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“I CHOSE TO LOOK LIKE THIS”: BODY MODIFICATION AND  
REGRETTING VISIBILITY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Communication

by  
Stephen Bryce Ross  
May 2023

Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

I began collecting tattoos and piercings just after I turned eighteen. As my collection grows and it becomes harder for me to conceal my modifications, I must contend each and every day with the ways in which my body is Othered by my choice to look different. Body modification is self-actualizing for so many, but it can position someone to be stared at, to be physically violated, to be tokenized, or to be vilified. This current project dissects a few key literature areas, from body modification history to the contemporary politics of modification to aesthetic and spectacular philosophy, with the aim to weave together an argument for a nuanced and complex understanding of the social ramifications of body modification. Focus group interviews bring together numerous body modifiers to discuss the right to look (Mirzoeff, 2011) and the effects of personal choice on marginalization. I look toward two broad questions to guide this project: how do those with visible, non-normative body modifications interact with others, and how do those interactions influence their sense of regret?

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my queer and trans family, those I know and those I have not yet met. In particular, my trans siblings are especially salient, as they are under attack each and every day through different acts of state-forwarded violence. They are among the strongest I have ever had the privilege to spend time with. In the face of adversity, we must continue to fight. Never stop taking up space.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will thank several people in no particular order. First, I want to thank my family for your undying support, whether or not you understand what I do or why I do it. It is an immense privilege to have a family that is so loving and genuinely, unconditionally supportive. Thank you to my parents for allowing me to chase my passions, and specifically for this project, for letting me do whatever I want to my body. Thank you to my sister for always being in my corner no matter what, and for always being a beam of joy when I need it.

Second, I want to thank my committee for their continued support and work on this project. Thank you to Dr. James Gilmore for applying pressure and ensuring that this project is rigorously and critically examined. Your contributions are greatly appreciated. To Dr. Elizabeth Gilmore, your brilliance is forever inspiring to me, and your contributions made this project into what it is today. I actually could not have done this work without your input, and I sincerely appreciate everything you have contributed. To Dr. Deb Cunningham Breede, you have truly been the rock that has kept me grounded throughout this degree program. Whether or not you agree with me in saying this, I would not be where I am without your guidance. Your mentorship means everything to me, and I look forward to years of collaboration, camaraderie, and Indian food. Lastly, to Dr. Kristen Okamoto, I am eternally grateful for your patience, your guidance, and your friendship. Your support made this degree program worthwhile, and I am elated to be able to be one of your colleagues and friends for years to come.

To my friends who helped me piece this project together, who were always available to help me workshop thoughts and contribute with insight or involvement, I am forever grateful. Thank you to all of my participants who came together and made this project possible by providing stimulating input. Never doubt yourself or your contributions, as each one of you truly contributed so much more than you could ever know. Thank you for trusting me with your testimony, and for supporting me in the completion of my degree. Thank you to Dahlia for entertaining my rants and raves about the intricacies of this project, and for always leveling valuable input. Thank you to Xan for always being willing to get into it with tough ideas and concepts, and for supporting me in the charge to be controversial at times. Without y'all's contributions, this project would not have developed into what it is now.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION	1
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Modification's Origins	6
A Mark/et of Difference	14
Identity Politics and Technologies of the Body	18
The Contemporary Politics of Modification	22
Pathologies of Presentation	24
Gender, Sex/ual/ity, and Presentation	28
Aesthetics, Visuality, and Bodily Regret	35
III.  METHOD	43
IV.  ANALYSIS	51
Getting Started with Modification	52
Preparing for Modification	60
Interacting with Modification	66
Regretting Modification	74
V.   DISCUSSION	82
VI.  CONCLUSION	94
APPENDICES	96
A:   Names, Pronouns, and Approximate Ages of Participants	97

Table of Contents (Continued)

B: Guiding Focus Group Interview Questions	98
REFERENCES	99



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

My mother, sister, and I like to take trips every so often. Our favorite destinations are often smaller mountain towns, places where we can relax and take in the clean air, get our steps in, familiarize ourselves with a terrain different from the flat land at the beach back home. It's summertime in a small mountain town in western North Carolina. We got lucky and made it there during a week where everything was relatively cool. A loose pair of shorts with a short inseam and a simple t-shirt was the uniform that week. My mom and my sister both don pale, freckled and sun-spotted ivory flesh, wearing simple silver jewelry at most. I, on the other hand, wear about forty black American traditional tattoos atop my pale flesh, covering one entire arm and half of the other, and scattered across one of my legs. I am a tall figure at 6'3". I carry weight in my legs and my midsection, and generally take up a lot of space. I have three different nose piercings and several ear piercings. My nails are often painted, and I typically wear a fair amount of jewelry (rings, large earrings, bracelets, all metallic). My left leg is almost entirely covered with a birthmark, a port wine stain that is red when I'm warm and purple when I'm cold. In no uncertain terms, I stand out in a crowd.

We make our way to a nature site on an early Tuesday morning. My sister and I walk through a small national park atop a mountain about an hour away from our rented mountain house. It's about twenty degrees cooler at the top of this mountain than it was when we left our house, dipping into the low sixties in the middle of July. I regret wearing

shorts as short as mine are. As we walk past appropriately clothed spectators and hikers, my sister cannot help but notice the attention that I garner.

“Wow, people really seem to have a staring problem. I didn’t realize people look at you like a freak in public.” She and I haven’t been out in public much together since I really finished my arm. I have had my whole life to process being abnormal in public. Not only that, but I have also now had a few years of experience with wearing visible tattoos. I have worked in customer service jobs in a tourist beach town, have frequented the beach and exposed my massive stomach tattoo, and have spent a considerable amount of time in academic settings around people who are overwhelmingly normative. My modifications draw a lot of attention. I regularly get comments on my arms and leg(s) wherever I go, whether I’m buying groceries or reading in a coffee shop. While the verbal interactions I have are overwhelmingly positive, I have indeed been singled out for my modifications, accosted in hostile ways by strange men while trying to buy barbecue sauce, or made into the subject of a discussion surrounding professionalism. My skin is often the topic of discussion, is one of the first things people notice about me and one of the first things they comment on.

The nonverbal interactions I have are often the most contentious. The scandalized gazes from older women clutching their pearls in the aisles of Target; curious rubbernecking from small children in the park, which do often manifest in some kind of verbal expression of intrigue directed at their parents; the reflexive pauses after telling people I teach classes; the shared glances between myself and other heavily tattooed people where we often say nothing with our mouths but everything with our eyes. The stare is a

powerful site of connection and separation, of noticing and ignoring, of recognizing and shunning. The few friends I regularly talk to who are similarly modified are well-aware of the occurrences I describe here. Regardless of gender identity, of age, of class, or of race, to be heavily modified is to be noticed. What is often read onto us is a drive toward exhibition, a craving for attention and a proclivity to do whatever we can to get it. While I will not ignore the truth behind that claim for some people, most modification testimonies that I am familiar with, whether they come from interpersonal discussions or public essays on the topic, express a need for personal satisfaction with the body. The social consequences are often an afterthought.

I feel certain that age does play into the lack of forethought regarding consequence. I started getting tattooed as soon as I legally could, and even toyed with the idea of starting younger. I am by no means the first one to note my early fascinations with tattooing, endlessly scribbling on my hands and arms in preschool and onward. The look of pure flesh never felt right for me. While I may marvel at the beauty of the unmarked flesh on people who I would consider to be objects of my desire, my own flesh felt lackluster and incomplete. Getting tattooed was not a matter of *if*, it was a matter of *when*. But at a young age, even as a ‘mature-for-my-age’ eighteen-year-old, I could not have prepared myself for being a sideshow freak at the cash register. Becoming modified proffers an acute understanding of the before and after, of pre- and post-treatment responses from social counterparts. From my vantage point, if I am looking straight ahead, I don’t see my modifications. I am still the same person prior to and after acquiring another tattoo or piercing; to another, my aesthetic presentation has shifted over time.

There is slight shame in admitting my naivety. I think any modifier who had a young start with their collections would be willing and able to concur. I love my collection of tattoos and the way my modifications make me feel about my body, but every day when I get dressed before leaving my house, I must consider the people I will be around, the goals I want to accomplish and the ways in which my choice to modify my skin may or may not have altered my chances to do so. I must consider if I want to *present* as a tattooed person on any given day. I am not yet at the point where my modifications are unconcealable, but some people are. I only have small hand tattoos that more or less blend in with the collection of rings I typically wear. I have nothing above my shoulders that couldn't be concealed with a simple t-shirt. One day, I might choose to get tattoos that are not easily concealable, without the cover of cool weather to shift my presentation for the season. I now spend summers and springs with a full collection of modifications, but winter and fall are my off-season, a time where the staring halts for just a while, or directs to my face which is harder to justify. This is a seasonal shift in aesthetics, in my visibility as a modified person. And because of this ability to 'turn it off,' I am keenly aware of the ways in which one *is* what they *look like*.

My intentions for this study as a culmination of my research experience are twofold: not only do I want to expand upon extant literature about body modification, aesthetic presentation, and the biopolitics of and autonomy provided by the gaze, but I wish to forward the experiences of myself and other body modifiers to make a case for the reframing of modification as a practice that often manifests in marginalization. The implications for marginalization are rather complex; body modification is (most often) a

choice, after all. Through textual analysis, focus groups, and some critical self-reflection, I will use this space to expand upon some of the intricacies undergirding alternative aesthetics, marginality, and the choice to become Other.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Modification's Origins**

Body modification literature and its manifold subjects are rather diffuse within academic literature. To track such a nebulous thing is rather difficult, as many cultures over the ages have long employed some sort of manipulation of the body. For example, tattooing literature is not going to represent the same individuals as does that which pertains to Chinese foot binding, to corsetry, to bodybuilding. It may be beneficial to consider the different kinds of modification prior to establishing origins. Featherstone (1999) lists a litany of modifications to introduce the variance within modification subcultures of his exploration of the body and its aesthetic technologies. For instance, one may immediately conjure ideas of tattoos, piercings, scars, implants, or other non-normative alterations when thinking about modifying the body. One must also consider prosthesis, bodybuilding, dieting, cosmetic procedures (from fillers to gender affirming procedures), and a host of other practices that result in modifying the body toward more normative standards. These typically involve a greater time commitment than is needed to get many of the non-normative procedures done—I can get a large tattoo in a few hours and then return to my day-to-day activities, but I wouldn't be able to get rhinoplasty without a lengthy recovery period. We can break modification into categories, and for this project it is essential; the former list comprises non-normative modifications, and the latter can be considered normative modifications (Pitts, 2003). Non-normative modifications complicate the body in an aesthetic sense, queering the

limits of what the body *can* look like. Normative modifications are cut-and-dry—they achieve a desired image that is within the realm of possibility already established by naturally occurring biological processes. There is, of course, some level of malleability when considering what fits into which category. For example, tattooing on brows is not perceived as an act of deviance in the same way as getting a feather tattooed above the eyebrow. Both cases would make use of the same procedure, and yet the resulting visual presentations are rather disparate. In addition, there are also important distinctions that rely upon who the individual is that is being modified. For instance, several scholars (Featherstone, 1999; Goldfield, 2009; Johnston, 1996) explain the difference between male and female bodybuilders, the latter being far more transgressive with their aesthetic presentation and gender performance. The strongwoman takes up space with her muscle mass, painstakingly denying the glorification of thinness as a female ideal. She comes to assume what is an oft-masculine physique while continuing to identify as woman. A necessarily intercultural project like this present essay, one in which participants will claim many different cultural groups, must contend with the fact that no one group can lay claim over body modification; it is something that has been with us for millennia. Though I will draw attention to Eastern, indigenous, and tribal means of marking the body for status, this work will center around the process of stigmatization and the Othering of the marked body, which has been catalogued as a Western phenomenon.

One must understand the fractured origins of body modification before beginning to rein it in and dissect Western modification cultures, and particularly nonmainstream body modification cultures. Truthfully, there isn't a great starting place. Tattooing, as one

of the oldest means of body modification, has rooted itself in different cultures through various means. One could cite the Maori tribal cultures indigenous to New Zealand, as they serve as an exemplar of using body modification to signal social status in a positive sense (Best, 1904; Nikora et al., 2004; Pritchard, 2001; Te Awekotuku, 1995). Maori tattooing is a rite of passage for young people, marking maturity upon not only the body, but primarily the skin on the face. The abundance of literature covering the Maori and their ornamental and social markings not only tracks the history of the practice, but also contemporary executions and the responses to Maori face tattoos, *moko*. Some of these are written by New Zealanders and take a more subjective stance, whereas some note the Western perspective that considered this status-marking practice to be abhorrent. Sacred modifications exist elsewhere as well. Different Asian countries and their respective cultures have numerous cultural applications of tattooing, mostly rooted in spiritual marking (Henley & Porath, 2021). Southeast Asian sacred tattoos are rather distinct in their design and are usually applied by monks. However, in places like China, Japan and Indonesia, tattoos were and are associated with criminality and gang affiliation. Now, as the authors note, we see a boom in what they call *naturalistic body modification*—what I would call normative modifications (e.g., breast augmentation, double-eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, etc.) We now see media, both academic and journalistic, tracking the racial politics of beauty standards and the normalization of cosmetic procedures among Asian individuals, and particularly Asian women (Aizura, 2009; Aquino, 2017; Aquino & Steinkamp, 2016).



The attitudes in China, Japan, and Indonesia draw parallels with European tattooing, which is largely understood to have origins in stigma and negatively-valenced deviance (Anderson, 2000; Jones, 2000). Caplan (2000) compiles entries from numerous scholars to detail the histories and implications of tattooing in Europe and America. A common misconception about tattooing is that European colonizers were introduced to it by their conquests of tribal cultures. While this is rather believable and holds some truth, Jones (2000) points out that the Greek use of the punitive stigmata can be traced back to around the third century C.E. That is, marking the body, generally speaking, was clearly chronicled as an Othering phenomenon. It has been used to mark slaves and convicts for centuries both in continental Europe and in colonies of the various imperial giants (Anderson, 2000). Notably, branding of the face or the shoulder would denote criminals and thugs, permanently stigmatized for their transgressions. Russian imperialists made use of branding as an Othering tool to maintain social order, which then gave rise to vagrant and convict tattooing practices (Schrader, 2000). In this case, marking the flesh extended the reach of the state, complicating the lives of those considered to be deplorables no matter where they were in the massive nation. This also made its way into the walls of the prisons in Russia, with prisoners tattooing themselves and others to denote their wrongdoings. Russian prison tattoos are iconic within contemporary tattoo history, with subject matter that encoded their assigned convictions on their flesh. One can now almost certainly come across database articles, photography collections, or even coffee table books displaying the vast array of these etchings.

Outside of stigmatizing means of body modification, there were some self-inflicted spiritual and mystical markings tracked in Europe surrounding pagan mysticism and astrology (Rosecrans, 2000). At the intersection of stigma and spirituality, Maxwell-Stuart and Duffield (2000) explore convict modifications for those who were shipped to the penal colony of Australia. Within this context, tattoos were observed as displaying tokens of hope and longing for those they were separated from. Tattoos marked defiance against the colonial state and worked towards maintaining autonomy in a situation where it was severely lacking.

When it comes to tattooing as adornment, we then see foreign conquest as the introductory force. Caplan, citing Guest (2000), makes the first mention of Omai, who was a figure from an island near Tahiti called Raiatea. Joshua Reynolds created a painting depicting Omai in the late eighteenth century, where we can see ornamental tattoos on his hands and arms. This is thought to have been integral to the use of tattoo as adornment in imperial Europe. Such a view turns us toward the idea of the exoticized Other, for Omai was a revolting and intriguing figure to many onlookers. The markings rendered him incompatible with ‘civility,’ and they were even omitted in a later painting of him by William Perry. Therein lies the condition which non-normative modifiers must contend with: how may we toe the line between compatibility and noncompatibility? To what end must we render ourselves in/visible to those who wield technologies of power (Foucault, 1982)? The term is used to bring into this exploration the idea of communicative, discursive strategies for the domination of the body. The body exists as a site of contest, an object upon which discipline can be performed. The technologies of

knowledge production are those which I find to be the most pertinent. How do the technologies of power-knowledge track the developments of non-normative modifications, and to what end are they rendered im/possibilities for presentation? How might non-normative modifiers use their body technologies, that is their tattoos, their piercings, their brandings, their scars, to chart new norms? Are non-normative modifications technologies of power in their own right?

