back...and that is not an easy thing. That takes a daily representation, a daily checking of yourself. And yeah, you fuck up sometimes. But you've got to represent...in the sense of being part of the tribe, one feels that one belongs, one feels loved.

Once more, Anna presents her idealized notion of the tribe, and argues it is still strongly embedded in Newfoundland culture. She feels Newfoundland still in many ways possesses that "tribal" sense which she describes so admiringly, but sees it slipping and

wants to bring it back. She wants people to help each other. She wants them to feel loved. She wants them to feel a sense of belonging.

Again, of course, we are not interested in relating Anna's notion of "tribe" to cultural and historical studies of "tribal" scale societies, but rather in analyzing Anna's notion of "tribe" as it relates to her social circumstances, and her perception and idealization of the world around her. The question to ask is what precisely Anna - and others with similar views whom I spoke with - mean when they talk about "the tribe:" what they see as lost, what must be regained, how they would like to regain it, and - particularly for the purposes of this chapter - how body piercing ties into this all.

Earl helps us draw the links together. He gave perhaps the most analytical interpretation I encountered on this topic, describing how he drew parallels between:

Earl: ...this city's downtown subculture and tribal traditions - as in rites of passage, comings of age, initiations, the things that led to acceptance and status in the community - and how they paralleled a tribal clan type tradition. And also the same kind of support structure as you have in a tribe or in a clan exists in a very large part in certain subcultures of the downtown area.

Earl's description is peppered with terms and concepts indicative of some of the university courses he took, as well as discussions he has had with other students and sociologists. Nonetheless, he puts his finger on an important series of issues: he looks at the way his beloved "downtown subculture" - the students, musicians, artists, workers, and others - operates, and sees a "tribal clan type tradition." Other informants gave me

examples of what he meant as well. Some of them also adopted - and adapted - the sociological jargon to their own uses, often reformulating their meaning to help make sense of their own feelings and experiences.

One such person was Morgan, a first-year university student and piercee whom I spoke with at some length. She did not need to take any sociological or folklore courses to feel she had put her finger on the role of these "traditions" in contemporary North American society. Drawing on a hodge-podge of popular piercing literature and TV documentaries, she explained to me her view that

Morgan: ...people from North America, young people, don't go through any of the rituals that cultures have, like African cultures and Indian cultures, whereas from a child to an adult, they usually go through a ritual. And in North America a lot of the people have this need to do something to themselves - usually physically, because in the cultures that's what they do - a physical ritual to kind of distinguish themselves from being a child or an adult. And I think piercings do that, because it's kind of a traumatic thing that helps you have insight to kind of, you know, more than you would have had. It kind of awakens you in certain ways and if there's a lot of pain involved...it usually helps even more, you know, to let people grow up kind of thing. Yeah, I honestly think that puberty needs that, like, traumatic experience to kind of shock them. Yeah, it's like a passage to bring them into adulthood. To kind of say, well, you made it, you passed, you know, you can be an adult now. And I think that's what piercings did for me in some ways, you know. Yeah, it just, to help identify myself and find out who I am, you know, compared to the rest of society and the world that I'm in...And that's something that most adults should have, and they probably didn't have any kind of experience like that so they don't have that sort of insight to their life...Yeah, exactly, if my parents aren't going to do it for me, then I have to.

For Morgan, she connects the spirit of what she feels her culture has lost with

practices it may never have really had to begin with. She has drawn those practices from things she has seen and heard about other cultures. She feels, for instance, North American culture does not have the kinds of "rites of passage" - the term she later decided she had been looking for - and she feels the lack of these has a disastrous effect on people in her culture. The notion of rites of passage - as it has been explained and shown in documentaries and books she has read - makes total sense to her, and it also therefore makes sense to her that many of the problems she perceives in her culture arise from her culture's lack of these things. Adults - like her parents - did not have what she sees as the benefit of rites of passage to mark them as adults - or more specifically, as adults who had "insight" or "experience" in their lives - and she does not want herself to grow up without the benefit of "a traumatic thing that helps you have insight." So, as she put it, "if my parents aren't going to do it for me, then I have to." Body piercing, for her, is a private ritual she uses to mark her passage into maturity; it is her own rite of passage.

This is not to say, of course, that youths in North American society do not undergo rites of passage. The difference is that Morgan's rites are a conscious, deliberate creation. She wants something she can clearly distinguish and recognize - something she can label, and physically mark - as a rite of passage. She wants, perhaps, a rite of passage she has some degree of control over.

Whether or not these rites gave her the experience and insight she was looking for, what I realized they most obviously did do was give her a sense of personal

empowerment. This was something she readily recognized as well. She was vague as to the precise nature of the problems she had attempted to deal with in her life, but from what she did tell me those problems seemed to centre around family concerns (her mother re-married and she has a number of step-siblings), as well as concerns relating to her relationships and sexuality. Whatever the nature of those "problems," she rationalized that this outlook and her response to them had helped her to deal with and overcome them.

Morgan: When I got my nose pierced, the first piercing, really...it was a depressed time in my life. I was really sad, and I didn't like the world at all. And then when I was seventeen I got my lip pierced, I was going through another hard time, but I was dealing with it in a different way. And then when I was nineteen...I got my septum pierced after breaking up with Aaron, so I guess that had something to do with it. Yeah, I mean other people will have car accidents or a friend will die, you know, other kinds of experiences, but for people like me who never had anything like that when I was growing up, I took it upon myself to just give myself a little ritual.

I've always thought that if I could overcome physical pain, it would help me deal with emotional pain. Because I've had a lot of that in my life, and usually if you can kind of deal with physical pain, then emotional pain you can just kind of laugh at and hope that it'll go away, you know, in time. Like if your body can heal physically, then it has to be able to heal emotionally, and mentally, and every other kind of - spiritually - every other kind of way that it might be damaged. So that's always a hopeful outlook I get...

Vaguely akin to medieval monks flagellating themselves to expurgate their sins,

not only did body piercing empower Morgan as an individual, but it helped her to feel she could rise above the "emotional pain" she felt as a child. It provided her with a physically

marked point in her life from which she could force herself to move on. Today, she notes, her body piercings are no longer necessarily in response to situations of emotional pain, but when she looks back on them it is in a positive light: she feels they are important markers of personal growth for her: personal rites of passage which she feels allowed her to grow and make it into adulthood. Moreover, she carries those markers of passage on her body with her, to remind her of all these things whenever she looks upon them.

Some weeks after Morgan gave me her elaborate thoughts on creating these "rites of passage" for herself, I encountered a startlingly similar story from Anna. Anna feels she has in many ways come to terms over the years with her personal sexuality and sexual identity, but recognizes that it has been a long and difficult process which has been going on for most of her life. She had children at a very young age, and eventually decided to have her tubes tied to prevent further pregnancies. In a sense, this represented the end of her reproductive life. However, the operation did not really - in itself - leave her feeling a sense of completion or fulfilment. That, she explained, had to wait until several years later, when she underwent a body piercing experience which she felt truly represented a fulfilment of her reproductive life - a "rite of passage from being a fertile woman," which "put deadbolts on everything." This experience involved a three-fold piercing, in which she had both nipples and navel pierced. What is most interesting about this is the manner in which she constructed and viewed her piercings as a rite of passage from one stage of her life to the next.

Anna: This piercing thing happened just very strangely indeed, okay? And I had thought about it before, thought about piercing my navel, basically. Not even my breasts, but my navel...and so lo and behold, creation manifests a situation where the money is there and the person is there and my daughter and I were and I decided well if I'm going to go get pierced in the navel I'm going to go get pierced in my breasts. Because somehow in my head it was symbolic of making a statement, that you know I have done my share, I have done my share as a woman, as a person, I have done my best by my children, those days are done. Those days are over, and I will symbolically wear them. Because I breastfed my children, both of them, and what I have done I guess by putting rings through my breasts, I will never be able to produce milk again. Not that way, you can't breastfeed after you've gone through the milk ducts like that [most piercers dispute this fact, and present a great deal of evidence to the contrary indicating that if done properly nipple piercings should not produce this difficulty: it is, however, a common concern for many women]...so what I've done I guess is put deadbolts on everything, you know what I mean? And it's sort of symbolic that way. It's like okay, I'm finished with that now. And you know like the navel being the lifeline as well, right, so for me that was kind of where that came from. I said no, I will do it all at once. And I lay there and had three piercings done...I don't regret doing it, don't get me wrong, I don't, but it's like each thing I do I think about all the time. You know I just usually it's got to have some symbolic meaning to go doing any of that to yourself...and with the body piercing too now, this is a symbolic move, and a Trinity, it's three. Yeah. The Trinity seems to come into play a lot more in my life now than it ever has, I know where there's two there will be a three. And you know the Trinity is real. And it works. It is powerful. Very powerful.

I think for me the piercing thing was definitely a ritual rite. Oh yes! Most definitely. Well, a rite of passage. A rite of passage from being a young woman, a rite of passage from being a fertile woman, and the right now to not have to go there any more. Not to have to deal with being pregnant, or nursing, or having the whole world, you know, that way. And now here I am, a singular human, forever. You know? It was like some kind of rite of passage, and I'm not even really sure yet what it was, but it hit me that way. And so therefore I knew it was.

The notion of the three-fold goddess is a concept of great significance to many

contemporary neopagans, above all Wiccans. It is the notion of the three stages of life: maiden, mother, and crone (Adler 1997: 10-11). It was this notion which came to my mind as Anna described her thoughts to me. Her almost innate sense of spirituality - which ranged from exalting goddess-worship to noting the powerful magic of the Christian concept of the Trinity - saw an extremely important symbolism in the piercings she had obtained. Whereas Morgan saw her self-styled "rite of passage" as marking her transition into adulthood, Anna saw the "rite of passage" she described above as marking her transition from motherhood into a new stage in her life. It was a rite she designed for herself on the spot. And just as Morgan's piercing empowered her to see herself overcoming her burdens and to see positive progress in her life, so did Anna's piercing empower her to see herself entering a new and vital stage in her own life. And for both of them, those stages are inscribed in physical form upon their bodies, a potent and living symbol of the meaning they have made of their experiences.

The notion of "rites of passage," referred to extensively in this chapter, is deeply bred into anthropological literature: Arnold Van Gennep defined these as "all the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (Van Gennep 1960: 10). Victor Turner, who drew on the work of Van Gennep, notes that these rites "accompany every change of state or social position, or certain points in age," and are "marked by three phases: separation, margin...and reaggregation." (Turner 1974: 231-232). This last point is important: it

forms the basis for which Daniel Rosenblatt criticizes piercees' perception of piercing as a true rite of passage: referring to a piercee named Rose, he emphasizes that

despite the fact that Rose is talking about a relatively formal event, she is not using the term to describe the passage from one socially recognized state to another by means of an accepted ritual act (or series of acts). Rather, in emphasizing the way she confronted and overcame her fear, she uses the term to link being pierced with acts such as climbing a mountain, or being in war – other difficult or painful experiences that are commonly described by the term. In this usage (which we can think of as the Western folk meaning of the term), individuals confront themselves, learn about themselves, grow up, or something similar; whatever transformation they undergo is on the inside and may or may not be marked on the outside or recognized by others (Rosenblatt 1997: 316-317).

Rosenblatt characterizes this as the “individualistic understanding of the term rite of passage.” (Ibid: 316) I would posit that while he is correct about the individualistic nature of the act, this very dichotomy between anthropology's traditional cultural rites of passage and piercees' individualistic understanding of this act is central to the transformative role piercing plays for some piercees, straddling the divide between public and private, individual and social. Moreover, the social positioning of piercing, in terms of the crucial role played by audience in the context of piercing, does indeed play a significant role, and will be further examined in the final chapter.

Summary

In this chapter we have begun to examine some of the ways in which the piercees I spoke with use body piercing to create and express their quest for personal meaning and

individuality.

The characters discussed in this chapter see a number of problems with the culture they live in. Some of these are personal problems, emotional or social difficulties they encountered while growing up. Other problems are more widely associated with the society at large: a lack of sense of community, and of belonging: the feeling that there is a degree of authenticity missing in the world they live in.

Piercees like Earl and Eileen work toward solving this sense of personal disjuncture by developing a sense of deeply personal spirituality, which they refer to as neopaganism. They create rituals and levels of meaning in a variety of actions, and they use body piercing to express symbolically those rituals and meanings.

Piercees like Morgan and Anna adopt a more holistic, social approach. They appeal to a sense of "tribe": they believe their culture is losing the social glue which allowed them to survive for generations - above all in Newfoundland, they note. Moreover, when they look at the world around them - using the tools their society has given them, from television to university education to old-fashioned word-of-mouth - they see a world of rich meaning and depth in cultures - both contemporary and historical - other than their own (it is ironic that the manner in which their own culture depicts other cultures renders those cultures more attractive than it does its own).

What all three of these mechanisms share in common - and what makes them so interesting - is that they offer for the piercee a sort of alternative universe from which

they draw inspiration and from which they selectively adopt elements to bring into their own lived cultural experience. Often these elements which they utilized - for instance what some of them referred to as "rites of passage" - were drawn from ideas they had encountered while reading or hearing about other cultures. In many cases they drew on alternative cultural ideas - i.e. their *perceptions*, based on mass media and popular culture, of historical practices - in rationalizing and attempting to contextualize their own personal interests in piercing, and in understanding their own lives. For instance, piercees like Earl and Eileen discovered meaning through an embrace of what they called "neopaganism" - they found meaning in adopting the spiritual beliefs and practices of their pre-christian ancestors, and in adapting those beliefs and practices to their modern lives. A similar process occurred through what Anna referred to as her adherence to "tribalism:" an embrace and exaltation of alternate forms of society.

Of course, they did not import these alternative cultures and universes wholesale; they selectively chose bits and pieces, practices, ideas, ideals and rituals, often reinterpreting and adapting them to fit the meet the needs of the present. But they seemed to share in common one theme: looking to their perceptions of the past to find ideas they felt could help repair what they saw as a broken present, and to create a better future, as we have seen.

The notion of "going back to something," as Earl and Eileen both put it, is a vital one in seeking to understand how neopagan spirituality, tribalism, and body piercing play

into each other. Both mechanisms described above - neopaganism and tribalism - have in common the fact that summon the notion of "going back to something" and drawing from the past methods of making the future better: re-inventing the social links they feel have been lost by their culture as it grew.

And just how do these two mechanisms manifest themselves?

For some piercees, the issue of authenticity appears to lie very deeply at the root not only of body piercing's role in conveying a sense of personal meaning, but also the choosing of one's spiritual path. And, with characters like Earl where body piercing and spirituality both intersect, the complementary and mutual roles they both hold toward each other become clear in the choice of symbols which unite the two: meaning and act.

I believe an important connection lies in Earl's juxtaposing his spiritual attitudes with his view on body piercing. He interprets body piercing as a "sacrament," wherein you "define yourself by what you've done to your body," and wherein you place "upon the temple of your body the symbols of your faith, reliance and self-perception." Defining yourself is an act of authenticity: of asking who you are, and of answering: the answer, in Earl's case, he inscribes upon his own body in physical and material form.

Those symbols, for Earl, reflect his strong tendencies toward Celtic "neopagan" traditions. He has discovered, through piercing, a means by which to make physically manifest those symbols which express his beliefs and faith. More so than jewellery, piercing allows the expression of those symbols through a process which is eminently

interactive. The pain and the ordeal of the piercing leave the piercee with a strong feeling of having undergone an ordeal - a sacrifice, of sorts - to mark the significance of the symbolism which they bear upon their body. Moreover, the piercee is intimately involved in the design of the piercing, and thus is able to ensure that the piercing truly reflects the nuances of a spirituality unique to that individual. Moreover, multiple layers of meaning are also possible - as Earl demonstrated above - whether they are intended from the outset, or whether the multiplicity of symbolic meaning is only discovered through the process of reflecting upon the interaction between physical piercing and spiritual self in the days and weeks following the piercing.

Morgan, on the other hand, felt her cultural upbringing was incomplete due to a lack of what she referred to as "rites of passage." For people like Morgan, who feel a void exists in their cultural upbringing, piercing allows them to create for themselves a physical mark indicating their personal achievement of such rites; or, given the painfully physical nature of piercings, they can often act in a way as a sort of rite in themselves.

Rather than having a preconceived set of rites of passage, what Morgan did was interpret her own life experiences as a set of rites of passage, and it was through body piercing that she materialized them into status markers: markers which symbolized her successful overcoming of her life's "rites of passage."

Spiritual implications aside, it is interesting and perhaps significant that her "tribalistic" outlook provided Morgan an important means of making sense of these

varied stages of her life. By adopting her view of the importance of rites of passage, she lends special meaning to what might otherwise be considered mere episodes of teenaged anomie. Yet recognizing that North American culture does not approach the transition from childhood to adulthood in the same manner as these other cultures which interested her as a child, she was able to define these different and - ostensibly, to most people - meaningless stages of her life as constituting a necessary set of ordeals and hardships punctuating her transition into adulthood. And, so as to demonstrate proudly her successful passage through these ordeals, she chose to mark upon her body symbols of her passage, in one of the many manner utilized for a similar purpose in many tribal cultures - her body piercings. Moreover, her piercings served, she noted, to constantly remind her not only of the hardships she went through as a youth, but also to remind her not to cause similar hardships to others.

Additionally, they served as a symbolic, quasi-spiritual reminder to her, as she explained, in the event she was called upon to undergo future hardships, or what she saw as "rites of passage." It is equally significant to note that modern popular conceptualizations of rites of passage vary from anthropological theory in the sense that these rites do not constitute a common, pre-determined stage in one's cultural upbringing. Rather, they seem to be interpreted as a self-made life-process, buoying the individual ever forward to the next stage of their life. It is in this process that piercing for Morgan plays an important role.

The notion of a return to a tribal state of social organization, as mentioned on numerous occasions by the individuals cited above, is an interesting one, and a common theme among many people I spoke with. Even if a "going back to" a tribal state was not specifically advocated, it was often exalted as a vaguely superior and desirable past state.

But what exactly is this "tribe" which so often came up? The "tribe" which Anna described so passionately does not necessarily relate to the complex social characteristics anthropologists have used to analyze tribal societies and cultures; this is a vital point which cannot be emphasized too highly. Anna's tribe is a profoundly modern creation; a spontaneous cultural invention which draws on a fascinating combination of anthropological theory and jargon as well as historical imagery to project an image of an idealized, utopic future. The idealization of the past is by no means a new phenomenon, but it bears closer examination in the context of its relation to body piercing. Anna interprets much of the "good" and the "ideal" in her own contemporary society as the vestige of a tribal past, and perhaps the herald of its return (which she feels it is her duty to work toward).

A vague, and again intentionally re-invented notion of "tribalism" is also often brought into use in this respect. This re-invented notion of tribalism is often seen as the potential cure for a variety of social and personal ills.

The notion of "the tribe" has become in these contexts, and quite separately from its connotations and implications in anthropological theory, a crucial and implicitly

manipulated tool in Anna's social discourse, providing a mechanism by which to contrast her perceptions of the tear in her culture's social fabric with the means by which to mend that tear, and set things aright. It is a tool which allows her to empower her discourse, and to play a part within it.

The fact that the people I spoke with find the notion of a "tribe" so useful to deal with lies in the fact that it offers such greatly varied possibilities for interpretation. Whether it is used to refer to a vague idealized historical past, or whether elements of tribal social institutions - "rites of passage" - are drawn upon, and at times re-defined, it offers for these people an imminently useful concept.

One piercee I spoke a great deal with - and who will be discussed in the chapters which follow - had this to say about the "primitive" - as it was put - nature of body piercing.

Sharon: ...[body piercing] definitely goes back into doing, you know, Indian ascetics, with the penis binding or stretching and body modifications and there's a lot of people who do sun rituals [the "sundance" ritual described earlier] on their own. You know, it depends. Like, some native people like come out and they condemn a lot of people for doing that, for appropriating and not really understanding it. And there are some people who have been quoted who do the sun rituals for themselves, they say I don't, it's a ritual but I don't do it their way, I do it for me and I do it my way.

The expression that "it's a ritual, but I don't do it their way, I do it for me and I do it my way" is an important one, and blends well into the forms of contemporary neopagan spirituality and tribalism which were described to me, where the emphasis is not on

emulating the past but on imagining it in relation to contemporary realities. The point is not to copy the old, but to create something new. And piercees do not just create ideas - they write them down, on their bodies. And whether the whole world - or only a select few - see and understand what is inscribed on their bodies, the importance of those piercings lies above all in what they impart to the piercees themselves: a sense of who they are, a sense that they are individuals seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, and that they are creating something new and unique in the process.

Chapter Four

Piercing and Sexuality

When I began broaching the topic of body piercing, sex and sexuality with my informants, the reactions of some of them would be to giggle and acknowledge that yes, perhaps piercing could play a role in sexual activities (notably, genital piercings). This was mostly, however, the product of second-hand gossip; hearing from friends of friends and so forth that some people use genital piercings to spice up their sex lives. A very few people I spoke with simply responded with shocked, blank stares.

However, other informants would grow excited at mention of the topic, and launch into a discussion of their views on sexuality and piercing; not only as it served functionally to enhance sexual pleasure, but also in the manner by which the very act of piercing could be a sexual experience. And the more I discussed it, the more I came to realize just how piercing plays not only a functional, but also a very symbolic role in sexual practice.

The previous chapter examined the role piercing played in the spirituality of some piercees, and how it assisted in creating spiritual meaning in people's lives. The important point here is *meaning*. As explained at the outset, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the manner in which body piercing serves to create a sense of personal meaning in people's lives; how it serves to create a culture of the "original person." For some people, this process works by imbuing piercing with a spiritual meaning. For others, the meaning

is sexual in nature. Yet it still seems to be used by some piercees to set themselves apart, and to give them a sense of uniqueness and individuality. It gives them a sense of authenticity, and of commitment to a sense of meaning. Spirituality can give one a sense of being "the original person;" so can sexuality, by investing people with a sexually charged identity. This chapter aims to examine how piercing can express this sense of original and individual meaning through sexuality. When I refer to sexuality, I am referring not merely to sexual acts - i.e. intercourse - but rather to sexual identity; the manner in which specific lifestyle choices and behaviour are utilized to establish a sense of - at times public, at times private - sexual identity.

The first section focuses on the complexities of sexual piercings from a general physical and social perspective. The second section will examine sexual function in the context of piercings, from the perspective of piercees. The third section will examine the aspect of sexual symbolism, while the conclusion will discuss issues of identity and the juxtaposition of public and private in the context of sexual piercings.

The Complexities of Genital Piercing

Mike: For a guy, to hold his dick out in front of a room full of people, they're going to be a lot more reluctant, because everyone's going to be looking at their dick. You know, it's like 'oh shit.' But because you've got a bit of jewellery on it, it's a little bit more easy, okay? You know, 'this is what I'm showing you, I'm not showing you my dick, I'm showing you that I've got jewellery, that I've got a piercing...a couple of friends of mine, like two beers in them, and they're pulling out their dicks at the end of the bar...

Mike makes an important point, which is at the crux of understanding the symbolic role which piercings confer upon the parts of the body where they appear. They add a new symbolic role to those body parts: they are no longer simply biological body parts, they are now an expression of personal aesthetics, bearing whatever symbolic meanings - if any - the bearer attaches to them. The genitals, in particular, are strongly affected by this process. Generally a symbol of sexuality, procreation, perhaps even virility or fertility, along with the metaphorical social attributes (dominance, perversion, pleasure) which have been imposed on them at different times by different societies, they now play a new role: as aesthetic decoration, or jewellery. As Mike points out, contemporary North American culture generally sanctions individuals against the public display of their genitals, outside of certain socially acceptable contexts (sexual encounters, the doctor's office, pornography or erotica, etc...). On the other hand, however, individuals are encouraged in North American culture to show off their jewellery and fashion accoutrements. While many of his clients, well indoctrinated in North American social mores, would feel embarrassed or uncertain about the public display of their genitals, now that they have had them pierced it is not the sexual aspects of their genitals which they are showing off: it is the pretty, shiny - and often expensive - jewellery which they are demonstrating. The scenario Mike describes above aptly demonstrates the ability of body piercing to remove the body from one interpretive, symbolic realm of meaning to

another: in this case, from the intimately private, to the proudly public.

When people speak of "sexual piercings" (as one of my informants put it), they are generally referring to either nipple or genital piercings: piercings which serve a function by enhancing sexual pleasure (certain other piercings such as tongue piercings are sometimes included in this category too).

Mike, the local piercer introduced in Chapter One, is the only (advertising) commercial piercer in St. John's who performs genital piercings. As a result, many of those who desire piercings for purposes of function and the enhancement of sexual pleasure seek him out and discuss their needs and desires with him. In one of our early discussions I obtained from him some rough statistics on the types of people and types of piercings he encounters at his shop. One of the things he told me was that he has more women customers than men seeking genital piercings. I asked him why he thought this was.

