This article examines the phenomenon of nonmainstream body modification in contemporary United States, with an emphasis on genital piercing, branding, and cutting in several West Coast cities. Based on participant observation and interviews over a 2-year period, it discusses the pleasures and problems of fieldwork with nonmainstream body modifiers, describes the events at a series of San Francisco body modification workshops, and ends with an explanation of what motivated the individuals in the study to involve themselves in a behavior that is not only physically painful but is considered repugnant and even psychopathological by American society.

NONMAINSTREAM BODY MODIFICATION
Genital Piercing, Branding, Burning, and Cutting
JAMES MYERS

THE TERM BODY MODIFICATION properly includes cosmetics, coiffure, ornamentation, adornment, tattooing, scarification, piercing, cutting, branding, and other procedures done mostly for aesthetic reasons. It is a phenomenon possibly as old as genus Homo, or at least as ancient as when an intelligent being looked down at some clay on the ground, daubed a patch of it on each cheek, and caught the pleasing reflection on the surface of a pond. Appropriate to my overall topic is Thevos’s (1984) observation that a “self retouching impulse” distinguishes humans from other animals (p. 3).

At the outset, it is important to distinguish between the two main types of body modification: permanent (or irreversible) and temporary. Permanent modifications, such as tattooing, branding, scarification, and piercing result in indelible markings on the surface of the body. With the exception of branding, these marks involve the application of sharp instruments to the skin. Dental alterations, skull modeling, and modern plastic surgery are also forms of permanent body modification. Temporary modifications include body painting, cosmetics, hair styling, costume, ornamentation, and any other alteration that can be washed off, dusted away, or simply lifted off the body. This article focuses
on permanent body modifications in contemporary United States, especially genital piercing, branding, and cutting.¹

The literature of anthropology abounds with descriptive and analytical accounts of body modification among humans, but almost all of it emanates from people living or who had lived in the non-Western traditional societies of the world. From Mayan tongue piercing to Mandan flesh skewering, Ubangi lip stretching to Tiv scarification, there is a vast and incredibly varied body of literature that seeks to explain it all—anthropologically, psychologically, sociologically, and biologically. Curiously, very little research has been done on contemporary, nonmainstream American body modification. When one considers the huge amount of literature devoted to the subject among traditional non-Western peoples, this paucity of data becomes glaringly evident. For example, one of the best recent sources on body modification is Rubin's (1988) *Marks of Civilization*, but even in this excellent publication, most of the articles deal with tattoos and cicatization and none are devoted to such contemporary Euro-American practices as multiple piercing, scarification, cutting, and branding.

That a tattoo renaissance has been occurring in the United States since the late 1960s is now quite evident in the popular media and to a growing extent in scholarly publications and papers presented at professional conferences (see especially Govenar 1977; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1989; St. Clair and Govenar 1981).² This void in the literature is probably due more to a simple lack of awareness of the practice than it is a lack of interest, as the population of people involved in multiple piercing, scarification, branding, and cutting is miniscule compared to tattooing. In addition, because the modification and/or jewelry involved typically creates even greater revulsion in the general public's eye than tattoos, much of the work is kept secret among recipients and their intimates.

My observations and conclusions regarding nonmainstream body modification run counter to the general public's assessment that people so involved are psychological misfits bent on disfigurement and self-mutilation. None of the people I inter-
viewed, however deep and varied their involvement in body alteration, fit the standard medical models for “self-mutilation.”

This article contains four major sections. First, I discuss the methods used and the population involved in the study. This section also includes some thoughts on the pleasures and problems of conducting fieldwork with nonmainstream body modifiers. Following this is a presentation of the ethnographic data, the largest portion of which is devoted to a description of my participant observation work with four different body modification workshops in San Francisco, California. The next section explores the motivation and rationale behind those who participate in body modification despite the physical pain involved and the stigma that American society attaches to the behavior. Finally, I conclude with some observations on the conventionality of the individuals in the study, an assessment that runs counter to the prevailing medical literature on the subject and the views held by the general American public. I also relate nonmainstream body modification to the worldwide practice of rites and passage and the rich body of ritual symbolism accompanying such rites.³