A fact that may be readily available in cultural memory regarding non-normative modifications would be the prevalent ‘freak shows,’ in which people would pay to see bodies that were abnormal. These abnormalities were both naturally occurring and applied by choice, ranging from those who were abnormally short or tall, thin or fat, often those with visible disabilities, and also heavily tattooed men and women. P.T. Barnum, a sideshow organizer, was noted as one of the figures that inspired a boom in tattooing in the late nineteenth century (Oettermann, 2000). These grandiose displays of deviant bodies would pave a clear path toward some of the integral American tattooers responsible for the work on the ‘freaks,’ and would inspire individuals to acquire tattoos of their own. As tattooing became more common toward the mid-twentieth century, the freak shows began to fizzle out (Govenar, 2000).

Govenar’s essay touches on the development of tattoos in the United States as a mostly deviant practice. American tattooing has been documented as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, with records of Martin Hildebrandt tattooing sailors and soldiers of the Civil War. Samuel F. O’Reilly was documented as the inventor of the electric tattoo machine, which then gave rise to a pioneering of tattoo artistry due to the speed and

precision they allowed for. Literature on gang tattooing suggests a technological development that turned prisoners into practitioners, skilled artisans who assumed the stigmatized markings as marks of community. Thus, we see a proliferation of gang-affiliated tattooing, deviant art forms that mark both exclusion *and* inclusion.

As the twentieth century progressed, legal injunctions began to temper the growth of modification practices. Modernist sentiments positioned municipalities to curtail the growing body art scene, and they succeeded to some extent. New York City, one of the sites of innovation in electric tattooing, began to restrict who could and could not be tattooed. In the present day, we can see state-level discrepancies in who can get tattooed. South Carolina, for instance, has a no-exceptions prohibition on tattooing minors and restricts where on the body one can legally place a tattoo. An artist's licensure can be revoked if they apply tattoos above the collarbone. As bodies are disciplined, the spaces they take up face similar ramifications. Tattooing is not protected speech in the United States, and state and local judiciaries keep a tight leash on where tattooing can take place (Picchione, 2004). Again in South Carolina, tattoo shops were not allowed to open until the early 2000s. They are zoned so that they cannot be within one mile of a church. Thus, they are forced into places like industrial parks, places where blue collar culture percolates and informs the cultural establishment of communication within shops. Tattooing spaces are sites of cultural development; shops and conventions alike are places where tattoo enthusiasts can congregate without being Othered for being heavily modified. As it stands, stipulations on zoning and licensure have complicated the placement of tattooing spaces.

The proliferation of tattooing practices that ultimately contributed to the normalization of their wearing is commonly referred to as the *tattoo renaissance*. In DeMello's (2000) pivotal book on tattoo culture, tattooing enjoyed a rapid shift in development both technically and socially after the second World War. While many have written about the renaissance, DeMello offers the most comprehensive account of the developments that turned the late twentieth century into the golden age of tattooing. What was once a practice that was concentrated in distinct spaces in the first half of the twentieth century was becoming more and more diffuse, with shops popping up in almost every city. Essential artists were defined, noteworthy for their technical developments and aesthetic distinction. Not only was the tattoo shop becoming commercialized, but the artists themselves were commodities and brands in their own right. Artists like Sailor Jerry and Don Ed Hardy were the most notable in terms of mainstream presence, creating brands of apparel and novelties adorned with tattoo designs. On a technical level, these were individuals who are considered responsible for the fusion of Japanese and American traditional art styles, borrowing from Japanese imagery and executing a hybrid style with electric techniques. While these two get a great deal of credit because of their mainstream prowess, we would be remiss to neglect some of their colleagues that similarly contributed to elite tattooing practices. Artists like Cliff Raven and Samuel Stewart would also pave the way for generations of artists to come, largely cited for their contributions to style and technique rather than their public personas (DeMello, 2000). Raven and Stewart also provide for us a queer lineage to track, as they were both openly gay men who found their home in the modification scene, occupying two stigmatized

identities and charting spaces for both. All in all, the tattoo renaissance defined tattooing as less of a fringe, counterculture movement by professionalizing and mainstreaming the industry. One could find a smattering of body art on the arms and legs of collectors much easier than they once could, and would be able to find a shop that was reputable and *safe*. Thus, we see the Overton window for the tolerance of the marked, Othered body shifting, and allotting space for a more radical modification subculture to make its mark.

### **A Mark/et of Difference**

Contemporary modification subcultures have morphed throughout the last few decades, and not so much individually. Rather, we have seen a convergence of modification under one umbrella. With tattoos being rapidly assumed by military servicemen (Govenar, 2000; Lande et al., 2013), the landscape of body modification shifted with the return of servicemen after World War II. A post-war, postmodern take on self-presentation was in order. The new artistic epoch was on the rise. The average consumer of tattoos was no longer homogenous, and the motives behind acquiring body modifications were becoming rather vast. Much of this analysis touches on tattoos specifically, given the extensive documentation available. Those that are more stigmatized modifications (stretching, branding, scarification) are harder to track. Nonetheless, the proliferation of tattooing can be seen as a push toward the uncommon. As tattooing becomes ubiquitous, we see modifiers taking on other forms of non-normative modification. Tattoos are now perceived as a tame form of body modification because of how frequently one can encounter them.

Modifiers who want to push boundaries resort to more extreme outward presentations, whether it be transgressive styles of tattoos, getting heavily tattooed, or engaging in some more underground modifications that are often not widely performed. The origins of something like corsetry or lobe stretching pose their own respective stories. However, one will encounter limits in analyzing the sociopolitical capacity of modifications with standardized goalposts; they do not forward the capability for cultural expansion like that which has characterized tattooing. Lobe stretching is a linear process with a culminative end goal—one may fill their stretched lobes with various jewelries, but the goal comes in standardized sizes. Scarification involves design, but does not offer us depth or color to analyze. Tattooing is far more common and has a lot more reach. The very process of creating art, of defining a visual genre based around linework, color use, placement, etc. will proffer rich cultural implications to undergird these markings. Figurational sociologists have established a framework for understanding the acquisition of tattoos as a “personal identity construction,” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 21). It is a process that is determined by a combination of “interaction, cultural ideologies, and social organization,” (p. 21). This is characteristic of all modifications to some degree, and offers a lens through which we can explore modification as a practice.

To understand the scope of contemporary modification cultures, one can take a look into the postmodern logics that dictate self-presentation in late-stage capitalism. Nealon (2017) describes postmodernism as an artistic epoch that champions the alternative, encouraging deviance and self-reference. The described “cultural dominant” (p.155) resists sameness and replaces it with ‘authenticity.’ The very notion of

authenticity is emblematic of feelings toward an oversaturation of market goods. In the realm of the art industry, we see postmodern producers renouncing formalism and structuralism, and ironically, the newfound function of art constitutes for itself a structural position by which we assess artwork. Late capitalism poses a vast buyer's market for artwork, and with it, a market for difference. Aesthetic production is a means of generating capital, and the primary aesthetic value that is sought after is distinctness. Consumers aren't clamoring for the classics, but hold on for something newer, something greater. The same old same-old won't do. The alternative becomes imperative. We become enslaved to innovation.

Body art is no exception to the boom in postmodern thought. I would argue, rather, that postmodern logics are the nexus for the proliferation of modification practices. In Sweetman's (1999) exploration of body modification and fashion, we see this line of thought explored in depth. He notes the rapid advancement of tattooing and piercing as acceptable accessories of self-presentation, making their way into mainstream fashion media. What we are cautioned away from is the tendency to fully lean into this idea of tattoos as purely postmodern. This would imply that they are devoid of meaning, nothing more than a stamp of the alternative. For some, this may be the case. Weiler and colleagues (2021) posit a higher score on a Need for Uniqueness scale among tattooed, pierced, and otherwise non-normatively modified individuals. Rees (2016) notes the previous outsider status as something that is lost in the tattooing scene with developments in tattooing reality shows or celebrity wearers. These two studies execute survey and interview methodologies to mark an older concept, and one that is now a much older



phenomenon, one that has stood the test of time: tattoos are for people who *want to look different*. Atkinson (2003) and DeMello (2000) cite the influence of middle-class collectors on a very important shift in tattooing: the shift toward the custom. What was once a culture dominated by street shops (shops that would only tattoo flash, or pre-drawn designs) began to define upper echelon tattooers. Don Ed Hardy was a tattooer that was in high demand and has been cited as the first to open a custom-only operation. Body modification became a site for not only marking difference but marking *personalized* difference. People wanted tattoos that were rich with personal detail, that marked significant moments, concepts, or figures on their flesh. Meaning-making was all the rage, and artists who could accommodate commissioned projects created a niche within tattooing that other artists had to then keep up with. In today's age, it would be incredibly difficult to find a shop that only does flash (a term for pre-drawn and painted designs that one could select off the wall or out of a book, a tattoo one could get in a flash), and this is due to the middle-class collectors' push for individualized artwork and elite tattooers' willingness to take on these projects.

Sweetman (1999) details the differences between tattooing and piercing as sartorial accessories. With piercing being a semi-permanent modification, it is far easier to see these as meaningless, solely for vanity's sake. Tattooing, however, as a permanent modification, necessitates a more thoughtful approach. His participants note putting more thought into tattoos, whether they implement a longer waiting period to get them or only commission tattoos with some deeper meaning to them. One other notable piece of information that Sweetman includes is how heavily tattooed or pierced a respondent is,

noting that individuals with a larger percentage of their body covered in tattoos will be incredibly important for any kind of project that explores the processes of body modification. Sweetman's reasoning for this is that heavy modifiers are going to present different views on body modification largely stemming from their commitment and their experiences existing in the world as uncommon.

### **Identity Politics and Technologies of the Body**

In tandem with a drive for difference, developments in social politics after World War II comprise a shift toward the personal. Warner's (2005) exploration of publics notes the feminist move away from privacy as a reaction to the confinement and domination of the domestic sphere. During this time, women were active in their desire to enter the public sphere of influence and make a departure from domestic labor. As Warner notes, the liberal logic to "explode" the private (p. 33) worked in the service of externalizing the personal and would culminate in a pervasive *identity politics*. To occupy a marginalized position was all the motive one needed to get involved. *The personal is political* (Hanisch, 1970). Subjectifying, or centering discourse around concerns of the self opens the door to an increased emphasis on the presentation of the self; if identity is first and foremost, demanding attention to personal affect and idiosyncratic needs, one must consider how that self is forwarded. In a political system dominated by an almost Darwinian conception of competition, one must stake their claim over their space, demonstrate their fortitude, their resilience. In an age where visual mass communication channels were planting themselves in nearly every home at a rapid pace, consideration for the aesthetic is paramount. We are not in an age of reason anymore, but rather an age of

the aesthetic. The “aesthetics of life and thought,” (Marcuse, 1991, p. 64) that were once concentrated in the hands of the wealthy were diffusing throughout the population. In turn, fights for equality became publicized, and looks began to matter more and more. The faces of the marginalized made their way into the home slowly but surely (Escoffier, 1998). Thus ensued the development of advocacy movements like never before. And whether it be a feminist project, a queer project, a Black project, a Chicano project, an indigenous project, and so on, there can be no rejection of the utmost salience of the various *body projects* that lie beneath the surface.

While it may seem out of place to reference numerous identity-based justice movements, each of them offers their own version of a body project. A lot of them are built upon similar values, and their respective subjects are predicated upon similar lines of thought. Shilling (1993) offers us a clear explication of body projects in general. In essence, the term defines any development of the body that foregrounds the owner as an actor that mindfully enacts transformative processes. Dieting, tanning, maintaining grooming rituals, and so forth can all be body projects that serve to fit a social standard of beauty. Among some of the standard body projects in the West, Shilling notes a few normative, or human in their likeness, modifications, particularly cosmetic surgery and bodybuilding. The intent behind calling attention to these two specifically, Shilling argues, is to explore gendered body projects and cites a compulsory adherence to normative body standards as the enforcement structure for these normative modifications. While his analyses do touch on some of the inequalities between and among bodies, his primary focus is on the normative human form.

Authors have built upon the idea of the body project to explore its strategic employment within modification subcultures. Atkinson (2003) notes feminist explorations of the capacities for body projects, citing the same practices of bodybuilding and cosmetic surgery as means of queering modes of presentation set forth by patriarchal standards, but doing so within the realm of normative modifications. What he contributes is the inclusion of tattooing as an increasingly common subcultural exploration of masculinities. Pitts (2003), on the other hand, interviews female body modifiers at length, encountering the common theme of reclamation. Numerous respondents use modification procedures to stake claim over their bodies after traumatic events, whether they be repeated sexual abuse or domestic violence. These women use modifications as a means of combating the alienation from their own corporeal temples, which are so often violated by the specter of patriarchy. Again and again, the personal is necessarily political.

And while these feminist body projects work in the service of liberating the female subject, the movement for women's equality is nowhere near monolithic. Rather, this project is a mosaic of positionalities with distinct axiological approaches to self-presentation. One disparate point of departure is that of the radical feminist writers at the turn of the century. Jeffreys (2000), for example, is one of the loudest dissenters who has written several pieces about body modification among marginalized groups. Her main contributions, which will be discussed further in the following section, posed a critique of the body modification industry and its laborers as the predatory practitioners of "mutilati[ve]" (p. 409) procedures to externalize self-hatred perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity. Her proposed body projects are far more assimilationist in nature, and

champion an acceptance of the natural form. I want to forward that the idea of a feminist body project is somewhat of a farce in the contemporary landscape of feminist politics; what is proposed will differ based on the theoretical camps that undergird subsets of feminist thought throughout the decades. Trans exclusionary radical feminists are not going to be on the same page with many queer feminists, for instance. Such a schism can be observed in other identity groups as well, and yet feminist movements are some of the easiest to track through academic literature. Queer modification practices pose their own difficulties, which will be discussed further in the next section.

If the modification market capitalizes on difference and deviance, one might rightly question how productive its tactics have been to mitigate the detrimental effects of Othering processes. Are we not still singled out for our commitments to difference? Are there not tangible repercussions that follow the decision to become modified? Social science literature may claim to forward evidence surrounding motives for modification, and yet to dissect the figurational circumstances that lead us to mark our bodies cannot truly be detailed within the pages of a journal or a book. Individual actors will be drawn to these practices by any number of inspirations. Modifiers, whether established or prospective, must look inward and interrogate the personal motives that belie the choice to become Other. Thus, the need for the current, humanistic essay presents itself. These are decisions that are (more or less) permanent, and to become permanently Othered is something that no one can be truly prepared for. What I offer next is an exploration of literature on the contemporary sociopolitical implications of becoming modified.

## The Contemporary Politics of Modification

First, we must acknowledge that the definition of body modification is somewhat elusive. It evades clean categorization. Clean is used intentionally; the modified body is often seen to be one that is impure, that is adulterated in some form. Purity of the skin is shunned in a different way than other normative modifications. Body modification looks different among different groups of people depending upon any number of circumstances: ability, resources, and cultural background to name a few. When one walks into the gym, one doesn't look around and see body modifiers in the same way that one would when walking into a body piercing shop. The individuals in the gym, in the tanning salon or in the medical spa are trying to refine and perfect the human form along lines that are commonly understood to fall under normative modes of gender presentation. These are seen as self-care practices. Even the verbiage of *fitness* as a genre of body modification suggests that this form of transformation works to mold the body to better fit the cast that normative standards have set forth (Garland-Thomson, 2011). On the other hand, according to Garland-Thomson (2011), non-normative modifiers are *misfits*. We are the square peg in the round hole. Our mode of presentation is not compatible with dominant standards of beauty. Such a conclusion is generalizing non-normative modifiers, without a doubt, and yet it is still clearly tied to our roots as a disjointed community. We are a forest of trees whose roots have merged, twirled to forge a forever-connected organism. This section explores distinctive characteristics among subcultures of body modification and the sociopolitical intricacies within which we find ourselves situated.

