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## Anthropological reflections on tattoos amongst punk women

Megan A. O'Shea

University of Central Florida, [the.wrong.megan@gmail.com](mailto:the.wrong.megan@gmail.com)



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ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON TATTOOS AMONGST PUNK WOMEN

by

MEGAN A. O'SHEA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology  
in the College of Sciences  
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Ty Matejowsky



## ABSTRACT

The relationship between identity and tattooing regarding female members of the punk community has not been fully explored by the academic community. Through the exploration of the anthropological history of tattoos as markers of identity, the pro-social aspects of this form of body modification can be illustrated. Placing emphasis on punk women, tattoos are shown to positively affect individual identity and reinforce social bonds.

The pioneering nature of punk music and the outright rejection of cultural norms creates an atmosphere in which women can more adequately express their identity through the use of body modification. In this open environment where societal norms regarding body modification are rebuked, tattoos are also used to reinforce social bonds amongst those willing to permanently display their dedication to a non-mainstream aesthetic.



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## Introduction

Tattoos have long been characterized as markers of both personal and group identity. Historically and cross-culturally, they have done much to indelibly mark the human psyche. From their roles in individual rites of passage to their part in preserving and depicting tribal genealogies, many aspects of human identity are affected by their use. Expressions of gender identity within individual and group contexts are often articulated through the aesthetics involved with the mechanical placement of ink in the human dermis (Atkinson 2003; Atkinson 2004; Bianchini and Rio 2005; Darko 1995; DeMello 1993; DeMello 2007; Langman 2008; Rosenblatt 1997; Schildkrout 2004; Sweetman 1999; Wojcik 1995).

For years, tattoos have been a popular form of body modification in Western subcultures. One subculture where body modification and tattooing gains maximal expression is punk. Matters of tattooing and female identity within the punk community have been characterized as pro-social at both the group and individual level (Atkinson 2004).

The punk aesthetic attempts to rebuke societal expectations in which it is more readily acceptable for men to have tattoos rather than women (O'Hara 1999; Leblanc 1999). The pioneering nature of punk music and the outright rejection of prevailing socio-cultural norms attracted a new generation of discontented young European and American women beginning in the mid-1970s. Even today the punk aesthetic and philosophy allows women to utilize body modification as a method of expressing their



individual identity that is largely restricted to them in other contexts by external cultural pressures. Through the shared use of a "stigmatized" means of expression reflecting their communal disenfranchisement, social bonds within the punk community are reinforced (Atkinson 2002; Leblanc 1999; O'Hara 1999).

### **Thesis Objectives and Overview**

The relationship between identity and tattoos within the female punk community has yet to be fully explored by scholars (Atkinson 2002). In this thesis, I address deficiencies in the literature by exploring the pro-social aspects of tattoos in relation to identity within this subculture. By examining the socio-cultural history of tattooing as markers of personal and group identity, understanding of how punk women utilize tattoos becomes more readily apparent. Furthermore, by considering tattoos within the female punk community, I address how gender differences are sometimes expressed within the context of this subculture's largely counter-cultural philosophy. Taken as a whole, findings from my thesis help illustrate how tattoos amongst punk women can positively affect individual identity and reinforce social bonds.

To better identify and examine the pro-social aspects of tattoos *vis-à-vis* identity amongst punk women, my thesis is organized into seven chapters. In the first section, I explore the diversity underlying the historical and socio-cultural impact of tattoos on human identity. By researching work on tattoos as markers of identity in such a broad context, I am able to better identify how women have utilized them in various cultural milieus. Next, I examine the punk subculture with a particular emphasis on its music,



philosophy, and aesthetics. After that, I synthesize the information explored in the previous sections by discussing the female punk community and how punk aesthetics and philosophy provide a context for the use of tattoos as expressions of both individual and group identity. All things considered, the compiled research illustrates how tattoos amongst punk women can positively affect individual identity and reinforce social bonds.

Before examining matters of identity amongst tattooed punk women in more detail, it is necessary to accurately define certain core concepts related to the primary aims of my thesis. Specifically, I provide clarification by what I mean by group (i.e. tattooed punk women) and identity within the context of this work.