Mike: Yeah, hood piercings for women are probably the most common [genital piercing]. You know, they're a lot more aware of the clitoris, it's a pretty easy piercing to have done, it's pretty safe, decorative, you know. It's not as intense, like, male piercings...The ones that are effective for guys, are through the head [of the penis]...the hafadas, which are in the scrotum, it's decoration, right. So when you go into a male genital piercing, through the head, like an apadraya, an ampallang, a Prince Albert, or a frenum...there's not that much sexual pleasure with it. And it changes a lot about what a guy's doing, right? A woman can have her hood pierced, get the stimulation from it right away, enjoy it right away, be able to have sex, it heals quickly, it isn't a major altering piercing. With a guy, you know, gets a Prince Albert done, he's got to sit down to pee now, right? An ampallang, an apadraya, he's got to sit down to pee. An

ampallang, he doesn't have to, unless it goes across the urethra, which happens sometimes. But other than that it's a long healing time, it's really sore, sex - you got to wait for a while - so it's a lot easier really to have a female genital piercing, especially in the hood. The labia's a little bit tough, it's a little bit sensitive, but even still it doesn't change the way they urinate, it doesn't change any of their daily habits, right? With a guy it does...you don't sleep a lot, because it's sore. And it hurts. And urinating hurts for the first little while. Right. And then sex hurts for a while after, you know. So it's not as complicated for a female as it is for a male. So I think that's why you get more females coming in having a piercing done, you know. It's enjoyable quicker and not much to it...

This is one of the very complex issues which arise from the nature of functional "sexual piercings," which he wants piercees to take into account when considering a particular piercing. In addition to adapting to the change in sexual function and experience, he noted the change in daily routine which often accompanies male genital piercings, given their effect on male physiology. His comments on the ease with which females can supposedly adapt to genital piercings is interesting: I was told much the opposite by some female piercees. Morgan in particular described to me the new difficulties and discomforts she encountered after her clitoral piercing: rough sex in particular, which she enjoyed, suddenly became very painful, and she too had to learn to adapt to the changes imposed on her sexual activities by her piercing.

In addition to the physical considerations, however, there are also an assortment of interpersonal considerations to be taken into account by piercees. When the purposes of genital piercing are not exclusively for personal benefit, but for the benefit of a sexual relationship with another partner, the fact that this relationship is by nature interactive

requires a consideration of the partner or partners' needs and desires as well. Moreover, manipulation and pressure within a sexual relationship can also wind up at the piercer's doorstep: he described situations where one partner was being pressured to obtain a genital piercing which she - in the following example - did not really want.

Mike: I've seen more guys there with their girlfriends getting pierced nipples and genitals than the reverse...I'm not into - like I have seen guys coming in, like the girl hasn't really wanted a piercing, but the guy really wants her to - I've seen a little bit of that and I'm not into that at all. I'll say listen, if she's not into it, then I'm not going to do it. And kind of get him out of the picture altogether, and talk to her and see if she really wants it...it [genital piercing] seems to be a relationship decision, you know. We've talked about this with a few people, and a friend of mine had a genital piercing, and his girlfriend was pretty upset. Because he didn't even consult with her. And there was that issue of, okay, "Yes it is your penis, but you know I'm using it for a while." Right? "I want to be consulted if..." You know, because it can affect their sex life. It can change it. She may not enjoy it, right? So usually couples will discuss it, right, couples will sit down and talk about it and figure out if they want it done...how it's going to work, and how it's going to affect their sex life and stuff like that, yeah. And then also when people have piercings done together, they wonder about that, about the piercing locking, the jewellery locking, and you know stuff like that.

Moreover, the intimate nature of the interaction between piercer and piercee when it comes to genital or "sexual" piercing can also create tension, in two senses. In the first sense - that of piercer to piercee - Mike went to very great lengths to emphasize the clinical nature of the operation, both to me as well as to his prospective piercees. Maintaining an atmosphere of clinicality and professional detachment similar to that demanded from - to use his example - gynaecologists was, he intimated, essential both to

his reputation and to the satisfaction and repeated patronage of his female clientele. Indeed Lisa, another local commercial piercer who refuses to perform genital piercings, commented to me that in the U.S. city where she trained, many piercers who did do genital piercings expressed a constant fear of sexual harassment lawsuits from their piercees, unless the piercee was known to them or the piercing performed with witnesses. However, by the same token Eileen offered me a much different account from the piercee's perspective of the complex relationship engendered in "sexual" piercing situations, recalling her thoughts when she had her nipple pierced by Mike several months earlier. While other piercees with whom I spoke maintained an attitude of strict clinicality, Eileen freely described the experience as "exhilarating."

Eileen: ...and it's another level to it as well, because you're exposing yourself to this stranger, you know, or a stranger to your body, anyhow, and you can't be shy. Right? You can't sit there in a chair with your legs splayed and to someone coming towards you with rubber gloves and a needle and be shy. You know, you just can't do it, right? And when I got my nipple pierced, I kind of, part of me, getting it done, you know, I was sitting there and I was naked from the waist up and here was Tom with these latex gloves on and he was poking right at my nipple...and trying to get it erect so he could mark it correctly so it would be even, and I started to laugh. Because he was the last person I had thought would ever be playing with my breasts. You know? For whatever reason, you know. So it's very exhilarating. Very exhilarating.

In the other sense, the intimate nature of the piercing operation also created tension in some cases where the piercee's partner was present for the piercing as well. While Eileen - as willing client - was free to express whatever thoughts and feelings she

desired (Mike described other clients who joked or teased suggestively with him), the piercer does not have that luxury. He or she must be careful to maintain an atmosphere of clinicality, avoiding anything other than professional detachment and professional concern: the sexual suggestiveness of the intimacy required for a genital or "sexual" piercing created tension and suspicion on the part of some piercees' partners, although again Mike emphasized that the clinical approach he adopts toward such piercings has in his experience quickly allayed the suspicions of piercees' sexual partners. In these contexts the piercing becomes a spectacle of a sort: and while the partners who accompany the piercee can bring whatever suggested intimacy they like to the situation, the piercer must keep him or herself separate from this. This aspect of "sexual piercings" - the suggestive and symbolic level on which they operate - will be examined at greater length in the following section, where Earl and Eileen describe a highly sexual piercing experience they had, with the help of another piercer. While it was intimately sexual for the two of them, however, the piercer's presence was in a sense disconnected from the experience between them. The kind of suspicious scrutiny Mike often experiences in association with partner piercings is illustrated in the example below.

Mike: Then you also get, when I'm doing a genital piercing - especially on a female - the guys are usually there watching me...for the first ten seconds they're like: [makes a frowning, suspicious face]. But then they see that it's like, you know. And I'm sure if they were in the gynaecologist's office they wouldn't be sitting there over him going, you know, are you touching her in any sexual way? It's not like that at all. So it lasts for a few seconds

and then they realize that there's nothing sexual about the piercings, so. Very clinical. But even with navel piercings guys are like that. Really protective over their girlfriends. "Nobody's touching my girlfriend's navel!"

We have so far dealt with the broader physical and social issues inherent in sexual piercings. The following section will examine the personal and social nature of sexual piercings in greater depth, beginning with a more precise look - from the piercees' perspective - at the mechanisms through which piercing operates in the role of enhancing sexual function.

Piercing and Sexual Function

As anyone who frequents body piercing shops or examines the popular magazines on the topic will quickly realize, there is a whole - and ever-growing - array of body piercings which are designed or chosen for the sexual benefits they provide to the piercee. This section will discuss these piercings, and how they serve to heighten the functional sexual experience for some piercees.

This occurs either through piercings which enhance sexual stimulation and pleasure, or piercings which enhance sexual aesthetics - decorating the genitals, so to speak. For instance, in the previous chapter Earl commented on how he wanted a nipple piercing because he derived a great deal of physical enjoyment from his nipples, and figured piercing them might increase their physical pleasure, by rendering the area more

sensitive. As Mike noted above, "sexual piercings" are usually either the product of somebody hearing that they enhance sensation, or the product of common sense: people knowing what they like sexually, and designing a piercing to increase sensation or make a particular sexual technique easier and more convenient. By the same token, Earl's "frenum ladder" is a good example of both function and aesthetics. Functionally, it provides extra stimulation for his female sexual partner. But it is designed aesthetically as well. The extra frenum piercings become redundant in terms of stimulation, but they like the look: it is jewellery for the genitals. Earl described the range of piercings he and his girlfriend have considered and investigated in the aim of enhancing their sexual experiences:

Earl: My genital piercings were done more for aesthetic than sexual enhancement. Mind you, I have had some interesting discussions with my girlfriend, and we were considering picking up a new piece of jewellery - and that's [for] the frenum piercing, where it's a bar across the top of the shaft - we were discussing...a slightly curved D-ring. Which means you have the bar going through [the shaft], then you have a ring coming up with a large bead, so in the process of thrusting forward the ring would come up and the bead would be hitting off the base of the clitoris in the process of thrusting...Piercings specifically for this purpose are the Prince Albert, which is probably one of the most popular male piercings...The Dido, which is actually a short bar that's put through the...base ridge of the head, it's a little bar put through there, and these were all for the purposes of increasing sensation of the male. I've also talked to a couple of women who find the extra ridges, knobs, etc. - particularly if it's a woman capable of vaginal orgasm - they find this really nice and in a couple of cases, specifically in regards to the Prince Albert piercing, when the person's worked their way up to a fairly large ring, I've heard it said that in the right positions it will very effectively rub off against the so-called G-spot. And

prove to be very satisfactory. Right? By the same token I've also met women who know where their G-spot is and just don't like having it played with.

Earl's comments indicate both of the common mechanisms used by piercees to decide upon sexual piercings: extrapolating piercing ideas from personal experience (where he and his girlfriend were considering experimenting with changes to the jewellery he used in his frenum piercing) and 'gossip': "I've talked to a couple of women..."; "I've heard it said that...".

After speaking with Earl about the role piercings played in his own sexual interests as well as in his sexual relationship with Eileen, I spoke with her as well and asked her what role sexual considerations played in the piercings she had decided to obtain.

Eileen: Well that [sexual function] was a very important reason [for her nipple piercing]. A very important reason to me. I think that I find pierced nipples very sexually attractive. And it's two-fold. Because aesthetically, it looks good, in my opinion. And in practice, it feels good. And when you, when your lover has a ring or a button you can push to exhilarate her or him all the more, then it becomes a really fun toy to play with. You know. And it's a lot of fun. It's just a lot of fun. Yeah.

Eileen notes the two-fold benefits these piercings hold for her: first of all, she finds them aesthetically attractive. But also, they allow for sexual experimentation, altering and enhancing the range of possibilities for stimulation and pleasure. This adds another important dimension to the spectrum of what piercees get out of sexual piercings.

Even with the more commonplace genital piercings, nobody really knows how their own body will react, and whether the piercings will increase stimulation or not. Mike told me of instances where nervous customers asked him for a particular genital piercing, and after discussing it thoroughly with them, he realized they were not interested in the piercing per se, but rather in the type of physical sensation they thought would result from it. Sometimes, he notes, they are totally wrong in the type of sensation they think will result, and he talks them out of certain piercings which he does not feel will produce the desired result. Other times, however, there is no way of knowing the result but to try. And when piercees design their own piercings, based on intuition and knowledge of their personal sexual feelings and tastes, the degree of uncertainty is even greater. So in addition to an element of experimentation, there is also an element of risk. As discussed in the following chapters, sometimes that element of risk is its own reward. For now it is important to note that sexual experimentation and risk provide another important aspect and motivation for sexual piercings: sexual experimentation comes, as will later be seen, to serve as a form of sexual identity in itself.

Sharon is a piercee who takes more risks than some, and she will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter. For her, too, the enhancement of physical sensation was a driving force behind many of the piercings she had acquired. In addition to several facial piercings, she also has both her nipples and her clitoris pierced. She commented on the importance of increased physical and sexual sensation as a consideration in her

decision to obtain these piercings.

Sharon: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, man. That's why I got my nipples pierced. My gosh. My gosh, they're constantly erect. Like, and I mean really, it heightens sensitivity to such an extreme. Like yeah, definitely! I mean of the piercings I have now - other than my earrings and my nose ring - are all very, like, well they're on very sexually sensitive areas, right? And it doesn't mean I'm constantly, like, in overdrive; like they feel good now and I don't feel them now unless I want them to be felt, you know. But yeah. It definitely heightens, like it heightens sensitivity and it heightens play, you know? You know, it's kind of a little monkey-wrench in the works, I guess...it was something I thought about before-hand. Definitely, I'm a very sexual creature, I find. Like even when I'm not - even when I'm playing, you know, the disciplined monk - you know it's always there, it's a little part of it, because now they're pierced, you know...and it's because I'm interested in BDSM, you know, like that's one of the reasons I did get those piercings, because like I want to gauge up, you know, and I want thicker piercings, and I'm interested in, like, sex play, like that sort of stuff, you know.

These days Sharon has a job where she must keep her visible piercings to a minimum (she is a chef at a local restaurant). This does not, however, affect her "sexual" piercings, which are of course not visible in her day-to-day activities. So, like other elements of her sexuality, they are very much a part of her private self, albeit an enhanced, experimental aspect of that private self. Even when, she notes, she is in a more celibate frame of mind (playing the "disciplined monk"), they are still there, always a reminder to her of her sexual nature. When she participates in sexual "play" (she uses this term to refer to sexual activity which might or might not occur in the framework of monogamous, emotional relationships), they act even more prominently, throwing a

"monkey-wrench" or offering additional possibilities for sexual pleasure and experimentation. When she talks about "gauging up," she is referring to the process whereby she starts with an initial piercing and piece of jewellery, and gradually increases the size and thickness of the jewellery, or even the style of jewellery (for instance, switching from a straight bar to a curved D-ring) thereby altering and increasing the degree of sensitivity and her own sexual response to the piercing. Thus even a single piercing offers myriad possibilities for sexual and stimulatory experimentation.

Morgan also attested to the importance she attributed to the sexual function of her genital piercings. Having recently acquired a clitoral piercing, she outlined both the positive and negative sexual side-effects of her new piercing, adding how she finds sexual piercings attractive on both male and female sexual partners.

Morgan: Well, okay, I have tried it since I got it, and so it makes orgasms come a lot faster and easier. But it also restricts in a way, too, because I like really rough sex and you can't really be that rough with it, because it kind of, not so much hurts, but it gets really uncomfortable when it's being stretched and like pulled and banged, and so in that sense it's kind of not as good, you know. But it's very, it makes the area a lot more sensitive...I think genital piercings on men are just, rrrah! Yeah, that's a big turn-on. For women, I think tongue piercings are good. And for men, other than genital, I think tongue piercings are good for women and nipple piercings are good for men. But genital piercings are always, like, the best way to go.

When she talks about tongue piercings (one of which she also recently obtained), she is referring to the effect of added stimulation and possibilities for oral sex. She also

noted her aesthetic attraction to genital piercings on men, function aside. She is quite pleased with her clitoral piercing, explaining that she finds it easier to reach orgasm with the enhanced stimulation it provides. But she also notes, wistfully, that she has to be more careful with it than she would like, lest it cause discomfort or tear. Another of my informants, Sonia, encountered a similar problem. She obtained a nipple piercing, which she very much enjoyed - it not only increased sensation but allowed for attaching things to it in S&M play. However, a few months after she got it, she engaged in some rough sex, was not careful enough, and tore it out.

In sum, piercees are able to utilize sexual piercings to enhance sexual function through three primary mechanisms: a) aesthetics; b) physical pleasure and stimulation; and c) experimentation and risk.

Aesthetics allows piercees to add an element of visual stimulation to their sexual activities. The genitals no longer stand by themselves in terms of function, but combine with the piercing to serve as an object of aesthetic appreciation.

Physical pleasure and stimulation are more straightforward motivations for piercing: during sexual encounters they serve to enhance the pleasure experienced by either the piercee, their partner, or both.

Experimentation and risk are also an important factor in sexual piercings. They operate on a more personal level, investing the piercee with a sexually charged identity expressed through the thrill and excitement of experimenting with the sexual

consequences of altering their genitals: concomitant with this is an element of risk and daring, especially when they are not entirely sure what the experiential results will be. While serving an intimately personal role, however, this identity is social in nature as well. Just how the sexual charge of piercing - along with aesthetics and physical pleasure stimulation - operate in the creation of a social identity, will be examined in the following sections.

Piercing as Sexual Symbol and Suggestion

Mike: I had a really interesting, one of my first couples - and first gay male couples - to have genital piercings done together, and this was back when I was just kind of getting into the genital piercings, and it was a real neat experience, you know. They were really good. I did all their nipples. I did their Prince Alberts, and then got them into some other things. And it really, you know, to come in - very straight-laced government workers, looked like brothers, you know, just two regular-looking guys - and I think it really opened up the doors sexually for them...that they made that step to getting their nipples pierced, for one. No, we did their Prince Alberts first. They had no earrings, they had no piercings, no tattoos, no nothing, and they got their Prince Albert done. And from there it grew...a couple more genital piercings, nipple piercings, and then they got into some fetish stuff, you know, it kind of opened their doors sexually for them, which was really cool.

The functionality of the "sexual piercings" and experiences discussed in this chapter so far have in common the fact that they are all associated with what some of my informants referred to as "vanilla sex." The phrase 'vanilla sex' is used in popular literature and discourse on sexuality to refer to sex which is considered "normal," or "status quo:" it is synonymous with mainstream sexuality. What it specifically refers to

can therefore vary depending on the context and on who uses it: when used by the informants I spoke with, it was generally used to refer to straightforward sexual intercourse, without the frills and thrills of less mainstream, alternative forms of sexuality such as S&M. For instance, in the case of the two men which Mike describes above, he notes that body piercing not only became an active interest of the couple, but that "it kind of opened their doors sexually for them." Their piercings not only affected their sexual function, but it "opened their doors" in terms of their sexual behaviour and identity.

This is an important distinction, for it demonstrates the line drawn between the straightforward functionality of the "sexual piercings" described so far and the wider array of symbolic functions which "sexual piercings" can also serve and which will be examined for the remainder of this chapter and the next. What should be noted here is that many of the piercings described above, while certainly not commonplace or mainstream for the population as a whole, still function toward the enhancement of sexual pleasure in forms of sexual experience which are on the whole accepted and socially sanctioned in contemporary North American culture (thus the condescending phrase "vanilla sex"). They aid the piercees in obtaining either self-stimulation (masturbation) or more satisfying and pleasurable forms of sexual intercourse. This section will examine the manner in which some piercees utilize "sexual piercings" and body piercing in general in the pursuit of less mainstream and less purely functional sexual experience.

Mike: Navel [piercings] have been popular for so long, you know. I thought that there wouldn't be any more navels left in the world to do. [There are] a lot of young girls getting it done, wanting it done, a lot of thirteen, fourteen year old girls wanting it done, right? It's the weird one, because it's a bit [difficult] for their parents to get through, because it's like, you know, it's sexy. And there's my thirteen, fourteen year old daughter, she's got this cute little navel ring in and it's like, it's kind of a sexual piercing. It's a bit [difficult] for their parents to get around at first. You can tell the dad's definitely not comfortable with it, right? Because then they have to think of their daughters, in that, well, they haul their shirt up when they're, you know, showing that off.

Here Mike demonstrates the more outward, visibly evocative side of sexual suggestiveness some piercings can be associated with. While piercings certainly can be exclusively personal, in many cases there is a level of inherent suggestiveness which they carry as well. As Mike notes, the parents of a young girl getting a navel piercing assume she is not doing it just for the experience: at the very least, she intends to tell some people about it: she will probably show it to them as well.

There is a lot to be said about this point in terms of the complex juxtaposition of public private identities: this will be examined further on. But for now, the sexual suggestiveness of some piercings demonstrates a great deal of the symbolic value which they can hold. Even moreso than in the case of decorative piercings (like navels) this is all the more evident with functional "sexual piercings," as another of my informants, George, indicates in the following account.

George: I knew a bunch of punk girls in Vancouver who had like clit piercings and who were like talking about it all the time...like when they

were talking to someone extremely boring they could just bring themselves to orgasm or whatever. It was really, like they described this and like did an impression of them talking to someone who was just blah blah and then, like, moving themselves to orgasm with this clit piercing...

The story resembles other accounts I was given of the use some piercees could put their genital piercings to. Interestingly, none of the accounts were from first-hand experience; they were either told them by friends or intuitively assumed to be true; again, the pervasive head of second-hand gossip. But the import of these examples lies in the suggestiveness of the piercing. If the piercings are seen as tools with which to enhance sexual stimulation, then that is what they are assumed to be used for. The implications of enhanced possibilities for self-stimulation are prime material for innuendo and gossip; true or not, they indicate the suggestive role sexual piercings can play.

George did have first-hand experiences of his own to relate, too. The following account he gave of his lip piercing further demonstrates the suggestive and experimental value of piercings in the sexual context.

George: When I first came back here after I got the piercing [in his lower lip], like this happened like four or five times, like girls wanted to kiss me, because they wanted to know what it was like to kiss a guy who has his lip pierced. It was weird. It was very strange. People that I knew fairly well, which was strange, but even people that I barely knew at all. Like yeah. So it's totally like it was a very sexual kind of thing. It wasn't really, in my mind, when I got it, but yeah. It was like startling the extent that it was!...I think like lots of piercings are sexy. Like that girl I was talking about who had that [clitoral] piercing, I was like intrigued immediately, you know what I mean? I don't know what it is, but there definitely is something

about it. It draws attention to the body, I guess, you know. Yeah.

George did not have any sexual implications in mind when he got his piercing, as he points out: it was for aesthetics (and, to a lesser degree, to fit in with the punks he was hanging out with at the time). Yet he soon discovered the suggestive value of the lip piercing: it drew attention to his body, as he notes, but more importantly it drew attention to the possibilities for experimentation which it suggested.

For some piercees, however, the piercings operate on a much more personal level, contributing to the way they view their own selves sexually. I was presented with one such account by Eileen. Her second body piercing - outside of her ears - was a clitoral hood piercing performed by her boyfriend. Not only was it a piercing she had wanted for a very long time, but it also represented the fulfilment of a very personal sexual fantasy she had held since her childhood, when she read about it in a novel. The novel in question - The Story of O, by Pauline Reage - deals with a woman in eighteenth century France. The woman, O, was brought to her lover's house and forced into becoming a sex slave. The book deals with her experiences. Eileen was fascinated by the book, and by the manner in which it dealt with O and "...being forced into submission and the whole idea of her being female and being there for the pleasure of men and nothing else, basically." Body piercing was dealt with in the book as well, and as Eileen explains, this is what she found particularly intriguing.

Eileen: It was really brutal, but anyway in part of the book she's claimed by a master, you know, she has an owner basically, and to show that she is his she is branded. And is given a labia piercing. A really thick ring with another ring attached to it with a piece of metal that's got his initials engraved on it. And ever since then I've wanted that done...Yeah. And in junior high school!...I just, there was something really wicked about having this piece of metal dangling from my labia. Ching-ching-ching-ching. And the fact that when she was wearing short skirts, you could see the jewellery hanging down. That was the point, you know, the fact that she couldn't hide who she belonged to...

Hans: Wow. That's early. What did you think when you first read about it? Was it an immediate...

Eileen: Well, I've always been interested in S&M. I mean, I'm not, I wouldn't say that I'm a serious masochist or a sadist by any means, but, I've played with it, but not to any extent of brutality. And I really enjoyed the book. I thought it was a tremendous introduction into that world and I thought that the way the character was portrayed was marvellous. It showed how she became, at the end of the book she became so submissive, she became so dependent upon her master that when he left she asked that she be killed. And it was a very interesting psychological study on what can happen to a person that's put into that situation. Who was forced to submit herself.

Hans: Wow. That goes back to junior high, hey?

Eileen: Yeah, like in grade eight. I was like, what, thirteen...there's a friend of mine who is a body piercer...this woman [Lisa] doesn't pierce below the waist. She doesn't do anything like that. And Earl [Eileen's boyfriend] really wanted to get a frenum piercing and I really wanted to get my hood pierced, so she basically took us in and told us about it and basically apprenticed us to a degree and we pierced each other...so that you know...that kind of really fits in with my whole fantasy about O and that. It's neat.

Eileen's long-held fantasy of a genital piercing like the one in the story she read was not so much a fantasy about playing the role of the woman in the story. She certainly

does not want to become so submissive to a man that she would rather kill herself than have him leave her. Rather, her interest in the piercing lies in the suggestions it carries with it. "There was something really wicked about having this piece of metal dangling from my labia," she says. The "wickedness" implies and suggests daring, and experimentation. It suggests a level of sexuality beyond the mainstream, a very personal sense of daring and sexual bravado. The "ching-ching-ching-ching" of the metal suggestively sounds to the world a sense of daring the forbidden: the "fact that when she was wearing short skirts you could see the jewellery hanging down" dares those about her with a suggestive glimpse into her personal sexuality, a glimpse which does not really state anything outright, but which hints and suggests at her personal sexuality, and leaves them wondering, and guessing. Of course Eileen's own hood piercing did not do all this; it was quite hidden for the purposes of day-to-day activities. But it is what it suggested and implied *to her* that is important here. Its meaning was a personal one, conveying to her a sense of personal commitment to her sexual fantasy. And the fact she was pierced by her partner added all the more to the sense of commitment conveyed by this act (this particular mutual piercing will be analyzed in greater depth in the following chapter).

Eileen told me that, much to her disappointment, the hood piercing tore while healing and then grew out. Yet her account of the piercing itself demonstrates the uniquely physical way in which she used her body piercing to make manifest a long-held sexual fantasy. Similarly, Mike recounted to me another instance where one of his clients

used body piercing as a means of physically making manifest a personal commitment toward their own sexuality.