METHOD AND POPULATION

My original plan was to concentrate my research efforts on tattooing, but 4 months into the 24-month study period, I shifted my focus almost entirely to piercing, cutting, burning, and branding. The change was brought about by my increasing awareness of the growing popularity of nonmainstream modification other than tattoos and the realization that research on the subject was scant. I was also intrigued by the deep feelings of revulsion and resentment held by mainstream American society against these forms of body modification.⁴

Using participant observation and interviews as primary data-gathering techniques, I involved myself in six workshops organized especially for the San Francisco SM (sadomasochist) community by Powerhouse (fictitious name), a San Francisco
Bay Area SM organization. Tattoo and piercing studios were also a rich source of data, as was the 5th Annual Living in Leather Convention held in Portland, Oregon in October 1990. I gathered additional data from a small but dedicated group of nonmainstream body modifiers at my university and the city in which it is located. Interviews with several medical specialists and an examination of pertinent medical literature provided an important perspective, as did solicited and unsolicited commentary from hundreds of mainstream society individuals who viewed my body modification slides and/or heard me lecture on the topic. Finally, chance encounters with devotees served to broaden my awareness and understanding of the various forms of nonmainstream body modification.

Entree to the workshops was of paramount importance to the study; thus early in the fieldwork, I contacted the primary organizer of Powerhouse and introduced myself as a straight, male anthropologist interested in attending the workshops in order to gather data on nonmainstream body modification for use in my university classroom and publication in a scholarly journal. Her response was immediate:

Good God, yes! You’re welcome to come. We need people to see that just because we’re kinky doesn’t mean we’re crazy, too. You’ll see people here with all kinds of sexual interests. We learn from each other and have a heckuva lot of fun while we’re at it.

As is true for most ethnographic participant observation situations, the largest amount of my data from the workshops were gathered from observation. I participated in the true sense of the word on two occasions, once during a play piercing demonstration and again during a playing with fire demonstration. The rest of my participation involved such typical “interested involvement” as mingling, asking questions as an audience member, introducing myself around, helping arrange chairs, setting up demonstration paraphernalia, taking photographs, conducting interviews, and generally lending a hand whenever possible. At the Living in Leather Convention in Portland, I was able to expand my involvement by showing my body modification slides
to several people, attending parties, and helping out at the host organization's hospitality suite.

The population of body modifiers in my study included males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals (lesbians and gays), bisexuals, and SMers. It is important to note that the single largest group was composed of SM homosexuals and bisexuals. Although this skewing likely resulted from my extended contact with the Powerhouse workshops and several SM body modifiers who I interviewed at the Living in Leather Convention in Portland, it is supported by a 1985 piercing profile of subscribers to *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (Nichols 1985). The survey determined that 37% of the group was gay, 15% bisexual, and 57% involved in dominant-submissive play, a keystone of SM activity. Also of interest from the *PFIQ* profile, 83% had attended college, 24% had college degrees, and 33% had undertaken postgraduate study. Caucasians represented 93% of the survey.

Like any fieldwork, this research had its pleasant and difficult aspects. On the positive side was the subject matter itself. Body modification is inherently fascinating to human beings. In addition, there was the relative ease with which I was able to gather empirical data on the topic. The people I interviewed and observed were for the most part barely subdued exhibitionists who took joy in displaying and discussing their body and its alterations. This was especially true when a group was together and a sense of trust pervaded the room. On such occasions, an exuberant “show and tell” was the order of the day. To field-workers accustomed to tight-lipped, monosyllabic responses and other forms of “informant lockjaw” from people they are studying, and who have been advised on occasion what they could do with their camera, it should be understandable why it was a pleasure to work with this uninhibited, communicative population.  

Such rapport presupposes that an element of trust has been achieved between the field-worker and the individuals or group being studied. Many people who I interviewed were keenly aware that because mainstream society regarded them as
deviants, there was a high probability that harm to themselves or their life-style was never far away. Thus interaction between the field-worker and the individuals being studied must occur early to establish the trust necessary to conduct a worthwhile study.