Given the nature of stigma directed toward modifiers, the social and political standing of people who wear non-normative modifications are rather fraught; their delineations are determined by any number of conditions. Within the body modification scenes, as I have mentioned, there are multiple subsects—the most documented being tattooing. I will start with politics within modification spheres and will then zoom out to dissect some of the political positions imposed on us by non-modified or normatively modified actors. To start, DeMello (2000) chronicles the fragmentation of American tattooing along class lines. Identity categories become incredibly salient within the tattoo scene as tattooing rapidly grows as an industry, an Othering practice within the Othered group of non-normative modifiers. DeMello discusses her tattooer respondents' readiness to emphasize the middle-classness of their clientele. The tattoo renaissance, paired with the proliferation of media that encompassed tattooing content, notably tattooing magazines, constituted a new space for tattooers to take control of their representation. We see a push by so-called 'elite' tattooers to professionalize the trade, citing doctors, law professionals, and so forth as upcoming tattoo collectors. Often, there is a juxtaposition that is forwarded by these artists and the people that collect their work that Others them from biker tattooing. Elite collectors are defined as 'normal,' and bikers are their counter. Working class tattooers and collectors are the subaltern of the subaltern, a process that serves to hierarchize body modification as a whole and to textualize certain figures as greats. Don Ed Hardy and those who could afford his work were the upper-crust of the tattoo community, and the everyday tattooers and collectors fall by the wayside.

DeMello (2000) then goes on to note the professionalization of the tattoo industry, something that can be applied more or less to other non-normative modification practices. Her focus lands on tattooing organizations, mainly the National Tattoo Association (NTA), as suppliers who turned into public relations practitioners. The middle-class emphasis was not as glaring as it was in tattooing magazines. However, their rules and regulations for their conventions served to restrict certain kinds of modifications that were deemed grotesque or “off the wall,” (p. 127). Specifically banned were displays of facial tattoos that were not cosmetic (i.e. eyebrows), heavy metal facial jewelry, or displays of genital piercings. Another organization, the Alliance of Professional Tattooists, Inc. (APT) focused more on the health and safety aspects of tattooing, forwarding the image of the tattoo shop as a clean space. Part of this push was due to the regulation of tattooing spaces by states. Abiding by organizational standards served a bureaucracy of tattooing that simply did not exist at its outset. Tattooers squabbled over their own capacities to be insiders or outsiders of these organizations, but the overall shift was one that favored a departure from the grungy roots of tattooing, signaling a move toward modifications that were sterile and pure.

### **Pathologies of Presentation**

Not only do we see a medicalization of the process of tattooing, but also a similar medicalization of the minds of those who wish to modify themselves. While I will abstain from droning on for several pages about the social pathologies of deviance and disorder, which is already well-established (e.g., Sutherland, 1945), we must acknowledge the psychological discourses that mark body modifiers. To begin, Atkinson (2003) makes



note of how psychological discourses positioned tattooing practices as coping mechanisms for self-dissatisfaction, maladjustment, and nonconformity. Scholars forward that the acquisition of tattoos can signal a proclivity for further deviant practices, marking them as 'primitive.' Atkinson (2003) writes, "as individuals who cannot refrain from brutally marking their bodies in such a primitive and barbaric way cannot contain other deviant impulses," (p. 54). Later in the twentieth century, primitivism becomes something that is championed by some modifiers, as with the Modern Primitive movement spearheaded by Fakir Musafar in the late twentieth century (DeMello, 2000; Klesse, 1999; Pitts, 2003). These non-normative body modifiers call for a return to what they consider primal practices of pain and marking as tools for social connection. Already, we can spot racist and xenophobic implications toward the exoticized Other that are projected onto folks who decide to modify their bodies.

Further, scholars have belabored the point of body modification as self-injury that is indicative of psychological distress. For many psychological scholars, self-harm by way of cutting is the gateway of body modification, or so they can support with self-report data and statistical analyses (Stirn & Hinz, 2008). Hewitt (1997) fixates on the flesh and its disruption as a means of maiming the body. Her intention, she says, is not to cast judgment upon modifiers, but rather to bring these practices to attention so that academics may conceptually pick apart certain phenomena, comparing them mostly to psychiatric conditions. This is what so many scholars have done; by putting tattooing and piercing under a section heading about mutilation, they try to mask their scorn as altruistic exploration and investigation. They interview people who are clearly in distress

and sensationalize the process of marking the body, a process that is liberating for so many. For instance, Lemma's (2010) book psychoanalyzing body modifiers begins with an anecdote about a young boy who experiences physical and sexual abuse, whose home was riddled with dangerous substances and people due to his parents' struggles with addiction. He then turns to body modification as a means of reclaiming his body at a very young age. Before he exited his teen years, he had covered a considerable amount of his skin with tattoos. The permanence of his modifications marks him for life, and some of the symbols that he etched in distress will serve as defining aesthetic traits without ever removing themselves. This is an extreme case, no doubt, but the phenomenon of modification as self-harm is something that many modifiers, whether they be normative or non-normative in their approach, have thrust upon them consistently.

Favazza (1998) provides a particularly regressive and ableist explication of body modification as self-mutilation. Notably, he draws comparisons between tattooing/piercing practices and stimming behaviors like hair pulling and head banging. While Favazza (1998) does acknowledge the complication of those who use body modification as a collective cultural practice, that is as a practice of aesthetic enhancement rather than an unbridled execution of internal distress, there is still an implicit motive here to paint body modification as a culturally sanctioned symptom of any number of psychiatric disorders. His book *Bodies Under Siege* (1996) covers more territory regarding religious and tribal intricacies of modification practices, and forwards treatment suggestions that would presumably extend to cover non-normative aesthetic enhancements. Whether or not it is explicitly stated, psychological or psychoanalytic

explorations into the topic of non-normative (or normative, at times) modifications give way to the treatment of these behaviors as disordered. Defining and archiving these processes are among the many technologies by which medical science can ‘treat’ these ills. And alongside these medical concerns, we see moral and ethical concerns working in tandem. From psychological discourses to media discourses, body modification is routinely portrayed as a symptom of some greater disorder.

Pitts (2003) makes mention of the media framing of body modification as socially problematic, creating a moral panic. The news media that she examines often take a similar approach to psychological scholars, conflating body modification practices with symptoms of mental disorder. Many journalists report on the aforementioned psychiatric discourse, and project to readers a concern for the growth of body modification. To Pitts’s (2003) participants, these accounts of modification are alienating for the actual modifiers, and strips them of their agency to present themselves as they see fit. She sees in these media accounts a reification of dominant discourses, ones that position the body modifier as aberrant, and as a cause for moral concern whether or not it is dressed up in psychiatric terms. Even ten years later, Adams (2009) finds very similar media accounts of modification practices, suggesting that nothing has really changed in the media landscape as far as representing deviance is concerned. Body piercing specifically gets a lot of attention as a non-normative modification practice, one that is portrayed as potentially dangerous and unclean. Adams (2009) also makes a point to note that the gender of the individual receiving these modifications changes the way the media views the practice, which is largely a reflection of dominant gender norms. Vanity is feminized,

and male modifiers are interrogated for their employment of modification, whether it be cosmetic surgery or facial piercing.

### **Gender, Sex/uality, and Presentation**

Gender and body modification are tightly woven together. Not only do we see a gendering of beautification practices by dominant discourses of presentation (think naturalistic modifications to maintain youthful look for women, or norms of masculinity that encourage strength training to be conventionally attractive), the very nature of one's gender identity gives rise to certain logics of body permanence. Transgender and nonbinary individuals will likely consider the body's limits to be malleable, a mere biological happenstance that they must then make into whatever they deem suitable. Cisgender individuals may feel similarly, sorted by their assigned sex and socialized into certain purviews of the body and its limits. Under the trans umbrella, we see complications of what the trans body should be, with the regressive take being termed *transmedicalism*. Transmedicalists (or transmeds, for short), assume a view of the trans body as a site of disorder, and this disorder can only be reined in by medical intervention. Transmedicalists see hormone replacement therapy and gender affirmation surgeries as medically necessary, a prerequisite to trans identification (Konnolly, 2021). Progressive gender scholars and activists see the trans identity as fluid and individualized, recognizing individuals who may not see medical intervention as necessary.

There are longstanding discussions surrounding gender affirming care, discussions that have rapidly made their way into the mainstream, representing another form of a moral panic. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health

(WPATH) guidelines to clinicians encourages mental health screening prior to gender affirming body modification. Murphy (2016) makes note of the surgical procedures undertaken by cisgender individuals that fulfill the very same purpose as gender affirming care: bringing bodies in alignment with the idealized image their owner holds. These procedures don't require counselling until they signal a shift in gender identity. Similarly, tattooing, piercing, scarring, and other forms of body modification do not require a counselor's assistance. Official guidance encourages counseling so that patients are forced to grapple with the permanence of their decisions; in some cases, these individuals are removing pieces of their bodies, something that cannot be reversed in any way. Understandably, permanent body alterations require their own unique coping process. Let us then consider what would come of clinical guidance prompted by non-normative modifications like tattooing or branding. This may be helpful for people who are unsure of the permanence of their decisions; not all trans and nonbinary people want medical intervention but are told that is what is necessary to be trans by certain discourses in queer and trans spaces. Certainly, body modification should not be forced upon anyone, and this is not to say that transmeds or any kind of trans activist would do so; the complication ensues when a prerequisite to belonging in the community involves who has and has not undergone gender affirming medical care. Not only does this raise questions of accessibility and classism, but also throws a wrench into what the trans community should be advocating for. The trans body project is nowhere near consensus, and yet it is vital to note a similar logic of permanence that underlies the body projects of trans and cis individuals, and body modifiers in particular.

Sexual minorities, I will argue, take on a similar position, though it may not be as accepted anymore to medicalize sexual deviance. To assume a queer identity is to acknowledge the plasticity of the body and its desires. We are forced into an acute understanding of aberration when we are socialized into a heteronormative system and recognize ourselves and our identities as points of rupture and departure from dominant structures. Queer desire stems from a queered body, a queered neurochemistry. How it becomes queered is not my concern; plenty of scholars have already discussed the social construction of sexual normativity. What I want to forward, rather, is a focus on the logics of queer identification and the ways in which they give rise to body modification practices. Pitts (2003) encounters the idea of visible queerness in her book on the cultural politics of modification. Her ethnographic interviews with queer modifiers points us in the direction of modification as a ritual (Carey, 1988). This ritualistic communication, for Carey (1988), offers community for sexual minorities and also communicates, on the flesh, a non-normative state of desire. Several participants in Pitts's (2003) project note their involvement in underground sex and fetish community spaces, spaces in which individuals will engage in body modification practices for show. For instance, one of her participants, someone who we would now likely consider nonbinary, describes a mindful use of body modification practices as a spectacular projection of their non-normative, liminal gender presentation and their aberrant desires. This person performs brandings in what they would consider to be a "pleasurable, intimate, and erotic drama," (Pitts, 2003, p. 98). These highly visible spectacular performances allow us to understand a microcosmic means of presentation, and act as a site of analogy for the quotidian

performance of aesthetic manipulation. We see here a queered presentation of modification, a confluence of identity positions that culminate in this unique and sensational display of deviance. I will bracket the discussion of aesthetics and spectacularity for now, but it will be picked up once again in a few pages in explicit terms.

Numerous participants describe the relationship between dueling stigmatized identities, being both queer and modified. While Pitts's (2003) is an older text, the stigma of homosexuality or gender deviance has all but left us. She consistently discusses the ways in which queerness has been pathologized and marked as diseased. Queer culture is mired in this projection of deviance from medical scientists and clinicians. Ahmed (2006) cites Foucault (1990) in her exploration of the development of queer as a classification among other sexual perversions. To say this pathologization lends itself to community building and space-making is an understatement. Pitts's (2003) other participants engage in similar performances of pain and pleasure, the common space for them being S&M (sadism and masochism) or fetish clubs. Aberrant sensational desires, sexual or not, give rise to a space where the sexual and the presentational are conjoined. Public scarring is an exhibition act that fulfills an erotic, some would say paraphilic, drive. It also fills a semiotic void, so to speak. Queer folks, and I would argue particularly queer white folks, may not have aesthetic markers of their difference as would people of color or people with visible disabilities. Signaling difference is more performative for queer white folks, and in some cases, is worn on the flesh by way of tattooing, piercing, branding, scarring, or cutting. While a lot of the focus is on S&M practitioners for Pitts (2003), many queer

folks do not wish to perform modification. In many ways, I see that queer people cannot find stable community outside of these counterculture spaces, outside of the spectacular, the performance which is defined along the lines of its Otherness (Warner, 2005). Here, I operationalize the word *queer* for its agentive dimensions, rather than using the term gay or lesbian. Many folks do not wish to perform ‘queerness,’ as not all people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or even transgender would define themselves with the once pejorative ‘queer.’ Some people grapple with assimilation and internalize the sexual as something that is intrinsically private. As Ahmed (2006) would put it, pathologies of deviance Other the spectacle in hopes of bringing them ‘in line’ (p. 74). Some sexual and gender minorities have taken on the challenge of assimilation as a survival tactic. They may not wish to be marginalized, to be pathologized. As Foucault (1990) puts it, “do not appear if you do not want to disappear,” (p. 84). Being visibly queer opens one up to vulnerability, to the threat of being brought in line.

As mentioned previously, the very idea of a feminist body project is fractured, and the current essay will add to the very cacophony I discuss. While I could say the body projects of transfeminism are feminist body projects, the presence of ‘gender critical’ feminists, a softening label for trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), have long been fighting against body modification in most of its forms. Radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys (2000), in line with some aforementioned scholars, defines certain modification practices as *body mutilation* as a sociopolitical tool to cast judgment upon those who engage in modification practices that she sees as invasive (2000). She makes the sweeping claim that non-normative modifications are not transgressive in their



opposition to hegemonic body standards but, are rather, the result of occupying a “despised social status, under male dominance,” (Jeffreys, 2000, p. 410). She aligns heavily with and draws closely from Favazza’s (1998) critiques of non-normative modification, while also assuming a position against the normative cosmetic procedures as well. Her intentional use of violent language to refer to modification procedures serves to position the modifier as dangerous and disordered, calling on sexual abuse as being one of the main catalysts for body modification practices. One of her most dreadful critiques is that of ‘transsexual’ (sic) operations as opportunities for surgeons to profit off the oppression and abuse that she believes lead people to confusion about their bodies. She has gone on to write lesbian critiques of transsexualism [sic] and transgenderism [sic] as human rights violations that serve to undermine the feminist movement and reify male domination (Jeffreys, 1997). These are ideas that we see a resurgence of in the modern political media climate as well. She also levels heavy critiques of gay male sex sadomasochists for making fashionable and commonplace the practice of engaging in pain for sexual pleasure, often by way of tattooing and body piercing. In her point of view, the masculinization of gay S&M scenes was a response to hegemonic masculinity, and the passive role in a sexual pair (which she conflates with the bottom) began to display pain as a rite of manhood—a spectacle of the endurance it takes to engage in receptive anal intercourse. This, she claims, is one of the practices that made headway for the industrial rise of body mutilation practices (or the opening of tattoo and piercing shops at large). She then employs this logic to blame men for women wanting to get body

piercings. What belies all her critical exploration in these subcultures is the assertion that gay men, and other sexual and gender minorities to be sure, are victims of sexual abuse:

“Gay men are a socially degraded group by any standards, and have been immensely influential in disseminating the practices of self-mutilation. Men’s involvement in self-mutilation can also be explained through understanding the effects of child sexual abuse. Although there is considerable evidence for the links between childhood sexual abuse and self-mutilation in women, such evidence is harder to come by for men. There is anecdotal evidence, however, in the stories that gay sadomasochists, pornographers and transsexuals tell about their lives (Preston, 1993). It seems likely that where membership of a despised group such as that of women, lesbians or gay men is combined with the experience of child sexual abuse, some of the more extreme forms of self-mutilation that threaten actual self-annihilation may be embarked on” (Jeffreys, 2000, p. 427).