Mike: I've had one person who didn't want to have sex for a few months, strictly out of just chastising, just to be, you know, 'I want to refrain from having sex, I want to test my will' kind of thing. So we had an apadraya done, which is, you know, which is a big commitment, to not having sex for a while.

In this case the piercing served much of an opposite function from those described earlier: it was a way of enforcing a period of celibacy. Committing to the piercing meant committing to a decision to remain celibate, and as such acted as the ultimate test of personal authenticity toward one's sexual decisions.

Other piercees use their piercings to affect the way in which they view their own sexual selves, and to reinforce their own sexual self-image. Leisl, another of my informants, had recently acquired a horizontal clitoral hood piercing. She pointed out that horizontal hood piercings (as opposed to vertical ones) do not necessarily provide a whole lot of stimulation, and emphasized that the piercing was therefore for her not so much for physical pleasure as it was for the reinforcement of her own sexual identity.

Leisl: Well for me anyway, I guess the difference is it's not so much for sexual pleasure as it for reinforcement of, to affirm my own sexuality, which is different. That's more of a mind thing than a physical thing, do you know I mean? It's moreso [that] it's there, and it's kind of also like an empowerment issue...I guess going back to the aesthetics, it's a reinforcement that my sex and women's genitals in general...it's pretty...It's a little secret bit of femininity on days when I'm like wearing big black

boots and jeans and like a ratty old t-shirt. Yet I know, deep inside, that, you know, like I'm still pretty somewhere. Not that I'm always trying to reinforce my femininity, and I don't want to push it on anyone, but to myself sometimes it's nice to know that I've got a gorgeous piece of jewellery adorning like a really sensitive, really personal place in my body.

The meaning and significance of Leisl's piercing in this context is primarily symbolic. She sees it as a "secret bit of femininity;" it is a private symbol for her, reinforcing her personal sense of identity, in a "really personal place in my body." She went on explain the importance this can hold, especially for young women, in terms of self-image and self-identity.

Leisl: And I guess like for so many years I worried that I was ugly, and especially before, you know before you start getting sexually involved...Before you really get involved with people sexually, and at least in my case, and I'm sure in many other people's cases, you're always worried, you know, you're worried that what if you're ugly, you know? You probably haven't seen many other naked women necessarily to compare yourself to. And that, or if you do compare yourself to someone, and you realize, you know, oh my gosh, my clitoris is small, or my labia are too flabby, or something weird, then you're really self-conscious. Especially about somewhere that you never show off, you know. So like, I remember when I was younger worrying someone would take a look at me and go 'Oh no! She's so ugly!' And run away, you know. Yeah, little stupid things you did when you were a kid. So I guess aesthetically it was kind of, not that it makes me beautiful, but kind of to quell the little child in me. To give her like a little piece of jewellery to play with. Do you know what I mean? Like it kind of makes me feel better about myself. Not that I felt bad about myself to begin with, not now, anyway, like if I felt bad about myself I wouldn't do it, which is why I did it now, when I feel good, but it makes me feel stronger, in some ways, because, especially too where there's such a taboo on genital piercing...And I'm glad I got it done now, as opposed to a couple of years ago. Because I think now also I'm more

comfortable with my sexuality, I'm more curious and interested and more knowledgeable about sexuality in general, so I feel like I'm not more mature for having it, but I feel like it's a good affirmation of how I've changed over the years, in coming to terms with my sexuality, and just sexuality in general, and understanding the grand scope of sexuality, which is quite grand and vast...

It is also useful to note that she draws a distinction between using piercing to build self-identity and using it to affirm self-identity. If she did not feel confident about herself, or have a firm sense of self, she says, she would not have gotten the piercing. Instead, she got it to affirm the way she felt: in acknowledgement and recognition of her self-image and identity. In other words, rather than getting the piercing to *fulfil* an image - to fit in, or conform to a fashion - obtaining the piercing was a symbolic means of affirming an image which she felt was an important reflection of the self-identity she had constructed over the years. It is symbolic: it is not there to look like something, but to reflect something back - even if the reflection is only for herself.

She described her thoughts and immediate reactions after the piercing.

Leisl: Besides [four people], who were all there at the time, I haven't shown it to anyone else. At least not so far. But so it's nice to know I have this little secret that no one else really knows about. Yet I could talk about it if I want to, but I don't really want to brag about it. I am really excited about it, and sometimes I really do - I know right after I got it done I wanted to tell like everyone in the whole world, and I wanted to walk down the street naked. I was all excited about it, but I don't feel like bragging about it. I just feel really excited and happy. And that's how you should feel about your sexuality! You should feel excited and happy that you're a sexual being. And you should embrace that, and I feel like I've embraced that. At least symbolically. With this piece of jewellery...I do

believe that the yoni is a very powerful female source, a very powerful source of energy anyway. So I find this like a nice symbolic, oh what's the word...accentuate, augment, accentuate, adorn? Sort of, you know, those sorts of types of words. But I feel like it's a good, like if I was talking in computer terms, it would be like an add-on, like a peripheral device, do you know what I mean? Like something to augment its value in some way. Either - not monetary value - but like you know, personal worth.

Again, Leisl emphasizes the value of her piercing in "augmenting" her self-image; not physically, but symbolically. It is an affirmation of her personal sense of sexuality. She wanted to tell "the whole world" about it - not to brag, she quickly notes, but to share the joy she feels in her confirmation of self and identity.

The symbolic use of body geography is useful to note here too. Earl, in the previous chapter, described his desire to create a Celtic cross on his chest using piercings, as a reflection of his personal sense of spirituality. Likewise, Leisl utilizes her genital piercing as a symbolic reflection of her personal sense of sexuality. Neither of these piercings would necessarily be seen by others on a day-to-day basis, beyond those they choose to show them too. Rather, their primary importance is to them personally: a symbolic affirmation and personal statement of self and identity - in Earl's case, of his spirituality; and in Leisl's case, of her sexuality.

For Leisl, the piercing serves not so much on the physical level of enhancing pleasure, nor on the purely aesthetic level. Rather, it helps her to affirm her views on sexuality in general, as well as to reconcile her own femininity with those "days when I'm like wearing big black boots and jeans and like a ratty old t-shirt." Additionally, it serves

as a confirmation to her of the maturity she sees herself as having attained in regards to her own sexuality and self-image. Contrasting her views now with those she held when she was a child, she recalls her fears and highly uncertain self-image. While she emphasizes that she feels the piercing does not - by itself - make her more confident, it does serve to her as an affirmation of the fact that she no longer suffers from the same uncertainty and lack of confidence regarding her sexuality and self-image that she feels plagued her as a child.

Summary

The examples cited in the previous section illustrate some of the ways in which piercees utilize "sexual piercings" in a symbolic manner. Piercees like the girls described by Mike and George at the beginning of the section, as well as George himself, are invested through piercing with a sexually charged identity, which is based on visual stimulation (aesthetics), as well as physical stimulation and sexual experimentation (coupled with a degree of risk): mechanisms which operate through the expression of sexual suggestiveness. This expression, more specifically, allows the piercees' sense of identity to flow from the personal to the social, as it is embedded in forms of interaction and reaction.

While some piercings operate on this fairly overt level, others contribute to a much more personal sense of identity. Eileen's desire for a hood piercing grew from a sexual fantasy she had held since the age of thirteen, and so in a sense also reflects the

manner in which she too has grown into her current attitudes on self and sexuality. It represents not only the fulfilment, in a sense, of that childhood sexual fantasy, but also the level of certainty and confidence she has attained in her outlook on her own sexuality and self-image. Likewise, Leisl's hood piercing represents the culmination and symbolic expression of a number of ideas, ranging from reconciling the "taboo on genital piercings" with her own ideas of femininity, to the physical and symbolic expression of the confidence and outlook toward her own sexuality and self-image which she has acquired.

But there is a very fluid line separating the personal (or private) from the overt (or public) in these instances. In fact, the focal point illustrated by the examples in this chapter seems to be that public and private identities in the context of piercing are not fixed at all; they consist of shifting, amorphous boundaries established by context and piercee.

At times these boundaries seem straightforward - for instance, in the case of the gay male couple Mike described at the beginning of the previous section. He emphasized - perhaps to the point of excess - their "straight-laced" exterior; he thought they might be civil servants, such was the impact upon him of the dichotomy he perceived between their public demeanour and their private sexuality. It was that dichotomy which he found so striking about them. In contrast are the young girls who come to Mike seeking navel piercings, nervous parents in tow. Here the parents have difficulty with the dichotomy of

dealing with their daughters wanting public piercings on private areas of their bodies.

The contrast between public and private is rendered even more elusive by the contrasting sentiments and motivations of piercees. On the private side of the fence is the gay male couple with their status-quo exterior yet fetishistic sexuality; Eileen with her secretive thrill at a labia piercing fulfilling a long-held personal sexual fantasy; Leisl with her secret hidden bit of femininity on the days she wears ratty jeans and combat boots. On the public side, Eileen thrills to the notion of the ching-ching-ching-ching of her heroine's piercing proclaiming itself to the world; Leisl wants to tell the whole world about her hood piercing; droves of young girls want their navels pierced and Mike has clients "pulling out their dicks at the end of the bar." People maintain their public and private identities; and they use piercing not only as a mechanism by which to establish these identities, but also as an elaborate means by which to modify and shift their boundaries according to varying situations of context, personal commitment and motivation.

Some might say that physical identities are public, while sexual identities are private. Piercing however blurs the distinction between the two. It increases the contexts in which the two merge: in some cases one's physical identity - through piercings - becomes a manifestation of one's sexual identity. And that in turn becomes public in a greater variety of scenarios: in piercing shops and jewellery shops, in the clothes one wears, in the ways one sits and acts (many piercees told me they can easily identify other

piercees by their physical conduct), and in everyday conversation.

There is another important point underscoring many of the examples I was presented with by piercees with whom I spoke, and this also relates to the contrast between public and private. One must ask oneself why there was such an openness on the part of the piercees with whom I spoke regarding their sexual identities, and the important role piercing played in their sexuality. It was not discussed in whispers and gestures; it was discussed openly and with pride. By establishing an individual identity based in piercing and sexuality, they are embracing - in a way which blurs the line between public and private - the positive and creative role of sexuality in their lives. It is a conscious, creative, and proactive approach to determining and experimenting with sexuality; and the increasingly blurred lines between underground and mainstream (as they refer to piercing) mean as well that it is becoming in some instances almost mainstream to experiment with sexuality in this respect. Other overt expressions of sexuality - for instance, seeing a sex therapist, buying items for protection against pregnancy or disease, or lobbying for sexual rights - operate on a much different level than piercing. Rather than creative, they are reactive. Seeing a sex therapist is seen as treating a problem; buying items in a drugstore or lobbying for sexual rights is protecting one's body and ensuring one's safety and rights. These are largely reactive measures, countering a perceived problem. Piercing, on the other hand, embodies a creative, proactive attempt to bring one's sexuality to the fore and to experiment with it. Sexuality - and the importance

of sexual identity - is embraced as something positive. Naturally, piercees do not go up to random people on the street (unless they have reason to think they too have piercings, which they are remarkably capable of doing) and talk about such things. Sexual piercings - as Leisl noted - are still widely taboo in that respect; and certainly not all piercees have the same outlook on these matters. As I indicated at the outset, some of my informants would merely giggle and look away if I mentioned the topic. Yet the ease and emphatic manner in which the matter was discussed by piercees such as those featured in this chapter indicates the significance which it holds for them. And by expressing that significance during the interviews I held with them, they were simultaneously expressing their desire that the positivity and creativity of sexuality and the manifestation of personal sexual identities be recognized - and accepted - as something positive and beneficial. As Leisl put it when she described her hood piercing

Leisl: I don't feel like bragging about it. I just feel really excited and happy. And that's how you should feel about your sexuality! You should feel excited and happy that you're a sexual being. And you should embrace that, and I feel like I've embraced that. At least symbolically. With this piece of jewellery...

The following chapter carries the themes explored in this chapter further still, into the realm of S&M⁷ sexuality in particular, exploring how piercing challenges boundaries of pain, fear, and pleasure, and how this too contributes to a sense of originality and personal meaning.

Chapter Five

Piercing and the Pursuit of Pain

Lisa: ...I do have people who say that it was really pleasurable to get it done...when I was in Virginia - I remember this is somewhat vulgar, so pardon me - but I remember one particular client who I pierced his tongue and he just let out this groan. And I stopped. And when I was done I said "Are you okay?" And his response was: "No - I think I'm going to cream my jeans."

Lisa's quote is a perfect illustration of the two conflicting experiential perceptions involved with piercing. As she pierced her client's tongue, her reaction to his groans was to worry that he was in pain as a result of her tearing through his tongue with her needle. He, on the other hand, responded that no, he was feeling ecstatic, describing the experience in decidedly sexual imagery.

Piercing - putting a needle through sensitive areas of one's body - is, obviously enough, a painful experience. But for some of my informants, that very pain was one of the most exquisite and sought-after parts of the piercing experience. The word pain is a highly subjective term: it conjures negative impressions of something unattractive, something to be avoided. A better way to describe the experiential aspect of the piercing process is perhaps simply as "sensation": a neutral term describing the intensity of feeling before it is interpreted into positive or negative viewpoints. The piercees I spoke with were not pursuing a negative experience by any means: what they were pursuing was intensity of sensation. While many people might describe the sensation involved with

piercing as negative - similar to the way a child shies away from getting a medical needle - others interpret it as an extremely positive and pleasurable experience. This chapter focuses on the pursuit of sensation through the mechanism of body piercing, and examines how the imagery and ritualization of that experience can contribute to one's sexual and self identity. By ritualization, I am referring to the process by which social - and often very imaginative - contexts are constructed around the action of piercing, and how piercing is imported into complex social relationships, like S&M scenarios. Much of the latter part of the chapter will examine this pursuit of pain-as-pleasure in the context of interpersonal sexual relationships - namely S&M relationships and experiences. To this end, an in-depth case study of one individual will be utilized as a means of discussing the complexities of this aspect of piercing. What I would like to show is that S&M is not necessarily about sexual pleasure, nor about achieving orgasm. Rather, it can also be about the manipulation and reinvention of values such as love, ethics, trust, and reciprocity. Utilising tools such as S&M sexuality, or body piercing (or both together, as in the case I shall examine), allows the individual to explore these values in a highly complex and emphatically personal process, as we shall see.

The following section, however, explores the pursuit of pain-as-pleasure from the personal perspective of the individual, and aims to show how the *personalization* of intense sensation - the personal reinterpretation and manipulation by the self of what society has traditionally constructed as positive and negative - contributes to the process

of individualization and self-identity through piercing.

Piercing and Pain: Personal Perspectives

Sonia, a piercee we have already been introduced to, told me that her most experiential piercing - which she recalled to me with both excitement and pride - was a large ring she had inserted through the skin of the front of her neck, about mid-way down, five years ago. While it became infected and had to be removed a couple of weeks after she had it done, she still remembers vividly her feelings at the time of the piercing.

Sonia: Oh! That was the biggest high I ever had from a piercing, fuck! Like you'd think it would be your genital piercings, but it was that one. I went to a cafe slightly after that, and I was like shaky and hyper, and when I - I had a class I guess about an hour, forty-five minutes after the piercing - and I got in and I went to grab my pen to write notes, and I was so relaxed that my notes were completely illegible for a while because they were so relaxed, and that was cool. I want that. It's one of the reasons why I want to get the needles and just do the temporary piercings.

The sensation which resulted from Sonia's neck piercing surprised her in its intensity. She imagined genital piercings would produce the most intense experience because they are among the more sensitive parts of the body which can be pierced. Yet she was overwhelmed by the combination of endorphins and adrenalin which soared through her body after this piercing, leaving her both "high" and utterly relaxed over the ensuing afternoon and evening.

The piercees I spoke with did not feel they needed any background in biology or chemistry to feel confident explicating this process to me. Some, like Sonia, cited it as one of their primary reasons for getting a piercing or - better yet, since it produced even stronger sensation - repiercing an old one. Sonia, for example, rationalized the experience by arguing that the reason small cuts hurt so much is because not enough endorphins are released into the body. The solution to this, she went on, was to produce massive pain - i.e., through piercing - to trigger enough endorphins to feel euphoric - "which of course is just feeling really wonderful - you get more of a high from it." Scientific biochemistry aside, Sonia's rationale made perfect sense to her, and from her perspective that, she told me, is what counts.

Like Sonia, Eileen also described the experience of piercing as intimately pleasurable. She had had - among other things - her nipple pierced, and confided to me that she would love nothing more than to remove her nipple piercing and pierce it again, and keep re-piercing it, solely for the pleasurable physical sensation she derived from being pierced, which she described as "exhilarating." The only things keeping her from doing so, she explained, were the cost of the piercing, and the fear that the resulting scar tissue would inhibit the ability to breastfeed in the future.

Given the cost of a commercial piercing, and the desire of some piercees to frequently repierce for purposes of sensation alone, some adopt "temporary piercing" as an alternative - or complementary practice - by which to obtain the pleasure-pain

sensation of piercing on a more frequent basis. These piercees purchase disposable needles, which they use to pierce themselves with. Rather than inserting permanent expensive jewellery; however, they merely allow the piercing to heal, and then re-pierce it again. The point of the piercing is not aesthetic in these cases; it is physical, and the goal of the piercing is the sensation they derive from it. Temporary piercing is becoming more common-place: Sharon described several semi-public contexts she encountered on the mainland - at parties, raves, and other social events - where it was routinely conducted. The problem in Newfoundland, however, is again one of access: costs are higher to order in the necessary materials, and it is harder to find sources from which to order those materials. Sonia had approached Mike about finding a source for temporary piercing materials, but he had not been very helpful: she formulated the assumption that he saw it as a possible encroachment on his business. Whether or not that was the case, I was told by other piercees they would love to do temporary piercing, but were simply unable to find or afford the cost of materials here in Newfoundland.

Earl acknowledged to me that he found temporary piercings a tempting idea, insofar as their ability to reproduce the sensation of being pierced: like Eileen, he lamented that he simply did not have the money to buy the necessary equipment for it.⁴ He described the attraction of temporary piercing:

Earl: While I've never done it, I can imagine that to temporarily put in a piercing through my unpierced nipple and then take it out again when the

evening is done with and have it at that raw, ultra-sensitive point where...the texture of your t-shirt will drive you mad, and for about the first hour there's no pain, it's just this incredibly powerful sensation...

While he had never done temporary piercings per se - citing, like Eileen, financial reasons as the impediment - he had explored other avenues of increasing the sensation of a piercing, albeit accidentally. When he had his nipple pierced, he described it as "a very exquisite form of pain that I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed." He then went on to obtain several frenum piercings. His first two frenum piercings produced little sensation: "...it was sort of like a little sting, and then that was it." His second piercing tore, however, and he removed it. Later on he decided to try re-piercing it, but this time it had to go through the scar tissue left by the previous unsuccessful piercing. The scar tissue being tougher than normal flesh, he found this piercing to produce almost as intense a sensation as when he had his nipple pierced. What is more, as he prepared to pierce through the scar tissue, he *knew* it was going to hurt more. Psychological preparation being an important contributing factor to the sensation which results from any piercing, this one was, he described.

Earl: ...a really interesting form of psychological trauma, exquisite pain...the sensation is so intense that your eyes roll back into your head and your breathing changes and then it's done, and you're like shaking with endorphins and adrenalin and you're like, oh man, that was good!

In all of these cases, the piercees emphasize the important role played by the physical sensation of a piercing. This is certainly not the case with everyone, of course.

One piercee in particular, when I asked her whether she enjoyed the sensation of piercing, laughed sceptically and said of course not, she had a low tolerance for pain, and this is what made her wait so long to get a piercing. She eventually gave in and got a nipple piercing since she liked the look of it, but warned the piercer she did not like pain and would probably scream and cry. She did not, but she said it did hurt a lot. She told me that while some of her friends did not find it as painful as others, she did not "think they'd go that far" as to intentionally pursue piercing for the pain or physical experience of it.

For others, however, the physical sensation of piercing is precisely what they do pursue. Earl, Eileen, and Sonia all find the rush and euphoria which results from piercing to be one of the most desirable aspects of their piercings. It demonstrates the contrast between those who pursue piercing for aesthetic - at times mainstream fashion - reasons, and those who pursue it for more personal reasons of experience and sensation. For the former, I would suggest, it forms an important part of their outward physical appearance, or aesthetics; for the latter, the meaning is more personal, and provides an important means by which to define themselves as an individual; it is part of their identity (although doing it for aesthetics by no means means it is *not* for personal reasons related to individual identity, as we shall see).

It is also an aspect which is often described in highly sexual imagery; and this is not, I would argue, mere accident. For instance, one of the ubiquitous questions piercees find themselves asked is whether it hurt to get their piercings. Eileen's response to this

was an emphatic "No! No!" She described the experience of piercing as being to her like rough sex. "It's like your lover biting you a little too hard," she said. "And it's the same rush, you know, during the sexual encounter, when your lover bends down and bites you really hard...except it's, you know, some guy with these forceps in his hand and a needle."

Like Lisa's client at the beginning of this chapter, Eileen finds sexual imagery the most appropriate way to describe the sensation she experiences through piercing. The commercial piercing environment itself is far from sexual - as described in the first chapter, it is in many ways a highly clinical environment. But the subjective interpretation of experience which Eileen brings to it is a sexual one; and the sensation of the piercing itself she finds highly erotic and sensualised, as we saw in her description of the "exhilarating" and erotic experience of being pierced in the previous chapter.

When I discussed her piercings with Morgan, she too emphasized that piercing was a strongly sexual experience. We were discussing self-piercing, and she surprised me by using the analogy that "It's a lot better to do it yourself, because it's kind of like masturbation." Her reasoning on this point was straightforward: "It's good, and it satisfies, and you don't really need anybody else there." Her analogy, based on the fact that self-piercing is personal as well as physically satisfying, intrigued me. I commented that it was an interestingly sexual analogy to use, to which she responded that piercing was "...definitely sexual...I don't care what anyone says, it's sexual, yeah!" I asked her what she meant by this, to which she replied

Morgan: It's enticing. It's erotic. It's different, it's kind of kinky, you know, and it has to do with your physical body, and sex. Okay, I'm sorry, emotions are involved as well, but sex is mostly physical and there's that peak, you know, with the pain, and then there's that release, and the soothing effect afterwards when you're calm and you feel purged and a whole lot better. It's definitely sexual.

Morgan, who had also pierced herself on occasion in the past, regarded the act of piercing - and of self-piercing in particular - as highly sexual in nature. She likened the act of self-piercing to masturbation, and then proceeded metaphorically to liken the act of piercing to a sexual act, complete with the build-up and release of energy implicit in a sexual encounter. She even joked sarcastically that some people probably consider her "I'm a big nympho, because I have piercings, yeah, ha ha." While she was laughing as she said this, it certainly demonstrates the sexual connotations which certain forms of piercing have come to suggest, as discussed in the previous chapter.

It is important to note that in all of these instances, the unifying factor is the pursuit of sensation. Whether sensation is the sole factor in the piercing - as in temporary piercings - or an unexpected by-product - as in Sonia's neck piercing - the satisfaction obtained from the piercing by some piercees depends in part on the degree of sensation derived from the piercing. The stronger the sensation, the more satisfied piercees like Sonia, Eileen, and Earl are with the piercing. Moreover, aside from personal satisfaction - the "rush," "high" and "euphoria" they described to me - there is a more generalized, conscious, intentional embrace of sensation involved as well. Piercees like Eileen do not

shy away from telling people what they liked about the piercing - she matter-of-factly informs them that no, it did not "hurt" in a negative sense any more than "rough sex." In this sense as well, it plays an empowering role in the creation of self-identity: Eileen is not ashamed that she enjoys being pierced. It is an important part of her identity, just as her predilection for "rough sex" is.

The application of sexual metaphors in describing the positive sensation of piercing is no accident either. In many ways, the liberalization of sexual attitudes in recent decades has involved the embrace of sexual pleasure (Califia 1994: 23-24). By regarding the physical pleasure derived from sex as positive rather than scandalous, individuals were able to explore and to affirm their sexual identities. Sexuality and the pursuit of sexual pleasure were - to a degree - no longer hidden; and people's feelings about sex and pleasure no longer as inhibited as they were in previous decades.

Likewise, a similar process is at work here. When Morgan describes the "build-up and release of energy" as being inherently sexual, she means that like sex, pleasure is obtained through an exploration of physical sensation. The sensation might be painful, but for these piercees that is no reason to avoid it. Sensation is what is sought after - and the euphoria which ensues is worth risking the pain for. Pain, then, is a physical sensation which some piercees do not feel as much inhibition in pursuing - either privately, through self-piercing, or publicly through a commercial piercer. As long as no permanent damage results, why should they not experiment with the experience and sensation of pain, they

argue.

For these people, of course, piercing is not a mindless pursuit of pain. If it was, easier methods could be found - and have been, for those who merely wish to injure themselves: cutting with knives, for instance. Piercing, on the other hand, involves very conscious and deliberate planning. It can also be rather costly. But the planning, cost, and mental preparation all contribute toward affirming the piercee's personal commitment toward exploring their own boundaries and abilities to deal with - and find pleasure in - pain and sensation.