The parameters for who can and cannot be classified as “tattooed punk women” may vary per researcher. While not attempting to stereotype or negatively label any one group or subculture, this research effort draws heavily on group definitions previously outlined by other researchers (Atkinson 2002; Atkinson 2003; Atkinson 2004; DeMello 1993; DeMello 2007; Malott and Pena 2004; Leblanc 1999; Sweetman 1999; Wojcik 1995). For the purpose of this thesis, groups are understood as categories in which individuals define themselves as a part of, or others define them as such (Barnard and Spencer 1996). Such classifications include aspects from which an individual derives a sense of knowing or belonging (Barnard and Spencer 1996). Additionally, while there are tattoo stories and firsthand accounts that are grounded in more of an emic perspective, they may not specifically state how tattoos relate to an individual's identity or his/her group relationship dynamic (Hudson 2007).



Individual identity, for the purposes of this paper, relates to how a sense of self is defined (Cerulo 1997). Identity within an anthropological context emphasizes the socio-cultural surroundings and the aspects of social and cultural acquisition on an individual's sense of self (Barnard and Spencer 1996).



## Tattoos and Tattoo Eras as Defined by Atkinson

From early accounts of European explorers encountering tattooed natives to modern day tattoo shops, the art, technology, and community surrounding tattoos have not remained static. To situate tattooing amongst punk women in a proper socio-historical context, it is useful to briefly trace the rise of this practice over time. Sociologist Michael Atkinson does an effective job of dividing tattooing into historical eras in his work *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003). One of the common threads throughout these varying eras is the affect that tattoos have on both individual and group identity.

According to Atkinson, tattooing within the context of Western culture can be divided into six distinct eras. Each era serves to illustrate how this specific form of body modification is manifested at particular times. Atkinson has compiled extensive ethnographic information regarding tattooing practices within each of these eras. His work provides an effective backdrop against which identity construction and expression amongst tattooed punk women can be considered. For the purpose of my thesis, I mainly concentrate on the last three eras: The Rebel Era, The New Age Era and the Supermarket Era.

The Colonist or Pioneer Era (1760s – 1870s) is marked by Western European travel and interaction with tattooed indigenous populations. While not the Europeans' first encounter with tattoos, this era marks the beginning of a time-line in which Western cultures began to significantly interact with native tattooed populations. These tattoos



were often viewed as exotic spectacles of an "otherness" which encouraged the exploitation of tattooed individuals. This victimization sets the stage for the next era of tattooing that depicts men and women as circus sideshows and is, thus, titled The Circus or Carnival Era (1880s – 1920s). Leaving the midway and entering tattoo parlors throughout the Western world, the Working Class Era (1920s – 1950s) highlights a patriotic "traditional" tattoo style which fostered a newfound measure of legitimacy for those with tattoos. The Rebel era (1950 – 1970), like previous times, is characterized by the stigmatization of tattooing. Mainly this is due to associations between tattoos, gangs and prisons. The New Age era (1970 – 1990) emphasizes the postmodern ideas about the human skin as an artistic canvas in which individuals can actively represent their own expressions of identity. Lastly, and possibly most relevant to my thesis's research aims, is the Supermarket era (1990 – present). This period is characterized by a resurgence in the number of individuals becoming tattooed. The Supermarket Era places focus on the uniquely artistic nature of individual tattoos rather than the stock design choices seen in previous eras.

Sociologist Michael Atkinson skillfully illustrates the rise of tattooing over time. By breaking the history of tattooing into eras, it is easier to observe similarities and differences of tattooing practices throughout history. Common throughout each of the eras that Atkinson describes is the affect that tattoos have on both individual and group identity. By researching Atkinson's eras, tattooing amongst punk women can be better placed within a socio-historical context.



## The Historical Relationship between Tattoos and Identity

Tattoos as a means of individual and group identity expression is not specific just to tattooed punk women. Tattoos have been used for centuries in diverse cultures and populations (Caplan 2000). By researching other tattooed communities, a better understanding of how tattooing within the female punk community affects identity emerges (ibid). Tattoos have often served as a means whereby individuals can either express their identity or as a way in which their identity has been altered by outside forces (ibid). These externalities can include groups associated with religion, class, and deviance.