We again encounter pathologization, this time in a roundabout way that makes a pit stop at sexual desire and then continues toward the final destination of self-harm. To close this section on the politics of modification, I encourage critical inquiries into the wellbeing of body modifiers that does not begin at the decision to get modified, but rather after the act of becoming modified. My intent is to portray established modifiers as visible Others, ones that are subject to marginalization for their decisions to transgress the normative human body. This is not to say that we cannot question individuals’ decisions to modify—that has simply been done already with great frequency. Individual modifiers likely all have stories of interrogation that precede their decisions to engage in

modification practices. Of course, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to go about doing anything, and unhealthy modification practices happen frequently. What has not been considered as much is the coping process that comes with being pathologized, marginalized, and spectacularized after the decision to become visibly modified. I got my first tattoo when I was eighteen, but my forearm was not tattooed until far later. I would argue that I did not ‘become tattooed’ until I crossed that threshold, until it became more difficult to conceal my modifications. I may have had tattoos, but I was not yet a ‘tattooed person’ in the eyes of onlookers. I now cannot even wear long sleeves without my wrist tattoos being seen as my sleeve shifts up and down, nor can I roll up my sleeves without my tattoos being on full display. What once was simply covered is now almost always out in the open, foreclosing the possibility of blending in with non-modifiers.

### **Aesthetics, Visuality, and Bodily Regret**

I cannot speak from any perspective other than that of a white American male in the South. However, I speak as someone who has always been marked. A splotchy red port-wine stain stretches from my hip to the extremities of my left foot. Half of my lower body is discolored and misshapen. I have never been stranger to the staring, the inappropriate comments about my skin, or the touch of curious spectators. Whether it be walking through the aisles of the grocery store or working my shift at the ice cream shop, onlookers made their attention to my abnormality rather clear. For the first eighteen years of my life, I was a biological anomaly. I presented something out of the ordinary, something genetic and mutated for people to stop and marvel at, offering them something to feel grateful for: an unmarked and uncomplicated pair of legs. When I began to modify

my body on my own terms, I was put in the driver's seat. I welcomed the staring, as annoying as it may be at times. To be marked with chosen modifications offered me solace in my skin; it gave people something to compliment rather than nervously ignore. In a way, I think I have been accustomed to the lived experience of a non-normative body since I was born.

Becoming tattooed is something that no one really prepares you for. I did my due diligence and informed myself about the process of getting tattooed, but the difference between being tattooed and existing as a visibly tattooed person is rather jarring. It's something I have to go through every spring when I shed my long sleeves and long pants and finally present my ink-laden flesh once again. And I am someone who doesn't have face or neck tattoos, and I only have small tattoos on my hands. I also wear three nose rings and various ear piercings. I am a maximalist; my adornment is involved and calculated from my clothing to my jewelry, but my skin is the *pièce de résistance*. Much of the work on becoming tattooed details the process of acquiring tattoos, as in Sanders's (1988) or Atkinson's (2003) texts. There is work that touches on the wearing of tattoos and the social repercussions of doing so. However, I would like to repurpose the term of *becoming modified* to not only touch on acquiring modifications themselves, but acquiring a new worldview that is informed by the decision to look non-normative.

Sanders (1988) performed ethnographic interviews with tattooed individuals to discuss how their visual appearance and the visibility of their markings characterizes their social interactions. Of course, becoming tattooed (or otherwise non-normatively modified) poses an identity shift. One moves from being non-modified to being modified.

Sanders's makes the important mention of interactional consequences, both positive and negative. Tattooing opens one up to involvement in new groups that would otherwise be foreign. His respondents liken the experience to joining a club. It can lead to some fruitful interactions, to compliments, to acceptance in certain environments. It can also lead to stereotyping, projections of deviance and sickness as mentioned before. But there is one consequence that I would like to call close attention to, one cannot be deemed as either positive or negative. Becoming modified, and specifically becoming visibly non-normative, is the process of becoming a *spectacle*.

Debord's (2021) treatise on the spectacularizing of social life describes the move toward the superficial; "What appears is good; what is good appears," (p. 4). In forwarding this Marxist critique of the political economy of the spectacle, Debord offers us a number of vital points of departure in considering spectularity. In short, "the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances," (p. 3). A spectacle need not be an object. It can take form in phenomena all the same. As it relates to political economy, spectacular displays of possession can constitute what one *is*. To recognize the spectularity of that which appears is to recognize that *what appears constitutes what is*. In this vein, the emphasis on having, and the spectaclist propensity for defining what one *is* based upon what they *appear to have*, throws a wrench into ontological presuppositions in dictating what is real. Because this current essay is not meant to be an ontological exploration, I bring to the discussion the act of becoming spectacle because of the ramifications that come with surplus visibility, with the subjectification and dehumanization of certain people through

the process of being read as a visual phenomenon and not as a human being. This is the very logic behind critiques of the freak show and its presentation of those who are visually abnormal; becoming spectacle is to become Othered, and sometimes that Othering results in commodification. I do not address the actual commodification process within this essay, nor how individuals capitalize on their modifications by using the modified body as a good with exchange value, yet I would argue that the reduction of the spectacular body is a clear exemplar of dehumanization and objectification. Clearly, there is a media focus within Debord's work that is absent within this project. I use this writing not as a framework, but for the resonance that I see it having with the modifier's experience.

The spectacle is often rendered the object of the gaze, and often a prolonged gaze at that. "Staring is the snagging of the eye by the novel," (Garland-Thomson, 2006, p. 173). To non-modifiers, modification isn't personally experienced, and may very well serve as a new and unfamiliar terrain. By marking my body, by differentiating myself from the normative human form, I am subject to staring. As Garland-Thomson puts it, staring is involuntary; one's eye is caught before reflex can correct the gesture. What becomes of the stare is a complex social exchange—a negotiation of autonomy. Mirzoeff's (2011) exploration of the "right to look" (p. 473) characterizes looking as a mutual act of invention, a co-construction of selfhood and Otherness. The visibility that is so expressly taken on by the starrer presents the opportunity to establish autonomy and political subjectivity, which I would argue often violates that of the individual on the receiving end. The right to look, as a co-constitutive action, would instead serve to render

both parties as agents of decision-making. To make sense of someone with your eyes, to invoke the gaze unabashedly at a passerby, is to objectify. The act serves to render the stared-at as something to be figured out—a phenomenon that lends itself to pathologies of various intensities. In Othering the modified body—by spectacularizing the abnormal—one must contend with the invasion of autonomy that they forward. As Garland-Thomson (2006) discusses:

“Staring witnesses an interruption of our comforting narratives – variously called truth, knowledge, certainty, or meaning... We may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us. Because staring both registers and demands a response, it enacts a drama about the people involved. This vivid form of human communication reveals who we imagine ourselves and others to be” (p. 174).

Thus, to stare is to define an Other, to operationalize and employ one’s sense of neutrality, of naturalness. Visuality, then, is a normative gaze that serves the purpose of rendering categories for the establishment of power. Alternatively, the right to look that Mirzoeff (2011) describes, is “the boundary of visuality, the place where such codes of separation encounter a grammar of nonviolence... as a collective form” (p. 477). The modified body, or the body which is clocked as modified, I argue, is effectively determined to be an alternative to the given form, and one that often does not participate in the right to look.

Needing to make sense of someone, to assign valence to them, is an aestheticizing of the individual. To draw upon Mirzoeff’s (2011) explication of visuality, visuality begins with classifying, which then leads to separation, and eventually “makes this

classification seem right and hence aesthetic... an ‘aesthetic of respect for the status quo,’ the aesthetics of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing, ultimately even beautiful” (p. 476). The body is read for its subtexts and contexts, for a narrative that may string together a complex set of presented visible characteristics. In becoming modified, in editing the text of the flesh, the skin becomes a site of analysis, of evaluation, and of aestheticization. To be visible as a modifier is to be spectacularized, to be spectacularized is to be objectified, and to be objectified is to become aestheticized.

The body is always already a text, in the broadest sense of the word. Whether the body is read or is read onto, we understand embodiment to be an internalization of the externalized, a more-or-less subconscious and taken-for-granted recognition of our lack of the purest autonomy that we pretend to crave. Modifiers, I argue, are attuned to their autonomy and the lack thereof in a way that others are not—how they come to this attunement, I believe, is a product of their social interactions. It is an atmospheric attunement (Stewart, 2010) in which bodies labor to understand their place in the world. One can only spend so long as the object of visibility until they come to terms with their utter helplessness. The choice to become Other, to become a freak of sorts, is so obviously alienating, but for many young modifiers, it is a byproduct of naivety. The choice to become marked is the choice to become the subject of textual criticism, it is a forfeiting of the crumbs of autonomy that some of us enjoy. And because the body is read, it is inherently read as raced, gendered, dis/abled, classed, aged, etc. (MacCormack, 2006). Individuals in already-subaltern bodies may be entirely suited for (or used to) the phenomenon of being less-autonomous, of being subject to staring, to objectification. As



a white man, I have embarked on this journey of permanent Othering that was entirely self-inflicted. At the same time, my visible deformity and my flamboyant queerness allotted me some padding so that the transition was not nearly as jarring. My own body was pathologized at a rather young age, fresh out of the womb to be exact, for a visible difference. Eighteen years later, I begin on a new journey of self-actualization that poses for me some of the exact same results (even lasering).

Regret necessarily comes to mind when discussing the negatives of being tattooed, of being undesirably visible. Some scholars do discuss the idea of regret. Sierra and colleagues (2013) track anticipated regret as a determinant of receiving a tattoo. Dukes (2016) discusses regret among adolescents in a Colorado school district, in which one third of tattooed adolescents regret their decisions to do so. Sanders (1983) draws on the distinction between the regret of being tattooed and the regret of poor purchasing decisions. Though it is an older essay, there is a clear acknowledgment of the social consequences of becoming tattooed, though the focus is on client satisfaction in tattoo consumption. The takeaway that Sanders (1983) forwards, however, is that folks generally don't regret *being* tattooed, but rather having bad tattoos. Regretting bad tattoos is different from regretting the aggregation of one's own tattoos. Madfis and Arford (2013) pose a post-structuralist inquiry into the regret of tattoos without meaning. They forward that their participants who cannot tie their tattoos to any symbolic significance are likely to experience more regret. Much of this work, as we can see, contends with poor decisions regarding the aesthetic qualities of tattoos. But to regret your collection and its composite presentation is what I wish to bring attention to. Regretting being seen,

to regret the choice to become Other, is something that presents itself in body modification discourses with some amount of fear and/or contempt.

To quote Judith Butler (2004), “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, and agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence... The body has its invariably public dimension: constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (p. 21). One must contend with the limits of autonomy, the limits that the gaze and the stare impose on our safety, on our social positionality. During the colder months, I am not prodded in the same way I am when my skin is visible. But to shed my layers and don my skin again is a grieving process in its own rite—is a loss of the security of invisibility. To be comfortable in my own modified body is to be subject to visuality in ways that I could not have prepared myself to face, and hence the morbid fascination expressed in these pages. Modification is a prison of my own making; it can hold me back from getting jobs, can mark me as suspicious, as worthy of criticism, of pathologizing. In this rite, to become tattooed is to become a kind of Other that is not often discussed because of the *choice* to become. I am certainly not conflating the white modifier’s marginalization with that of a person of color, a disabled person, or any other individual who is marked for a lifetime. However, if body modification stands in the way of someone obtaining gainful employment despite their qualifications, surely we must recognize that marginalization at play. How, then, are we supposed to feel about the choice to become an Other? Should individuals be made to face the consequences of their actions, or should we alter the systems of power that stand in our way?



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD

This project forwards a hybrid method of textual analysis and focus group interviews. I set out to gather contributions from other modifiers as well so that I may display the range of voices that exist apart from my white, queer, educated position. I began with a reading of one internet artifact touching on modification regret, that being Morgan Joyce's (MJ) YouTube video entitled *Tattoo regret is REAL. (very personal video)*. My training in the practice of critique, particularly poststructuralist critique, has fostered a methodology that is grounded in suspicion (Felski, 2011). Treating these internet artifacts as texts to be deconstructed, I approached the video itself and response videos with skepticism so that I may draw out meaning. Informed by Gill's (2000) explication of discourse analysis, I align with the concern of "action orientation," (p. 175), considering discourse as a social practice and prodding into its consequences. I toyed with the question of how MJ constructs herself as a marginalized figure when interacting with the public as a heavily modified woman, and in tandem, the responses of her vast audience.

MJ is a mainstay of the body modification and tattooing community online. She got her start on YouTube pretty early in YouTube's lifespan, and soon amassed a large following of people who enjoy piercing, stretching, tattooing, and scarification content. She has since developed into an alternative model and has been included in content production with numerous tattoo publications and platforms throughout the years. In August of 2019, she published a video entitled *Tattoo regret is REAL. (very personal*

*video*) on her YouTube channel, sparking discussion among online tattoo collectors. In her video, she discusses the regret she felt with the way she rushed into permanently modifying her body. She notes an extant feeling of Otherness, of being unlike others in her town, and finding refuge within the tattooing community as she already had numerous facial piercings and considerably stretched ears. She was enthralled with body modification as a form of art, and obtained work from numerous artists that put her in a position where almost her entire body was covered in her early twenties. Now, she feels silly for rushing things, and wishes that she could be treated as something other than a modified body when interacting with people. In essence, her issue is essentialism, the way that folks operate as if her modifications are her personality, are a defining trait that marks her personally. Of course, we must consider the privilege imbued in this position; MJ is a thin, white woman, and is a model who has now moved into naturalistic modifications, notably lip fillers and breast augmentation. It is easy to read the subtext here: MJ wishes she wasn't seen as a freak. If she wasn't heavily modified, she would fall in line with a conventional standard of beauty. Her non-non-normative modifications place her just out of the realm of acceptance within mainstream culture. If it weren't for her modifications, she would be privy to spaces of privilege that others might not be. Naturalistic modification does not inherently attract staring, and doesn't necessarily involve trivialization and tokenism. She doesn't regret the artwork on her body for its quality, because she has an incredible collection from talented artists. What she regrets is the decision to become an Other. She regrets not strategically choosing modifications that could be easily concealed if she wanted to buy groceries without being accosted for her

hand tattoos. She wishes that she could lighten the load that she picked up by sitting on those tables for so many years. The issue is not with her, per se, but with the way that her decisions affected the way others view her.

Implementing this video artifact at the beginning of my focus groups was a means of streamlining the explanation of the premise for our discussion. It encouraged participants to put on their textual criticism hats and dissect the way another community member feels about their journey with modification. Some participants agreed strongly, and others did not. By bringing a popular modification influencer into the discussion, it positioned participants to think about the larger community and its members, and for some participants, it reintroduced a familiar face who may have helped them get started with body modification. She created content for so long informing people about the experience of acquiring and maintaining modifications, and now she feels differently about her collection. With this video guiding folks, I then asked questions about individuals own experiences with beginning in the scene, the ways their public interactions play out, and the ways in which they might resonate or disagree with MJ. I used an inductive coding scheme to render distinct categories of messages with hopes of representing key concepts of shame, blame, regret, sameness and Othering. What resulted from this coding was a set of chronological categories that span the participants' journeys with body modification.