Naturally, there were dilemmas and problems, of which photography loomed the largest. Photography is a must in any discipline where the recording and analysis of visual data is important, but unfortunately it also has the capability of violating the personal world of those being studied. The agonizing dilemma in my use of the camera at workshops and with individual informants quickly became apparent to me. Body modification is a visually charged phenomenon that is by its very nature designed to be seen. The richest written description of a tattoo or piercing when compared to a photograph can only pale. I was always plagued by the nagging question, “Should I or shouldn’t I?” Fortunately, many subjects made it easy for me by volunteering, “Would you like to take a picture?” Others queried me regarding the use of the photos and their concerns that they might appear in a newspaper or magazine. Some of them flatly said no, often with an apology and some such clarifying comment as “My family lives in the area and they’d die if they knew what kind of scene I was into.”

I always asked permission to take photos and tried to use common sense in determining whether or not a particular situation was appropriate for photography. For example, I did not take pictures during actual workshop demonstrations but did so only while people were socializing before and after each session.

I believe that, overall, my camera helped to reduce barriers between myself and my informants. Indeed, many people requested, and received from me, copies of photographs I had taken of them. This exchange served as a type of “cultural brokerage” and enhanced my rapport with several individuals. Still, I must confess that although I took hundreds of pictures during the fieldwork, I was never quite able to shake the uncomfortable feeling that I was intruding in someone’s very personal life.
As always in fieldwork, there was the problem of assessing informant reliability. In the case of my SM body modifiers, this problem reached new heights for me because of their devotion to fantasy, imagination, and role-playing. For example, although role-playing in an SM relationship is usually reserved for a specific “scene,” on a few occasions I encountered informants who cleverly remained in their contrived roles throughout my interview. If not detected, the ethnographic perils inherent in such a maneuver can be devastating. For example, I am reminded that it took me 2 weeks to discover that one Wolfgang Muller, who wore a heavy, shin-length Wehrmacht coat and spoke English with a thick German accent during my interview, was actually an American accountant from Oregon and not, as he led me to believe, an expatriated East German border guard who had recently immigrated to the United States after the Berlin Wall was razed.

Another difficult aspect of my research was continually having to affirm the legitimacy of my topic to campus colleagues. There were welcome exceptions, but most seemed to view my work as a thinly disguised voyeuristic adventure. I fared better within my own department, but even these culturally aware stalwarts were often incredulous and jokingly referred to me by such cute sobriquets as Dr. Kink or Professor Sleaze. For the most part, students were enthralled with the topic and, with mouths agape, viewed my slides with a mixture of curiosity and astonishment. However, some were less enthusiastic. During a one-semester period, the dean of my college received formal complaints from two students to the effect that I was showing pornography in class. In addition, a colleague for whom I guest-lectured was graced with a particularly nasty written assessment of my presentation. Of interest here is the zero number of complaints registered to me or anyone during my 30-year period of discussing, semester after semester, similar forms of body modification in non-Western cultures. After listening to me ruminate on this problem, one of my anthropology graduate students offered a provocative observation, “As long as the tits and pricks being pierced are brown, OK—but if they’re white, no way!”
BODY MODIFICATION WORKSHOPS

Most of the ethnographic data in my study were derived from the body modification SM workshops I observed and the contacts I made while in attendance. These workshops were part of a series of continuing programs sponsored by Powerhouse and were designed to “enhance the SM experience.” Taught by individuals who were regarded as professional practitioners of various nonmainstream body modifications, the workshops were limited to a top enrollment of 50 people. The six workshops I attended were on male piercing, female piercing, branding and burning, cutting, play piercing, and playing with fire. The audience at each workshop was markedly homogeneous. With the exception of myself and perhaps a half-dozen others, each session was typically attended by SM-oriented lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. Participants ranged in age from their late teens to their late 50s, with most attendees in their mid-20s and 30s. Leather was predominant—jackets, trousers, skirts, chaps, trucker’s caps, gloves, boots, arm bands, wrist bands, and gauntlets. Heavily laden key rings, hunting knives in leather scabbards, slave collars, and T-shirts with sexual preference messages were also omnipresent. Tattoos, lip and nasal septum piercings, and multiple pierced ears were quickly visible, whereas more intimate piercings, such as nipple, navel, and genital would become evident as the workshops proceeded. It is fair to say that the groups would have attracted some attention were they to have gathered in a suburban shopping mall.

The four workshops described here were held on Saturday afternoons in an upstairs room of a liberal church in San Francisco. Two other workshops I attended but do not describe in this article were conducted in a small room above a popular San Francisco gay bar.