### Religion

Religion is one outside force which affects an individual's identity that is oftentimes expressed through the presence of tattoos (Zubrinic 1995). For example, the *sharati* tattoos popular amongst generations of Catholic Croatian women arose out of the fear of forced conversion and enslavement (Krutak 2007). These tattoos of religious symbols and mortuary art were considered at the time to be a sin amongst the Ottomans who sought to enslave them and forcibly convert Catholics to Islam (Zubrinic 2005). These tattoos not only protected their bearers from forced conversion but also effectively identified them as part of a specific religious group. The *sharati* tattoos both reinforced individual identity by acting as a visible symbol for religious beliefs and as a means to express a shared group affiliation.



## Class

Beyond religion, other socio-cultural factors can influence how individuals express their identity and how they self-identify as members of a larger group. Notably, tattoos have been used as both status symbols and as pro-social indicators within various societies (Caplan 2000). For example, the Timucua, a Native-American group from the Southeast United States, hold tattoos in high regard. High status Timucua of both sexes typically have much of their body covered with elaborately designed tattoos (Paterek 1996). While both sexes in high standing are heavily tattooed, the overall aesthetics are different for men and women (ibid).

Similarly, the *moko* tattoos or facial tattooing of New Zealand's Maori have various pro-social functions ranging from religious aspects to genealogical information. Maori facial tattooing serves as a way to indicate higher status, personal lineage, and social position (Atkinson 2003). Noted anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has remarked that: "The purpose of Maori tattooings is not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group" (Levi-Strauss 1963). Both the Timucuan and Maori *moko* tattoos help convey an individual's group membership and an aspect of his/her identity. These tattoos are also used to distinguish those within their societies who hold high status.

## Deviance

While some cultures place value on tattoos as status indicators, their use has often been characterized as deviant in Western culture. Atkinson identifies two eras in which



tattoos are classified negatively, the Circus Era and the Rebel Era. As previously mentioned, the Rebel Era (1950 – 1970s) is a recent time in which body modification emphasizing tattoos was looked at less positively by mainstream society. Despite such prevailing negative connotation, tattoos are still utilized by some as an expression of individual and group identity (Atkinson 2003).

Social groups throughout history have used tattoos to express their dissatisfaction with prevailing socio-political conditions and norms (Atkinson 2003). During the tumultuous 1960s, many young Americans protested the Vietnam War and participated in various counter-cultural movements (Mifflin 1997). Notably, it was also during this decade that differences over major social controversies that led to the formation of new movements including the emergence of quasi-criminal gangs (Cummings and Monti 1993).

Some of the more notable Rebel Era criminal groups that use tattoos as a form of individual and group expression are prison gangs; notably, these include the Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerilla Family, La Nuestra Familia, Mexican Mafia, Texas Syndicate, and the Neta Association (Bianchini and Rio 2005). These gangs use tattoos as a way to identify members and gang rivals (Walker 1999). Crime-related tattoos such as marijuana references and other anti-social motifs also add to the growing disrepute of tattoos (Atkinson 2003). While there is very little freedom in correctional institutions, control over an individual's body serves as a way he/she can express some degree of freedom (ibid).

While gang membership affords individuals some degree of mobility within



prison, these very same group affiliations have real anti-social connotations for individuals on the outside. In the context of body modification, tattoos are a permanent means in which group affiliations gain expression.

One criminological theory discussing the permanency of ascribed attributes given by others is the labeling theory. This theory examines the effects of negative labels associated with prison tattoos. Once individuals leave the penal system they will always carry the label of “convict” (Allen, Conrad, Cox, and Hanser 2008). In some cases prisoners may choose to identify with a gang for reasons of self-preservation while incarcerated. Unfortunately, they often find that when released they will carry that identity with them regardless of any new non-prison group affiliation. While prison tattoos may provide an outlet for expressing group affiliation and reclaiming a sense of freedom while serving one's sentence, the repercussions of prison tattoos can remain throughout an individual's life (ibid). The prison stigma is often so great that it can be extremely difficult for ex-convicts to overcome on the outside. The presence of prison tattoos can serve to only further exacerbate this hardship.

Both today and in the past groups exist along the fringes of mainstream society. From circus performers that displayed ethnic stereotypes and focused on an “exotic otherness” to the current modern primitives, it seems many people hold a fascination for individuals living in fringe subcultures (Atkinson 2003). Historically, individuals visited sideshows and exhibits that provided glimpses of this “deviancy” without actually directly partaking in it themselves (ibid). Currently, individuals watch television shows depicting individuals getting tattoos and documentaries about prison groups and other



sub-cultures. As tattooed individuals may no longer be considered non-European savages, today they may still be seen as exotic others to non-tattooed individuals (ibid).