Though they have commonly been used for market research, focus groups function as a tool to proffer comfort to participants, to collectivize the interview experience and snowball into conversation (Rakow, 2011). The aforementioned essay

highlights publications that use focus groups well in dissecting critical cultural issues. I align with the perspective that she forwards to focus on standards for reporting rather than adhering to a proscriptive research process. Rowe and Frischherz (2022) make note of the growing use of focus groups in the realm of critical-cultural communication studies, deeming them a “definitive site of phenomenological orientation” (p. 487). Focus groups will allow modifiers to interact in the comfort of community, in the comfort of familiarity. Participants may be able to relate to one another, but each one brings different identity perspectives and interactive memories. To prompt discussion, the clip of MJ’s video played for around 15 minutes, and then participants were asked several questions regarding modification and visibility.

Upon being granted IRB approval to disseminate recruitment materials, I began to network and promote this project online and in person. I requested that participants are visibly and non-normatively modified. I defined this as having tattoos, piercings, brandings, or scarring that show when wearing casual clothing. I posted a flyer on my social media profiles, reached out to those I know who are visibly modified, and participated in snowball sampling. The visibility of modifications was the main topic of discussion, so folks who had modifications that were almost always concealed were asked not to join. The identities of body modifiers are represented here as a counterpublic (Warner, 2005) that situates, and certainly considers, itself to be bracketed from the ‘dominant’ public of non-modifiers. Through common media artifacts, spatial occupation, and lexicon, body modifiers may be unified as a collective with a purpose,

and that purpose is to alter the body for the comfort of the self, which often runs counter to the dominant codes of presentation.

I grouped participants together based on their temporal availability acquired by use of a Google Form. I conducted five focus groups with two to three participants in each one, with twelve participants in total. Most participants were in their early or mid-twenties, with two in their thirties and one in their forties. A list of the names of participants with pronouns and age ranges is attached in the appendix. Each group averaged an hour long, with two groups reaching almost an hour and a half. The entire process culminated in 316 pages of transcribed text, converted from Zoom to TextEdit file and then to PDF. Focus groups were mediated through Zoom and were recorded with participants' permission. I utilized revised transcriptions provided by Zoom's automated transcription feature.

Transcripts are coded inductively, with categories presenting themselves throughout the process until I reached theoretical saturation. Upon finishing focus groups, I combed through the recordings and the transcripts to find emergent categories, only to find that it was incredibly difficult to compare folks' responses. I anticipated that a lot of my participants' contributions might begin to overlap at a point. Pointing to Charmaz's (2016) writing on constructivist grounded theory, this project pays special attention to the subjectivities of individuals situated within a collective, and focused on a form of the quotidian that looks different from that which others might assume to be common. What resulted was a series of categories that followed the chronological order presented with the questions.



Throughout this work and the subsequent discussion, I continually recognize the limitations of a human subjects project and bring constant attention to the fact that modification experiences are going to be bound by copious identity classes that may not be represented within these focus groups. Nonetheless, the focus group will act as a transgressive space, one where modifiers get to lament with other modifiers about their identity position as a modifier, as someone who has adopted an alternative aesthetic presentation, and will riff on the perspectives presented by others within the group so that they reflect upon the realities of sticking out.

I approach these semi-structured interviews with the guidance of Kvale's (1983) musings on phenomenological interviewing. My interpretations will represent my own "bracketing" (p. 184) of experience, yet because I incorporated autoethnographic processes in the text, my moderation focused on participants and maintained sufficient distance so that I would not dominate or alter discussion. Questions will be broad and open-ended, focusing on the accounts of public interaction in response to presenting a modified body. Some of the questions to be asked include: "When you began to get modified, did you mindfully process how you might be perceived by others?"; "How do you respond to perceived negative interactions in public?"; "Do you ever feel regret in the way MJ does?" I anticipate an hour and a half for focus groups, but these time parameters are flexible. It is my hope that combining textual analysis and using that text to prompt discussions will invite other modifiers into the folds of intellectual inquiry and criticism. In this, participants are encouraged to contribute their own analyses to this YouTube video as an artifact, giving them an active task in the intellectual production of

this argument, I have every intention of co-creating knowledge with my participants in this process so that this exploration should not be homogenized by my insular experience.

This project is borne of my experiences with existing in a modified body and within a community of body modifiers. My own embodied purview, my affects and my emotions, are inextricably linked to my process and my writing. Body modification can never be a disembodied experience; only the subjectivities of modifiers can be considered in an exploration of the lived and the felt. My sister may have recognized the staring as she stood beside me, but she cannot be subsumed in my flesh. Any knowledge she has is tangential to that of my own journey with modification. I respond to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner's (2011) call to scholars to write on their experiences; I bear witness to readers about my own perspectives with self/social reckoning, with the limits of autonomy, and situate my own experiences within the realm of humanities and social sciences with acute attention to the subjectivities that render this extension of knowledge possible. I treat my body and other bodies as texts to be read and dissected. This gives rise to my research questions:

**RQ1: How do people connect with their bodies through modification?**

**RQ2: How do body modifiers' interactions with others help them conceptualize themselves?**

**RQ3: How might body modifiers conceptualize a sense of regret?**

Autoethnographic research is not about the product but the exploration. As the going-away gift my mentor gave me states, "the journey is the reward." I do not intend to produce theory, nor do I have any interest in doing so. What I extend, rather, is a critical

inquiry along the lines of body modification and regret. This is not an autoethnographic project, but is an exploration of modifiers' experiences with visibility and public interaction, a topic that I can contribute to myself. I divide the sections in my analysis and use some of the space to pick into my own anecdotal contributions to the discussion, and will have other sections of analysis where I solely focus on the testimonies of others. While I am heavily influenced by autoethnography and will incorporate that influence within this project, this essay is about the breadth of modifiers, and aims to highlight the accounts of modifiers who are not in the same position as I.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS

Upon spending hours in focus groups and interviewing various body modifiers, no clear clusters presented themselves. Each individual provided me with anecdotes and testimonies that were rather different from one another; group conversations posed polite disagreements, acknowledgments of identity positions and the disparities imbued therein, and apparently different levels of awareness turned to the gaze of others. Initially, I was surprised at the variance since my participants were relatively similar demographically. Of course, as a good social constructivist, I welcome idiosyncrasies of my participants' contributions, as they aligned with what I already understood to be true in the first place. Modification is such a personalized experience, and often serves as some kind of self-actualizing practice. Modifiers, and by extension the community of body modifiers, are fragmented and disjointed, clinging to some kind of amorphous collective experience without any real consensus. As the following sections will detail, no matter how similar their experiences or their involvement in the community, each individual modifier must navigate the social consequences of the decision to modify the body. I will walk through the analysis portion with subsections pertaining to the general category of question in sequence with the way in which they were posed during focus group interviews. Participants are given pseudonyms so that their confidentiality is protected. However, I detail everyone's relevant identities that naturally present themselves throughout.

## **Getting Started with Modification**

MJ's start with body modification was marked by piercings and stretching, something she could do while she was a minor. Tattooing and other modifications that are considered more permanent were not introduced until she was eighteen and could legally participate in the process. Some of my participants had a very similar experience, whereas others went about acquiring modifications in very different ways. Half of my participants (6 of 12) made mention of piercings first when asked about their foray into modification. Some mentioned their first lobe piercings as a small child or an infant as their first modification, being intently attuned to the very beginning of any kind of non-normative body alteration. Others disregarded their lobe piercings, only making mention of subsequent cartilage or facial piercings. Simple lobe piercings are so common that most people may not consider them non-normative. For folks assigned female at birth, it is almost a part of female socialization to get ear piercings, a rite of passage even. Some parents pierce their children's ears before they can talk or walk. Though many may not consider it to be so, lobe piercing is a body modification that is mainstream and bordering on normative, yet it is not naturalistic.

Stretched ears marked a beginning for two of these participants. Stretching piercings is not uncommon, but the location of the stretched piercing will alter the perception of the modification. Ear stretching is relatively common and accessible, as minors can easily purchase tapers and start stretching as they wish. This is also an easy modification to fix; people can get their lobes sewn up easily and without much visible scarring. Erin's modification journey began with lobe stretching when she was just

thirteen. Wishing to be just like her older sister, and noting a chronic affinity for tattoos and piercings, her investment in modification was aesthetic in nature. She discussed her parents' disdain for her stretched ears, and their fervent support for her earlobe reconstruction when she was eighteen. She expressed regret for moving too fast with her stretching process, as one of her ears "blew out," which is when scar tissue builds up due to improper stretching practices. Though she has had her lobes sewn up, she has since had them re-pierced and continues to wear big earrings, but she expresses relief for the fact that she was able to reverse the effects of that modification. Since then, she has acquired multiple tattoos and facial piercings, and has brightly colored and long hair.

Similarly, Ashton began getting various ear piercings at thirteen as well, and started stretching their ears at fourteen:

So I started getting into body mods when I was like literally twelve, like preteen, like super into it—mostly because I listened to a ton of metal music, and was like exposed to people that look like that. Super loved it.

Here, a subcultural community involvement inspired the choice to become modified, and modifications may have provided some sense of likeness among community members.

Their parents are both people who have tattoos, so they were generally accepting of modification, though Ashton says they are not really into piercings, but they wanted their child to express themselves. They started getting tattooed as soon as they legally could and jumped headfirst into the process with four days of ten-hour sessions on their legs. From there, they began working in a tattooing and piercing shop, and eventually started performing body piercings. Ashton has spent the better part of their life with

modifications, with various facial and ear piercings on their body since middle school. They still have large, stretched lobes, some head and ear tattoos, a stretched septum, and most of their body visibly tattooed when wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

Lizzie began as a teen with various ear piercings and colorful hair. She notes being one of the only people in her high school with colorful hair or piercings, and she feels that this positioned her as an Other in her school, especially with administration. Even as she reached adulthood and continued collecting piercings, she said she has garnered a lot of attention for her various piercings and hair color choices. Though she does not have visible tattoos, she does have plans for large pieces in the future once she is more established in her career. This was one of the two people within this study who expressed trepidation for the fact that they may want to be more established in their career before getting modified the way they want to. Similarly, Sav started with facial piercings in high school. She got her septum pierced at fifteen, and started coloring her hair with unnatural shades even before that in middle school. Her first tattoo was a stick and poke tattoo on her finger that she got when she was seventeen. As an adult, she obtained more facial piercings and ear piercings and even ventured into some smaller tattoos in subtle and concealable places. She has only recently gotten her largest and most visible tattoo on her forearm, but she is no stranger to being visibly modified with facial piercings for several years now.

Audrey similarly deems the start of her modification journey being her belly button piercing, though she qualifies and says that her lobes were pierced when she was an infant. A home piercing job with her friends, she says that her belly button piercing

made her feel “grown,” although she was only thirteen when she got it done. She then had her septum pierced when she was fifteen and still wears it to this day. She has since gone on to get multiple nose piercings. She got her first tattoo when she was sixteen, but did not expand all too much on that experience. However, she got involved with a tattoo shop in her early twenties and served as their desk girl for a few years, collecting pieces from their artists during her time there. Again, we see a community involvement that may have pressed someone to get modifications for involvement purposes. She now has a full arm sleeve, a large piece on the front of her torso, and various large and colorful leg tattoos.

Some participants skipped the piercings and got straight into permanent tattoos. Sandra, Jan, Tyler, Addison, Emma, Lane, and Sam all mention starting with tattoos. Whether or not they got piercings first, they consider their tattoos to be the real introduction to body modification. Starting with Sandra, she got her first tattoo at thirteen, a tribute tattoo for her favorite band on her forearm. She spent the entirety of high school with a visible tattoo, and even notes that she was known as “the girl with the Dead Kennedys tattoo,” or “the DK girl.” She decided at a rather young age that she was going to permanently mark herself to signal involvement with and affinity for a certain sub-genre of music. Inclusion seems to be a driving force behind the decision to acquire tattoos; participants use tattooing as a means of signaling to others that they are a member of a certain group. Historically, this function has been stigmatizing, signaling involvement with gangs, prison, or some other outcast group. Now, it can signal fandom, queer identity, or any number of cultural affiliations. She has since had this tattoo



covered with a larger and more colorful piece. She tried nose piercings, but she never kept them. Now, she just has a few visible tattoos on her arms. Jan got her first tattoo at sixteen to commemorate a boy that she had a crush on, and never covered that tattoo. She then continued to get tattoos in high school, but mostly kept them concealed. She had parents who were heavily tattooed, so she knew the consequences of modification, which I will go on to discuss further in the next section.

Tyler's start was an impromptu decision to join his friends who were getting tattoos. Though he had not given the decision much thought at all, he ended up falling in love with the whole scene. As an artist, he initially wanted to illustrate children's books, but realized "a lot of [his] artwork would be really conducive to this medium," so he built his portfolio and got an apprenticeship. Addison had a very similar experience, and got their first tattoo right after they turned eighteen. A large and colorful piece on the back of their neck, they started strong with visible modification. They then fell in love with the shop atmosphere and the culture of tattooing, and were able to secure an apprenticeship shortly thereafter. They have been tattooing for around three years now, and love the work they get to do every day.

Emma had been considering getting a tattoo for a long time, and when she turned eighteen, she finally picked one to get on her ribs. Her older sister had some tattoos, and a lot of Emma's friends were getting involved in the scene as well, so she was influenced by people in her network who were into modification. She has since amassed a sizable collection on her legs and has a couple of small pieces on her arms. She notes the intentional decision to get tattoos that she could conceal easily, and regularly wears pants

or leggings where they are not visible. Having a slightly later start, Lane got her first tattoo at twenty, and started with a large, visible arm tattoo. She said that it took some convincing to get the artist to agree to do such a visible tattoo for her first, but she has since built on her collection and has a smattering of black and grey tattoos on her arms. She notes her impetus being the desire and drive to veer away from traditional femininity, but she did not feel drawn to any particular tattoo subculture. She notes that finding that line between tattoo enthusiast and tattoo community member was difficult, but she continues to embody her own femininity and masculinity through various means of presentation. Working in higher education has allowed her to express herself and don her modifications as she sees fit, and she feels no constraints in the present moment for being modified.

Sam settled for a tattoo, oddly enough. They wanted to get their eyebrow pierced, but their mother didn't like the idea. She did agree, however, to sign off on their first tattoo at the age of sixteen. They wanted a memorial tattoo for their grandfather, but their mother ended up influencing the artist to manipulate the design. They have since had the design covered with something that better serves the intention they initially had for the design. They have since obtained multiple facial piercings and tattoos all over their body, and also have brightly colored hair. As someone who also works in higher education, they also feel no constraints in regard to their job. If anything, being modified gives them a sense of rapport with students. They also describe a sense of youth that modifications may convey to others, which also connotes inexperience and lack of qualification. This

mostly happens at conferences, they claim, as their department is rather accepting of the way they choose to look.

In this theme we see an array of methods for getting involved in body modification. Some participants began with rather typical ear piercings as they dipped their toes into altering their appearances. Some jump into the deep end and get permanent tattoos as their first modification, as I did and as many of my participants mention doing as well. For everyone in these groups, these were only the starting point, and these people went on to continue modifying their bodies as they saw fit. Some participants don't have a clear reason for obtaining modifications, and just felt like it was something they did to fit in with a certain subculture. Some folks use modifications as a means of affirmation, bringing their physical appearance in line with their imagined ideal. For some, this may be a means of gender affirmation—as was the case with Lane. Given the association of masculinity with toughness and endurance, sitting for tattoos may fly in the face of traditional femininity, and a mix of traditional femininity and perceived masculinity might be a sense of ambiguity that gender nonconforming folks aspire to. Some folks see tattoos as a means of marking themselves with their interests, aestheticizing a piece of themselves for others to consume. This may fall under the umbrella of getting tattoos for inclusion purposes, yet it almost serves a reductive function. When one marks themselves with an interest through a tattoo of something they hold dear, they permanently mark upon their flesh a default conversation that the onlooker can take on. For example, I have a tattoo on my arm of the name of one of my favorite albums—Ctrl by SZA—and this has been a conversation starter with strangers on multiple occasions. I have effectively

marked myself as a SZA fan for the rest of my life, and anyone with access to the skin on my left arm can forever identify me as such; one of my interests from my teen years will be frozen in time upon my body. The art on my body serves to help onlookers conceptualize me in terms of the art's content, and when that content is in reference to other existing endeavors, I become a living extension of someone else's project, a walking advertisement even.