MALE PIERCING

The first workshop in the series was on male piercing. Jim Ward, the teacher, was the president of Gauntlet, Inc., one of the few firms in the world that manufactures nonmainstream
piercewear. Recognized as a "master piercer," Ward has been piercing since the mid-1970s and has estimated that he has done 15,000 piercings in the 14 years between 1975 and 1989. He is also the editor and publisher of *Piercing Fans International Quarterly (PFIQ)*, a successful glossy publication devoted exclusively to the subject of piercing (see appendix for descriptions of piercings, both male and female).

Ward arrived at the workshop early to set up his piercing equipment and a massage table that would serve as a piercing couch. He was wearing Levi's, a studded belt, black boots, and a black T-shirt that had the logo "Modern Primitives" (see Vale and Juno 1989) printed above 12 white-bordered rectangles, each of which contained a graphic drawing of one of the most popular genital piercings. Ward's lover and assistant set out several jewelry display cases and arranged chairs for the audience. He had multiple ear piercings, a bonelike tusk in his nasal septum, and a Gauntlet button on his T-shirt that proclaimed "We've got what it takes to fill your hole."

Ward's popularity and fame were evident as several arrivees paid their respect by shaking his hand or hugging and kissing him. Even though the workshop was on male piercing, one third of the audience was women, a crossing-over evident at each of the workshops regardless of the gender-specific body modification being highlighted. Ward welcomed the group, confirmed that his prearranged volunteers were present, and began his discussion of male piercing. It was evident that he had been through the routine many times, which he had, both before live audiences and in his continuing series in *PFIQ*, "Piercing With a Pro." His presentation was divided into halves, the first of which was a general discussion of the topic, or as he said, "the ins and outs of piercings," and the second consisting of actual demonstrations. As was true of each of the Powerhouse workshops, there was much emphasis on safety, cleanliness, sterilization, and proper hygiene after the procedure. Assuming that most of his audience was already involved in or at least aware of piercing, Ward dispensed without definition such esoteric piercing terminology as ampallang, dydoe, frenum, Prince Albert, guiche, and so on. Questions were asked about autoclave
temperatures, rubber gloves, anesthetics, antiseptics, play piercing versus permanent piercing, the dangers of AIDS and hepatitis, body rejection, jewelry selection, and the like.

During the break, I asked Ward about his own piercings:

Well, you can see them in my ear lobe and tragus, but I also have a Prince Albert in my cock and a nipple ring on each tit. Oh, I've got a guiche with a piece of cord in it, too. I'm wearing all that stuff right now. I've been piercing myself for 20 years, but I don't wear jewelry in most of the holes. I travel all over the country, and I can tell you it's a real mind-fuck to get on an airplane and sit next to some hunk knowing you've got all this sexy stuff on.

I also talked with an audience member who was not interested in getting pierced but wanted to see what the attraction was for his pierced friends:

I don't feel the need to get pierced. Actually, I'm deathly afraid of needles. I don't think I have to look like a pin cushion in order to look sexy. When I'm out cruising I might stuff my balls through a coupla cock rings. Gives me a great feeling and enough basket to turn a few heads. Best of all, no artificial holes in my body to get infected.

Ward's first volunteer after the break was a leather-clad male who wanted his left nipple repierced. He sat shirtless on the table as his companion offered him a reassuring hug. Ward examined the nipple and told the group the scar tissue from the previous piercing would make this one more difficult. He also took advantage of the audience's concern to note the difference between pain and sensation in piercing and that he preferred the latter term to best describe the feeling. The volunteer's facial expression gave the impression that he had some doubts about Ward's evaluation. Before starting the piercing, Ward summoned his second volunteer and explained to the group that before he did the nipple job he needed to prep Number 2 for his forthcoming Prince Albert, a procedure that requires the application of a local anesthetic because the needle pierces the urethra, a particularly sensitive area. Number 2 dropped his leather trousers to his ankles, and Ward casually tamped a xylacane-coated cotton swab into the urethra about 1 inch. A
male in the audience teased, “I bet he wishes there wasn’t any anesthetic on that Q-tip®.” Laughter. Ward directed the volunteer to step over to one side of the room and wait for the anesthetic to numb the area. The volunteer, leather trousers still at his ankles and undershorts dropped below his knees, hopped over to the wall where he waited patiently, with the Q-tip® jauntily protruding from the tip of his penis.