### **Conclusion**

Tattoos as a means of expression are not specific to only punk women, and they have been used throughout centuries and in varied cultures (Caplan 2000). By looking at how tattoos have been used in other cultures we can better discern how tattooing within the female punk community emerges (ibid). Tattoos have served as a means for individuals to express their identity and they are used to display instances in which outside influences have affected an individual (ibid). Groups associated with religion, class, and deviant behavior are excellent examples of outside sources which are often expressed through the use tattoos.



## Punk Identity

Arising as a rejection of prevailing musical preferences for popular music in the mid-1970s, a new sound emerged. With fast guitars and screaming vocals, the frustrations of a small group of misfits found a means to express themselves, and a different social group with which to identify (Mallot and Pena 2004). Along with this innovative sound, a novel fashion style and general aesthetics developed which focused on shocking the mainstream (Sabin 1999). Rejecting cultural values and norms, some within the punk subculture espoused an egalitarian ideology that stood in marked contrast to the inequality they perceived within conventional society (ibid).

One of the characteristics uniting many of the differing facets of the punk scene is a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. This approach permeates nearly every aspect of the punk movement, ranging from actual musicality to the production of clothing and magazines (Leblanc 1999). The DIY ethos as it relates to music suggests that knowledge of how to play an instrument, much less musical talent or experiences, are unnecessary to create a new band (Sabin 1999). In this way, if individuals hope to make a change on the scene, they can effectively do it on their own terms.

One of the more commonly known punk symbols are “zines.” These handmade publications involve pasting images and stories onto a master copy before mass producing them with a photocopier (ibid). Such documents tend to cover issues important to punks. In addition to “zines,” the DIY approach is also used to create a new style of attire. Ranging from embossed and studded leather clothing to handmade knit



cardigans embellished with safety pins, punk fashions are very much linked to the DIY philosophy (ibid).

## Music

In contrast to the melodic tones popular in mainstream music, punk focuses on sounds that are typically both more aggressive and louder than what is usually heard on Top 40 radio (Malott and Pena 2004). As punk music gained a wider audience after its emergence in the mid-1970s, it also changed and morphed into different sub-genres; each with different sounds and ideologies arising out of shared locales and values (Rachman 2005). The sub-genres of punk that I will briefly examine are the Hardcore, Straight Edge, and Skinhead scenes.

## Hardcore

Hardcore focuses on a shared dislike of political authority and its effect on society. It is also critical of the roles that are ascribed to individuals by mainstream society (Malott and Pena 2004). As many roles are ascribed locally, hardcore scenes are typically associated with different locales around the country (Rachman 2005). One of the most well known local based scenes is the West Coast Scene. Bands such as Social Distortion and Suicidal Tendencies arose in the communities in and around Los Angeles during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Among other things, the West Coast Hardcore scene is known for the violent slam dancing that would later characterize the entire punk scene (ibid).



## Straight Edge

While some groups are based on ascribed roles and local concerns, others are associated with shared values. The Straight Edge scene which was inspired by a song of Washington D.C.-based Minor Threat espouses a philosophy that condemns substance abuse and focuses on a drug-free lifestyle (Haenfler 2006). Generally speaking, two factions of the Straight Edge community exist: one that peacefully asserts their drug-free ideology and another that aims to aggressively eliminate substance abuse altogether (ibid).

## Skinhead

Contrary to the groups that coalesce around positive messages and ideals, others are founded on racist and/or anti-Semitic messages espoused by white power groups. In fact, these hate groups often sought to recruit the “tough looking” punks to their rallies (Sabin 1999). Many of those who attended the gatherings began to adopt the views that were presented. The name “skinhead” is taken from typical uniform aesthetic characteristics of this subculture, most prominently a shaved head. It is important to note that not all skinhead groups hold chauvinistic and divisive ideals; some are even aggressively egalitarian. Nevertheless, mainstream society tends to view all skinheads as racist (ibid).