This is demonstrated uniquely well in the case of Earl. He has done self-piercings as well, and has indeed performed one of his genital frenum piercings on himself. In the following account, he was describing to me the important role played by mental preparing in piercing, and likened it metaphorically to an S&M encounter.

Earl: ...and S&M from both sides, both the dominant and the submissive, there's a lot of mental control of themselves involved in the situation...never interrupt a dominant while they're working and whatever you do, moreso than interrupting a dom, never interrupt a sub, because there's a certain mindset, there's an altered state of consciousness that you achieve where this is no longer painful. Right? In my experience initially the first few times you get struck can be excruciatingly painful but as it starts - and it starts off, generally speaking, if somebody's good - they'll start off fairly slow with the occasional shock but after a point I can honestly say there's not that much in the way of pain. It's just incredibly intense localized sensation. I can't even call it pain after a point. And that's an altered state of consciousness.

In an S&M scenario, the "dominant" refers to the individual in control of the

situation; and the "submissive" the one who surrenders themselves - often to a pre-determined degree - to the "dominant." While the dominant might in some cases derive a degree of mental satisfaction from their position of control, it is the submissive who experiences the brunt of physical sensation: being whipped, struck, or whatever else is involved in the particular scenario. Likewise, Earl suggested a similar relationship between piercer and piercee. The piercer is in control, and the piercee is experiencing the physical sensation of the piercing. They are creating or enacting a relationship of physical control and physical submission, which is in a sense a sort of double drama: physical contact (or in the S&M context, enacted violence) is central to making the dramatized relationship work; but on the other hand this is precisely what is expected and therefore understood. Central to the relationship therefore is the need to act this out well, and meet the dramatized requirements for the scenario; otherwise it is too easily experienced and seen as fake. Both piercer and S&M dominant have important dramatized roles to fulfil in order to make for a satisfying relationship between piercer dominant and piercee submissive.

What Earl is describing in the particular situation he quoted above, then, is the process by which he transforms an erstwhile painful experience into pleasurable sensation. Concentration is paramount; and by focusing on the situation at hand, he is able to mentally transform the pain into a positive experience. He emphasizes that this is an "altered state of consciousness": were he experiencing physical sensations as he

normally would, he would find them excruciatingly painful; but by entering into this altered state of consciousness he transforms them into "just incredibly intense localized sensation." And that intense sensation is what he is after. This mental process is the key to any pleasure which may come of the situation; and he notes the danger of interrupting the submissive, lest they lose the control they are exerting over their mental state of consciousness.

Earl applies the same mental and psychological approach to his piercings. Ever curious, however, he found himself wondering what would happen if he did not prepare himself for a piercing. With the consent of a piercer - at a private venue, not in a commercial shop, it should be noted - he tried it one day with one of his genital frenum piercings.

Earl: For a couple of my piercings I've prepared myself mentally for the piercing and it's the same type of experience. And in the case of one of my piercings I specifically did not mentally prepare myself and that just plain hurt! That was like nasty! Right? But it was a conscious effort not to [prepare himself]. All right? And like the piercer said 'Do you want me to count or anything else?' And it's like 'No, do it whenever you feel like.' And I purposely didn't prepare myself for it. And in doing that you specifically understand that this is more than just enjoyment of pain. It's enjoyment of sensation. But in an altered mindset. It's like full of meditation, almost.

Realizing the importance of mental preparation, here Earl tried a piercing without preparing himself. The piercer offered to count - as a means of allowing Earl to get himself psychologically prepared for the moment when she would drive in the needle.

But he asked her instead to do it with no warning. And just as he expected, the experience was not pleasurable: "that just plain hurt! That was like nasty!"

Earl sums up a key point when he comments that "this is more than just enjoyment of pain. It's enjoyment of sensation." The intensity of sensation is what some piercees seek, and the intensity of that sensation results from their own "altered mindset," as Earl put it. It is their ability to control their mental approach and reaction to an erstwhile painful act which allows them to transform it into pleasure. Pain is mentally disassembled and reduced into sensation, and sensation then re-constructed into pleasure. Earl's "altered mindset" is perhaps another way of describing a heightened degree of self-control. This process is taken to greater heights still when the piercee must achieve a degree of self-control sufficient not only to allow themselves to be pierced, but even moreso to pierce themselves. Earl performed a genital piercing on himself - in a private venue, and under the supervision of another piercer - and this is how he described the experience.

Earl: And piercing yourself is another thing entirely! Right? Because there's a whole bunch of psychological trauma you got to get over before you can consider doing it. Because the human body does not generally let you inflict pain on it - your own instincts and reflexes, you have to beat them down in order to do it...the piercer in question found it kind of amusing - now I don't even recall doing this but - and she said all of the sudden my facial expression changed, and there was like complete focus and I was mumbling under my breath like stream of consciousness of "all right-line this up-make sure this is going in straight-oh man-that's awfully painful-going through-yeah-just got to-" and I kept up a running commentary of what was going on in my head when I did this, but I was

quite literally in a meditative state. When I pierced myself it was not till I was done piercing - it was about a minute or two after I was pierced - that it hit me. The actual piercing itself I cannot say I consciously felt. Right? It was an altered state of consciousness. Right? Were I to do it again, I might consider allowing myself to feel more of it.

Earl's "altered state of consciousness" is demonstrated very powerfully in the case of this self-piercing. Especially noteworthy are his comments at the end - "Were I to do it again, I might consider allowing myself to feel more of it." What is implicit in this statement is the message of control he is suggesting. He calls his mindset an "altered state of consciousness," almost as though it were something he accidentally found himself in. But there is nothing abstract about it: it is Earl himself who is exerting control over himself. Perhaps a more useful method of considering it would be a heightened state of self-control. Ultimately he is very clear on who is in charge - he believes that largely what helped him through the piercing was his ability to not let himself feel it: "The actual piercing itself I cannot say I consciously felt." Furthermore, that ability is something he feels he can regulate as need be: "I might consider allowing myself to feel more of it."

To some piercees, then, piercing encompasses two very important roles. First of all, it is an exertion of control over themselves. By mentally forcing themselves into an "altered state of consciousness," they are simultaneously focusing themselves into a heightened state of self-control, which is the key to their ability to reduce pain to sensation and transform sensation into pleasure.

Secondly, it is a conscious embrace of sensation, and a means of deriving pleasure

through intensity of sensation. It is unique in that it involves the manipulation of what would in mainstream society be considered negative sensation - or pain - and transformation of that sensation into positive pleasure. By exploring their boundaries of pain, piercees like Sonia, Eileen, and Earl are exploring the boundaries of their ability to transform pain into pleasure, by reducing the experiential factor into the channelling of intense, albeit neutral, physical sensation. Sexual metaphors are key to understanding their approach to this: sexual pleasure having positive connotations in popular mainstream culture, sexual imagery is used to convey the sense of pleasure they derive from this intense sensation. The analogy goes deeper than that, though. Sex too involves a great deal of mental preparation, even though popularly it may have largely physical connotations. A highly anticipated sexual encounter while in a state of physical arousal lies in sharp contrast to rape or sexual assault. The former involves personal commitment to the experience, coupled with mental preparation, resulting in physical pleasure. The latter, on the other hand, involves violation of person and psychological trauma. Similarly, while a person like Earl derives great pleasure from a piercing he has committed himself to and which he has mentally prepared himself for, he would not find pleasure in somebody accosting him on the street and jabbing a needle into his genitals. The pleasure of piercing, as he pointed out, is not "enjoyment of pain. It's enjoyment of sensation."

Yet given this, why do some people choose pain as the means by which to achieve

pleasure? Why not adopt some less strenuous, less risky means by which to obtain physical pleasure and sensation?

The answer to this returns us to the issue of identity. While choosing piercing and pain as the route by which to achieve pleasure is ultimately a personal choice, it also acts to distinguish people like Earl, Eileen, and Sonia from the mainstream who do not. It is a unique means by which to obtain pleasure, and choosing it aids in distinguishing them from those about them, who do not: from those who wince in shock, horror, pain or astonishment when they hear and imagine what piercees like those described above do to themselves. The pursuit of pleasure through intensity of sensation can most certainly be a goal unto itself; for the people I spoke with, however, it also plays an important social role. It is a non-mainstream pursuit of pleasure, and is often hard for those versed in mainstream pleasure pursuits to understand. This however allows for the construction of unique social contexts and practices on the part of those who choose to practice it, as the following section will explore. This is of course not the primary motivation to seek pleasure through pain: it is, however, an important aspect. As a uniquely distinguishing approach to the pursuit of pleasure, it can serve an important role in the construction of one's sexual - as well as social - identity.

These factors are essential - as Earl pointed out - to understanding the value which S&M experiences convey to their practitioners. Having examined some piercees' exploration of pleasure and pain in the piercing context from the individual, personal

perspective, I shall in the following section examine similar ideas as they relate to more formalized S&M sexuality. By "formalized" I am referring to more stereotypical S&M practice as an interactive experience between multiple partners or practitioners. The remainder of this chapter will focus on a case study of Sharon, the woman introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Much of this will involve a lengthy examination of S&M sexuality. While this may on a superficial level seem unrelated to body piercing, I would argue that it is not at all unrelated. S&M sexuality, like piercing, involves the focused pursuit of sensation for a variety of purposes. Both S&M and piercing involve this process of embracing sensation - sometimes looked upon as pain - as pleasure and as something positive. Moreover, piercing often plays a significant part in S&M scenarios; it serves an important practical role in achieving the mental and psychological aims of S&M scenarios, as we shall see. Above all, however, it was the people I spoke with - such as Sharon - who consciously drew strong connections between body piercing and S&M sexuality: they saw both of these things intimately related, and used them in combination to achieve the various aims which they discussed with me. Our discussions provided some fascinating insight into S&M sexuality and the role which piercing - and all the ideas, identities, and meanings associated with it which we have explored heretofore - can play in that world.

Case Study: Sharon - Discovering Piercing and S&M

One day, about six months before I began my fieldwork, I was at the community radio station where I work when a young woman walked in through the door. She was new to Newfoundland, had just transferred to Memorial University following brief stints at two mainland universities, and was interested in volunteering. This twenty-six year-old woman's name was Sharon, and while she did not really have any idea where her academic interests lay, she had a fair bit of experience working at other community radio stations across the country. I chatted for a while with this rather plainspoken young woman with very short-cut dark hair and no other truly striking features. I noted that we shared some tastes in various forms of experimental music, satisfied myself that she seemed sensible enough, and enrolled her in an upcoming radio training course. She caught on quickly, passed her radio training exams, and took a very late-night on-air shift. I therefore saw fairly little of her from that point on, although we bumped into each other occasionally and had brief chats on rather mundane, everyday topics. She remained a reliable volunteer, although after not too long she stopped attending university and went to work full-time instead.

Several months later, during one of my interviews with Earl, we got to talking about piercing and sexuality, namely its relationship to sadomasochism (S&M). Suddenly, he very excitedly related some details from a conversation he had had with a

woman at a downtown bar several weeks earlier, and told me I should track her down, since she would provide some invaluable discussion on the topic. After several minutes of unsuccessfully trying to remember her name, he made a last-ditch effort of going through his wallet, and at the bottom of his wallet he found a crumpled-up piece of paper with her name and phone number on it. He handed it to me. The name and phone number were Sharon's.

I proceeded to call her, and left a message on her machine with a few brief details about my project, and my interest in speaking with her. I mentioned her name had been given to me as somebody who would be interested in talking about, among other things, S&M and piercing and sexuality.

What ensued was a few days of phone tag, which abruptly ended one afternoon when she ambushed me as I got off a downtown bus. She seemed very taken aback, and somewhat upset, that I had been given those details about her sexual interests: she demanded to know who had told me and why. I told her, figuring that given Earl's very open nature he would not mind, that she would probably find out anyhow, and that withholding information from her would not make for forging a very good basis for future discussion. After I told her in greater depth about the nature of my project her concerns seemed to dissipate, and during the course of the more in-depth conversations we later had she told me she was glad I had gotten in touch with her. Over the course of the discussions we were to have, I often thought with some surprise and irony at how I

had when I first met her written her off as a pretty status-quo, far from radical person. In fact, the very manner in which we were "introduced," for the purposes of my project - where it took a third-party whom we both knew to tell me that this woman I had spoken to on several occasions and had so misjudged would be someone I should speak to regarding my thesis - is an interesting reflection on the manner in which alternate forms not only of body decoration but also of sexuality manage to co-exist beneath the surface of otherwise quite status quo, mainstream exteriors.

Sharon grew up in Ottawa, and has held an interest in body piercing for several years. She had always been fascinated by piercings, she explained to me. Her first piercings at the age of eight were her ears. Four years later, at age twelve, she added a second set of piercings to her ears, and subsequently added several more ear piercings which she did herself - she had seven ear piercings in total. Then she wanted a nose ring, but being heavily involved in sports, she put it off as she would have been required to avoid sports for several weeks to let it heal. At age eighteen, however, she was no longer as actively involved in sports, and decided to get pierced; her mother was very opposed to the idea (her mother, Sharon explained to me, saw things like piercing and tattoos as a practice of "lower-class" society). Nevertheless, she went ahead and got pierced. On her birthday, she and a friend went to a piercing salon: her friend had her bellybutton pierced while Sharon had her eyebrow pierced - "It's a real just aesthetic piercing, it has no purpose whatsoever" (by purpose she is referring to sexual function, which is now one of

her primary interests in piercing). Some time later, however, her skin reacted to the soldering on the piece of jewellery and she had to have it removed. In the interim, however, she had also had her nose and lip pierced. She then also obtained a piercing in either nipple and a clitoral hood piercing. "Once you get one you're just, like, more more more!" she explained. "And I'm currently considering getting my nipples pierced again, like below the piercings that are in them right now."

Sharon explained that she recalls her interest in sexuality as beginning with her reading erotica as a youth before she really knew what interested her sexually (this brought to mind Eileen's similar account of her childhood). In her pursuit of literary erotica, she eventually stumbled across writings on S&M and, as she put it, realized that "I now know a name for what I like. I now know this is what I want."

For a time, however, she did not know how to actively pursue her interests. Eventually she wound up in Victoria, and found a male friend who was interested in S&M as well, and who had had some limited experience with it. They came across some sexual and S&M personal ads in a local paper, and challenged each other to answer one of them: she selected five ads and he had to choose one of the five to answer; he also did the same for her. She described the experience which followed.

Sharon: So I answered one and it was not a really good experience. Like the person...just like for piercing and tattoos, people are into it for different reasons....people talk of old school and new school - some people, like new school, are more spiritually oriented: much more discussion.

negotiation is a big word, negotiation beforehand and aftercare, like calling up and making sure they're okay. And other people are into it purely for sex or domination. And the person with whom I talked with and met and actually played with...he was an older man, older white man, heterosexual: all buttons, warning lights go off. For me. Because his thing was very much into, he wanted to be pure dominant, and the submissive's only pleasure would be just from being submissive. Where[as] a lot of new guard is mutual satisfaction of fantasy. Which is what I was into. And I'm into like the psychological debates...like, the mindfuck, pardon my French.

So her first foray into S&M or dominant submissive sexuality was an unpleasant and disappointing one, and she was forced to extricate herself from the situation as quickly as she could (she was, however, proud both that she had the courage to follow through with what many people would have told her was a dangerous undertaking - meeting a total stranger for a sexual encounter - and also that she was able to get out of the situation safely). She draws a distinction between what she considers (much popular literature on S&M draws a similar distinction as well) "new school" - "more spiritually oriented, much more discussion, negotiation is a big word, negotiation beforehand and aftercare, like calling up making sure they're okay" - and "old guard" S&M - "into it purely for sex or domination." The individual she met with, through a mutual challenge with a friend to answer a personal ad, was very much interested in the latter, which she also stereotyped as "older man, older white man, heterosexual." Her interest lay more in her so-called "new school" S&M: "...new guard is mutual satisfaction of fantasy. Which is what I was into."

She did not give up on her interest as a result of this first unsatisfactory

experience, however. Her next expedition into the world of S&M sexuality was a much more positive one. In the summer of 1997 she attended her first "Burning Man Festival." This is a festival which takes place annually in the deserts of the southern U.S. and which, among other things, explores through direct participatory experience a variety of aspects of more extreme radical culture (it is named after the effigy which is constructed over the course of the festival and then communally burned at the end, which is meant to symbolize in part the burning and destruction of social and cultural inhibitions which seems to be the focus of the week-long festival). Needless to say, sexuality is one of the many facets of contemporary culture which is explored at the festival, and it was here that Sharon was first truly immersed in S&M sexuality.

She drove down to the festival's desert location with a few friends, and as they parked the car, they met a "large, beautiful black woman with a sun hat, just baking out in the sun." They offered her some water, and she introduced herself as Madam Alesandrya, from the Temple of Atonement. The Temple, she explained to them, was a Spanish Inquisition-themed BDSM [bondage-dominance sado-masochism] camp. The Madam invited them to camp with the other Temple members. Sharon and her friends happened to have brought the material for an altar, so they agreed to provide an altar in exchange for camping with the Temple. What followed was in many ways an initiatory experience for her.

Sharon: That's where I had my sort of initiation. I guess, into like active [BDSM] culture. The partner with whom I'd been gave me a really good present. This was towards the end of our relationship too, it was really strange...and he, on one night he got Madam to tie him up - I didn't bring those pictures, actually - tie him up, gag him, blindfold, and then teach me how to do it. Yeah. It was amazing. And he went for like an hour. Like which is an amazingly long time. And it was like flogging, you know, like with the wide leather straps, like many-thonged whips, and just like arousal and like that was my first experience. But...the next day when I saw my lover's back, I was so, I don't believe - this is the person I love more than anything else, you know, gave me this amazing gift of himself, you know, and this trust - and his back, he's a skinny boy, and his back was just covered in blood vessels and marks and it was really disturbing. You know, I was really, 'am I some kind of sick perverted person, that I would hurt the person I love more than anything and do this to them?' It really disturbed me, and that's I think one of the good things about like BDSM, is like a lot of people use it to work things out and like talk about it because it brings a lot of stuff to the surface, if you're always pushing boundaries, you know, and it brings a lot of experiences and problems to the surface so you always have to - like aftercare, you know, is really important - and so we talked about that and my friend made a really good point, you know: if he had ever said 'Stop, ow, you're hurting me,' I would have. You know, I never would have hurt him. And the marks are just a totem of that expression of love. You know, and the marks go away, but the totem, you know the marks, the bruises are a totem of that experience. So I thought that was a really interesting way to look at it. And it is the way I look at it now, you know. If you leave like a strap mark on someone, or a hickey even, you know it's just an expression...

Discussion: From theory to reality

While her overall experience, by the end of it, was a positive one, it also troubled her in many respects. She was disturbed by her ability to inflict the bloody physical wounds she saw the next day on somebody she loved. Much in the style of this "new guard," "mutual satisfaction" S&M she talks about, however, her partner reassured her on

these points, emphasizing that that pain - the physical sight of which was so disturbing to her - had been pleasurable for him, and also reminding her that if it had become unpleasant for him, he trusted her to stop upon his request. This was a lesson she was to bear with her in the future relationships she discusses further on, and a point which is important to note. It seems that in the pursuit of and experimentation with new experiences - experiences which are not socially sanctioned by the mainstream society and in some cases are either socially or legally forbidden - a sense of morality is maintained by adhering to the notion of consensuality as the supreme ethic. When social tradition and popular "common sense" is set aside, to the degree that notions like "pain," "bondage," "torture" or "sadoomasochism" are divorced from the popular connotations which would define them as morally "wrong," supreme authority is conveyed on the individual to determine when experience - no longer intrinsically positive or negative, pain or pleasure, but defined as such by the individual experiencing it - becomes undesirable and he or she wishes it to cease. This is partially what Sharon means when she refers to "pushing boundaries." This idea of "pushing boundaries" is an important one for her. It arose several more times in the course of our discussions, and will be explored more deeply further on. But what is interesting here is that when boundaries are pushed in the manner Sharon describes, it also forces a much more fundamental re-evaluation and exploration of one's self and motivations: of one's ethical viewpoints and actions. She said, while recalling how disturbed she felt at the physical injuries she had inflicted on

her partner, that "...one of the good reasons about BDSM, is like a lot of people use it to work things out and like talk about it because it brings a lot of stuff to the surface, if you're always pushing boundaries, you know, and it brings a lot of experiences and problems to the surface." In other words, while it is one thing to discuss things like torture, pain, bondage and dominance in an academic and theoretical manner, enacting S&M scenarios makes otherwise theoretical power relationships manifest, and forces the participants to examine and evaluate their feelings and thoughts while in those situations. When Sharon looks back the next day and realizes she tied up her partner and whipped him until his back was bloody, she is forced to consider what this meant for her: why she did it, how she felt, and how to reconcile her actions with her overall moral paradigm. Her partner helps her in this process, providing support to prevent her from losing perspective in what is obviously a very emotionally delicate situation.

Sharon's account of her exploration of S&M sexuality demonstrates clearly the progression of her interests, and of her participation in that world. For her, S&M sexuality grew from a personal, private interest she developed from reading erotica in her childhood, to semi-private experimentation with a partner (when they challenged each other to answer the personal ads). With the Burning Man Festival, however, it developed into public participation in S&M sexuality. As much as an initiatory experience, it was also very much a 'coming out' experience as well. While exploring herself inwardly through her experiences with flogging her partner, she was simultaneously coming out

publicly to those about her, most notably in the final communal experience in the Temple at the end of the Festival (described below).

Another interesting point is her idea that the physical bruises and scars resulting from S&M activity act in a way as a 'totem': "the marks are just a totem of that expression of love...the bruises are a totem of that experience." This was not the first time I had heard this notion from one of my informants. Earl, while speaking about his own experience with S&M spoke about the usefulness of physical scars and marks as "totems" and personal markers or symbols. He was speaking about the virtues of scarification - the practice of intentionally producing patterns of scars on one's body - and commented jokingly that while he found the idea exciting, he already had a number of scars he had obtained unintentionally. He was, however, proud of his scars, and explained that he could tell me the story behind each one. To prove it, he recounted the story behind his favourite scar - an impressively huge scar on the side of his neck. He got it one night at a local pub, at the hands - or teeth - of a close female friend of his. They were celebrating her last night in the province before moving away. It was also, coincidentally, the night he and his current girlfriend first got together. While "joking" and "horsing" around the pub, he explained, his departing friend

Earl: ...was after biting me on the side of the neck fairly hard enough to leave an impressive mark. My girlfriend was after doing the same, at which point I said 'Man, she got sharper teeth than you do!' At which point she actually bit into the side of my neck and tore it open. Actually drew

blood and left a gash on the side of my throat. And in a really bizarre way it was a gift, because she was going away for what could be forever, and she was very much an S&M type personality, and it held a lot of meaning for me. And it still does, the scar on the side of my neck. And it was left on purpose. I made sure in the process of healing that it would scar. That I would have that for the rest of my life. And similarly on my, my girlfriend, on the other side of my neck, and unfortunately this only lasted a year, but it's impressive enough that it lasted a year - for a year I had a perfect circle of toothmarks. You could have taken a dental record from the side of my throat...those two markings have a great spiritual meaning for me personally. And some people might view that as sick and twisted, but it did...it's incredibly sensual. And it was an incredible gift to be given.

While the sight of blood and bruises the day after she flogged her partner disturbed Sharon at first, she came to realize that he saw the marks as a sort of gift, in that it reminded him both of the sexual energy expressed between them the night it happened, as well as the trust he placed in her when he allowed her to do it. Similarly Earl views the scars left on his neck - one by a close friend who was leaving Newfoundland, the other by the woman he was to develop a relationship with - as gifts and symbols of the love expressed between himself and these two women.

In both cases their value as "gifts" lies in their symbolic value to the recipient. They symbolize a number of things: the shared trust between the person who gave the mark and the person who received it, as well as the self-control exerted by the recipient of the mark at the time it was given; moreover, they serve as a semi-private affirmation of identity to those aware of their meaning. While the mark or bruise would be indistinguishable from an accidental mark to a passer-by - and can often be easily hidden

beneath a shirt or collar - to those who know how it was obtained it serves equally as a secret marker of shared identity. It is a physical marker of all these things, which in Sharon's partner's case would heal but which in Earl's case he specifically ensured would not, so that the marker would become permanent. They act in much the same way piercings do for some piercees - again, as permanent markers of trust, of self-control, and of shared identity. Earl and Sharon's partner, obviously, went to greater lengths in obtaining their physical markers: still, they can for some people both serve the same role.

Sharon went on to describe the culmination of her experience at the Burning Man Festival: an introduction to BDSM culture which was, as she points out, both "headfirst" and "intense."

Sharon: Okay, the last night, it was funny because ha ha we brought this altar; the last night I ended up serving as the altar. Yeah. It was most bizarre. Like when, my introduction to BDSM subculture ever, it was headfirst, like so intense. It was public, I was on this half circle bench, like naked on my back, all public, but not one picture was taken. Like basically someone took a picture and then Madam said no more pictures. And twelve people, like she had twelve people on me at once, like hands and stuff, and then she just like played, inspected the piercings, you know, she definitely stimulated the piercings with the whippings, just like talking, until she, it was almost like - she's a witch, right - and it was almost like she was working a spell, right? She brought like everyone in on the same time, and it was almost like she brought like a crowd to orgasm. It was crazy. It was really wild.