Ward returned to the first volunteer and spent several moments discussing different types of male nipples and the particular piercing technique warranted by each. Then he scrubbed the volunteer’s nipple with Hibiclens and Betadine, marked each side of the nipple with a dot to guide the needle path, clamped a Pennington forceps on the nipple to keep it from retracting and to afford better manageability, and expertly pushed a needle through the guide dots. An audible sharp gasp and a rigid tensing of the volunteer’s body confirmed Ward’s earlier comment about the likelihood of tougher tissue in repiercings. There was an immediate sigh of relief from the group accompanied by applause and congratulatory whoops. One end of the jewelry was used to push the needle the rest of the way through the nipple, thus resulting in the needle being expelled and the jewelry attached in one continuous movement. The entire procedure had taken less than 3 minutes.

The second volunteer was invited back to the table, Q-tip® still in place as he waddled across the room. Ward had him sit on the table, then decided that it would be better if he stood on the table. There was some concern in the group about this stance, as the volunteer was visibly trembling, a circumstance that was all the more worrisome because the table itself began to shake. It was not clear whether the bare-legged volunteer was simply cold or whether he was suffering from pre-op jitters. Nevertheless, Number 2 balanced precariously atop the uncertain table while Ward, who had now gained an eye-level view of his work site, examined the about-to-be-pierced penis with his eyes and his fingers. As he worked, Ward maintained a running commentary on the history of the Prince Albert, noting that “it was originally designed to tether the penis to either the right or left pant leg for a neater looking appearance, but now it’s strictly
erotic.” After completing the usual prepping around the piercing area, he deftly pushed the needle into the underside of the penis just behind the head, into the urethra, up toward the tip of the penis and the still lodged Q-tip®. As he pushed, the Q-tip® suddenly popped out of the urethra—“a sure sign I’m on course”—followed by the tip of the gleaming needle. The volunteer gazed warily down at the sight while being steadied by a friend. Applause and cheers. The jewelry was attached and Number 2 was eased down from the table. Still shaking, he pulled up his shorts and trousers. Ward peeled off his rubber gloves and disposed of them while discussing his thoughts on abstinence during the healing process.

The third volunteer was to receive a dydœ, a piercing that would pass through both sides of the upper edge of the glans. This volunteer, in his late 40s, removed his trousers and under-shorts and stretched out calmly on the table. With more than 2 hours of discussion and demonstrations behind him, Ward was now much quieter. The usual preliminaries were undertaken while the volunteer chattered about his piercing history. The group was only mildly interested in the disclosures, but full attention resumed when Ward began the actual piercing. As with the first two volunteers, this one emitted a controlled but audible gasp, then relaxed. The jewelry was attached and the volunteer hopped off the table and dressed while the group applauded. Later, this person expressed his feelings about piercing to me:

I like the jewelry very much, but the real turn-on comes from having my body penetrated. Everytime I see that sharp, shiny needle heading towards my flesh I know I’m going to get either a dick orgasm or a head orgasm or maybe both.  

Several of the audience congratulated the new piercees and expressed their appreciation to Jim Ward. The first workshop was over.

BRANDING AND BURNING

The second workshop of the series was devoted to branding and burning and was taught by Fakir Musafer. Musafer, who
pierced his own penis at age 13, was 58 years old at the time of the workshop. Recognized by many as the doyen of “modern primitivism” in the United States, there is little in the practice of body modification and “body play” that he has not experienced on his own body. He has been tattooed, burned, cut, pierced, skewed, and electrically shocked. He has fasted, deprived himself of sleep, rolled on beds of thorns, and constricted and compressed various parts of his body with belts and corsets. He has also gilded, flagellated, punctured, and manacled himself. In addition to frequently suspending himself with fleshhooks à la the Sun Dance, he has reclined on a bed of nails or blades, “negated” his scrotum and penis by sealing them in plaster, and conversely “enhanced” the same by such practices as scrotum enlargement and penis elongation (a procedure accomplished by regular stretch workouts with 3-pound weights, or, what he refers to as “rock on a cock” exercises). His fame continues to spread in the United States and abroad through his continuing involvement with Jim Ward’s PFIQ and the release of “Dances Sacred and Profane,” a widely distributed videotape that highlights his Sun Dance ritual. Musafer undoubtedly represents the distant end on any scale of contemporary nonmainstream body modifiers, the great percentage of whom are content with their tattoos and/or multiple piercings.