## Aesthetics

From studded leather jackets and dog collars to religious iconography, punk aesthetics are chosen for various reasons. Using the DIY method, the clothes, hairstyles, and overall image of punk is adapted to fit an expression of individuality (ibid). Many within the punk scene select clothing for shock value (ibid). Pieces of clothing are meticulously selected and adapted to express an aspect of an individual's personality (ibid). Some items of apparel such as lingerie are selected specifically to transform the intended or original meaning of the garment (Leblanc 1999).

Shocking the mainstream is something that appeals to the confrontational nature of many within the punk movement (Hebdige 1991). Wearing heavy leather jackets covered in metal studs and sometimes grotesque band logos regardless of season or weather often disturbs non-punks (Sabin 1999). In addition to the leather, more intimate apparel such as lingerie is chosen as pieces of everyday attire (Hebdige 1991).

Body modification is also a provocative way of confronting society at large. Safety pins are sometimes used to pierce cheeks, eyebrows, and other facial areas (Sabin 1999). Initially, wearing facial jewelry was exceptionally shocking since most women up until that point would only have their ears pierced. Tattoos depicting grotesque imagery including skeletons and corpses are preferred by many punks as a way to both to shock and reflect their anti-establishment orientation (ibid).

Until recently, most punk apparel was not mass produced. Reflecting the DIY nature of the movement, clothes are used to reflect the identity of the wearer. Rather than picking clothes off the rack or buying them as ready-to-wear items from chain stores,



many punks purchased clothing at second-hand outlets and then modified them to better represent their ideals (ibid). Whether this involves painting band logos, purposefully destroying part of the fabric with tears and holes, or by affixing metal studs to mainstream clothing, the more individualistic the clothing became, the greater the significance(ibid).

Beyond shock value and individualizing clothing, many punks co-opt certain items in an attempt to alter their intended original meaning (Wojcik 1995). For example, many punks wear things that are largely viewed by mainstream society as private or sacred. They include items related to religion and sexuality (ibid). Religious icons such as rosaries and crucifixes are both worn to alter original meanings and shock the public that hold these icons in high regard (ibid). Female punks sometimes also wear lingerie as everyday attire in an effort to provocatively highlight matters of sexuality and sexism in public ways (ibid). Similarly, some punks wear the politically confrontational Nazi swastika to show the rejection of the previous generations values (Raha 2005).

### **Philosophy**

The openness present within the punk community provides an environment that attracts individuals from varying backgrounds and ideologies (O'Hara 1999). While many cliques within the punk movement coalesce around shared ideologies and values, others may not identify as members of any group that limits their personal freedoms (Sabin 1999). Even while some segments within the punk movement ostracize parts of society, others are determined to create an egalitarian environment in which women,



homosexuals, and all ethnicities can express themselves openly (O'Hara 1999).

In contrast to its stereotypical violent image, equality initially serves as an important foundation of punk that allows the freedom of expression for individuals (ibid). As mainstream media portrayals of punk as a misanthropic and malevolent group of “misguided youth” became more common in the 1970s and 1980s, many anti-social individuals were drawn to the scene (ibid). These new and more aggressive cohorts would later divide and form their own splinter groups where they could engage in shared value systems (ibid).

Sexism within the incipient punk scene of the mid-1970s appeared to be minimal. This is arguably one of the reasons why women were initially attracted to punk (Leblanc 1999). Not content with a quiet life in the suburbs, some actively sought a way to separate themselves from an ascribed identity that they did not choose (ibid). Through the use of fanzines and local shows many young women were able to meet others who shared a dislike of mainstream society. In effect, they were able to find a group that accepted them without placing them into stereotypical gender roles (O'Hara 1999).

Issues could be discussed within punk circles that other social groups felt uncomfortable largely mentioning. Topics ranging from gender expression, politics, religion, and world conflicts can be discussed openly within the punk community (Leblanc 1999). Eventually, however, the punk scene would change significantly enough that those that still believed in these views would form another group focusing on their shared values (ibid).

With the group's same focus on the freedom of expression, many viewed



homosexuality as just another facet of individual identity (O'Hara 1999). In a time when many were still being taught that homosexuality was a bad thing and that gays were somehow inferior to heterosexuals, many punks expressed a belief that "love was love" (Sinker 2001). In the same manner as those who shared ideals relating to gender, this group too would eventually change to form a group whom shared the same ideologies.