From Burning Man to Newfoundland

Armed with this very positive, albeit very headfirst, introduction to S&M

"subculture"². she continued her immersion into this world. Returning to Victoria, she began to participate in "play parties" - discreetly advertised gatherings involving sexual play. The ones she attended were all-female play parties, as she described to me.

Sharon: So I went to a few play parties, and I find, like with all women it's very, it's a very different vibe. I guess. It's all very supportive, a lot of the women are lesbians, or come from abusive backgrounds, so it's all very much about negotiation and talking and like it's really fun. You know, it's not, you know, I mean when you're in scene [enacting a sexual scenario], people play roles, you know it's all acting out, but I don't know, it was just a really good supportive atmosphere. There was a couple of women who actually operated, who were professional dominants, you know, so they - everyone's into teaching other people and bringing each other along. Renting hot tubs, and hanging out, you know, it was really fun. So you know when I did Hallowe'en, last Hallowe'en, I had a friend who wanted to bring in the New Year, like the Celtic New Year, by doing a mock death ritual. So I helped him out with that. Yeah. We had this like spider web. I was dressed as spiderwoman, and we had him up on the spider web, and it was all very much, like he wanted to let go of everything. So we went through that and it was very very much like both of us coming public, right, because we had this huge party that they had at their house, with like people that we didn't know and like there was hundreds of people there and we had this small room and it was public up to a certain point, and then I asked everyone to leave and then it was just us working. Him, myself, and his lover. And, but I mean it was - everyone knew what we were doing, and both of us sort of like 'okay this is what we're at, this is what we're doing, and we don't care.'

She began frequenting these 'play parties' in Victoria while she was still in a relationship with her ex-boyfriend, and stressed that her interest in the parties was purely experiential and experimental, sexually speaking. She said neither herself - nor, she added, her partner - saw them as a threat to their relationship: indeed, he would often give

her the admission money to attend the parties. This is important to bear in mind while seeking to understand the notion of sexuality which she expresses: her interest and experimentation with sex (in these particular situations) is much more sexually functional than integral to an emotional relationship or attachment with somebody. As she pointed out earlier, she sees it more as part of her 'pushing boundaries' than as part of forging an emotional relationship (this point will be explained in greater depth further on).

The episode at Hallowe'en, she explains, continued even further her "coming out" process: while her experiences at Burning Man took place publicly, they still occurred in a community of sympathetic participants. At the Hallowe'en party, however, not all the partygoers were necessarily sympathetic to her S&M interests; it was perhaps more of a risk to undertake (albeit at the request of the person throwing the party). In a sense moving into the role which the Madam played for her during the Burning Man Festival, she allowed her ritual to be observed as public spectacle up to a certain point, before asking everyone to leave and continuing in private with her friend and his lover.

A bit less than a year after her first major foray into S&M sexuality at the Burning Man Festival, she moved to St. John's, in the spring of 1998. Here, too, she sought to continue her journey of self-exploration. She commented that when she arrived here she was a lot more open about her interest in S&M sexuality than was perhaps wise. I asked her why she decided to be so open about it here.

Sharon: I was looking for what kind of, to see what kind of S&M community was here, you know. Someone I met - the person who told you about me [Earl] - I was like "Yeah! Let's talk! You're the first person I've talked to who's open about this and interested in it...and is not just 'I think there's places you can go if you find a partner who's into that...you can just do it, you two'"...with these women's play parties that I experienced there's also that mutual friendship and pursuit of these states that don't rely on being in a relationship and don't rely on casual sex, you know. Because a lot of it, like genital play doesn't have to come into it, you know. *It's not all about orgasm. I mean that has a lot to do with trust.* And so I was sort of looking to find a community where to develop those friendships and the respect and trust and play, but not have all the politics of like, 'oh, relationship, la la la.' I mean hey, yeah, if you find a lover who's into it, sure. But I haven't found it yet.

Discussion: Relationships of power, relationships of trust

Casting out for an S&M community in St. John's, and looking to continue her journey of sexual experimentation without the "politics" of a relationship, she did eventually meet a partner interested in experimenting and enacting S&M scenarios with her.

Sharon: In St. John's I met...this one person...I met this person through a mutual friend who'd been into it for years. So like we played a few times...but I had never, I don't, he's an older white male, again, you know, triggers all those things that I don't trust him. There's that trust thing. He's very sexually motivated. And he doesn't play the head games. I don't know, see I'm into it for different reasons...

It is interesting to examine this relationship she was currently involved in. Like her first - unsatisfactory - encounter in Victoria, she characterizes this individual as "an older white male," and again this "triggers all those things I don't trust him." He also

seems to fit into her "old guard" category of S&M, being "very sexually motivated." She said she was into it for "different reasons," and I asked her what those reasons were.

Sharon: Well it's definitely about sex. Like sex is a huge part of it. I mean it doesn't work if you're not turned on. I think that's the trick, you know, you have the head games, but...if you aren't turned on just by the situation and the person and the talk then it doesn't have to get into genital play and stuff unless you trust them. I don't know... There was that trust and intimacy I guess, that I couldn't reach with this person...like [this] person with whom I was playing with a bit here, like I have no problem topping him, that's fine, I just won't ever bottom for him, right? Because that's like, for me, you know I can maintain control of the situation and maintain power in the situation by - if he's setting the limits, I can respect his limits, you know. But I don't trust him to respect mine. But if I'm topping I'm in control basically of the situation and I can do whatever I want.

Sharon's hesitation and caution in regards to her current partner rises from her lack of trust in him. She stressed that she was happy to "top" him - or play the dominant role in sexual S&M scenarios - since she trusted herself to stop when he wanted her to. However she was not willing to "bottom" - or take the submissive role - since she did not trust him to obey her wishes if she wanted him to stop or not to do something.

The issue of trust is therefore an essential one to consider, and Sharon spoke a great deal about the issues of trust which S&M relationships incur. The issues of trust which arise in S&M scenarios are analogous in many ways to similar issues which arise from piercing. Just as the submissive in an S&M situation must trust the dominant to look out for their welfare and to carefully provide them with the sensation and experience they desire, so is a similar trust placed in the piercer, who is responsible for the welfare of the

pierce and must carefully ensure they provide not only a successful piercing (as some of the piercees have indicated in previous chapters, the piercing jewellery and aesthetic itself is often secondary to the experience of being pierced) but also a satisfactory experience and sensation. I mentioned this to Sharon, noting that it seemed many people's fear of piercing arose from a fear of putting one's body in the hands of a piercer, and a fear of trusting them to drive a needle through, for instance, one's genitals. She agreed, adding that she considers the most integral part of this intricate relationship to lie not so much in placing trust in the other person, but in placing trust in one's own self. She elaborated on this in the context of S&M.

Sharon: Yeah, it's much a matter I think of having that trust in yourself...it's not so much being afraid of other people and of putting your trust in other people - which is part of it, you know - but you have to be able to trust yourself and trust your own judgement. And like trust yourself that you can go there. Which is why negotiation aftercare is really good, because a lot of people go there and then it brings up all this stuff, you know, and they have to talk about it. Like after my experience with my ex-lover, you know, with his back and all I was just like 'Oh! We went there, and now I have to deal with this.' You know, and for some people it might bring up a spanking or a scolding that they had when they were a kid that they never thought would come up. You know? Or the aspect of being blindfolded. Some people have different boundaries. Some people will not be blindfolded, because of claustrophobia. Or some people do not want any genital play, because that's not what they're into. Or some people do not want, you don't touch them in that one spot. You don't scold them. You don't, they don't want to be punished - you can play any way that you want, but never as it comes as a form of punishment.

When she refers to "negotiation," Sharon is describing the process by which - in

her "new guard" S&M - the dominant and submissive will discuss as equals, before beginning to enact the desired scenario, how far they are each willing to go. They discuss what they like and do not like, and what they each seek to get out of the scenario they are about to act out. Consensuality is the key to the relationship they build through S&M, and like any relationship it is built on trust. It is consensuality - based on trust - which may eventually lead to their mutual satisfaction, and which may allow their relationship to deepen as they take greater risks, trusting each other more, to push their boundaries further and further. Pre-negotiated boundaries could be as basic, she notes, as the submissive not wanting to be scolded - they might be okay with being whipped or beaten, but do not want to add the emotional, psychological element of scolding to that. Or they might not want to be blindfolded, or to have any genital contact. In many ways the lack of an emotional relationship underpinning the S&M relationship might very well aid this process: there are no popular 'relationship'-related assumptions or presuppositions infiltrating their scenario, beyond what they very objectively negotiate prior to beginning.

"Safe-wording" is a key concept in this situation as well - just in case something happens, or an unexpected situation or problem arises, both agree on a word or phrase to use to end the scenario. For instance, the submissive may find yelling or screaming in pain or terror to be part of the desired scenario, and the dominant might expect that to happen as a matter of course. The "safe-word," therefore, is the means by which the dominant knows that something is wrong, or a boundary has been reached, and upon use

of the safe-word they will immediately end the scenario and return to their roles as equals.

Some of the negotiated "don't's" of the scenario might be based on unsavoury or negative past experiences, and to this end, Sharon points out, she believes S&M scenarios can in some cases be therapeutic in dealing with these experiences. By enacting a negative experience from their past - but this time in a controlled and trusting environment in which the submissive can end the situation when it becomes too much for them simply by using their safe-word - the submissive can in a sense exert control over experiences which may have proven uncontrollable in their past, or attempt to deal with situations they perhaps never had a chance to deal with and fully explore in the past. This is where the notion of "aftercare" arises: once the situation has ended, the participants do not simply leave each other and forget about it - leaving potentially traumatic memories or fears hanging - but they discuss and explore each others' thoughts and feelings about what they just experienced, bridging the gap between fantasy and reality. Of course, this does not usually happen in a day; as the relationship progresses and the trust deepens, deeper and more dangerous boundaries might be broached. This aspect of an S&M relationship - like the physical aspects described earlier - involves not only a trust in the other person, but a trust in one's own self, as Sharon noted.

Sharon: And it's a matter I think of trusting yourself, and like that's what I mean I guess when I push my own boundaries, is seeing how far I can trust

myself to push myself. Which is why I answered that ad [in Victoria], you know, like it's scary but I trust myself enough to handle this and to be able to see what goes on there because I know where I'm at...It was a matter of seeing how far I had trust in myself to push myself that way...I know the way I perceived that situation and the way it went down is that that was, I don't know, a moment of strength for me, you know. Like I did something to which I was challenged, and challenged myself by doing it...I mean you don't know unless you take the challenge, right? Like, for every risk you risk falling, right?...I think that's part of the endorphin rush and like, by pushing yourself any way...you're always pushing yourself. And I think that's where a lot of people get that high. They're like, oh! I did this! Woo-hoo!

Sharon's comments reminded me much of Morgan, who in Chapter Two described the sense of strength and empowerment she found she developed through her piercings. Similarly, Sharon found a sense of empowerment which endowed her S&M experiences with added meaning. That sense of strength arose from the risk inherent in many of the activities she involved herself in, and in challenging the natural fear she experienced in those situations. The way Sharon describes her experiences connects in a number of respects with what I encountered in terms of peoples' perceptions of piercing. She describes the ubiquitous "endorphin rush" which Sonia, Earl, and others praised so highly as one of the important things they got from piercing. And even though in the piercing context that "rush" they describe is sometimes attributed by piercees to the physiological results of piercing, it can not be ignored that an equally important role is played by the element of risk - in both piercing and potentially dangerous S&M scenarios. The significance of risk and experimentation to piercees was described in the

previous chapter: here it is carried further still, and utilized by people like Sharon in combination with other avenues of risk and experimentation: namely S&M. In the previous section we dealt with the aspect of piercing which leads piercees to experiment and explore the way their body reacts to pain, in a manner outside of the mainstream socially sanctioned methods by which people normally pursue pleasurable sensations. Likewise in the S&M scenarios discussed here: the risk - which created the fear - arose not necessarily from the fear of the other person, nor from the activity itself. Rather, what she was facing was her own fear, a socially-derived fear which told her it was wrong and dangerous to be tied up and whipped by a stranger. Or conversely fear of herself - again derived from popular consciousness, which tells her it is wrong to tie a stranger up and whip them. It is only through an implicit trust in herself - a trust that she will not abuse the situation of power she takes on as a dominant - that she is able to overcome that fear, and emerge, in her mind, the stronger for it. This is paralleled too when she acts as a submissive: in this case, she must also trust herself to "handle this" and to "know where I'm at."

These issues of trust and fear are woven in a mesh of power relationships which must also be explored: indeed, it is in issues of the use and negotiation of power that both fear and trust arise in these cases. As a dominant Sharon must use her "power" wisely, but almost paradoxically any power she has in that situation is conferred power only, and she must be willing to concede her power when her submissive requests her to. In this

scenario part of what she must face is her own fear of the immense trust her submissive places in her: her fear that she might not live up to that trust, or might not have the presence of mind to concede her power when her submissive wants her to. Likewise, as a submissive it is she in many ways who confers power on the dominant, and yet she wields ultimate power - in a consensual relationship - by holding the final say on what is too much and on when the dominant is to stop. Sharon feels an immense responsibility as a dominant: while she finds it hard to trust her current partner and therefore act as a submissive with him, she also finds it hard to trust herself to live up to the expectations and responsibilities she faces when her partner acts as submissive.

In addition to these issues of trust, she also repeatedly emphasized the importance to her of "pushing boundaries" (as she put it repeatedly). I asked her rather pointedly what she meant by it, and what kinds of boundaries she was referring to.

Sharon: Fear...the fear of like trusting. You know, trust is a big thing, or trusting your own self and what like limits you can go through. That's a big thing, I think. You know it's why I want to get a motorcycle - because I'm dead scared of getting on them. So yeah, I'll get a motorcycle... Yeah! I'm into challenges. That's what I like.

When Sharon refers to "pushing boundaries," she is referring to the boundaries of fear, and that which she considers fear to be the product of: the limits of one's trust in one's own self. She wants to overcome this boundary, which she considers to be self-defined; and she overcomes it by continuously challenging herself to push beyond what

she perceives her limits at the moment to be. S&M and piercing serve similar roles in this process: piercing is a more directly physical challenge, where the self-imposed boundary she challenges within herself is one of physical pain. It is perhaps the most immediate and directly approachable boundary, given its physical nature. It also, however, possesses a certain mental, social, and psychological aspect; in addition to the more personal element of physical pain, she must also deal with the consequences of her actions - or piercings - as they play themselves out in the social world, whether this involves people's reactions, the manner in which she obtains the piercing, the manner in which she uses the piercing, or even the mere thought process or motivation which lies behind the piercing (which, as we have seen with other piercees, can involve some fairly complex considerations). S&M serves a similar role; while there is always a physical element to S&M sexuality, however, it possesses the added aspect of mental challenge. Scenarios are delineated and enacted, and it also involves two or more people, so it is a challenge which requires interaction between persons. Piercing as well can become contextualized within the S&M environment; sometimes piercings are actually conducted as part of an S&M scenario, and at other times they play a role within that scenario (for instance, attaching things to them: recall Sonia's nipple piercing which was torn out during some S&M play).

Sharon's notion of "pushing boundaries" represents, I believe, the line which some piercees cross in seeking to utilize piercing - here in the context of S&M - as an experience of physical transcendence; of achieving a sense of self-cognizant mastery over

their physical and mental selves. The following section explores this notion more fully.

Using S&M and piercing to "transcend the body"

It is a fairly complex challenge which brings people together in a confrontation with their own personal fear and trust: a confrontation which is in many ways an experimentation with power. Power, however - expressed in relationships of dominance and submission - is a highly charged issue, and as Sharon notes, certain forms of power and certain types of power relationships are, in the popular consciousness, already highly stigmatized.

Sharon: Well I mean, I have a friend and when she heard what I was into [piercing] thought, she said, 'Why do you want to mutilate yourself like that?' You know, 'why do you pierce yourself, and why would you want to be hit?' Or 'why would you want to hit other people?' Because her experiences were all very violent and non-consensual. And that's the whole thing. If it's consensual - I mean I have a sister who I wouldn't tell what I'm into because...she sees it all as a form of abuse. Especially against women. That even if you think even if a woman thinks that she wants it, she doesn't, because she's just socially programmed for it. And I mean I'm sorry...that's underestimating the power of a woman's thoughts to decide for herself what she is into. I think society tells you more not to be into that, you know...I mean if I can say what I want, and I can say that I want that and be consensual about it, I find that empowers me more! You know? Than living in denial of what I am interested in just because I think that just because someone else tells me that I'm not supposed to think that, because I've been programmed to enjoy it...it's interesting that a lot of people in S&M subculture do come from abusive backgrounds. And for some people it's very cathartic, like they use it to work through that and just like...where some people have bad experiences but they know that they're into it [S&M]. I think it creates more difficulty for them to come to

terms with it because there they're, you know, 'Am I enjoying this because I don't like myself? And because I'm used to being treated like this? Or is it, do I have to get past the way I was raised like that to realize that 'this is still who I am' this is still who I am' and...I can take control of it...I can appropriate it for my own uses and make it positive. I'm all for that.

In addition to noting the parallel her friend draws between "why do you pierce yourself, and why would you want to be hit?", she raises two other important issues here. The first deals with consensuality. Sharon has hidden her sexual interests from her own sisters because she fears they will not recognize her consensuality as a strength, or even as consensual. It does indeed beg the question of how consensuality operates, and to what degree an individual's personal history and past sexual experiences affect them - whether an individual can indeed make a free consensual decision, and to what degree their past sexual history influences their ability to do so. This is related to the second point she raises - that of abuse. Much in the same way her initial S&M experience of whipping her boyfriend forced her to confront personal issues of fear and trust, so she believes that some S&M practitioners, coming from a background of sexual abuse, can use the psychological side of S&M to come to terms with unpleasant sexual histories and painful sexual experiences. The following discussion on Sharon's part further examines these issues. It also raises the question of how these psychological and intellectual challenges posed by S&M interact with the more physical, sensation-oriented side of S&M sexuality. This discussion began with our talking about a recent court case in Ontario, where a professional dominatrix was, following an undercover police operation, charged

with "operating a bawdy house" and taken to court. She was later found guilty, but the focal point of the court case came to rest on whether the dominatrix and her employees were performing professional functions (the defense argued they were merely creating and enacting S&M scenarios without sexual contact with customers and without the employees deriving sexual pleasure from their acts) or whether they were, as the prosecution argued, performing sexual acts much akin to prostitution. Sharon noted that this very issue raises questions she has pondered in regards to her own views toward S&M sexuality.

Sharon: Yeah. It's all about sexual gratification [sarcastically]. But it's not. Because...it's about getting off, but not just sexually, you know? It's about opening yourself up to new limits, new possibilities, you know, and heightened awareness. Because that's the type of drug it feels like when you get off. You know the endorphin rush - really, it's an endorphin rush. Like for me it doesn't have to be about sex, it's not about sexual gratification. It's about power, really. Yeah, relinquishing power and having power, it's all power games, I guess, because there's those defined roles of bottom and top...But it's not power over them. It's power with them.

Sharon raises some important issues here. Again, she dwells on the "endorphin rush": endorphins aside, what she is talking about is the thrill she gets from taking charge of her body and putting it in situations which mainstream culture tells her she should not: situations of danger and risk. Like the piercees who are stared at in shock on the street, S&M practitioners too encounter conflicting messages when faced with mainstream cultural moral stereotypes. In a culture where the popular consciousness operates in an

atmosphere promoting ideals of liberation or of freedom, it is difficult to reconcile these mainstream cultural slogans with the desire to be dominated, sexually or otherwise. But by doing so, they achieve a very similar thrill to that experienced by Earl, or Sonia, or the other piercees who get a "rush" from taking control of their bodies and exploring pain. It is an experimentation of the boundaries which their physical and mental selves can overcome, and an experimentation which mainstream cultural values tell them is wrong: they should not inflict pain, on either themselves or others. But they do, and the combination of experimentation and risk, combined with the unique intensity of physical sensation which results, both thrills them into a "rush" or "high," and becomes an intrinsic part of their identity, as they see themselves operating on ever more daring frontiers of mental and physical experience and sensation. But, as Sharon stressed above, she believes S&M is wrongly perceived as being about sexual gratification. "But it's not," she counters. "It's about opening yourself up to new limits, new possibilities, you know, and heightened awareness." In the same manner, Earl told us earlier, people sometimes wrongly perceive his fascination with piercing to arise from a strange enjoyment of pain. This is a perception he struggles against: it is not enjoyment of pain, he tells us. "It's enjoyment of sensation." The popular stereotypes they see themselves as struggling against appear compellingly similar.

Sharon emphasized repeatedly the mental and functional nature of S&M: the psychological "mind-games" as she earlier put it. As noted earlier, sexuality in her view is

separated both from emotional "relationships" of the traditional sort, as well as "orgasm"-oriented physical sexual pleasure. The focus, rather, is on fusing mind and body - mental S&M fantasy scenario construction and physical sexuality - toward the aim of achieving what she earlier referred to as "new limits, new possibilities, you know, and heightened awareness."

Part of the difficulty faced by practitioners like Sharon arises from the manner in which they divorce sexuality from the cultural and emotional trappings with which sexuality is associated in mainstream cultural ideals. Instead of sex and sexuality being part of a relationship between people (a compartmentalized aspect of their interpersonal relationship) or even being about reproduction and family, it is seen as a phenomenon unto itself. I suggested to her that this might partly be why people find it hard to understand the functional, exploratory and experimental approach which she adopts toward her own sexuality.

Sharon: That's where like I guess some of the societal stigma or judgement comes in, it's all so like oh there's free sex all like loose promiscuity, you know...Because for me I know that...I don't want to just pursue it with someone who's into it just for the sex...I'm not into it just for the sex...I'm willing to forget about part of the sexual side if I can get the mind side, the pushing - the boundaries - and just the play side. Which is why I like the challenge of just going out public and doing stuff like that. That's fear, you know, like public sex is frightening. Or like...[that] could go back to piercing and tattooing. It's sort of a challenge, you know? To put yourself through the piercing, to put yourself through the tattoo, and then wear it. Pull it off.

As she noted, mainstream social perceptions toward things like piercing and S&M also play a part in the manner in which the personal value which they contain for their proponents manifest themselves. Although she does not like the social stigma attached to what she does, and stresses that contrary to popular belief she is somebody who practises S&M is not into it "just for the sex" or for "loose promiscuity," popular belief does help define what she gets out of it. In her quest to "push boundaries" and challenge her self-perceived limits of fear and trust through things like piercing or S&M, she uses the example of public sex - "public sex is frightening." Yet it should be pointed out that the *reason* public sex is frightening is due to its public perceptions. It is wrong, risky, risqué, and thus - frightening. She challenges herself, in a sense, to overcome her fear of the social stigma attached to it; to challenge, again, a socially and culturally inspired fear. Her attempt to challenge fear and push boundaries brings her - unfortunately, she feels - into conflict with social mores and stigmas; yet so too does it at the same time evolve out of those very social stigmas.

Much as the piercees I spoke with drew a contrast between those who obtain piercings for fashion motives versus those who do it for more personal, symbolic motives, so too did Sharon, as we spoke, draw a contrast between those who involve themselves in S&M for sexual reasons, and those who do it for "purity and ascetic reasons." The former are more interested in achieving forms of sexual gratification; the latter, on the other hand, do it because "they want to be pure and they do [it] to heighten

themselves...It definitely puts the energy there...Gets you into a real pure state." The dichotomy Sharon draws is between S&M in its role as "the sexual thing" - or sex for physical gratification and pleasure - and those who pursue it "for purity and ascetic reasons" - or the mental, psychological, and intellectual aspects of S&M. She went on to relate this dichotomy as she sees herself experiencing it.

Sharon: For me it's definitely a purity thing, you know...and that goes back to piercing I guess in some respects...I think purity for me is like having, like you can heighten a different aspect. You might be able to heighten your physical senses, through piercing, and also heighten like your body and your awareness...through piercing I think. Because I mean the awareness you get from having a pierced nipple when someone touches it you're like 'hello! I'm here!' You know, and that's what I think BDSM brings into it too, is that it heightens awareness...it's not about sex, it's not about getting off, it's about the breathing...It's that pleasure-pain principle...You know, like how can something like a piercing - pain? It's the pleasure-pain, you know. I mean in S&M...if you hit someone you stimulate them at the same time. You're constantly pushing them because they're so stimulated and so that border between pleasure and pain is constantly being pushed back. You know? And it's being heightened. You're channelling all this energy I guess and it's heightening you into a new awareness, I guess. You're getting, I mean for me, I don't know, it's the perfect drug. It's better than any drug. You get off the rack or you stop like beating on someone or whatever and you're just revved, you know. And it's because you've been heightened, you know, you've had that bit of pain-play, the neurals are like, your senses are just roaring to go.