Musafer arrived 30 minutes before the start of the workshop. He was wearing a black T-shirt and baggy khaki cotton trousers with large flapped mid-leg pockets. Puffing on a cigarette, his hair dyed sable brown, and bereft of any visible piercing jewelry, he looked like any other middle-aged ad executive enjoying his weekend. I volunteered to help him unload his van. The contents of the box I carried up the stairs vaguely hinted of his workshop’s topic—acetylene torch, metal snips, needle-nose pliers, wire, matches, incense sticks, candles, several strips of copper and tin, mirror, two potatoes, and various other oddities.

Like Jim Ward at the previous workshop, Musafer was hugged and kissed by many arrivees. And, as in all the workshops, a spirit of bon homie prevailed as arriving couples and singles of both sexes hugged and kissed acquaintances, chatted amiably with others, and shared their latest body art. A few moments
before the starting time, Musafer shed his T-shirt, revealing a small ring in each nipple. He removed the rings and deftly replaced them with hollow metal tubes, each, according to his admission, 7/8 of an inch in diameter by 1 inch in length. Then he quickly inserted white teflon tubes through the holes on each side of his chest that had been created several years earlier for his Sun Dance hooks. Each tube was about the size of a king-sized cigarette and ran vertically through the flesh behind each nipple. Finally he reached into a pocket and pulled out a large nasal septum ring, which, with the aid of an audience member, was installed in his nose. He pulled his T-shirt back on and commented, “A-h-h, that’s more like it!” Now, with open arms he welcomed everyone.

“The Fakir” as he frequently refers to himself, is an old pro at this sort of presentation and glibly but knowledgeably discussed his first topic of the day: branding. With the aid of an easel and predrawn charts, we learned about technique (“Don’t go too deep, you’re not doing a ‘Mighty Dog’ brand”), patterns (“The simpler the better”), important reminders (“Remember, each mark in the final scar will be two to four times thicker than the original imprint”), desirable locations (“The flatter the surface the better. Try to stick with the chest, back, tummy, thighs, butt, leg, upper arm”), and tools and materials and where to get them.

A prearranged volunteer indicated a preference for a 2-inch skull to be branded on the calf of her left leg. She reclined on the table with her skirt pulled up over her knees and her left leg extended toward Musafer’s work site. A previously drawn pattern was transferred onto her left calf. As we watched, he fashioned the skull shape out of a strip of metal cut from a coffee can and showed us how to heat and apply the brand. Holding the brand in his needle-nosed pliers, he heated it in the acetylene torch until it was red hot, then quickly applied it to a piece of cardboard to check the design’s appearance. Musafer also cut a potato in half and applied the reheated brand to the cut surface, noting that this was a good way for beginners to practice depth control before doing the real thing on human skin. The volunteer, a professional piercer and cutter in her early 30s, laughed with the audience as the potato hissed and smoked
from Musafer’s strike. “The Fakir” was now ready and alerted his client. The brand was heated, precisely positioned over the desired part of the pattern, and struck. There was an immediate hiss and a crackling sound, followed by a wisp of smoke and the odor of scorched flesh. The volunteer scarcely twitched. Musafer examined his first strike and proceeded to do six more to finish the skull, complete with stylized eyes, mouth, and teeth. The only time the volunteer reacted to the hot brand, and intensively so, was when Musafer inadvertently brushed the edge of her left foot with a “cooled” brand as he returned it to the torch for renewed heating. Musafer rubbed some Vaseline on the brand and the foot burn, and the volunteer sat up and put her low-cut boot back on. The audience applauded.