Whatever the reason may be, we can see each participant bringing something different to the table. Gauging the start of one's modification journey may give us a clue as to one's intentions behind modifying their body, which will surely shade the ways they feel about interaction and regret. Someone whose modifications make them more comfortable with their body might consider their comfort to outweigh any hostile interactions they face with non-modified folks. Someone who wanted to look tough and unapproachable might be sorely disappointed once they realized that modifications consistently open the door to discussion. Someone who uses modifications to fight insecurity might be upset with the constant attention paid to their body. Before we get to the present of modification, I want to jump to the prequel. I asked participants about their experience with modification before they got involved, and what they understood about the perception of body modification ahead of being a participant themselves. Again, I encountered vastly different responses, incredibly different backgrounds and identity positions that informed the ways in which folks felt about modification. In the following section, I will detail the responses to this complicated question and will extrapolate the best I can to draw comparisons between folks' preconceptions and their intentions.

## **Preparing for Modification**

For most of my participants, there was no mental preparation involved in becoming a modified person. Of course, one prepares for getting a tattoo or a piercing and arranges materials for aftercare purposes, but there was little work done to navigate the shift in their sense of self. Again, I am departing from Sanders's (1983) idea of becoming modified as the process of acquiring modifications, but rather I turn my attention to the development of a new worldview informed by being perceived as modified, and thus, the preparation for modification represents a mental process, an acquired understanding of the consequences of modification. Participants were asked about their perceptions of modified people before getting modified themselves, and were prompted to discuss any guidance they may have received from people around them leading up to the act of starting with modification. I was provided with mixed responses, with some folks having a lifetime of experience around modifiers to folks who didn't know anyone with modifications and did no preparation.

Most of the participants describe no preparation for the process of becoming modified. Sandra's first tattoo was an impulse decision in her early teens. She did not have life experience at that point to understand the complexity of becoming marked as different, she just wanted to show her love for Dead Kennedys. Similarly, Lizzie began collecting piercings in her early teens, and didn't describe any kind of mindful preparation process. She did, however, note the ways in which she noticed a shift in the way she was treated for her brightly colored hair throughout her high school years. She mentioned a story of an administrator at her high school singling her out for 'bad

behavior' that was inconsequential and nonthreatening and claims that she was told that there were concerns about her posing a threat to the safety of the school. Specifically, the administrator mentioned her alternative appearance as something that would possibly unsettle some of her classmates. She notes her principal saying, "...A lot of people here are blonde... your blue hair... it's very, very blue, you know. It's not really normal." Because she was more of a loner and she looked alternative, her peers deemed her as frightening and intimidating. Whether or not she had prepared for that kind of treatment, she would quickly become aware of the ways in which body modification and non-normative presentation affect the ways in which she is seen. She is read onto as a deviant.

Sav was another teen who began getting facial piercings and one small tattoo in her teens. She knew that some of her family members would feel like her nose piercings were unbecoming for a young woman, but she was not fazed by it. "...[T]he only people I thought like wouldn't like it, I didn't care about, but it definitely was like the ideas were implanted into my head by others like my family or, like, media." For her, she was interested in fitting in with her group of peers and the people she wanted to be like.

Audrey had very similar modifications at the same age, and she notes an existing feeling of Otherness for her race, as she grew up half Black and half white. She notes that some of her white family members treated her differently already, so she was prepared for any kind of Otherness that she would take on through modification. It is interesting to note here that race, an aesthetic marker of difference, is likened to the products of body modification, which is a chosen marker of difference. What Audrey suggests is that discrimination for modification may not be as jarring for those who are always already

marked as deviating from a white standard, and one could assume then an able-bodied standard, a cisgender standard, and so forth. Aesthetic qualities serve a heuristic function, as Audrey notes, and the way she presents clearly alters the way that people respond to her.

Sam was another participant who started their modifications in their teens. They were the “...badass sixteen-year-old with a tattoo, until other people started going to, like, basement tattoo parties and making poor life choices.” Once upon a time, they were the only one of their peers who was marked as modified, and they seem to boast a reputation that was informed by that very marker. They note before this statement that their grandmother could not know about their tattoo, because she would have been infuriated by the fact that they were allowed to do this to their body. Perhaps this is what informs their idea that modifications are a deviant practice, and one that could be associated with “poor life choices.” Part of their distinction between good and poor choices may be due to the fact that their tattoo was performed in a shop, and the basement parties are often not seen as a sterile and safe operation. Therein, a pathologized logic of cleanliness as order served to relegate home tattoo operations to be less than for the fact that they are not a state-licensed operation. Following up with this, I asked them to expand on the idea of modification as deviance, and they simply doubled down and said that in their life, they were straight-laced, a rule follower, and that modifications were their medium for rebellion.

Tyler waited until he was an adult to get tattooed, and he said it was more or less an impulse decision. He did not grow up around modified people, so he did not have

much exposure to the community prior to becoming involved himself. Of course, he then went on to work in tattooing, but he notes that his identity as a cis white man may play a part in allowing him a general sense of comfort for his decisions. He also does not have any tattoos that are unconcealable in casual clothes, and can easily ‘turn it off’ need be. Addison also waited until they were an adult to begin getting tattooed, and did not pay any mind to the way that they would be seen as a modifier. Their first tattoo was on the back of their neck, and was rather glaring when their hair was up. They did not have to wait long until they would get accosted and touched on the neck by a stranger in a grocery store. From then on, they realized that this might be something that they have to contend with permanently. They have since been mindful about where they put tattoos on their body, and have very few that can be seen when they have on jeans and a t-shirt. They are considerably tattooed, but choose to conceal a lot of the time so that they don’t find themselves as an object of interest for strangers. They resonated with MJ’s analogy to being a “sideshow freak,” and make intentional decisions at times to control their image.

Lane did not start getting modifications until she was twenty, and was mindful and ready to plunge into being visibly tattooed despite the naysayers. Part of her motivation was to be seen as something other than traditionally feminine, so concealing her tattoos was not ever an interest as they would not serve their purpose. We see here that the participant who was the oldest when she started with modification made the most intentional decision and put the most thought into visibility ahead of time. The preconceptions she had about body modification were that they could serve her in her quest to queer her gender presentation. Even her artist warned her about doing a large and



visible tattoo for her first, but she convinced them to move forward with the process regardless. Lane utilizes tattoos for their transgressive capacity, and even capitalizes on that very utility today as an educator. “My students really love it,” she claims, “like they love seeing someone up front in the room who’s, you know, a person, a whole person, and who looks like them. And I talk about that openly, like as a part of my teaching persona.”

A few of my participants did describe some prior knowledge and understanding about modification and the social consequences that serve to regulate modifiers. The most innocuous account was from Erin, who simply notes that she grew up around folks who had some tattoos and piercings and how she always admired them growing up. Her sister, specifically, was a figure who she looked up to and whose behaviors she wanted to emulate. She did not wait long until she started stretching her lobes and playing around with stick and poke tattoos. Her experience was subtle, but it influenced her to start making decisions to alter her appearance for her own pleasure. Emma similarly discusses her sister being an influence in her modification journey. As her older sister was already beginning to acquire modifications, she softened the blow within the family system specifically. Having a close family member to offer guidance and support also served to settle any kind of trepidation she may have felt.

The most explicit experience with modification comes from two participants in particular. First, Ashton had two parents who had some tattoos. While they were not heavily modified, they served to guide their child in the process. Ashton had a secure system in which they could navigate being modified with the people who were raising

them, which is not an experience a lot of people get to tout, and may very well inform their lack of regret for becoming heavily modified at such a young age. Similarly, Jan had tattooed parents. Her father was a tattooer and her mother a collector, so she grew up around people who were heavily tattooed. She told stories of her parents being stared at and avoided in public spaces, with women clutching their purses because her mother walked near them. Her father, a bald man who was heavily tattooed, she described as kind and caring, but others saw him as something else because of his appearance. Her sister also went on to become a tattooer and to amass her own collection of modifications, so Jan's entire family system was well acquainted with the consequences of visible modification. With that experience, she was the most bold with placing the onus on modifiers to know the consequences of modification. "We are spectacles because we choose to be them... you choose to put tattoos on your body... you didn't come out of the womb with tattoos on your body." She is comfortable with her decisions, and doesn't regret any of the modifications on her own body—she also had a system to prepare her for that shift toward becoming a modified person. While she was well-prepared, others do not have that system around them and don't understand the depth and breadth of the social consequences to being seen, nor do they have the support of others who might understand the way that they experience the world.

I don't feel comfortable making the generalization that people are taught that body modification, generally speaking, is a deviant practice; certainly, the brush used to paint that picture is far too broad. There are folks who see non-normative modification as good, as a means of self-expression and self-actualization, whereas some may see

normative, naturalistic modification as too invasive, as a tool used to perpetuate a problematic beauty standard. The discrepancy between normative and non-normative modification is not one of which one is more noble in its quest, but rather that normative modification, to the untrained eye, frequently flies under the radar. Aesthetically, the normative modifier is more closely aligned to the clean standard of the human form, one that people consider natural and good. Of course, as detailed within the literature, non-normative modification has been historically tied to deviance or deviants, and has been used to Other people for an incredible stretch of time. However, with the growing freedoms we now enjoy with regard to self-presentation, we still must contend with the lack of autonomy that we face in how other people perceive us, and the freedoms that they employ to render us the objects of their curiosities. With the decision to look non-normative, our text-like bodies are subject to the viewership and readership of other actors. Through each and every interaction, we are co-constructing ourselves and our interlocutors; when modifications communicate for us, the social consequences might just inspire disaster.

### **Interacting with Modification**

While some of the stories of participants' interactions have been briefly described thus far, I will expand upon the responses of interviewees when asked about the interactions they have regarding their modifications. The questions asked in this vein were somewhat difficult to answer, and I infer my participants have such a vast swath of interactions that it may be next to impossible to recount the quotidian exchanges at this point. Of course, when put on the spot, people will surely think of the most inflammatory

transactions. I know from my own experiences that my tattoos are constantly the sole topic of discussion with people I don't know very well. It is almost always the first thing people bring up when striking up a conversation with me. I simply cannot sift through half a decade worth of memories regarding interactions that center my tattoos. My piercings don't get nearly as much attention. And similarly, I am so used to being stared at in public that I am mostly unfazed by any nonverbal communication on the topic. I have adopted the move of looking straight ahead and ignoring those that I pass by a lot of the time. If my participants are anything like me, surely they don't notice or recall every act of communication regarding their modifications. Nonetheless, I will detail some of the anecdotes in the following paragraphs.

Erin's initial stories were positive. She works with a population in which modifications and alternative appearances build a sense of solidarity and comfort. Some of her clients are glad to have people who present themselves the way that she does, with ornate facial jewelry and vibrant tattoos and hair, but there are also times in which her appearance reads as intimidating. She also notes that she frequently makes tattooed friends, and that it's an easy commonality to find in relationships because of the visual and heuristic nature of tattoos. However, when she was working in the service industry, men would often make her feel as though they disapproved of her choices. She waitressed in a biker bar, a place where many of the patrons were tattooed themselves, but because she was a young woman, that was not something that was welcomed on her body. Tattoos are often seen as rude guests on the femme body; they masculinize and

therefore detract from the clean, feminine form. Thus, the standard is unfairly leveled against certain kinds of bodies.

Sam, working in higher education, notes that people often assume they are a student instead of a worker. Though they are working on their second master's degree, at conferences they are often underestimated and discounted because of their loud hair color and piercings. As a young scholar, they are actively charting a path to determine what is considered acceptable presentation within the academic spaces they occupy. On the other hand, they also have plenty of positive interactions with people when discussing their modifications. In the same professional vein, they say their modifications allow students to feel more comfortable with them, and they get to build some rapport with the young student demographic. I feel the same way with my modifications, and I know Ashton does as well. We are the new generation of teachers, and we stand in stark opposition to some of the antiquated professional conventions that they might be familiar with. Seeing something new and exciting, and seeing their instructor with visible modifications, might serve as a pedagogical tool to disrupt hierarchy, lending focus to expert authority and drawing away from the presentational façade of legitimate authority. Even outside of the classroom, they make mention of the way in which their modifications open them up to so much group membership, and they feel a sense of amity with strangers who compliment their tattoos out and about.

Though Ashton has now made the career shift into higher education, they recount the experiences they have with being singled out for their appearance. When working in a tattooing and piercing shop, they were singled out for being queer. It wasn't so much that

they looked different from the people around them; they clearly had tattoos, piercings, and wore dark clothes as is typical in tattoo shops. However, their gender presentation was atypical; their modifications served to subvert traditional gender presentations, and they were at the center of attention for it. Even outside the shop, they found themselves subject to unwelcome advances, touching and grabbing, which they note are often expressions of intrigue and affinity. The intentions of these onlookers are a sort of softening here; though they have no permission to touch Ashton, they sort of shrug it off and note that they then fulfill the sideshow role that MJ had discussed. They made sure to mention that they must consider their safety when dealing with these invasive interactions, as they may be in harm's way if they were to rashly react to a stranger who was trying to pay them a compliment. Nonetheless, they also posit that they have experienced degrading comments. They discuss the confluence of modification and the presumption of promiscuity. Particularly weaponized against women and femme folks, having tattoos and piercings seems to conjure some kind of air of sexual openness. As a man, I can't say that I've necessarily experienced this stereotyping. But it was mentioned by more than just Ashton. Audrey similarly says that she gets hit on for her tattoos, and that it regularly becomes the subject of a pick-up line, or serves as an excuse for someone to talk to her. Likewise, the presentation of body modifications serves as a justification for spectacularizing. While it is not mentioned in these groups, plenty of modifiers have heard the talking point of 'if you don't want attention, you shouldn't get tattoos/piercings/etc.' Modifications themselves are seen as a means of communicating a

desire for attention, or as a warrant for folks to focus a great deal of attention on another's body.

Audrey works in food service as a server in a restaurant, and notes that customers often make strange comments about her tattoos and have interactions with her. Male customers, notably, use them as a means of making small talk, and making themselves available to her as something other than a customer. They use it to prod into her personal life, the most prominent anecdote from her serving experience being a conversation about the meaning of the tattoo on her wrist, a tattoo that signals solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. In this case, we see the idea of modification as resistance in plain view, but this may also fall under the umbrella of inclusion and affiliation. This is rather tame in comparison to the experience she notices her fiancé enduring, as he is considerably more tattooed than she is. She mentions old women being scared of him at restaurants where they are simply patrons eating at a nearby table. Their knee-jerk reactions to him are noticeable and serve to shift the power dynamic within the dining room, where the 'victimized' old woman is wary of the tattooed man bending over to grab his daughter's pacifier.

Lizzie has a similar experience in customer service to Audrey and says that she used to regularly have unwarranted conversations about her various ear piercings and her hair color. Customers question her decisions openly, asking her if she knows that she will still have a hole or a scar upon removing her jewelry. One of her piercings—a surface piercing on the side of her face by her ear—receives some concerned attention, as she contributed more than one story about that piercing being the subject of conversation

when it didn't need to be. Combined with her experience as a teenager in school, her piercings and hair color seem to be discussed against her will with some regular frequency. It's hard to not feel like a fish in a bowl when you work with the public; you must stay put while people shuffle in and get to sustain attention on you and your body as they wish. But some participants do not accept this power dynamic and have taken matters into their own hands.