Sharon believes her interest in S&M is "definitely a purity thing." But she gives purity a very specific meaning: for her it has to do with her ability to "heighten a different aspect," or to "heighten awareness." She identifies what is for her the most telling and

significant characteristic of that "pleasure-pain principle" which underlies her interest in S&M as being: "heightening...into a new awareness." For her both piercing and S&M act as the "perfect drug" - and the purpose of that drug is to heighten her own awareness: her awareness of her physical self, her mental self, and of the border between the two, which is what she seeks to explore and to, in a way, disassemble. Piercing and S&M allow her to explore the fragility of what she perceives as the self-defined constraints of her physical body. They allow her to feel she has, to a degree, overcome those constraints, and developed a fuller sense of control over her physical body. This she sees herself as achieving through a control over her mental self: she uses her mental self to overcome pain, fear, and other "limits" which she perceives to manifest themselves on the physical realm. And by doing so she feels "heightened" into a "new awareness" of her physical and mental self.

These notions of "heightening" and "new awareness" appear to be integral to the pleasure she derives from S&M. She made reference to these ideas frequently, and stressed the intricate way in which her use of her body is directed in a sense toward transcending the self-perceived constraints of the body.

Sharon: And...talking about like BDSM and like piercing and the role of the body, some people use piercing or BDSM or just body modification...they do it to the body, to get beyond the body...and if you're putting yourself through these piercings, or afterwards the play, like working with the piercings, like adding weights and pulling and twisting and dragging things out...you're getting past your body, or working with

your body in some way to get past that. Because that's like the rush, you know...There's a lot of people talk about flying. Like when they get to a certain point and they start flying because they've gone beyond where their body is at...it's all about working with your body to get beyond like the immediacy of what your body's feeling, you know?...I don't know what it opens up into, but it feels good.

In the account provided by Sharon above, she ties together not only body piercing and S&M, but also the physical and mental aspects of each. Both piercing and S&M offer possibilities for extremes of physical sensation and experience: in this it becomes clearer why piercing and S&M so often overlapped in discussions with piercees, and why some of them used both in tandem toward what they saw as - in experiential terms - the same end. While they provide a channel for those seeking the extremes of physical sensation, however, Sharon is quick to emphasize that the physical experience is not sought after as a goal unto itself; rather, for her it provides a means and channel by which to "get beyond the body...and take control of it." The idea of using piercing - or S&M - to demonstrate willpower and control over one's reflexes - in this case, the reflex being to avoid pain - was brought up by other piercees, and discussed to a degree earlier. However Sharon takes it a step further, and aims for the more complex - albeit rather vague and abstract - goal of going "beyond the body." In other words, she utilizes these physical extremes as a means of jolting her consciousness out of complacency, and of achieving a mental state which she characterizes as a kind of transcendency over her physical self. As we spoke, she made repeated references to the experience she has of "breathing" in this context.

which brings to mind notions of tantric exercises and meditation, propounded by various alternative spiritual movements in recent years as a means of achieving transcendence over the physical self. It is interesting, though, that Sharon and those like her see body piercing and the practice of S&M as an analogous process, and perhaps as a means toward the same end. If it can be seen as similar in a sense to transcendental meditation, it is perhaps at the opposite end of the spectrum: rather than seeking to transcend the physical through processes of calming and relaxing the body, or of minimizing physical sensation: she seems to suggest that through piercing and S&M the physical can be transcended through pain and the maximizing of physical sensation, taking that sensation to levels beyond those encountered in everyday activities. Sharon sees herself as a pioneer on the borders of sensation and experience, and in the process of challenging and forging ever new borders for herself, her own body becomes her tool of choice.

Sharon: ...you know, it's a tool. You know, I mean it's one of the only tools we have to work with...it's one of the only tools we have to actually like explore. We can't explore other people; you have to do it yourself.

Summary:

Sharon's case is a fascinating one, and provides us with valuable insight into a number of issues.

It offers, first of all, a look at the manner in which one piercee's interest in both piercing and S&M sexuality developed and matured over the years, as well as how her

participation in these two very interconnected worlds progressed.

It also demonstrates the close connection between S&M sexuality and piercing, as it applies to Sharon and, to varying degrees, other piercees as well: people like Eileen, Earl, and others whom I did not explore to such a personal degree. S&M sexuality in this context acts as kind of an elaboration on piercing: piercing is encompassed and utilized within S&M as a means toward the larger goal which practitioners like Sharon seek. Where piercing allowed her to explore and to challenge boundaries of fear and pain on a very personal, and very physical - although not exclusively so - level, S&M allowed her to extend those same aims into a more immediately social, interactive world, and to expand her exploration of her physical and mental self in a more holistic manner.

But of equal significance are the informants I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. The chapter began with an exploration of notions of pleasure and pain, which I found contrasted with Sharon's emphasis on transcending these notions and on moving "beyond the body". While this is what Sharon focuses on, on the other hand we have Eileen who speaks of the "rush of the needle," and Earl who describes his eyes rolling into the back of his head; they describe with great relish the physically pleasurable side of piercing. Furthermore, Earl has taken to exploring the varieties of physical responses he can experience, through altering the way he prepares for and approaches the piercing, as he described in the instance of his deliberately painful genital piercing. What seems to emerge is somewhat of a spectrum, which consists of on one end piercees like Earl and

Eileen - who obtain immense satisfaction from exploring the physical nature of piercing - and on the other hand Sharon. Although Sharon readily admits she finds the things she does in terms of piercing and sexuality to be immensely pleasurable, this is no longer the aspect which focuses on. Rather, what she wants to draw out of these experiences is something emphatically mental in nature: she wants to transcend the limitations of physical experience, and of her own body. That is not to say of course that the informants described earlier in the chapter are only interested in the physical aspects of piercing: they draw important mental and symbolic gains from their piercings too. Earl for instance with the "gift" of teethmarks and scars his friends have "given" him. Yet Sharon has taken the mental pursuit of piercing to a further, far more transcendental level than the rest of them.

In Sharon's world, notions like pleasure and pain are divorced from their moral and metaphorical associations as positive and negative notions. Through what Sharon emphasizes that she regards ideally as a mutually consensual exploration of sensation, often in the context of elaborately invented or simulated social situations, these notions are manipulated and probed, and any boundaries which she encounters - physical, mental, and or emotional - are constantly "pushed". The ultimate aim, as she puts it, is to use the body to go beyond the body - to achieve a form of transcendence which allows her to feel fully in control, if not of her surroundings and environment, then at least of her mental and physical self.

Furthermore, it demonstrates the significance played by piercing - and S&M

sexuality - in the development of her individual and social identity. These are not accidental, tangential aspects of her person. They are intrinsic, individual, and important elements of her identity, which she is reminded of every day - from her "constantly erect" nipples, to the time invested in the creation and pursuit of S&M scenarios. Moreover, it is not an obsessive fetish, something which she sees as preoccupying her to a perverse degree. Rather, the point is - as she demonstrated by the open and searching approach she adopted in seeking out an S&M community when she came to Newfoundland - to *embrace* sexuality and her challenge of physical and mental "boundaries", as well as intensity of sensation and its use in transcending the physical. In this process, the body becomes an infinitely manipulable, and intricately complex, tool in the process of exploring her physical self and her social identity.

For Sharon, S&M is not about sexual pleasure, and it is not about orgasm. It encompasses a much deeper exploration of self, and of values and motivations. It involves the inversion of values such as love, ethics, trust, and reciprocity. But she is not trying to do away with or eliminate these values; rather, by standing them on their head, she is able to explore and to reinvent them, in such a way as to more deeply authenticate them as she feels and decides they apply to her personally; as the individual she considers she has become. This is the "shifting boundaries" which she refers to so often, and it is not a static experience, but an on-going process. The notion of "rites of passage" as applied to body piercing was discussed earlier. Unlike typical cultural rites of passage,

however, the sorts of rites which I am exploring here - the "shifting of boundaries" - do not occur at a specific time and place, and they do not result in a predetermined, predictable change of perspective, either from the point of view of the society around the piercee S&M participant or from their own individual vantage point. Rather, by inventing them as they go - as they feel the personal need arises - and by adapting the specifics of the experiences to the situation at hand, they constitute a sort of never-ending exploration and evolution of self-identity.

Sharon's approach to piercing and S&M enables one to achieve a degree of insight into the spontaneous expressions of individual identity and development of the self as some of my informants experienced it. But self-identity is not constructed in a vacuum: the effect which the larger cultural context exerts upon the individual must be kept in mind. Having explored these elements from the deeply personal perspective offered us by the case of Sharon, therefore, the following chapter will return to the larger social picture, and explore the manner in which the ability of body piercing to serve as a unique marker of individual identity - through the forms of spirituality and sexuality examined in the past three chapters - is challenged by the rapid and constant change of public perceptions toward it in the wider culture.

Chapter Six

Searching for Audience

I have so far examined the role played by body piercing in the realms of neopagan spirituality and sexuality, particularly S&M sexuality. In both of these contexts, piercing seems to allow the individual to create a sense of identity which is forged simultaneously on the physical and on the personal level. The levels on which both operate are often complementary to each other, the physical complementing the personal symbolism inherent in the piercing, and vice versa. The process of creating identity manifests itself in part through the creation of distinctions, which distinguish either the individual from those about them, or which create a fluid group identity wherein membership is defined through distinctions and contrasts drawn with "mainstream" identity: the 'mass-produced' Other. Yet the purpose of these distinctions and contrasts is not to construct a metaphorical wall designed to shut out whatever is perceived as 'mainstream' identity. Rather, the purpose is primarily to emphasize the unique significance of the self, the individual. It allows my piercing informants to build up contrasts, to forge identity, to prove their uniqueness, their difference.

The more conversations I held with my informants, however, the more I was struck by their discussion of how they perceived piercing to be becoming more and more fashionable and accepted. The increasing fashionability of piercing is fairly self-evident:

any glance at television ads directed at youth, or even ad campaigns attempting to appeal to youth by governments or such innocuous organizations as the Girl Scouts - all of whom have recently featured ad campaigns permeated by piercings - will demonstrate the propagation of images of pierced youth in mainstream popular culture. What struck me about my informants' comments however was the negative and at times hostile attitude with which they viewed these changes. "It's [piercing] trendier now, really. That's the downfall of it," Morgan told me. Leisl commented that with piercing's growing popularity, "I worry that people aren't taking it seriously, you know?" And Eileen fumed that "It bothers me, because I would like to be able to get something pierced and not come up with a reaction from someone saying, 'Well, everybody's got that done now.'"

Their comments, suggesting that they saw some form of idealized 'authentic' body piercing having been coopted by less authentic elements - brought to mind some of the comments which my informants raised in Chapter One. I was reminded of how some piercees had criticized the fashionable ambience surrounding Elektron, even while the piercer there, Mike, had discussed with me his own desire to keep piercing real and authentic. Why this hostility, I found myself once again wondering, toward the growing fashionability of piercing?

The primary content of previous chapters has dealt with the important role piercing can play in the development of a sense of self, and of individual personal identity. So why did my informants feel so bothered by - even hostile toward - the

growing attitude of acceptance piercing was experiencing in mainstream society? What *exactly* was it that bothered them about this? This is the issue I shall attempt to examine in this chapter.

In attempting to grapple with these questions, I examined what some of my informants had told me.

Morgan: It's [piercing] trendier now, really. That's the downfall of it, too. I liked it when it was kind of an anti-social behaviour, because it was more interesting. But now that it's popular, people are going to be doing it just because it's popular. They want to fit in. And I think that's wrong. I mean most people who have piercings already, got them a long time ago because they wanted to be their own person, and they didn't want to follow everybody else. And now that everyone's catching on to it, it's kind of, you know, you have to find out who's really original, and who's just following the crowd, and trying to be cool to have piercings. It's just stupid...here, you'll find that a lot of the younger people that have piercings are all kind of the same, they're all following the same trend, yeah, and they'll listen to the same music, and they'll dress the same way, and those are the kind of people I just give the boot, you know. Get out of here, I'll rip the piercing out of your face!

Morgan was angry, no doubt about it. But what was she angry about? What seemed to anger her the most was the notion of being "the same." What she seemed upset about was the idea that more and more youths were getting piercings in order to be "the same" rather than getting them to be different, or unique. She argued that "most people who have piercings already" got them "because they wanted to be their own person." Drawing a clear dichotomy between piercing in past and present, she seemed in other words to feel that originally their piercings played a role in allowing them to differente

themselves and in defining their identity as individuals. And "the downfall of it" - that is to say the ability of piercings to act meaningfully in creating this unique personal identity - lay in its fashionability, which she felt is attracting people to it who are not interested in using their piercings "to be their own person." Many modern piercees, to her view, seem to function as a sort of undifferentiated mass where they "are all kind of the same."

Certainly, even these piercees of whom she speaks are not *really* "all the same" - there is enormous variety in the types of people who have adopted piercing, even recently - "punks," "Goths," "skinheads," "ravers," "yuppies," to name just a few. But what it seemed to me disturbed her the most was the perception that they were doing it to be part of a group - any group, i.e. to belong - while she felt that she did it to be her own person. And since her pride in this was so fundamentally based in her perception that her piercings express herself to the world as a unique individual, I felt that what she was angered and frustrated by was this phenomenon of piercing as a fashion trend among so many youth groups. Perhaps, I thought, she felt it diluted her own individuality, in a sense, to have her emphatically personal symbols and method of expression coopted by people who utilized piercing as a symbol of corporate membership in various fashion trends.

But this somehow did not seem to capture the whole picture. To try and isolate the sources of her frustration and anger, I took a closer look at what she told me. I tried to pick out what precisely she talked about in a positive sense, and what she lashed out at

with disapproval.

On the positive level, she refers to those people "who have piercings already, got them a long time ago...": in other words, it seems, an older generation of piercees. She also refers to people who got piercings "because they wanted to be their own person, and they didn't want to follow everybody else."

On the negative side, she describes people attracted to piercing because they are "just following the crowd, and trying to be cool". She speaks with derision of the "younger people that have piercings": derides them for being "all kind of the same", "following the same trend": "they'll listen to the same music": "they'll dress the same way."

So on the one hand, she draws a contrast between "younger" and "long time ago" piercees. But it is not just an issue of when they got their piercings. It is also a matter of people who are "all kind of the same" and who are "following the same trend" (which she generally seemed to associate with present-day piercing initiates) versus people who got piercings "because they wanted to be their own person, and they didn't want to follow everybody else" (which she generally associated with piercees of the past).

These, at least, were somewhat concrete distinctions. And she was not the only one who raised them. When I spoke with Leisl one night, she expressed to me her disappointment in the way she perceived some of the more recent piercees' attitudes toward their piercings. After describing to me in some depth the meaning her piercings

held for her. she commented

Leisl: I really wish more people felt that way about it. I guess. Like I know when we were down at the Coffee Bean tonight. I saw that...guy...And he has all those piercings now! Where did they come from? We just saw him a couple of weeks ago! He didn't have any of those! And I remember less than a year ago, he didn't have spiked hair, he wasn't into the punk look, he was into the skater look. And, not to sound elitist, but...there's a lot of things you want in life, but you don't go out and get them all at once! I mean, where's the fun, and where's the, like, where's the depth in that?...And when I see this kid with all these piercings, I'm like...it's just more junk on your face, as far as I'm concerned. Like it's not very meaningful...to me piercing was never, like, an 'in' thing, it was never, maybe when I was a kid, and I kind of see that now, like I wonder if this new generation...are going to grow up with the idea that body piercing is - like all-over body piercing, not just ear - is something they're supposed to do in life. Like ear piercing, you know. Good little girls get their ears pierced. Once in each ear. Yeah. And I find that is a bit wierd...Yeah, and I worry that people aren't taking it seriously, you know?

What bothered Leisl in this situation was the near instantaneous transformation she witnessed of a younger person, who went from "the skater look" to "the punk look" - piercings and all - virtually overnight. This suggested to her that an overnight fashion switch like that was probably not accompanied by the types of deep personal insight which she herself felt toward her piercings. If it were a gradual switch, she would perhaps have felt that his piercings were the outward physical manifestation of an evolving sense of self and personal meaning. She argued "there's a lot of things you want in life, but you don't go out and get them all at once!" In other words, she found it difficult to believe that obtaining a myriad of facial piercings over the course of a couple of weeks could be

accompanied by any deep personal feeling toward those piercings, or an appreciation of the depth of meaning they can hold - as her piercings did toward her. And she found this somewhat distressing. She found it distressing because she recalled that when she was growing up, having earrings did not mean much for her as a young girl - it was just something she did as part of growing up, without thinking about it - and she fears that one day piercing will have the same lack of meaningful significance for young people growing up in a culture where it is but another mundane fashion symbol.

It seemed to me that like Morgan, Leisl referred to specific notions in positive and negative lights. In terms of the positive, she talks about: "the fun", "the depth". On the negative side, she does not like piercings gotten "all at once", "this kid", "junk on your face", "it's not very meaningful", "an 'in' thing", "this new generation", "something they're supposed to do", "good little girls", "people aren't taking it seriously."

Again, she refers to "this kid" and "this new generation" in a negative sense, drawing a contrast between presumably 'her' generation of piercees and a newer generation. But also there is the contrast of the "depth" of meaning which she pursues, and the "it's not very meaningful", "an 'in' thing" of this "new generation". This attitude, she feels, reduces erstwhile meaningful piercings into merely more "junk on your face."

All this seemed to imply, furthermore, that she does not consider the process - important to her - of building identities to be something one can simply do overnight. It requires thought, reflection, and commitment. It demonstrates that she draws a distinction

between those who adopt piercing as a means of constructing an identity, and those who simply decide to wear a fashion for a while.

Leisl's comments seem to distinguish between two types of piercees in particular: those who approach piercing as a means of expressing and reinforcing a sense of identity intimately unique to themselves, and those who approach it with the intent of wearing a fashion. The "kid" she referred to at the coffeeshop is someone she sees as falling into the latter category - those who intend very clearly to be seen. For them piercing is a fashion aesthetic which they quickly build up and for whom it is central that they been seen doing so, as it is with any fashion. For Leisl, on the other hand, whose clitoral hood piercing for example is quite private and not visible in day-to-day undertakings, the central point is not to be seen by others, but to recognize the importance of piercing to the individual within. The fashion is secondary to the motif of identity, and this is something which, she observes emphatically, cannot be thrown on overnight.

More significantly, Leisl's comments demonstrate the variety of *audiences* which these distinct groups of piercees are communicating with. The "kid" Leisl talks about is displaying his piercings for those he is seeking to fit in with, for those he knows will respond in a manner which benefits him and meets his aims. Leisl, on the other hand, is not piercing herself for the benefit of his audience, she is doing it for herself, and for those she feels she can communicate with on a level which recognizes the significance of personal meaning and identity as expressed through piercing - those who do not just

adopt piercing overnight, and for whom piercing plays a role more subtle and deep-rooted, and more close to home.

Then Eileen too had things to complain about. In her case particularly, she was upset not merely at other people's attitudes toward piercing, but at her own motivations being misinterpreted as a result of this process.

Eileen: It bothers me, because I would like to be able to get something pierced and not come up with a reaction from someone saying, "Well, everybody's got that done now." What they don't seem to understand is, for me personally, body piercing - any creative modification at all - is completely and totally for me, you know, I want the rush of the needle, and I want that piece of metal hanging off me, that I can play with, and I want, you know, and it's not for the reactions of other people. It's for me. And you know, the reaction is just a neat little bonus. And I don't like it that so many people - like a lot of other things - have kind of been suckered into a trend, and are getting it done because "Oh, my friend got her bellybutton pierced, so I'm going to go get my bellybutton pierced too." You know, just like getting one's ears pierced when you're twelve or thirteen, and, you know, the girls, you know, the girlfriends go out together and get their ears pierced, or going out and buying a dress or something like this. It's become just as common as going out and getting your hair cut. "Oh, I'm going to get my nipple pierced." Or get my tongue pierced. And it's not that I really want to be original, you know, I'm not doing it to be a one of a kind, you know, I am one of a kind, but that's it, right? I'm not doing it to be a part of something, or not to be a part of something. It's purely for me. So when I see, when I hear people lumping me, or other people, into that category [of fashion-seekers], it bothers me, you know. And some people do do it for that reason, but not me.

While Eileen tried at first to downplay the importance which other people's reactions hold for her, like Leisl she was frustrated that the personal significance of piercing is, as she saw it, being reduced to the level of mundane fashionability with which

- as Leisl too observed - ear piercing is viewed today. She said she was bothered "because I would like to be able to get something pierced and not come up with a reaction from someone saying, 'Well, everybody's got that done now.'" She felt her piercings' personal significance were being belittled by this process, and it troubled her. She was, in a sense, losing her desired audience. She wants people to know that her piercings mean something important to her. She wants them to see her as something more than a fashion hound. Her sense of unique, personalized identity is important to her, and she wants people to know this. The security she feels in how she expresses herself is, she sensed, somehow threatened by this process: now people lump her into a category in which she does not want to be lumped.

Eileen adores "the rush of the needle", and she is proud of the fact she sees herself as "one of a kind." What she views negatively is people "suckered into a trend", doing it because it is "common", doing it "to be a part of something, or not to be a part of something", "people lumping me...into that category". In other words, she seems to be offended by the notions of piercing as a "trend", as "common", as a "category".

Eileen appears to distinguish two particular groups of piercees too. There are, on the one hand, those who do it "to be a part of something"; in other words, people who do it to be seen, visibly, as following a fashion, of being a part of a "clique." She, on the other hand, pursues it for the opposite reasons: to *distinguish* and to *separate* herself from that "clique". She wants to see herself as unique, as an individual, and she feels that her

piercings can help to express this for her. So it distresses her when she discovers that the "cliques" she despises suddenly adopt it as a means of demonstrating their adherence to a fashion, and their desire to be a part of a "clique" and a fashion which she is trying to escape from.

And, as we saw with Leisl, the distinct sets of piercees are here even more obviously pursuing distinctly different audiences through their piercings. The "cliques" which Eileen abhors are not piercing themselves for her benefit; they are piercing for each others' benefit. It is a common symbol for them, operating in much the same way as their hairstyles or other fashion accoutrements operate, in terms of representing their own adherence to certain fashion trends, and of indicating their membership within those "cliques" she despises; their piercings, in other words, are directed at an audience which will recognize them as a visible sign of *belonging*. Eileen, by contrast, is not directing her piercings toward this audience; far from it, her piercings are for herself first, and for those who, like Leisl, recognize the important messages of meaning and identity which they convey to her. Much to her chagrin, Eileen discovers that the risk exists of her piercings being misread by an audience she does not even necessarily intend them for in the first place - or even not being read at all.

I spoke at some length on this subject with Eileen, who on several occasions would return to the topic.

Eileen: I think first initially when, back in, I guess, punk and that kind of thing, where anybody who had that kind of hairstyle or something outrageous like that, was, by the general public, looked down upon, or thought of as scary and apart, you know, and a different part of society. Now it's become accepted. It's a commonly accepted thing for a girl to have her nipple pierced. Or, well, not necessarily, not yet, to have her nipple pierced, but her belly button pierced, or her ear pierced, or anything like that. So it's become so common for it to get done, which is, now, it's becoming like everything else.

Eileen draws a contrast between a time when piercing was "outrageous," "looked down upon, or thought of as scary and apart", and today, where "it's become so common for it to get done...it's becoming like everything else." She draws the contrast between these two periods largely on the basis of how she perceives the public reaction to piercings as having changed: 'back then' piercing shocked, today it does not. She described to me how she experienced this situation herself in high school.

Eileen: ...[I had] the unfortunate experience of going to high school in Mount Pearl and seeing the cliques, which I guess are in every school, and the popular jocky type crowd, you know, and all the preppy rich girls getting their bellybuttons pierced, and thinking this was so cool and showing it off to everybody - 'totally, totally awesome!' - which is kind of disappointing. Because I probably would have liked to have it done but the thought of becoming part of that has spoiled it for me. Like it's a certain kind of snobbery, I think.

Here the range of conflicting feelings expands. What bothers Eileen are the notions of "cliques", "the popular jocky type crowd", "the preppy rich girls", "a certain kind of snobbery". She describes what she perceived as groups of people in her school who she did not like (the stereotypically mainstream males, and the elitist girls, as she

points out), and who also pierced: this, she felt, somehow spoiled the idea of certain piercings - like the popular bellybutton piercing - for her. Consequently she avoided the bellybutton piercing. She did not avoid piercing itself: she later pierced her nipple and genitals. Yet this decision was partly affected by the popularity of the bellybutton piercing: she was worried what other people would think of her if she pierced herself the same way they did.

It is not, perhaps, by accident that she associates these mainstream notions with her childhood experiences in Mount Pearl, either. Mount Pearl consists of ever growing rows upon rows of houses virtually identical to each other, and of streets and blocks laid out in precise, undeviating order. It is in many ways the quintessence of contemporary North American suburbia. Mount Pearl's association with stereotypical suburbia often renders it the butt of innumerable jokes on the topic in neighbouring St. John's, where it is frequently seen as the epitome of mainstream stereotypes, of undeviating sameness. This is precisely the notion which Eileen reviles when it is applied to piercing: she wishes to escape from the bland, stereotypical surroundings and mainstream "cliques" that she recalls from her youth. For her, it is an insult in the extreme that those very cliques she encountered in her schooldays in Mount Pearl have taken piercing and assimilated it into their practices of suburban high school homogeneity (see also Sonia's aversion to "Mount Pearl twits" which appears in the next section).