Musafer’s next demonstration was on burning.12 Displaying a row of seven or eight self-imposed circular burns on the front of his right thigh, each about the size of a penny and resembling inoculation scars, he discussed different types of burnings (“Cigarette burns are nasty but nice”), and techniques to cause them (“I prefer incense sticks because they work real well and smell so delightful during the burn”). There was no prearranged volunteer for burning, but a woman in her early 20s volunteered from the audience. Her friends cheered her as she removed her Levi’s and sat on the table. Musafer touched her gently on the legs and softly said, “Your are giving your flesh to the gods.” He also instructed her on the importance of deep breathing and visualization as he glued a 3-inch length of incense stick to her left thigh and lit it. Within 4 or 5 minutes, the stick had burned down to skin level and extinguished itself. Although the stick was slightly less than a pencil in diameter, the circular burn mark quickly expanded to the penny sized marks I had viewed earlier on Musafer’s thigh. Throughout the burning, the volunteer kept her eyes tightly closed and followed Musafer’s instructions on deep breathing. She now opened her eyes and the audience applauded. Several of the audience members came up to where she was sitting and examined the burn, while one of her friends asked Musafer for some extra incense sticks to take home. Musafer doled out some sticks and jokingly admonished, “Watch it, this stuff is catching!” Many chuckles. Musafer responded to
several last-minute questions while packing up his paraphernalia. This workshop had ended.

FEMALE PIERCING

The female piercing workshop was taught by Raelynn Gallina, a woman recognized throughout the Bay Area as a professional “total body” piercer. In addition to her popularity as a piercer and cutter (some of her clients glowingly refer to has as “Queen of the Blood Sports”), Raelynn is a successful designer and manufacturer of jewelry. Although she pierces males (“above the navel only”), the greatest proportion of her clientele is female, most of whom are, like herself, lesbian. She had been piercing for 7 years at the time of the workshop. Two thirds of the workshop’s audience of 45 people were women, all but a few of whom were lesbians involved in sadomasochism. Most of the men present were gay SMers. Raelynn announced that she had four volunteers for the afternoon and would pierce a nipple, a clitoris hood, an inner labia, and a nasal septum.

The first half of the workshop was devoted to a “do it yourself” clinic on technique, tools, antiseptics, and various do’s and don’ts and ended with the admonition that it was safer and better to be pierced by a pro:

I get a lot of people who want me to fix up their bungled piercings. Usually turns out they were heavy into a torrid scene when someone says, “Heh! Wouldn’t it be hot if we pierced each other!” All I’m saying is if you do get carried away, make sure you know what you’re doing.

After the break, Raelynn’s spiritual-psychological bent revealed itself as she emphasized the importance of centering, grounding, visualization, client-practitioner compatibility, and the relationship between individual personality and type of piercing jewelry to be worn. She later commented to me:

Piercing is really a rite of passage. Maybe a woman is an incest victim and wants to reclaim her body. Maybe she just wants to validate some important time in her life. That's why I like to have a ceremony to go along with my piercing and why I do it in a
temple—my home. Most of my clientele are bright, sensitive women. It’s not as if a bunch of “diesel dykes” are busting into my place to prove how tough they are by getting their boobs punched through with needles.

Raelynn’s first volunteer was an achondroplastic dwarf in her 30s. Dressed in leather trousers and field boots, it was obvious that she was extremely popular with many in the group. At least three different women lifted her up and danced merrily around with her in their arms during the break, while numerous others bent down to kiss her on the cheeks or lips. As Raelynn described the nipple piercing she was about to perform, the volunteer peeled off her blouse and climbed up on a long-legged director’s chair. Clearly visible across her left breast in what appeared to be a recent cutting were the words “The bottom from Hell.” There was much laughter, expressions of encouragement, and joking about anticipated pain, needles, second doubts, and the like. Raelynn scrubbed the volunteer’s left breast and nipple with Hibiclens, applied a good coating of Betadine, and clamped a Pennington forcep on the nipple. The exact penetration and exit points for the needle were marked with a pen, and Raelynn quickly and expertly forced a needle through the nipple and into a small cork at the exit point. The forceps were removed, and a gold ring was inserted in the place of the needle. The only sign of pain from the volunteer was a short gasp as the needle pierced the nipple. As in the previous piercing procedures, there was a collective sigh of relief from the group, followed by applause and various congratulatory remarks. The volunteer climbed down from her perch and hugged Raelynn around the hips. Raelynn scooped her up, returned the hug, and kissed her.

By the time the first volunteer had put her blouse back on, the second volunteer had already removed her jeans and underpants and was sitting on the chair. In her mid 20s, this volunteer would receive a clitoris hood piercing and jewelry. During most of the procedure, she held a hand mirror over her pubic area to better monitor the procedure. Raelynn advised the client to close her eyes and visualize the process. The piercing and jewelry attachment was completed within 3 minutes, again with
the client showing minimal reaction to the actual piercing. As the volunteer pulled her tight jeans on, Raelynn reminded the group that it was important to wear loose-fitting clothes when getting a genital piercing.