### **Conclusion**

In researching the musical and aesthetical preferences of punks, chosen means of expression can be more readily determined. In the mid-1970s small groups of individuals used an innovative approach to music to better express themselves. Those same individuals also found a different social group in which they could identify themselves (Mallot and Pena 2004). By examining the origin of punk music, aesthetics, and prevailing philosophical ideals amongst punks, a better image of how punk women utilize tattoos can be drawn.

Prevalent throughout the musical and aesthetical means of expression utilized by punks is a DIY ethos. In music, the DIY approach encouraged individuals no musical experience to learn while performing. Thus, knowledge of how to play an instrument was not necessary to be a successful punk musician. Within the realms of punk fashion, this DIY method was evident as individuals would purposefully alter their clothing to better reflect their own individual aesthetics. By exploring specific aspects of punk, this chapter better explains how some punks express their identity through music, aesthetics and shared ideologies.



## Punk Women; Music, Aesthetics, Tattoos and Identity

Punk women as a group stand out with regards to musical interests, new aesthetics, and the use of non-standard forms of body modification to express individuality. Within the context of the punk genre, women break certain boundaries that had previously limited their role within the music industry. Women groups such as the Raincoats and the Slits, along with notable figures like Patti Smith and Poly Styrene, stand out as examples of female punk pioneers.

Punk women emphatically move away from the traditional standards of many things. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than the break from mainstream ideals regarding beauty. Emphasizing androgyny, body modification, and a DIY approach to personal appearance, many punk women find a way to express themselves in a manner which had previously been denied to them. Among various forms of body modification, tattoos are utilized by this group.

### Music

Historically, the role of singer was one of few places within the music industry where women played a prominent role. At the time singing was not widely viewed as much as a skill but more as an innate ability (Daugherty 2008). Famous jazz singers were well known and loved they were still seen as “sequin-clad eye candy” used when the “skilled musicians” needed a break (ibid). Many girl groups such as the Vandellas and Shirelles were not taken seriously as musicians, and those that were, were viewed as



the product of a skilled male organizer (ibid). Even while some popular soul and rhythm and blues artists were able to gain some “R-E-S-P-E-C-T” like Aretha Franklin, the rock-n-roll community was notably hostile to female musicians (ibid). The notable female rock stars were known to take on a more masculine persona while on the stage so as to be better accepted by their male counterparts (ibid). Even those women who did adopt a masculine persona such as Janis Joplin still performed lyrics that placed her in a “submissive” context to the man or men; for example, “Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)” and “One Good Man” (Raha 2005).

With the split of many popular genres in the 1970s, new sub-genres were created. Some of these genres were targeted directly at feminist women but still failed to gain the interest of the younger generations (Daugherty 2008). The punk genre allows disenfranchised young women to participate in every aspect of the music-making process, from the writing of lyrics to playing each of the instruments (ibid). The DIY atmosphere encourages those new to musical instruments to learn while performing. This kind of learn-as-you-go experience empowers many young women by encouraging them to pick up an instrument which society may have heretofore frowned upon (ibid). All-girl groups like The Raincoats and the Slits, and outspoken performers like Patti Smith and Poly Styrene, are hailed as female punk pioneers.

One notable pioneering group the Raincoats was formed by three women with no formal training including violinist Vicky Aspinell, guitarist/vocalist, Ana da Silva, and bassist/vocalist Gina Birch, with numerous drummers over the years including former Slit Palmolive (Raha 2005). While the band was criticized for not being proficient enough to



sound like any other group, their presence and sound presented a challenge to the more masculine aspects of the punk genre (O'Meara 2003).

In stark contrast to many of her 1970s contemporaries, punk pioneer Patti Smith fearlessly carved her own path through musical history. Described variously as punk godmother and beat poet, she focused on taking underlying reasons and emotions of love songs to the forefront and made herself the dominant force in her music (Raha 2005). Smith also focused on the destruction of a music industry which ascribed vastly different roles for male and female musicians (ibid). Her individualized philosophy of being only responsible for creating her music without regard to established gender roles was one of the first significant introductions to androgyny within the female punk movement (ibid).

As one of the first punk bands with a female front person, X-Ray Spex shocked many as being anything but the stereotypical punk group (Gaar 2002). Marion Elliot, who would later put together the punk group X-Ray Spex in 1976, would also rename herself Poly Styrene. Poly Styrene was not white, not skinny, and most notably not a man, but it was more than just her physicality that was provocative (ibid). While some of her songs tackled issues pertaining to sexuality, Styrene rejected sex symbol status even going so far as to shave her head to become more asexual (Raha 2005).