Emma does not often interact with people about her modifications. Her collection, as I have mentioned, is almost entirely concealable, and she often chooses to cover her legs so that she does not have to have a conversation about her tattoos. She used to get comments working in food service as well, but she soon realized that she was tired of the attention, and nipped the issue in the bud by withdrawing people's access to her body. She put up a physical barrier so that she was not rendered an object of the onlooker's gaze. Though we worked together for several years, she maintained consistent coverage and established boundaries, and I rarely got to look at her collection as a friend and modification enthusiast. She says if she goes on a run with shorts on or leaves her house not completely covered, she shuts down conversations about her tattoos. Though it does not happen often, she has been stern with strangers before about her limits. This is an extension of her personality at large, and does not just pertain to modifications, and yet she has clearly gone to great lengths to avoid being seen as a modified person.

Addison is somewhat similar in their approach to concealing modifications. While they are a tattooer, they have a couple of clearly visible pieces and the rest of their collection covers their legs. They often wear pants and long sleeves, and from head on,



you can't tell they are considerably tattooed. Working in a tattoo shop, they say they often grapple with being more visibly tattooed. They note that they are discounted by clients for not being visibly modified. They often get read as a desk worker or as shop help instead of as one of the artists in the shop. However, they choose to maintain cover so that they can be more comfortable day to day around non-modified folks. I might note, though they did not mention this, that they are quite short and they are still young, so they must also contend with these two vulnerabilities while also being semi-visibly modified. They also face harassment by male clients, and note that they have been groped while trying to tattoo men on multiple occasions. If they did not occupy the position of being short, young, and femme-leaning, they might not be the subject of harassment in that same way.

Sav similarly cites men as the aggressors most of the time with regard to their modifications. Though her tattoos are subtle and few in number, she has been accosted about her facial piercings for some time. Her hair color is also a site of contention historically, and she notes that men will tell her what they prefer on her without her asking. She, like Lizzie, has also received condescending comments about piercing scars as if she is unaware of the consequences of her modifications. Regularly, we see actors trying to knock modifiers down a peg by questioning something as basic as their understanding of permanence. By undermining the sensibility of body modifiers, onlookers make attempts to construct the modifier as unwell, as incapable of making sound decisions, and as folks who need to be reminded of the basic logic of permanence.

The remaining participants provide minimal inflammatory anecdotal experience. Tyler only has one story of an older woman invading his personal space and trying to hike up his shorts so she could see his leg tattoos, but he says he is very forward and establishes very clear boundaries with people. He is also a cis white man, and is someone who covers most of his collection day-to-day. He has no hand, neck, or face tattoos, though the majority of his body is tattooed. As he is also a tattooer, he spends a lot of time with modified people. Similarly, Lane lives in a place that is mostly progressive, and she no longer experiences the kind of violation that she did when she lived in a more rural space. Her modifications are a means of establishing connection with onlookers often.

Lastly, Jan is sort of an anomaly, as she is rather visibly tattooed, hands included, and yet she experiences minimal interaction because of them. She says that she doesn't notice attention on her body modifications, and if anything, they're positive or they open her up to business inquiries, which she notably doesn't appreciate at times—when people know you're a tattooer, they frequently try to use you as a source of information and force you into a consultation of sorts. Mostly, she brushes it off as 'people have opinions, people make comments, who cares?' She chooses to neglect the opinions of others. However, as a tattooer, she often tries to negotiate with young clients who want visible tattoos as some of their first pieces, and even tries to dissuade some people from getting unconcealable pieces if she thinks they're too young or they aren't ready. She recognizes that others do not have the same resilient spirit that she might, and she tries to brace her

clients as much as she can. Thus, she is not ignorant to what the reality of visibility is for some people, it just happens to be a non-issue for her most of the time.

These participants provide a great variety in experiences, though we can draw similarities among the crowd. I am certain that more participants in the study would have provided both consonance and dissonance in their testimonies of living with visible modifications. While many of these interviewees harp on the negative and breeze over the positive, I think a lot of participants can agree with me in saying that the majority of their interactions are brief and complimentary. Sometimes, compliments take a turn toward tokenizing, and thus we arrive at the issue of spectacularity. However, these negative experiences that are detailed are some of the many reasons why modifiers make decisions like Emma, Addison, and even MJ to some extent. There are folks who are not comfortable with being seen, with being the subject of someone's staring. Sometimes, this discomfort manifests as a sort of regret, not of having tattoos, but of *being* modified and existing in people's purview as a modified body.

### **Regretting Modification**

I asked participants to expand on the idea of regret, and to consider whether or not they felt that MJ's use of the term was an adequate descriptor that they could resonate with. Overwhelmingly, these body modifiers report that they don't feel the same way that MJ does. To that end, none of these folks are as heavily modified as MJ is, and they are not necessarily subjected to the same discrimination as her because their modifications are mostly concealable. Nonetheless, the responses to this question did vary quite a bit, and very few people said no for the same reasons. Some folks said they like their

modifications, but they wish they were treated differently by strangers, which seems to fall in line with MJ's line of thought rather well. Some of them love their work and want people to talk to them about it, and appreciate the attention to their modifications. We cannot necessarily group these people together based on any specific characteristics—like locale, gender, or age. Once again, the data from these participants supports the stochasticity of human actors and strengthens a constructivist position toward body modification.

Put simply, some of these participants offered very little expansion into their answers. Sav acknowledged the complexity of the use of the term, but briefly noted that she does not feel any regret with her modifications. Even though she began rather young, she still wears everything proudly and openly, and wants to continue with her collection as soon as she can. Lizzie felt the same way, and is content with all of the decisions she has made thus far. She also has big plans to continue getting tattooed, and discussed her goals of getting a full back piece as soon as her resources are in order to get that work done. Might it also be noted that Lizzie has small, concealed tattoos at this point, and her modifications are various piercings which can easily be removed.

Emma did not have any regrets. Though she doesn't love her first tattoo, she likes her collection and she doesn't feel like her modifications were a bad decision. As discussed before, she does keep most of her modifications concealed most of the time, and she does not like when her tattoos are a point of conversation with strangers. Overall, she loves the work on her body, but she did not mention any future plans to continue collecting. Sandra does not regret any of her work right now, though she did get her Dead

Kennedys tattoo covered. As it stands, her pieces make her feel happy about her body. She does, however, regret some of the decisions she made with regard to who she let have “access to [her] body,” noting that her younger decisions put her in an odd and vulnerable position. The tattooing process can be rather intimate, as someone is spending quite a bit of time in close contact with your flesh, holding you and tending to your skin. I would imagine that the illegal tattoo she got in her early teens was not done by a reputable artist, and that the nature of the operation shifts what is and is not considered appropriate during the session. Tyler said that he does not feel regret for any of his modifications, but rather there is a “simmering dissonance,” that shades some of his reflections on his work. He said that the tattoos that he doesn’t love on his body don’t draw from his happiness, but they aren’t additions that he appreciates. In sum, he does not experience any regret regarding the work on his body.

Ashton does not regret their modifications at all. They claim that the fact they initially experienced interest very young may have helped with making decisions that last. Because they got to think on their permanent modifications for so long, they were likely to make better choices, and thus skirting a sense of regret. I would be willing to bet that the fact that they grew up with a supporting family may have also helped with making those good decisions. Not only do they not regret their modifications, they feel happy for having them, and note that they certainly lend to creating a supportive environment for students in their profession. As they do queer community work, they forward that modifications are tied to queer culture, and that their modifications make them visibly queer, serving to comfort the young queer and trans folks that they work to

support. Sam expresses something very similar, and notes that their modifications mark them with some symbol of community involvement. They also work in higher education with a younger student population, and find that their modifications make them somewhat disarming with this younger group. They love getting to talk to people about their modifications, and it makes them happy to be able to relate to other modified people. The regret that they did feel was centered around decisions that didn't age well, but they have since been able to cover the tattoos that they were unhappy with. Both of these participants, being non-binary transgender people, express joy for the fact that they were able to make their bodies into spaces that were more enjoyable to occupy. These decisions to aesthetically communicate group involvement proffer a heuristic function, and act to instantaneously signal to onlookers that they are a certain kind of person with a certain kind of perspective. Whether or not that was the intent with acquiring modifications, the process of becoming modified has allowed them to realize the potentials of body modification as a communication tool.

Audrey claims that she doesn't feel any sense of regret for her modifications. As someone who started rather young, she has tattoos that she would have done differently, but these don't make her unhappy. "I feel like I don't regret any of mine, and I am twenty-five. I do—I have stupid tattoos, one hundred percent, really stupid tattoos, but at the end of the day, like, I don't—I've never like hated any of them that I've gotten so far." She then discusses that some of her tattoos were borne of insecurity, as with some of MJ's, and that she now feels more confident about those parts of her body that she went on to modify. However, right after discussing the lack of regret, she discusses the fact

that her pregnancy experience was shifted by the fact that she was visibly tattooed. She claims that doctors treated her differently, and would constantly drug test her to make sure she wasn't doing anything that would harm her baby. She expressed a desire to look 'normal' for her appointments so that she would not be judged as a mother. While she may not feel overwhelming regret, the sentiment does seep in at times, and she recognizes the alternative treatment that comes with alternative aesthetics.

Erin has also made some decisions that she went on to correct, and now appreciates her modifications more because they have been reworked to suit her desires. As discussed earlier, she also notes a sense of involvement that drove her to get modified initially, and that she continues to benefit from having body modifications in her occupation when dealing with clients. She does, however, acknowledge that she doesn't like the adverse attention, that she wishes she could do without the naysayers and disparaging comments. Any negative comments she brought up in specific detail had to do with gendered expectations of purity, whether it was bikers telling her they don't like her tattoos, mothers trying to divert their child's attention from her body modifications, or people telling her she would be more beautiful without her modifications. She uses the word regret to mark bad decisions she made in terms of execution of modifications, but the sense of regret she notes for being visible is not given a name. In a similar vein, Addison likes their modifications in total, but would have made different decisions if they got to redo things. As an apprentice, they had to do some tattoos on their own body, and they wish they would not have had to use their own skin for practice. One of their tattoos is associated with a negative tattooing experience, and they wish that they could redo that

piece so that it would not be such a permanent reminder of that time. Similar to other participants, the tattoos they don't like are regretted, but the collection itself is fine. They did, however, spend time talking about the actions they take to cover their modifications when they're out and about. For Addison, becoming tattooed has provided a sense of visibility that they aren't super comfortable with, and they have chosen to withdraw somewhat, maintaining a sense of security—maintaining the capability to be seen as not modified, and thus, not spectacularized—before they go too far and get unconcealably modified.

Lane and Jan were the two participants who resoundingly disagreed with MJ's feelings of regret. Lane is pleased with her decisions, and wouldn't redo anything. They started getting modified as an adult, and did so to mindfully signal queer identity. She is glad that she made the decision to get modifications, and still clings to the sentiment of rebellion that they initially allowed her to boast. While she notes that she was not into any tattoo subculture that got her involved in the scene, she uses the queer community, to some extent, as a site in which body modification is common and acceptable. A queer sense of bodily autonomy lends one to make decisions for themselves, to permanently alter the flesh that they show to the world, to decorate the canvas that they must exist in for the long haul. Some folks see the body as something given, and something they must keep in a natural state, as if it were a rental that we must leave in a certain condition; modifiers see the body as something they own, and something they get to modify as they please. Jan did not have the same community element driving her to get tattoos, but has always lived and operated around tattooed people and continues to do so through her



work. She is heavily involved in the world of tattooing, and has achieved great success as an artist. Her work is fulfilling and her clients enrich her life. Again, she was the most vocal about the idea of regret being unfounded. She used her time in this focus group to encourage Erin to ignore dissenting opinions and to take ownership over her body in the ways she sees fit. Jan holds very firmly to the idea that modifications are a means of empowerment, of expressing autonomy over your own body. As a tattooer, she works her hardest to make sure clients don't experience regret. She has an open dialogue about 'job-stopper' tattoos (unconcealable tattoos, often used as a term for hand, neck, or face tattoos) so that her clients are informed about the consequences of tattooing. Her primary focus is on longevity, and she serves as an educator for her clients and for folks who want to get tattoos at large. She aims for a tattoo community and a tattoo culture that privileges craftsmanship of the highest degree, one in which all clients are happy with the work they have and where all artists are happy with the work they've created. Her platform, so to speak, is driven by the prevention of regret. So with her own body, she doesn't have any regrets, and that is her praxis. Of note, she also grew up around heavily modified people who likely provided a lot of the foundational knowledge that it takes to make decisions that you don't regret. Both participants who had modified parents express the same lack of personal regret, and I argue this is because they obtained more information before deciding to become modified.

Regret is an odd thing, and we can clearly see that while most participants claim they have no regrets, they recognize the role of social construction in their day to day lives in ways that they might not without their modifications. No matter how happy they

may be with their choices, every participant has some kind of anecdotal evidence of transgressions against modified people. Our bodies, through modification, become objects of the gaze, become commodified through their spectacularity. Onlookers feel privy to our bodies because of the way that our modifications communicate for us, as if they are always already communicating consent, communicating that it is okay, or even desired, for them to communicate with us. All modifiers react in their own way to the experience of operating as a spectacle, but we see here that these feelings of vulnerability and autonomy are layered and nuanced, informed by a multitude of life experiences and identity positions. We cannot use this data to make any sweeping claims about modifiers in general, but we can use these individuals' experiences to dig deeper into an understanding of the communicative power, and the communication of power, underlying body modifications.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

This project blends an array of topics together with the intent of dissecting the aesthetic elements of body modifications. Several disciplinary positions meet in the middle to contribute their own toolsets to the conversation—notably, sociology, history, and philosophy projects all lend indispensable support to the argument(s) developed thus far: non-normative body modifiers invoke the gaze in a way that subjects them to commodification and vulnerability. However, the major source of information for this exploration was the numerous participants who agreed to engage in a discussion of body modification, visibility, and regret. The use of focus groups provided a sense of depth with this critical-cultural endeavor that I would not otherwise be able to boast; my participants were able to expand this discussion into a new realm that I would not have been able to provide on my own. I would have a far narrower understanding of the phenomenon of modification regret had I not been able to organize these individuals to have a discussion on the topic; their testimonies prompted insightful thought pieces for everyone involved in the process. This project contributes to Rowe and Frischherz's (2022) explication of the phenomenological prowess of utilizing focus group interviews for critical-cultural work. Combined with an element of textual analysis, one in which participants were encouraged to contribute their own analyses to a cultural text, this project offers an interactive means for the participants, the researcher, and the reader to participate in an open discourse centering body modification practices and the sense of community that they dis/allow.

Participants were asked a range of questions, all prompting them to recall certain anecdotal accounts that asked them to contemplate their positionality as a body modifier. When asked about their start in the body modification scene, these folks got involved for a multitude of reasons, from community involvement to covering insecurities to personal pleasure. Most participants in this study used body modification as a means of communicating membership with some kind of subcultural group, whether it be a music culture, a queer culture, or some other kind. It does not suffice, however, to claim that individuals who choose to modify their body are intentionally communicating through their modifications. Most of the time, these are decisions that are considered to be individual and personalized, deeply connected to one's sense of self. For some, these modification practices are a means of self-actualization. However, as I continue to point out, through aesthetic means, we are always already communicating with the onlooker. The choices that we make to modify our own bodies signify any number of things to other communicators, and often, the master narratives that shroud body modification are persistently vilifying and dehumanizing. When modifiers are unaware of this master narrative, or turn a blind eye to the disparaging narratives of non-normative modification practices, they are unprepared for the realities of living as a visibly modified person—as a person whose body is (sometimes permanently) communicating on their behalf, and in ways that are socially disparaged.