Toward a theoretical understanding

Yet we still have not managed to explain why the 'popularity', 'trendiness', or growing 'mainstream'-ness of body piercing turn erstwhile piercees against it?

One possible explanation for this is suggested by Dick Hebdige (1979), and discussed in some length in the Introduction. Hebdige theorized a process in which unconventional and subcultural behaviour is perceived as a threat by the "mainstream" society, to which the mainstream responds by a process of fetishizing and commoditizing the appropriate, attainable, and expressive (i.e. stylistic) elements of a subcultural style.⁴ Through this process of commoditization, the shocking and erstwhile threatening stylistic forms, initially subcultural or outside of the mainstream, are transformed into something desirable within the confines of mainstream fashion culture, and the perceived threat which they pose is thereby removed. Were, then, my informants somehow recognizing the fundamentals of this process? Did they feel mainstream culture had "taken over" the "threat" posed by body piercing, and by doing so disarmed that "threat"? Is this what had disillusioned them about body piercing? Did they want it to be threatening?

Of course, this presumes a number of things: namely, that my piercees had viewed piercing as significant solely or primarily due its "threatening", "subcultural" aspect. And to be sure, there are cases - for instance in Sonia's drugstore encounter with an older woman - where there is definitely an underlying element of shock value. Yet much of my work heretofore had focused on the variety of personal meanings which my informants

created and drew from piercing - of which being 'threatening' was only one. Hebdige's theory, which he had applied to punks in 1970s England, did not seem quite so tenable in this light. Nonetheless, I was intrigued when Sonia seemed to present to me a notion startlingly similar to Hebdige's ideas.

Sonia: ...once something, it has to be degraded in order to be accepted, like I think to turn something like body piercing into fashion is degrading, and therefore now it's not so frightening any more. Because...it does have those links to a kind of an edge that a lot of people aren't comfortable with...You make it fashionable and you take its meaning away, therefore taking the threat away. Which sucks, because I like the fact that it's a threat to shallow society. Right? I mean these people suck. Like fucking Mount Pearl twits...Because it's different. Anything, anything different that you could get freaked with, whether it's your sexuality, whether it's your race, whether it's the way you dress, it doesn't seem to matter. If it's different, they're afraid. And you know people take security in that they're going along with whatever, because want to believe that the world's black and white and that there's a right and a wrong and if something's being done that's different from what they're doing, then, well, there's a right and there's a wrong and they're on one side of it, and so they have to be right because they can't be wrong. So they want the security of that, and there's a lot of frightening aspects I suppose of a diversified world, you know. I don't think it is, personally, but to a lot of people they get very afraid, you know, they don't want to deal with these issues at all.

Sonia seems to believe that mainstream culture reacted to the metaphorical threat it perceived in "anti-fashion" or new and unusual practices like body piercing by assimilating them into the mainstream's own fashion consciousness, thereby taking control of the manner - and perhaps implicitly the meanings - conveyed by those fashion symbols and thus removing the threat and fright from them. Sonia considers this process

to have "degraded" the symbolic and personal meaning and power of body piercing. The nature of the "threat" they might originally have posed is abstract and vague in her comments: she says simply that "it does have those links to a very, kind of an edge that a lot of people aren't comfortable with." She is referring, I believe, more to an attitude of threat, than a specific set of threatening elements. She *pursues* a "diversified world" - one which possesses a measure of unpredictability - and her piercings help her to convey and reinforce this. She wants them to express a level of unpredictability - one which allows her to surprise old ladies with courtesy where they expect rudeness or threatening behaviour, as she described to me.¹¹ In these instances her piercings provide her a form of power as an individual - the power to provoke in ways that are not predictable. What she appears bothered by is the fact that now piercings are in some contexts serving as a *predictable* fashion, one which is increasingly used and understood to indicate adherence to a mainstream fashion form which sometimes stymies her attempts to use them to express herself as unpredictable (note also her aversion to "Mount Pearl twits" in her comments above: like Eileen earlier, she too associates Mount Pearl with the epitome of those fashion stereotypes so at odds with the "diversified world" she seeks). Either way, the point is that Sonia now feels that piercings have been left in a sense symbolically impotent, in terms of what she perceives to have been their consciousness-raising, assumption-challenging ability. Perhaps Hebdige's theory had some merit in this situation after all.

I also found it useful to consider in this context Edward Said's theories of power, whereby fear of the unknown - which one could extend to include that which is deliberately placed outside of the known world, or a subcultural style formed and created to stand apart or in contradiction to mainstream style - is conquered and power is attained over it by coming to know and understand it: by reducing its essence to a familiar and manipulable framework (Said 1979). Perhaps, I felt, the process of commoditizing and fetishizing punk or other subcultural fashion elements could be understood through this process. Could it be that through this process they were being re-placed and re-situated in a social and cultural position which the mainstream society could understand: as a commodity, an element of fashion, a consumer trend? Was it a matter of mainstream society translating the materialistic and extraneous elements of the unknown into elements knowable and understandable?

Perhaps, in this view, rebellion could be sanctioned, so long as it took place within the framework in which it was allowed. Spontaneous acts of counter-hegemonic control - i.e. "anti-fashion" statements like body piercing - perhaps fell outside the accepted, sanctioned arena for social rebellion and discourse, and thus had proven problematic to the invisible hand of mainstream ideological hegemonic control. Was this a way of accounting for what was going on?

While these were the initial theoretical ideas I was contemplating, I felt I was perhaps reading a bit too much into my informants' dialogue. I had not, up to this point,

detected any over-arching theoretical or conceptual framework common to my informants' piercing interests - quite the opposite, they were varied and disparate, albeit at times intersecting - and the more I considered it, the less I thought that was the explanation now. For much as Sonia argued that piercing for her was less significant because its "threat" had been "degraded", there were still people like Earl, who tried to extend an attitude of tolerance toward even those piercees he did not think highly of. And when he did express anger, it was not so much at the notion of piercing being popular or fashionable, as it was at the idea of piercing being meaningless.

Earl: I can't take it personally. I can't take it personally. Because it was not meant as a personal affront to me...if somebody walked up to me and said, "Yeah, I got pierced, it's nothing," right, who degraded the experience, to me personally, in front of me. I would be offended. But somebody who went out and got it done, I can't be offended by it. Right? It mildly perturbs me, but in a general sense, as opposed to taking it as a specific affront...It's the same, well, it's the same reason why a staunch Christian will be offended by somebody taking the name of God in vain. Right? You're taking and profaning their symbol. Right? And it causes the same level of discontent and anger. You have taken the symbol that is important to me and you have degraded it. It's burning the American flag, or whatever else. It's the same thing. Symbols are incredibly important...if you take somebody else's symbol and profane it...you're going to offend me. Right? You are belittling a part of me in doing that.

Earl speaks of the experience and meaning of piercing being "degraded" by those who approach it with no significant sense of personal meaning. It is not so much the nature of that meaning which is important to him, but rather the presence or absence of meaning itself. His two analogies are interesting ones. He speaks of the "degrading" of

piercing as being analogous to the burning of a flag. In other words, piercing as a symbol is one that is close and dear to him, and encountering somebody using his symbol but in a non-meaningful way, he sees them as "taking and profaning [the] symbol." He also compares this process to the manner in which "a staunch Christian will be offended by somebody taking the name of God in vain." This too is a useful analogy. He uses the label "Christian" much like the way "piercee" might be used: to indicate one for whom the symbol has meaning, regardless of the precise nature and interpretation of that meaning on an individual level. In other words, while a "Christian" might not be as offended by another "Christian" who holds a differing interpretation of Christianity and what Christianity means, he says they *would* be offended by somebody taking their meaningful symbol - their God - and profaning it in a sense which implies that it holds no important meaning: "taking the name of God in vain." His piercings are important to him, and he endows them with very deep, personal, and spiritual meaning (as we have seen in previous chapters). He does not object to others doing the same, even if they endow them with different - albeit still personally significant - meaning. What he does object to, and feels somewhat offended by, is somebody who tells him their piercings do not really mean much to them at all - that they have no audiences, in other words. This in a sense belittles the manner - and the meaning - in which he makes his own piercings a significant part of his personal identity. "You are belittling a part of me in doing that." This, then - in contrast to Sonia's outlook - was what Earl felt about the matter.

The difficulty with applying theories like Hebdige's and Said's is that they do not seem applicable on a sufficiently wide basis to my informants' notions. The problem, I came to realize, is that the application of these theories requires the assertion of a common underlying motivation - however vague and abstract - for my piercees' undertakings. These theories seem suitable for specific cases - like Sonia - but then there are cases like Earl, who was not so much concerned with "degrading" a "threat" as with "profaning" a personal "symbol": burning his metaphorical American flag. What all these piercees had in common, however, was that they were on some level disconcerted and frustrated by the popularity of piercing. They felt threatened, yet even so they were determined to carry on being who they were: they demonstrated that though they feared it they felt they could not be coopted. There was an underlying complexity in this which I had still not thoroughly unravelled. If fashion, trendiness, and the popularity of piercing did not threaten the specific meaning which piercings held - for they seemed to hold such varied and disparate personal meanings for different people - what then did that popularity challenge?

To attempt to answer this, I decided to focus more closely on one of my informants whose motivations seemed significantly different from those I have discussed so far in this chapter. Perhaps exploring his motivations would provide some further insight. Wally, a local punk, introduces a much more confrontational, and at times fundamentally violent, level to these heretofore relatively abstract theoretical

considerations.

Wally: piercing and punk

As Wally has not yet appeared in this thesis, it is useful to briefly comment upon his background. Wally was born and grew up in the smallish Newfoundland town of Holyrood, where he went to school and worked until coming to St. John's in his late teens. When we began discussing body piercing, he related for me the story of his first body modification, which was a tattoo given him by his friend Robert.

Wally: I got it, well I guess I was about a year after high school, and Robert had done a couple of tattoos, he'd done one himself, and he said 'I'll give you a tattoo.' He pierced my ear the same night, actually...and I said 'Cool!' And I had to come up with what kind of design I'd want, and I got, well, it's the Dead Kennedys' logo...I think there's something...I can't think of the word, it's almost like initiation. Yeah. And it's that kind of rite of passage kind of thing. Because like, okay, I didn't get this done in like a tattoo parlour, I got it done in my bedroom. And I didn't get it done with a gun. I got it done with, this is basically, now this is do it yourself: we made the needle, we made the ink, it's kind of ridiculous. I'm really lucky I didn't like I wasn't allergic to anything because I probably would have been in a lot of trouble. The ink was made from toothpaste, spit and soot. The needle, we just took a regular sewing needle, a kind of big one, and wrapped thread around the very tip, so there was just a little bit of the needle sticking out. And the thread would hold the ink and you would dip it in the ink and then it's like puncture the skin and the ink would go down into the skin. And it took - it's a small tattoo - it just took about an hour and a half. And it bled a lot! And it hurt a lot! Like they might have it done in ten minutes in a tattoo parlour, because it's just lines, right? Okay, well it didn't hurt that much, like it hurt a lot at first, and eventually my shoulder kind of went numb, and it stopped hurting. So that's what I mean when I say it's kind of an initiation type thing. And...I think it adds that kind of element to punk, like if you bother to get something - the needle's dripping, like mutilating, like this spike inside your body - it kind of

proves you're, I don't know, you're hardcore or something. So I think that element is there. There's also something about this tattoo I really like is, well Robert did it. So it's kind of like when I was in high school, me and Robert hung out, and Robert's home situation wasn't so great, my home situation wasn't so great, and so I depended a lot on my friends. And we're kind of cheesy about it, we're very into friends, so it kind of meant a lot for Robert to put his mark on me. Because I'll take it to my grave, right?...And the same night he pierced my ear, with the same needle.

A number of issues are raised by Wally's story of his first tattoo and piercing. On the one hand, his piercing was a deeply personal act, marking in a very physical sense the bond of friendship between himself and his friend Robert. He states that friends are very important to him, in the wake of an unpleasant home situation growing up, and the act bound him physically in a sense with his friend (a type of contemporary "blood-brothers" act, but one which leaves its mark on him physically for all to see).¹²

Like many other piercees discussed earlier, he also viewed this act as an "initiation," "rite of passage kind of thing." In this case, however, it acted as an initiation into the "hardcore," "do-it-yourself" punk ethos. Do-it-yourself, or DIY is an important philosophy of the punk movement, referring quite basically to self-reliance: the ability to make one's own clothes, make one's own music and books, to not rely on cash income or mass-produced commodities or other items or practices which would curtail one's sense of individual freedom. Self-piercings, or "non-parlour" piercings, have quite obvious applications in this context, as demonstrated by their construction of tattoo ink from "toothpaste, spit and soot." Indeed, Wally commented to me that "I think for some people

it might be like more hardcore to get it, you know, a homemade one. It might mean more...I think people getting parlour tattoos might be doing it more for fashion reasons."

This notion of "hardcore" is another important concept to consider.

Wally: ...hardcore meant, it has lots to do with integrity. Especially I think kind of juvenile definitions of integrity, you know. Like doing something that causes you pain, but doing it anyway! You know? And there's something that's kind of romantic about that. And doing something that's like anti-fashion, doing something that's - even though it's a form of fashion itself, you know - hardcore is basically real, you know. And I think when hardcore gets used about anything, it tends to mean the same thing. It's like oh - this is the real stuff. There's the other stuff, then there's like hardcore. The people who really believe, the people who really know how to do it, you know. So yeah, I think it's real, whatever connotations that has.¹

Rather than labelling punk as "new" or "old," as my informants do further on, Wally eschews chronological references and instead considers "hardcore" and non-hardcore with the use of terms like "integrity," and "real": moreover, he believes there is something "kind of romantic about that." He notes that even though he considers the willing infliction of pain somewhat juvenile, it is desirable nonetheless not because he obtains any kind of sexual pleasure gratification from the act (unlike some piercees discussed in previous chapters), but because "there's something that's kind of romantic about that." This romanticism is an important point which I shall return to soon.

When I first encountered Wally some years ago, he was wearing ripped denim clothing layered with patches of punk bands and broken, pinned-on computer chips, and

sported a large pale green mohawk hairstyle. In more recent years, he has toned down his clothing somewhat, but his punk rhetoric has become in some ways even fiercer, though it has evolved in different ways. He has, it seems to me, become more interested in the ideals and philosophy behind punk, and in some ways seeks to differentiate that from the more superficial - stylistic - elements of punk fashion and aesthetics. He discussed with me the role this fashion - and body piercing - plays in "punk culture," again repeatedly emphasizing the "real"-ness of it.

Wally: ...the reason people are attracted to, say, punk culture, is because it feels real. It feels less co-opted. It feels less, I don't know, alienated, commodified, all that stuff, you know. Yeah, most subcultures have that same kind of thing. And I think piercing was the same thing for years and years and years. It was a kind of underground, they, those weird, it was a badge that said "Yeah, I'm a freak, fuck you!" And like people would get shit on in high school, would get beat up in high school, get called a freak, and they'd say, "Okay, yeah, yeah, I'm a freak, and I'm going to wear it right on my forehead, and fuck you!" And now suddenly...yeah, seeing how acceptable it is now, it's not the same thing at all. Like it's a completely different thing. But it's like fashion, you know. It's not the kids, it's not like some fourteen year old kid's fault that piercing is hip now and they want to go do it...I once heard someone write about punk that the best thing about punk was that you could put on a leather jacket and a Sex Pistols pin anywhere in the world and have instant friends. That was the best thing about punk rock. That's kind of what a subculture is. And that's why people get pissed off when other, like, outside people start using subculture stuff. Because suddenly it's not your little club any more. You can't be sure that the person with the Sex Pistols pin is a friend. They might be that same person who last year would have beat you up - but now it's cool. So people feel that their little world's kind of collapsed...you never know, really. Even when it's underground, it's only kind of a superficial friendship. But at least you know, like, that person's not going to beat you up for being a freak.

Wally explains that he finds himself attracted to punk because "it feels real. It feels less co-opted." He believes the same was probably true for body piercing at first - that it might have been attractive as an image because it felt "real." He talks a lot about being considered a "freak," and sees body piercing as a sort of countering move, an act of empowerment. By freely and visibly adopting these "freak"-ish physical symbols of fashion, it is in a sense seizing them as symbols of power, and of self-affirmation: "Okay, yeah, yeah, I'm a freak, and I'm going to wear it right on my forehead, and fuck you!" In contrast to the pleasure piercees like Sonia and Morgan found in subtly manipulating these symbols, and in "challenging assumptions" through doing so, Wally adopts a much more confrontational approach toward those around him, particularly in his case - at first - those who picked on him in high school. Rather than glean pleasure from challenging assumptions or pushing boundaries, his response to assumptions and stereotypes is much more blunt: "fuck you!"

The recent fashionability of these symbols, however, removes much of the punch from this response. Body piercing no longer "feels less co-opted"; indeed, it has been co-opted as fashion by those very people who once condemned it, and against whom the "anti-fashion" response was aimed. As Wally described, the use of punk fashion meant one could supposedly instantly recognize one's friends, as well as one's enemies, but now the dichotomy is no longer so clear cut, and one cannot make any assumptions about the attitudes of somebody using those fashion symbols. This becomes frustrating to those

who once designed and used those symbols: "You can't be sure that the person with the Sex Pistols pin is a friend. They might be that same person who last year would have beat you up - but now it's cool."

Another point which I noted in my discussions with Wally was the frequent reference to physical violence, which did not arise all that much among the other piercees I spoke to. In the symbolic confrontation or challenge implicit in many of the punk fashion symbols Wally described - including body piercing - there seemed to be much more of a sense of physical danger associated with their use. In the following passage, Wally describes this in somewhat greater depth.

Wally: ...there might be places where you can go with a big mohawk and people will get out of your way, but where I came from they beat the shit out of you. Like, yeah. A mohawk [hairstyle] was a walking, like you were a target right there. And in St. John's the scene was like that. Like when I used to have a mohawk, or when I had blue hair or something like that, I got threatened on almost a daily basis while walking the streets. And I got jumped once. And the shit kicked out of me. By some guys who called me a freak and a fag and stuff and beat me up. That was only a couple of years ago, I guess, yeah, maybe three years ago. And it didn't happen in the middle of the night. And it didn't happen on a bad street. It happened on a Sunday morning, on Freshwater Road. So yeah, it kind of depends. There might be places where you can go where looking like a freak means people are, like, scared of you, but that's certainly not necessarily true...Bannerman Park¹⁴ becomes a battleground in the summertime. I know lots of people who have been beaten up pretty badly for being freaks. Jason had the shit beat out of him. I think he had like ribs broken and face busted up really badly. I know another guy who shit had like the side of his face broken anyway, like this bone here was like fucked. So yeah, around here anyway, I don't think it gives you that much power. And there are enough punk songs about stuff like that for me to believe that that's been true in a ton of places.

Making reference to one of those songs, however, he identifies a certain kind of romantic power which is created as a result of this sense of physical danger and persecution. It is a very personal form of power, based on the notion of personal integrity, and verging almost on a form of martyrdom.

Wally: ...there's a song called Broken Bones by a band called Freeze, the chorus is like: I heard them come behind me And they said bunch of fucked up fags. Their beady little eyes saw that we were punching bags. They beat me quick and bloody They said that punk was dead. They asked me what I thought of that. Fuck off was all I said. I think that sums up a lot. There's also like the romanticism there of, like you know. They said that punk was dead. They asked me what I thought of that. Fuck off was all I said. It's like yeah, you might get beat up but you maintain your integrity, you know. I think there's power in that too. There's a certain power in saying even though this is dangerous, even though, you know, I'm still going to take a stand. Even if it's like a small individual stand and it won't make much of a difference at all in the greater scheme of things, but, you know.

Even though he has been attacked - physically - over his punk appearance, Wally finds a certain romanticism in the matter. In the same way he described home piercing as having a certain "hardcore" or "real" sense about it - "Like doing something that causes you pain, but doing it anyway!" - he seems to find the same sense of "real"-ness in the physical danger he has experienced through his outward punk fashion. It makes, perhaps, his own sense of challenging the mainstream much more "real," when he puts his own physical safety at stake through the use of symbolic confrontation and challenge expressed through style and aesthetics.

Wally, I felt, was a man on a clearly different mission from many of my other

informants. Certainly, they were all unique and individualized, particularly when it came to their piercings - but Wally I felt offered an extremely visible contrast to them. Some of the piercees I spoke with felt they were "challenging" assumptions and stereotypes, but through a much more subtle manipulation of meanings: combining confrontational fashion with acts of kindness and courtesy. Wally challenges assumptions and stereotypes as well, but his is a much more direct and confrontational challenge. He focuses his attitudes on the fact that his use of a symbolic fashion challenge like punk hairstyles or body piercing will not just result in his surprising or unnerving people, but rather physical violence like that which he encountered in the incident described above. Wally is willing to risk metaphorical - and perhaps physical - martyrdom for the sake of the meaning he builds into his personal style, from mohawk to piercings.

My other informants also place immense meaning in the manner in which people - the general public - react to their piercings. The consequences are not quite so brutal as those Wally has experienced, but they are still significant, and play into the sense of self-identity which surrounds their piercings. The manner in which Earl, Sonia, and Morgan interpolate these reactions are more subtle, and more psychologically manipulative. Yet what they hold in common with Wally is the importance of authenticity. And what they express, like Wally, is a resistance to the perception of piercing as fashion. Wally knows he is authentic, or 'hardcore' as he puts it: actions like his 'do-it-yourself' tattoo and piercing help to ensure this, in his eyes. Yet, just as he points out that a leather jacket and

a Sex Pistols pin can no longer be interpreted as a sign of friendship among punks, no longer can a tattoo or a piercing be seen as a sign of authenticity, or 'hardcore-ness', either. The importance of authenticity, and the resistance to piercing-as-fashion, is what Wally has in common with some of the other informants I have discussed.

Given these contrasts and also these similarities, then - and aided by Wally's overtly visible contrast - I began to look more closely at the nature of what my informants were trying to say. And, even more importantly, to whom. Wally was trying to express his idea of hardcore. Earl was trying to express the importance and sanctity of his symbols. Sonia was seeking a threatening edge to wield against conformity and mainstream society. These are all generalizations, to be sure, but they demonstrate the degree to which differing meanings were being wielded and directed at specific audiences. A great deal of the symbolism potentialized through piercing is personal, and operates on the individual level, as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate. Yet as I considered the issues I had been grappling with in this particular chapter, I realized that an important aspect had been left out: the manner in which these individualized meanings intersect with society at large: with the receptive public audience. The meanings which my informants' piercings reflected and crystallized in the context of self-identity are immensely significant, as I have argued. Yet at the same time my informants were attempting to say something publicly too. Their statements were varied and individualized. Yet what they all held in common were that they each saw in their

piercing a particular statement or commentary directed toward a particular - and once again chosen or selected - audience.

However, as I have demonstrated at length throughout this chapter, many of my informants had become jaded and disillusioned as to the effectiveness of their statements, and to the receptivity of their target audiences. This, I believe, is what they were expressing in their hostility toward the popularity of piercing. Piercing's growing popularity and acceptance in mainstream society had not changed the messages they were attempting to convey. What it had changed were the audiences. Eileen, for instance, had been trying to express herself in opposition to the "cliques" and the "preppy rich girls" she so disliked in her high school. Yet all of the sudden that very group of people began adopting her own method of symbolic expression - body piercing. Moreover, the fact that these "cliques" began assimilating body piercing into their method of self-expression - using it to express their values and their ideas, which Eileen had sought to oppose - meant that the response of the audience - the public - changed as well. Now they saw piercing as a 'cliquish', 'preppy rich' thing to do. Eileen's message had not changed. Her audience had.

Eileen: It all depends on the people who get it done...it's just that everybody does it for a different reason...you can either get it done because you think it's neat because everybody else has it done, or you can get it done for you, make it an empowering thing...It's all about the reason why. So if you do it because you think it's cool and because you think people will look at it and go "Oh, she's cool," or "He's cool, or neat," or whatever, you know, that's not a good enough reason, you know. And it's your body, and you have as far as I'm concerned every right to do whatever the hell

you want to it, but at the same time it's your body and you should be, you know, you should take pride in it, you know...you should be able to do whatever you want, but for the right bloody reasons! You know? Not just because it's trendy.

Eileen's frustration, I believe, stems from her fear that the audience might misinterpret her motivations for being pierced. When she says "you should be able to do whatever you want, but for the right bloody reasons!" she is, I believe, concerned more with ensuring the public understands her reasons for being pierced. She does not want them to think she is doing it to be "cool." "That's not a good enough reason," she says, yet acknowledges that people have the right to get pierced for whatever reason they like. What I believe she is really trying to say is that "that's not a good enough reason" for *her* - and she wants her audience to know that. The possibility that they might no longer recognize that is a cause of consternation to her and many of the other piercees.