From women just learning to play musical instruments to accomplished poets, pioneering punk women paved the way for future generations of female musicians regardless of genre (ibid). In the past, the role of women in the music industry was all but secondary to men. The punk community allows women to explore their roles both within the industry and their own lives (Daugherty 2008). In addition to offering women



a place within the music industry, the punk subculture also provides a context where women are able to discuss ideas that are largely unfamiliar to the general public (ibid).

### **Aesthetics**

While many punk women are not feminists, they do use punk ideas to recreate ideas of feminine beauty (Daugherty 2008). Some embrace the mainstays of punk fashion including leather jackets and torn clothing, while others subvert the original meaning of certain clothing by removing it from its context. With an emphasis on body modification and the DIY approach, punk women discovered new ways of expressing their identity (ibid).

Punk ideals allow women to explore their presentation options. Expressions ranging from uneven hairdos, torn clothing, and revealing skirts are some of the ways through which sexuality and race issues are addressed through fashion (Daugherty 2008; Raha 2005). While mainstream female performers are either actively or passively deemed sex symbols, women within the punk community often seek a means to combat such labels which take the focus away from the music and objectified their bodies (Gaar 2002).

Siouxi Sioux, of the pioneering punk band Siouxi and the Banshees, was known for controversies surrounding some of her stage attire. Amongst the many things she wore, an armband featuring a Nazi swastika served both to shock viewers and symbolize the rejection of mainstream values (Raha 2005). Another notable fashion for Sioux was



leather bondage gear and see-through clothing. These items, in conjunction with Sioux's stage posture and makeup, were chosen to evoke a repulsive rather than appealing image (Leblanc 1999).

Punk fashion is not typically mass produced and, thus, is more difficult to acquire at local retail outlets. The lack of ready made punk clothing encouraged punk women to alter preexisting fashions to better convey their individual style. The DIY aesthetic was also used to transform everyday clothing into an intentional rejection of mainstream fashion (Leblanc 1999). By utilizing everyday objects such as safety pins to hold together intentionally torn t-shirts and garbage bag dresses, clothing could better express individuality as each piece was handcrafted (ibid). In addition to transforming normal clothing, punks also appropriated clothing used in other contexts such as military clothing, helmets, and boots (ibid).

The aesthetics of the punk genre focus on a non-standard beauty, in which punks have the freedom to choose how their presentation affects their identity. From using clothing to express ideals or rejecting values to re-purposing everyday objects, the punk scene favors individuality over mass production (Leblanc 1999).

### **Tattoos**

While traditional mainstream women are often dissuaded from getting tattoos, punk women already accept their outsider status when they choose to utilize tattoos as a means of expression (Atkinson 2002). Punk women place an emphasis on defying



gender stereotypes in various forms, so the use of tattoos is a natural choice as a new means of expression. While tattooed punk women utilize an atypical means to express themselves, the subject of their tattoos is often quite feminine (Wojcik 1995). As tattoo designs remain feminine amongst punk women, the place on the body chosen for tattoos becomes an arena for gender stereotyping resistance (Haenfler 2006). Tattoos for punk women are chosen to express their individuality and their mere presence illustrates membership to a group (Atkinson 2003).

Punk women utilize tattoos as a means of both personal expression as well as a means of group affiliation. As punk women rebuke gender stereotypes, the tattoo designs chosen tend to be of a more feminine design (Haenfler 2006). Feminine designs such as floral imagery are a popular theme in tattoos chosen by women, both punk and otherwise (Wojcik 1995).

While the designs tend to remain more feminine, the location of tattoos amongst punk women has changed (Haenfler 2006). Tattoos amongst mainstream women are generally placed in easily concealed places including the lower back or ankles, whereas punk women are willing to get tattoos in highly visible places such as the biceps, calves and upper chest (ibid). Many punk women use their body, and associated body art to resist mainstream standards of beauty (ibid).

Punk women tend to choose tattoos which, while remaining feminine in design, are often placed in locations that will forever mark their commitment to a non-mainstream lifestyle (Wojcik 1995). In this manner, body modification becomes a permanent display of the aesthetic choices of the punk woman, which may include



evidence of resistance to societal ideas of femininity. Even as tattoos are emerging as an increasingly utilized form of identity expression for mainstream women, tattoos amongst punk women still serve as an indicator of affiliation to a group outside the mainstream culture (Manuel and Sheehan 2007).