Participants recounted their interactions leading up to their decision to get modified, and some of these folks were able to learn from people who were modified before they made the decision to begin collecting themselves. Participants who had foreknowledge

were better prepared to handle some of the consequences of existing in a modified body, such as making lasting decisions with permanent modifications like tattooing, or being prepared to handle an invasive discussion with a passerby who wants to scan every inch of your skin with their eyes. Those who discussed feeling regret for some of their decisions were not people who had experience with or prior knowledge of the consequences of body modification. Similarly, those who were more sensitive to being stared at or interacted with on the basis of their modifications were also not prepared for becoming a modified person. Sanders (1988) discusses tattooing as a “voluntary stigma” (p. 397) that works to Other individuals from people who they consider to be ‘normal,’ and forwards an intent to be different. I forward here that the act of *becoming modified*—a term that is loosely used by Sanders (1988) in the context of tattooing to discuss the actual process of acquiring tattoos and the motives by which one arrives at tattooing—is a process that shifts one’s understanding of the communicative power of aesthetic presentation in a jarring way. As we saw with MJ’s testimony, her actions as a young woman rapidly modifying her body in permanent ways altered the course of her life by way of shifting the way people interact with her. Some of the participants in this study similarly recognized communication shifts, and have acted accordingly to adjust so that they may be more comfortable.

A fundamental position that permates this research is that of a social constructionist. These participants actively engaged in the construction of identity and self through narrative means (Ricoeur, 1991). I structured the interviews in a chronological way, starting with questions of starting with modification and then leading up to the present experience of being visibly modified. These participants used stories to detail their

experiences with modification and visibility. As Ricoeur notes, “The act of telling or narrating appears to be the key to the type of connectedness that we evoke when we speak,” (p. 77). Not only do the modifications themselves signal connectedness and affiliation, but the very stories we tell about our modifications serve to connect participants. Some of my participants had very similar experiences with visibility, vulnerability, and regret, and yet they characterize themselves through narrative means in different ways. Notably, Audrey and Erin both experienced harassment and unwelcome comments as servers with tattoos, and yet Audrey held strongly to her lack of regret, whereas Erin acknowledged some feelings of regret and dismay. The reluctance to utter any kind of resonance with MJ would surely be an act of co-constructing a narrative in which all decisions led to a positive outcome, which we know surely was not the case. This is not to read regret where there is none, as I surely don’t think that every body modifier has regrets. I know that I don’t regret any of mine at this point in my life; yet I still must acknowledge the ways in which my decisions to move quickly and to get considerably tattooed in my early twenties certainly will have an impact on the ways in which I interact with people for the rest of my life, and sometimes for the worse.

The folks written about in this project are all people from vastly different backgrounds, identity positions, occupations, and goals. These are people who were inspired in different ways to modify their bodies as they saw fit. With confidence, I can say that each of them experience joy when looking at their favorite tattoo, or when putting a new piece of jewelry in. Though modification may pose the possibility of vulnerability, so much of modification is about pleasure, about liking what you see when you look in the

mirror, and about being the very person that you consider to be ideal. While an assemblage of social factors may position the modifier to be looked at as freaks, as deviants, as ill or misguided, there is undoubtable power in taking agency over your body, in taking the reins and adjusting something permanently despite the dissenting opinions. Body modifiers are a strong people. To get modified is a meditative process, as healing processes often force us to take care of our bodies and ourselves for extended periods of time. We are willing to put ourselves in painful circumstances just to come out on the other side content with how we look. We are often kind and willing to endure conversations about our tattoos while we're trying to buy eggs and barbecue sauce, even though there are likely much more interesting things about us that we would rather share with others. To be able to take agency of your own body and then to recognize the vulnerability of living in a modified body is resilience that is akin to that which is necessary for advocacy and activism.

I will note that the overwhelming majority (11 of the 12) of participants were non-men. Because these modifiers were women or non-binary people, and the men of this project (myself and Tyler) provided fewer negative anecdotes, we might be able to interpret these results as being inherently gender specific. Masculine modifiers may not experience the same violation, and the feminine body might be far more susceptible to vulnerability because such is already the default for any feminine body. For non-binary participants who already read as queer, the vulnerability is two-fold; the queer body is a medicalized body in a similar way to the modified body. My own experience lies in a liminal space; I am a large man, but I am usually read as queer. I experience a great amount of staring, but I am rarely aggressed and violated in a physical or verbal sense. I may be more comfortable than

Addison—a short, non-binary modifier—with the gaze of the public because of the fact that I am a larger person, and because of that, I am far less vulnerable to physical violation. People don't touch me in public like they have Addison, and thus, I feel that much more secure within myself when walking out of the house in shorts, a t-shirt, and my tattoos on full display.

The purity politics imbued within discourses of body modification can presumably be tied certain religious beliefs for multiple reasons. Of note, Christianity seems to take a clear stance on marking the body, disallowing tattooing and scarring in some interpretations. There may also be a blasphemous component to self-inflicted stigmata. There may also be issues of modesty, as many folks see modifiers as drawing excess attention to themselves on purpose. Faiths that disavow flamboyant or revealing presentations of self may allow people to take a stance against body modification for some perceived immodesty or lack of humility. Religious fundamentalism may just be one of the things that drive folks to make disparaging comments about modifiers, leading them to see certain people as impure and in need of cleansing and salvation. Dissenting comments on body modification may be one means of proselytizing that we don't often consider. The imposition of regret that comes from acts of shaming may be a means of encouraging penance for the unholy, for the irreverent and resistant.

As these results show, modifiers are a proud people; regret is something that is deeply discouraged by some, and is skirted by others. Those who did admit some regret were doing so begrudgingly, and it was clearly a touchy subject for some of these participants. The phrase 'no regrets' gets thrown around in tattooing spaces as both a joke



but also as a serious affirmation and ethic of performance. The no-regret mindset is a strong resistance to existing standards of presentation, even when the alternative choice has resulted in some unhappiness or pain. Modifiers hate to admit regret because, as MJ says, it makes the naysayers feel like they were right. While we can acknowledge that some of our decisions were rushed, half-baked, or just purely questionable, the logic still stands for most of us; our bodies are ours to modify, and no one else should have a say in what we decide is best. This is exactly why MJ's video was so transgressive in the larger tattoo community—she is openly admitting that she regrets participating in non-normative body modification, even saying in plain language that naturalistic modification is what she should have relied on instead, as a tool to obtain happiness in her skin. She is openly critiquing herself for her decision to aspire to alternative presentation rather than the conventional standard of beauty that she could have achieved with time and patience. Non-normative modification is often more financially accessible for young folks, and is a quick means of making a change. Tattoos, piercings, and other non-normative modifications are far less expensive than naturalistic modifications, and are also far quicker as far as healing goes. This was available to her when she was young, and was the lasting decision that she decided to make; the opportunity cost was the option of becoming the demure, thin, toned, ivory-skinned white woman that more people would consider beautiful. MJ is not representative of the larger community; for some of us, we will never fit into a normative and conventional iteration of beauty. Many of us simply reject that standard of presentation and find beauty in other ways. Often, modification can be a means of rejecting overarching beauty standards and fighting for a sense of autonomy in an aesthetic sense. If we reclaim

our agency and redirect course to make ourselves more content with our bodies, we harness our own power and ward off the influence of others with whom we disagree. The gaze may be a means of undermining that power; nevertheless, we persist with modifying our bodies, and thus the standards of purity, beauty, and autonomy.

Non-normative body modification is a sort of resistance; to challenge what a body can and should look like is no small feat. Though we come to realize the precarity of living in a visibly modified body rather quickly, many of us continue our journeys toward fulfillment and accept the consequences that may come our way. It is incredibly hard to blend in as a non-normative body modifier in most spaces, and for so many of us, being willing to take up that space and to be the object of the gaze is a means of advocating for ourselves, and possibly for others. Insofar as modification is a passive means of transgressing normative rules of presentation, modifiers may be acclimated already to the visibility and the everyday advocacy that it takes to perform activist work. Of course, some bodies are marked from the beginning, whether they be people of color, people with disabilities, people whose bodies don't align with gendered projections, and so forth. Non-normative modification, being chosen by the wearer, is a means through which someone elects some form of marginalization for themselves, the degree of severity varying based on individuals' existing identity positions; a Black woman modifier is likely going to be treated differently from a Native American man with tribal tattoos, on the basis of gender, race, class, and cultural differences. White folks who choose to modify their bodies take on an interesting position in that they open themselves up to marginality by way of their own choices—though obviously different in nature and in consequential treatment, the

white modifier may begin to recognize that visibility is informed by one's modifications rather fiercely, and that even the act of mutual cocreation will shift with the adoption of a new presentation. Visibility's capacities in establishing power are expressly employed with body modifiers, I argue. The right to look (Mirzoeff, 2011) is nowhere to be found, as it wasn't in the freak shows. Now, the service station is a microcosm of the freak show. However, we must recognize that visibility has long served as the site of establishing power over Black and brown folks. When a young Black man gets followed around the gas station by an employee or a 'concerned' patron, they are entirely familiar with the reality that visibility is something that they historically had little control over, and that it was always already a means of maintaining white supremacy. Similarly, in decades past, a young Black boy could not participate in a mutual glance with a white woman for fear that she would fabricate some violent interaction that may position the boy to be subject to state violence. White modifiers elect marginality and stigmatization, but these are things that some folks have been living with for their entire lives. Thus, it is my belief that non-normative modification may serve a didactic purpose for the wearer to understand the ways in which power operates through visibility. Perhaps this might be a spark of inspiration and a means of mobilization. Though this may not be the default logic of heavily modified people, and yet this may just be one of the capacities that being a non-normative modifier may pose.

Similarly, a number of the concepts that I take up through the analysis and interpretation build upon my training with queer theory. I will posit that non-normative body modification may be a body project (Shilling, 1993) governed by very similar logics to those of queer and trans folks. Some trans folks are body modifiers themselves, whether

they take on normative or non-normative modifications. Perhaps gender affirming body modification is already non-normative because of cisnormative societal dictates, yet I would argue that any modification that assumes a human form is a naturalistic or normative modification. Yet, there is something to be said about the idea that multiple participants forward in claiming non-normative modification was an avenue through which they find inclusion in queer spaces. Perhaps a queer logic of body modification has long been a major position upon which advocacy and liberation efforts have been built. Maybe transgression is one of the main tenets we must capitalize on with modification projects.

Santibañez (2020) has recently written a piece on tattooing specifically as liberation work, and details some of the potentials that social justice education can pose for the tattooing industry. In a similar vein, I see non-normative modification as a whole being a means of liberation in a performative sense. Aesthetic liberation might be needed now more than ever. We are consistently seeing juridical efforts at eradicating queer and trans folks in a number of places across the United States. A raging epistemicide (2009) threatens the youth of the LGBTQIA+ community, and alienates young queer and trans people from spaces in which they can thrive. With attacks on pedagogy being build, we might be able to rely upon aesthetic transgression to do some of the integral introductory work with queer and trans community building. Non-normative body modification could be one of those tools that we use to fight cisheteropatriarchy. I hope to continue with this line of thought in future projects. Similarly, there may be a strong case for the use of modification as a means of dismantling white supremacy and neocolonialism. I would hope this is a project that is not taken up by white writers, as people of color should be the ones we listen to

when embarking upon liberation journeys. There is also plenty of room under the umbrella of body modification for writers to better understand raced, classed, and gendered spaces of tattooing, piercing, and otherwise modifying in a non-normative way, specifically when distinguishing between licensed spaces and home/community spaces. The realm of ‘scratcher’ tattoos (those done by a non-licensed artist) might be rife with information on classism, pathologies of space, ethics of care, and so much more. Any number of authors might find a niche within body modification that could open the door to groundbreaking scholarship.

This study runs in to a few limitations when presenting information about non-normative body modifiers. The overwhelming majority of the participants were white, with only two participants who were people of color, and even then, the participants were effectively white-passing. Having participants who are people of color would add a new layer of complexity to understanding regret and modification, especially as it pertains to visibility and the violative gaze. In a similar vein, having some patients with visible disabilities would have also enriched this data with a new perspective on medicalization and the responses to being pathologized. The ages of these participants were concentrated around the mid-twenties, with a few older participants in the mix as well. I believe an increased concentration of older or younger participants would skew the data quite a bit, and would give us various positionalities on body modification and regret sentiments. There was also a clear imbalance with regard to gender in this project, as I only had one man participate in this study. Perhaps additional men would have provided for us a cleaner split with regard to regretting visibility or not. Men who modify their bodies may not be in

a position of vulnerability in the same way that women and non-binary folks are. A stronger male perspective would complicate the results of this study and would urge us to reckon even more with the gendered implications of modification and the heterosexist norms of something like tattooing or body piercing. I would have also loved to get an indigenous perspective on body modification, as there are entirely different cultural valences surrounding modification in Native American cultures. For some tribes, tattooing is a rite of passage, a coming-of-age symbol that is worn with pride. The motives behind modifying the body in this way would be an entirely different contribution to this project. In the same way, some kind of international perspective might have been a fascinating input, as all of my participants (to my knowledge) were born and raised in the United States, and still reside here. A more diverse sample with regard to these identity positions would surely invigorate this inquiry and would pave the way for even more novel explorations into the topic.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Non-normative body modification is just one of the myriad ways in which people can express themselves through aesthetic means. However, the difference is in the permanence of those choices—choosing a t-shirt in the morning will not relegate to the wearer a lifetime of commitment to that tool of self-expression in the same way that a tattoo or a scarification design might. This project explored some key literature areas to build an argument in which non-normative body modification (tattooing, piercing, scarification, branding, etc.) positions the wearer as an object of the gaze, and thus, serves to communicate on behalf of the modified individual. Often, I argue, this works in the service of rendering the non-normative modifier as a figure whose power is limited. Through spectacularity, aestheticization, and then dehumanization, the non-normative modifier is seen as an oddity and a freak, and one that need not occupy certain positions. The stigma of body modification places people in a position to be passed up for employment, disregarded as unprofessional, pathologized, and generally Othered by non-modified or normatively modified folks. Through focus group interviews with non-normative body modifiers, we touch on anecdotal interactions on the topic of modification, and explore the extent to which those interactions inspire a sense of regret, and in turn, an awareness of and sensitivity to the vulnerability of being visible. Through understanding the modified body in these terms, modified folks might be able to advocate for ourselves in new ways, and may also be able to translate that advocacy into new realms and new conversations. The human form is a hard thing to come to terms with, as there is no one standard body.

Though white supremacy, heterosexism, and ableism may forward their own ideal body standards, non-normative modifiers seek to abolish standards and transgress normative modes of presentation. The choice to modify our bodies may leave us in precarious positions, yet we will always have a power within us, and I see it as an imperative to capitalize on that power and to use it for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion purposes.



## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Names, Pronouns, and Approximate Ages of Participants

- Addison (they/them), mid-twenties
- Ashton (they/them), mid-twenties
- Audrey (she/her), mid-twenties
- Emma (she/her) – late twenties
- Erin (she/her) – mid-twenties
- Jan (she/her) – early thirties
- Lane (she/her) – early thirties
- Lizzie (she/her) – early twenties
- Sam (they/them) – early thirties
- Sandra (she/her) – early forties
- Sav (she/they) – mid-twenties
- Tyler (he/him) – late twenties

## Appendix B

### Guiding Focus Group Interview Questions

1. For those of you who haven't seen this video before, what are your initial thoughts?
2. For those of you who have seen this video before, what was your initial reaction to her perspective?
  - a. If at all, how has it changed now that you have seen it again?
3. When did you start your journey with body modification?
4. How have modifications affected the way you think about your body?
5. When you began to get modified, did you mindfully process how you might be perceived by others?
  - a. Did others warn you about being visibly tattooed?
6. When you go in public, do your modifications affect your interactions with people?  
If so, how?
  - a. How might they make your interactions more positive? How might they be more negative?
7. How do you respond to perceived negative interactions in public?
  - a. Does the intent of the other communicator change your feelings about being spoken to in public?
8. Do you ever feel regret in the way MJ does?
  - a. How does that make you act? Do you change the way you present based upon this regret?
9. How might this video change the way you approach public interactions?

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