Viewing it from this perspective suggests to me that the import of Hebdige's theories of incorporation-through-commodification (discussed earlier) do not appear quite as significant as they were first demonstrated to be. Hebdige fails to take into account the diversity and the significance of multiple, intentional audiences upon the stylistic expressions of "subcultural" groups. Piercing may have been incorporated as a mainstream fashion commodity, but this has not really diluted its impact: it has divided and multiplied it, and added deeper and more complex levels of diversification. Regardless of how common piercing has become, the fact remains that it still packs a

punch: Wally, even in an age of commercialized fashion where punk hairstyles have been around for years, is still beat up on the streets by homophobic young men who interpret it as a symbol of homosexuality. This is certainly the most (sadly) remarkable expression of the fashion's symbolic power. Yet even those who do not get attacked over their piercings do not necessarily consider themselves to have been "incorporated" into something they do not want to be. Their expressive stylistic element - piercing - may have been adopted by other people, but it has not been stolen. The more recent piercees utilize piercing to express a specific message to a specific audience, just as my informants always have. Certainly, the fact that piercing's audiences have multiplied has increased the level of confusion which can occur, but it has not deprived people like Eileen, Earl, Leisl, or Wally of a potent method of symbolic expression.

I was reminded of two contrasting stories I was told by Morgan. On one occasion, she gleefully recalled frightening an old lady in a drugstore.

Morgan: ...one day I was in Shoppers Drug Mart, or something like that, and I just turned around an aisle, and an old lady was standing there, and I guess I turned around and faced her just as I came around and I think I gave her a heart attack! [laugh] She went "Oh my gosh!" and she freaked out and she ran off down the aisle. [laugh] I was like, okay, that's funny...

She is pleasantly amused in this instance by the reaction which her piercings provoked. She is not particularly hostile toward old ladies, yet she feels empowered by the sense of fright with which some people view her. Yet on another occasion, she felt

differently about this reaction.

Morgan: ...little children find me interesting and they'll say 'Look mommy, look!' And the mother's 'Oh! That's a bad person!'...I've had that happen a couple of times where I'll be out in the park or on the bus or something like that and the little kids will point and whisper to the parents and the parents are 'Oh! Don't look at that person!'...I love kids, I'm great with kids, and usually they're fascinated by the piercings! They like to touch them, they want to see the inside, and what it looks like, and they want me to take them out and put them in and my little brothers and sisters love it! But when parents put that impression to children that it's bad or I'm crazy...I don't like that. That's bad.

Here, Morgan told me that she really likes children, and she loves to share her joy of piercing with them. Yet their parents often keep them away from her, disturbed by them in the same way the woman in the drugstore was. The point here, I believe, is that Morgan is sending different messages toward different audiences. To the adults, she is attempting to convey a sense of danger, power and threat. To the children, she is attempting to share her joy of piercings. Consequently the children react with curiosity, and the adults with fear-induced maliciousness. What bothers her, is the conflict produced by this intersection of differing messages to differing audiences: the children are taken away from her and, she feels, given an intolerant and malicious influence from their parents.

And this, perhaps, is what produces the sense of conflict which I have examined throughout this chapter. The proliferation of piercing throughout mainstream society has not changed the variety of possible meanings which piercings can convey: if anything, it

has increased them. This is, I believe, demonstrated by the groups of positive and negative contrasts in terms which I discerned among my informants at the beginning of the chapter. They are no longer sure how to identify the audiences responding to their piercings. My informants were attempting to isolate not merely different groups of piercees when they spoke about "new generation" versus "piercees back then", or "past" and "present", or when they spoke about "trendiness" and "not taking it seriously"; they were also, I believe, trying to draw distinctions between those piercees transmitting similar messages as their own, and also between the audiences those messages were directed at. A "kid" (a frequent term used with derision by my informants) might, for instance, be getting a piercing to rebel against a parent. Yet somebody like Morgan might, in contrast, be simply trying to live her belief that adolescents need more rites of passage. The adult, however, toward whom both of these two different messages might be directed, would not necessarily recognize the distinctiveness of each message. As a result many of my informants expressed the concern that their message and their audience might be mistaken. Moreover, they expressed a fear that with all these increasingly diversified audiences, they had less control and ability to convey their desired message properly: the growing element of being seen as a 'non-threat' was a critical issue to some of them.

This perceived problem might very well have been confounded and exacerbated by the growing popularity of body piercing. For the increasing use of piercings has also

consequently increased the variety of audiences responding to those piercings. And with a greater number and greater variety of both piercees and piercing audiences, piercees such as my primary informants are having trouble maintaining control over both the messages they are expressing through their piercings as well as the manner in which the audience receives them. It is this increased diversification in - and loss of control over - audience which is, perhaps, the most fundamental source of the frustration expressed by my informants. For the presence of an increasingly diversified audience, reading different messages from different piercees, means that what for many of them was the original message of representing an alternative, unique individual is no longer received as uniformly as it once was. The popularity of piercing has not taken away the presence of meaning in piercing: it has multiplied its meaning and interpretation in myriad ways, and consequently, has taken much of the power over their audience away from some piercees who previously enjoyed that sense of control. It is a loss which seems to be keenly felt.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to grapple with the hostility I encountered among many of my informants toward the increasing popularity or "trendiness" of body piercing in commercial fashion and mainstream culture. After examining the issue from a variety of theoretical perspectives, I eventually came to feel that it demonstrated a facet of piercing which I had, in my focus on the personal significance of body piercing (as it

contributes to a sense of self-identity), underemphasized: that is to say, the social factor. Yet in addition to utilizing piercing to explore their own selves and identities, my informants were also transmitting messages toward selectively targeted audiences. The range of those messages and of those audiences varied as infinitely as the types of personal symbolism which piercings could hold and convey. Yet the change which I believe my informants perceived as a result of piercing's increased popularity was not so much a change in the meaning of piercing as a change in the receptivity of the audiences. When piercing was less fashionable, and less sought after, the reactions of the public were more predictable, and piercees exercised a degree of control over the range of reactions which they could expect from their audiences. However, with the rapid growth of piercing's popularity, they have lost much of that control. The public audiences are no longer so predictable, and they are much more varied, in almost direct proportion to the increasing numbers of people seeking piercings. The frustration expressed by my informants is not so much a frustration with popular culture per se - it is more of a frustration at the loss of control, and at the perceived change in the reaction of their audience to body piercing.

This 'fashion problem' is in many ways a phenomenon of the recent diversification of piercing, and its audiences. In this process, there appears a dichotomy between piercees' perceptions of the "past" and the "present". They associated the "past" with a sense of body piercing as 'authentic'. What they saw in this was that the role body

piercing played toward themselves, as piercees, was one of expressing deeply individual meanings. Yet in terms of the message which they seemed to believe piercing had 'back then' held toward the public as audience, that message was varyingly one of danger, of threat, of risqué anti-mainstream behaviour. The public audience, in terms of their reaction, was more or less undiversified: common themes could be conveyed and seen as understood (at least, such was the perception present-day piercees had about the past).

Today, however, the various meanings and audiences have become varied and diversified, which serves to confound this process in many respects: it renders it more complex. The meaning body piercing holds toward the piercee, ranges from one of individuality, to the "kids" (the perceived new, inauthentic generation of piercees) fashion oriented piercings. What fashion in this case represents is a meaning directed not at themselves as individuals but aimed at each other as audiences. And my informants felt this was 'wrong' in many ways - that the proper audience for the individual should be the individual, not the peer group in which one attempts to fit in. Moreover, the public meanings of piercing - referring to the public as audience - has also become diversified. Piercing is no longer always seen as a danger or a threat, but by many is seen as public, as normal, even as a social behaviour.

In this process, it must be noted that my informants resist cooptation, and resist the fashion statements which they feel dilutes personal individual significance in piercing. The many ways they resist this have been explored throughout this chapter. In

closing, however, it is worthwhile to note that my informants held steadfastly to their perceptions of themselves as individuals, and to their ability to express that through piercing, in spite of what they feared in what they saw around them. Although they feared being coopted, in the end they were adamant that they and their piercings had not been coopted. What might, however, have been coopted was their audience. And in this, perhaps, lay the source of much of the anger and fear they felt toward body piercing today.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Identity and Diversity

While I was discussing piercing with her one day, Morgan recalled an interesting story from the age of six, which she felt related to the early origins of her personal fascination with body piercing.

Morgan: Okay, my first memory of it, and this affected me, this is one of the major influences, was when I went to England once as a child. And I went to England a lot, because my mom's family lived there, but one particular incident was in 1984 when a lot of the punks, when the punk revolution was on the go, and we were walking down, I think it was King's Cross in London, the street, and there was a big group of punks and they were walking down the middle of the street, and cars would literally drive around them, and people were scurrying on the other sides of the road to get away from them. And they had safety pins in their noses, and mohawks, and everything! And one of them looked at me, and smiled at me. And I was like, "Wow! Look at the power they have!" That's, that was the first time I was exposed [to body piercing].

Morgan's encounter, at the age of six, with these British punks left a lasting impression on her. Indeed, it was one which she has integrated deeply into her personal paradigm today - through body piercing. The thing which struck her most prominently about the punks, she says, was the level of power which they seemed to wield.

Morgan: Like, they had so much power! I was just, wow! People were just running away, and my aunt was like, 'Oh! Don't look at those people!' you know, and my mom was all 'Oh! Look, how can they do that?' And I just had a, wow, that's really neat! It was like a whole different level of being, right there! And everyone was afraid of them.

Morgan's initial impression of the power which these punks conveyed, through their overall style and, perhaps more significantly, the manner in which people about her reacted to them, has translated itself into what is today a deeply significant personal form of meaning for her. In Morgan's view, it is not so much the cultural or subcultural stylistic trappings of punk which convey that sense of personal power, but rather the fact that wearing a piercing conveys the implication of a badge of power, of sorts (or a "badge of honour," as Wally described and labelled it in Chapter Five). The pain which Morgan had to go through to obtain her piercings (described in Chapter Two) is expressed symbolically as a badge of honour, which gives her a sense of power she believes is conveyed, by the piercings, to those about her.

I commented, during the course of this conversation, about the punks she remembered and how they seemed so threatening walking down the street. She immediately interjected with vehemence at the notion that they seemed threatening.

Morgan: Oh, but they weren't! Because like one of them looked at me. I was a girl, and she looked at me and she had, like, earrings everywhere and spiked hair, everything, and she just smiled as she walked by. And that's because, I guess, I was staring at them, right, you know like oh my god, I'm staring in awe at these people, you know, walking down the street, and I think she just probably found amusing, as I would now...And if she had like made a rude gesture it would have been a totally different story, you know. But I thought, you know, she's nice, she's smiling, you know, and being friendly, it wasn't like a scary kind of menacing smile, it was just a 'Hey, look that kid's looking at us' kind of smile, you know? And that made me have to question, like, why is everyone being so afraid of these people, you know?

Today Morgan is twenty-one years old, and much as she admired these punks she encountered during her childhood, she certainly does not look much like them. Despite the wealth of piercings she has (described in Chapter Two), one would not imagine she had any interest in piercing upon first encounter. Whether working at her job in Tim Hortons, or running from class to class at university, she looks no different from any other student or worker; most of her piercings are hidden, and those that are not are subdued by nearly-invisible studs (which she replaces with bright shiny jewellery only for the occasions when she feels it is appropriate for her - personally - to do so). Her piercings are important to her sense of identity, but in contrast to the punks she described above who marked themselves publicly as part of the vaguely defined punk movement of 1970s England, she draws hidden strength from her piercings and only wields them publicly when she wants to.

A great many of the everyday acts we partake in during our daily routines carry very little import toward the construction of our self-identity. Making breakfast, combing one's hair - these are things many people do each day yet do not think about in a deeply meaningful way. Yet at other times, people do make conscious attempts to endow these simple everyday acts with personal significance. Making a traditional meal, for instance, can help to bolster and empower one's sense of ethnicity. In combing one's hair, some of my neopagan informants told me how they braid or comb spells into their hair in the mornings, for protection or inspirational purposes. There are a wealth of ways in which

everyday routine acts can be transformed into statements of immense personal significance.

Body fashion and aesthetics is one of those ways, and body piercing lends itself especially well to the endowment of significant personal meaning. The very manner in which it is carried out helps this process. Typically, my informants spent a great deal of time before actively pursuing a piercing, considering what type of piercing they would like, and how they felt it would play a significant role in their lives: either through function or, even more often for my informants, through personal symbolism. Once they have decided upon a piercing they want, the process continues as they first of all spend time saving up the money for the piercing, and then finally book an appointment at the piercing salon. At this point they often discuss the piercing in some depth with the piercer, both so that the piercer is certain they know what they want and what they will get (as Tom explained in Chapter One), and also so that the piercee feels confident the piercers themselves know what they want them to do and how they want it done. Following this there is often a further waiting period. Piercees at Elektron often told me they had to book at times a month in advance of the piercing, both due to the scarcity of reputable establishments in the city offering piercing services, and also due to Elektron's large clientele, serving a dual nature as a hair salon. During this waiting period some of my informants found they often wound up cancelling the appointments, either because they decided the piercing was not precisely what they wanted at that time, or because

unforeseen financial situations arose to drain the money they had saved up for the piercing. Alternately, other piercees found this period further reinforced their desire for a particular piercing, and built up the anticipation they felt while looking forward to the piercing. This entire process - the build-up period (planning, saving, preparing), leading to the climax (the piercing itself) - lends itself especially well to creating a social act by which the individual feels they have somehow transformed themselves, a sort of rite which leaves the individual forever changed. The important point, however, is that they have been the one exerting control over how they want to be changed. They decide what they want to highlight, accentuate, reinforce, or express about themselves, they plan how they wish to do this (by what type and means of piercing), and then they live the results in their lives following the event. Many of my informants seemed very pleased with the way this process worked for them.

Through this thesis I have attempted to probe this process, and to examine how individuals utilize body piercing to help create a sense of self-identity, forged or reinforced through conscious, deliberate planning. Some of these piercees draw empowerment from the results of the piercing - if it is sexual function for instance which they wish to alter or enhance, then it is their sexual identity they are creating and reinforcing, as I focused on in Chapter Three. Others use it to reinforce and to express in a material way something they feel very deeply. Chapter Two examined those piercees who were attempting to create for themselves alternate realities, either drawing from the

past or from cultures other than their own. For many of these it served an extremely spiritual function: for others it served to create a rite of passage for themselves which they felt their own culture and upbringing had deprived them of. Still other piercees used piercing to explore the limits of their physical self - and to try to push those limits and boundaries to still further heights, as I examined in Chapter Four, particularly in the case of Sharon. For Sharon, as well as other informants whom I discussed earlier in Chapter Four, piercing played a role in their sexuality too, but in a less functional manner: the S&M sexual identities allowed individuals to exert control over and to manipulate situations of dominance and submission, as well as to explore a range of other complex issues, from power to trust to healing.

For most of these informants, piercing allowed them to articulate a sense of self, and to empower their self-identities. It was a unique act of self-definition. Yet there can be no doubt that in the society in which these informants live, piercing has gone from being a purely unique act, to being a commodity in the mainstream commercial fashion market. One need only turn on the television to see a plethora of ads marketing everything from shampoo to orange juice, from no-smoking ads to Girl Scout recruitment campaigns - all featuring pierced youth. This presented some of my informants with the challenge that I explored in Chapter Five - has the commercial attraction and commoditization of body piercing diluted its ability to serve as a meaningful personal expression of self-identity? In Chapter Five I examined how my informants responded to

this perceived challenge, and they responded to it in a variety of ways. Yet one particularly important point struck me in this process. This is that for many of them, piercing did not act on an exclusively personal level. Other people's reactions to their piercings were important too. For some informants reactions of others were directly important: they *wanted* to provoke a reaction, not necessarily of shock, but at least a *reaction*. However even those piercees who did not do it directly for the reaction it provoked in others found themselves affected by piercing's increased trendiness. Eileen described how she suddenly felt herself to be lumped in with the other trendy girls at her high school - the "preppy rich kids" - who got piercings because they perceived them to be trendy. In a sense, the piercing which had helped her feel a sense of empowered self-identity suddenly threatened to damage her self-confidence and unique sense of personal identity. Thus we saw demonstrated the important element of audience in this whole process. Either implicitly or explicitly, the role of audience and public perception played an extremely important role, both in the social construction of piercing as commodity and fashion, and also in the complex interplay between public symbol and private meaning.

Body piercing today is many things. It is private: a physical symbol expressing a world of personal meaning for the piercee, to the piercee. It is also public, a symbol expressing meanings both intended and unintended through the intersection of public and private social meanings. It is also a commodity, and a fashion. It is subcultural, yet also an unmistakable part of the culture at large.

These multiplicities of meanings and roles are not at odds with each other (though sometimes their consequences may be). Piercing's role in consumer fashion does not divorce it from its subcultural context. Indeed, it demonstrates that mainstream and alternative meanings and fashions are not wholly separate entities, but are each defined not by any set of rules but by *how* the piercee uses them. Piercing - and perhaps any fashion symbol - is not merely one or the other. It can be both, or its meaning can shift back and forth, depending upon the way it is used and manipulated by the wearer. Similarly, the adoption of piercing by mainstream commercial fashion has not rendered it incapable of expressing personal, individual meaning. For, as this study has demonstrated above all else, there is no one single meaning or symbolism inherent in piercing. There is no exclusively 'punk' piercing, or 'neopagan' piercing, or S&M piercing, or fashion piercing. Instead, there are multiple meanings, meanings which are as varied and different as the vast numbers of people seeking piercings today. Far from being a paradox, this multiplicity of meaning is an expression of the infinite variety of the human identity.

Notes

: I use the terms "subculture" and "punk ethos" in their most general, infinitely malleable popular connotations, which is how I thought of them in my youth: that is to say, non-critically. Were I to invoke more analytical considerations, I would point out - indeed, such is the theme of much of this work - that body piercing doesn't hold up under closer theoretical scrutiny as a "subculture" either. For instance, Michael Brake (1985) exhaustively analyzed youth subcultures under four categories: 'respectable youth', 'delinquent youth', 'cultural rebels', and 'politically militant youth'. Without getting lost in the specifics of each group, I found my informants to easily belong to different, multiple, and sometimes none of these categories. Moreover, he defines subcultures as meeting the following functional uses:

"1. They offer a solution, albeit at a 'magical' level, to certain structural problems created by the internal contradictions of a socio-economic structure, which are collectively experienced. The problems are often class problems experienced generationally.

"2. They offer a culture, from which can be selected certain cultural elements such as style, values, ideologies and life style. These can be used to develop an achieved identity outside the ascribed identity offered by work, home or school.

"3. As such, an alternative form of social reality is experienced, rooted in a class culture, but mediated by neighbourhood, or else a symbolic community transmitted through the mass media.

"4. Subcultures offer, through their expressive elements, a meaningful way of life during leisure, which has been removed from the instrumental world of work.

"5. Subcultures offer to the individual solutions to certain existential dilemmas. Particularly, this involves the bricolage of youthful style to construct an identity outside work or school. This is particularly employed by young males for reasons I will discuss later, and therefore subcultures have tended to be masculinist subcultures, especially working-class subcultures" (Brake, 1985: 24).

The problems I believe inherent in these functions aside (for instance, the gender bias implicit in the last), I hope to demonstrate through the following chapters that although piercing often offers aspects of the above functions to my informants, just as often what they get out of piercing is manipulated in contradictory fashions to the all-too-easy categorical, functional structure which Brake outlines above.

Furthermore, as much of body piercing is embedded in issues of fashion or style, the analytical Brake provides us with three elements of which he believes a "style" must consist:

"a 'Image', appearance composed of costume, accessories such as hair-style, jewellery and artefacts.

"b 'Demeanour', made up of expression, gait and posture. Roughly this is what the actors wear and how they wear it.

"c 'Argot', a special vocabulary and how it is delivered"(Brake 1985: 12).

With the obvious exception of 'a', piercees certainly do not define themselves by a common demeanour or argot.

Brake isn't unique in this regard; this type of approach is characteristic of many of the scholars lumped under what has come to be referred to as the "New Subcultural Theory," centred around the post-World War II work of researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (Widdicombe & Wooffit, 1995: 14-20).

However, the point of all of this is not to criticize Brake and those scholars who adopt analytical approaches to the study of youth subcultures; rather, my intent in the pages which follow is to observe - qualitatively - how piercing transcends any categorical analysis which would seek to define it as a uniform expression of social status or belief.

The term "authenticity" is an equally complex term, laden with a multiplicity of anthropological and popular connotations. I use the term loosely, and generally in deference to my informants' malleable use of the term: from their perspective of popularized anthropology, it combines meanings such as personal commitment to an idea or ethos, sense of realness, personal integrity. Rosenblatt provides a useful if cursory presentation of authenticity in this context as reflecting a need "for meaning, fulfillment, and experiences that can confirm the existence of a genuine self", which is predicated upon a Western notion of the self that "figures authentic selfhood as prior to and outside of society". In this context, he goes on to say, body modification is "based on the recovery of the self in response to the experience of consumer capitalism" (Rosenblatt 1997: 322-324). The relevance of this may not seem clear at this point, but is useful to bear in mind in the latter chapters, where authenticity becomes of crucial importance.

2. The perceived importance of Hebdige's work is evident from the fact that it was cited in virtually every subsequently-published work on punk, subculture, or fashion which I read.

On the negative side however, Davies (1996: 4) sums up the arguments against Hebdige's theories, arguing that Hebdige "...typifies the sociological approach that acknowledges the oppositional force of subcultures only by limiting that force to ritual or symbolic resistance." Hebdige's theories, he states, although elaborately symbolic, "...deny the possibilities of self-consciousness that represent the only means by which subcultures could transcend the ritualistic symbolic forms of opposition and actually get around to changing social relationships" (Davies 1996: 4). Similarly, Widdicombe & Wooffit (1995) emphasize the glaring denial of subject voices implicit in Hebdige's elaborate theories, highlighting a quote from Hebdige's own work: "It is highly unlikely...that the members of any subcultures described in this book would recognise themselves reflected here" (Hebdige, 1979: 139).

3. Sometimes a piercing will refuse to "stay in," and will slowly migrate or push its way back out of the body. While occasionally this is the result of the manner of the piercing, more often it simply occurs for no obvious reason. Some areas of the body are more prone to doing this than others: good piercers will warn clients of the chances of this happening before the piercing.

4. Unlike other professions which involve subcutaneous incisions – i.e. surgery or dentistry – there are no regulations governing or establishing levels of standards in the piercing industry in Canada (for a variety of reasons, none of which are immediately relevant to the subject of this thesis). While the lack of regulation is appreciated by some piercers, others – like Mike – find it frustrating and would like to see some basic standards required, in order to – as he put it – ensure body piercing "stays reputable."

5. Margot Adler, in the 1997 revision of her classic work on the history of paganism in the United States, explains that "By ritual, of course, we do not mean the continuation of those dry, formalized, repetitive experiences that most of us have suffered through... We are talking about the rituals that people *create* to get in touch with those powerful parts of themselves that cannot be experienced on a verbal level..." Margot Adler, Drawing Down The Moon, (Penguin Books 1997), pp. 197-198, emphasis mine.

6. Cited in interview in Vale & Juno 1989.

7. The term sadomasochism or S&M is defined in a multitude of ways, from forms of "sexual perversion" (according to the Oxford Dictionary) to forms of sexual pleasure

(according to sex activists like Pat Califia, quoted later). I use the term very loosely to refer to forms of sexuality predicated upon the conscious manipulation and enactment of scenarios of dominance and submission, often with the use of a variety of sexual aids, i.e. whips, chains, masks, costumes, or verbal dialogue, among others. The varying approaches and perceptions among S&M practitioners of what they believe S&M is supposed to be about will be discussed in the next chapter.

§. Much like buying versus renting a car, it is the initial cost of temporary piercing equipment which is daunting: in the long run – for frequent piercees who are not interested in permanent jewellery – it becomes much cheaper than soliciting a commercial piercer for each piercing.

§. Authors such as Wojcik (1995: 11-26) have noted the use of piercings as an identifiable symbol – if one of many – of style used by various ‘subcultural’ groupings: Wojcik uses various forms of piercing and body art as distinguishing identifiers among the punk, goth, industrial, and riot grrrl subcultures, for instance.

§. When I asked Sonia what assumptions she felt she was challenging with her piercings, she replied

Just that you shouldn't do it. I mean people are just, they look at you and they assume you're a freak. But I don't want any, I'd much rather it be assumed that I'm a freak than some nice little passive girl. You know when you look like a punk they don't think you're quite so nice. And I'm nice, I think I'm nice. [laugh] But it's kind of that funny thing too, like going around pierced and tattooed and back when I had more punk hair, which I kinda miss...but you know you'd open the door for this little granny and she'd kinda look at you pretty strangely and say "Thank you." [laugh] They don't know what to think. They expect you to, you know, you'd sooner tell them to fuck off than be nice to them, so I think it's kind of fun to mess with people's heads. But yeah. Very odd looks from grannies...

§. A well-known American punk band.

12. He also commented that he was going to give Robert a piercing in return, but never did it because unlike Robert he had no experience in body piercing or tattooing, and did not trust himself to do a decent job of it.

13. The use of the term “hardcore” in this context has been noted by other researchers as well. Kathryn Joan Fox (1987) uses it as one of her primary theoretical categories in distinguishing “real punks and pretenders” in her study of what in her view is punk’s deliberately countercultural social organization.

14. As Wally notes, neither of these milieux are places one would go expecting danger. Freshwater Road is a principal, heavily populated thoroughfare near the city centre, while Bannerman Park is a downtown park adjoining the lieutenant-governor’s residence, and which plays host to fancy weddings and theatrical performances during those same summers when Wally finds that it serves as a “battle-ground” for those who pick on people like himself and his friends.

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