### **Conclusion**

In referencing punk women as a group, a tendency to express individuality through musical interests, aesthetics and body modification becomes apparent. Through examining the punk genre, women emerge within the punk movement as pioneers. By analyzing the historic role of women within the music industry, matters of how punk women are able to express their individuality through music are illustrated. By considering women groups such as the Raincoats and the Slits, as well as notable figures like Patti Smith and Poly Styrene, as high profile punk women, examples of the different ways that punk women have expressed their individuality become discernable.

In addition to the music produced by punk women, the aesthetics of punk women are seen to be comparably different than the mainstream fashion industry. By illustrating how punk women altered their clothing and appearance to better express their individuality, it is easier to see how tattoos often do the same. Through the use of body modification with a focus on tattoos, punk women use their bodies to rebuke mainstream ideas regarding feminine beauty.



## Final Conclusions

For years, tattoos have been a popular form of body modification in Western subcultures (Atkinson 2003). Expressions of individual and group identity are often articulated through the aesthetics involved with the mechanical placement of ink in the dermis (ibid). The emergence of punk in the mid-1970s offered small groups a new musical medium to express themselves and a new social group through which they could identify (Wojcik 1995). To varying degrees, female punks have been able to express their individuality and community identity through the use tattoos.

Throughout each of the eras that Atkinson lays out, tattoos serve as a means either through which individual identity is expressed or altered by outside influences. By exploring the role of tattoos within a historical context, the link between tattoos and their effects on the identity is better illustrated (Atkinson 2003). Examining historical aspects of identity expression and tattooing reveals similarities between present methods amongst punk women and those practices over the centuries.

While occasionally misrepresented, misquoted, and misunderstood, punk has offered many women since the mid-1970s a means to better express themselves and a group with which to identify (O'Hara 1999). With a shared sense of aesthetic values and a DIY ethos, punks found new outlets for identity expression (ibid). Even while new sub-genres emerged within punk, means of expression like the DIY approach and certain fundamental aesthetics including the use of body modification remain.

The roles of women within Western popular music has changed from being nearly



nonexistent, to ones whereby women struggled to be more than decorative backdrops for their more popular male counterparts (Daugherty 2008). All female groups within the punk genre such as the Slits and the Raincoats, and notable woman musicians like Patti Smith and Poly Styrene, created new ways for punk women to express their individuality within the music industry (Raha 2005). Through this new musical genre, punk women were exposed to new aesthetic ideals and an atmosphere where they could challenge previously held notions regarding beauty and femininity.

Tattoos within the context of punk women become a pro-social tool for the expression of identity. While much of mainstream society still condemns tattoos, the punk community uses body modification as a way to challenge or subvert mainstream aesthetics. Punk women use tattoos, new styles of fashion and a DIY ethos to challenge gender stereotypes and mainstream standards of beauty (Gaar 2002). Through the use of tattoos, punk women are able to express aspects of their individuality that they would previously never have expressed due to societal pressures (Leblanc 1999).

The non-standard aesthetics of the punk scene allow for a wider variety of femininity types than is permitted within normal societal confines (ibid). Since there is no pre-existing mold for women to be valued within the punk movement, the choice to use non-standard forms of expression can be made without the fear of ostracism. While the punk community allows a greater freedom of expression for many women, it can also be very exclusive regarding whom is considered punk. Tattoos provide the means of acceptance into the punk community for women while also allowing an outlet for personal expression.



Tattoo enthusiasts including those within the punk community utilize tattoos as a "pro-social and affectively regulated act of communication" (Atkinson 2003). While tattoos are inherently individual, their presence affords the enthusiast access to a group of people who have also chosen to alter their body to better express their individuality (ibid). This allows for the development of a "we" society versus an "I" based society where kinship is fostered by a shared means of identity expression. Within the context of punk women, the presence of tattoos indicates a lifelong pledge to non-standard ideals of beauty and femininity. The ties cultivated through this shared form of identity expression can foster strength and a sense of kinship amongst women who may have otherwise been unable to express their identity. Tattoos amongst punk woman have a pro-social effect on individual and group identity.



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