The third volunteer, in her mid-20s, had spent the first half of the workshop curled up in the laps of three different women. She removed her cotton skirt and hopped onto the chair. Pantyless and clean-shaven, two labia rings and a clitoris hood ring were easily visible. Raelynn announced that this client would be getting a third labia ring today and with a theatrical leer, added, “And she has asked me to do it real-I-I slow and with a twist.” The audience responded with mock moaning and various teasing expressions. While Raelynn talked about genital piercing in general, the client sat spread-legged and observed with the hand mirror her present labia piercings and jewelry. Raelynn noted that a clamp was not usually needed for labia piercings and started the procedure. An audible intake of air and a slight tensing of the body were the only signs that the needle had pierced the flesh. The jewelry was quickly attached and the usual applause delivered.

I was unable to remain for the last piercing of the session, a nasal septum procedure through the nose of the first volunteer.

CUTTING

Raelynn was also the teacher for the workshop on cutting. She had arrived in the room an hour before the scheduled starting time to set up her equipment and a videocamera. As people entered the room, she greeted them, occasionally examining a piercing or cutting that she had apparently performed at a previous occasion. By the starting time, 43 people had arrived and there was the usual happy buzz of chatter. Three fourths of the group were women, most of whom were wearing leather. As in the other workshops, the majority of the group members were gay and lesbian. Couples held hands, snuggled, kissed, and engaged in animated conversations. Raelynn sat on a table with knees crossed and officially greeted everyone.
Although she welcomed the group by saying “Hello fellow blood sluts” and there was a button attached to her equipment case that read “I’m hungry for your blood,” she quickly stated she does her cutting for aesthetic reasons and not just for the joy of blood. Some of the audience responded in unison, “O-h-h, su-u-re!” She told the group she had been cutting for approximately 8 years and that she got her start while “caught up in some heavy SM scenes.”

During the 2½ hour workshop, she discussed where cuttings should be done on the body (“Fleshy areas like the butt, thighs, back—not on the neck, joints, places where there are veins”), cleanliness (“Cutting is a clean procedure, not a sterile one”), use of rubber gloves, and concern about AIDS and hepatitis, depth of cut, design, tools, and various other bits of information regarding her subject. She also distinguished between her style of cutting and the types of scarification and cicatrization done in several preliterate populations of the world.

After a short break, Rosie, a prearranged volunteer in her 40s, stripped to the waist to receive her cutting. She and Raelynn had decided earlier on a design that consisted of a pattern of stylized animal scales in a triangular shape. The design was large and would be cut into the upper left area of the back near the shoulder blade. Raelynn scrubbed Rosie’s back with the usual antiseptics, dried it off, and covered the area with stick deodorant to facilitate the transfer of the design. Using a No. 15 disposable scalpel (“Toss it after it’s been used”), she started her first incision. As she cut, she explained that cutting was not really a painful procedure because of the sharp scalpel and the shallow cuts. Someone in the group wondered aloud, “Is it bleeding yet?” to which someone else reported, “I certainly hope so!” Raelynn also urged would-be cutters to remember to start cutting at the bottom of the design so that the dripping blood would not wash away the uncut design. Both the cutter and the client were obviously moved by the procedure. Daubing away some blood, Raelynn told the group, “Once you start cutting someone, you get a very high, heady experience.” Rosie, her eyes closed and mouth sensuously open, emitted several soft
sighs during the 10-minute procedure. At one point, Rosie squeezed her companion’s hand and whispered, “This is intense, wonderfully intense.”

When the cutting was completed, Raelynn blotted the design several times to soak up the still bleeding incisions. Rosie was alerted to brace herself for the alcohol rinsings, which were done several times over the cutting. A towel around Rosie’s waist kept the alcohol from dribbling further down her body. Raelynn then ignited a fresh rinsing of alcohol with her cigarette lighter. A loud poof was heard, and a bluish flame danced across the entire left side of Rosie’s back. The flame was quickly doused as Raelynn announced, “Rosie asked me to do that because she’s into fire.” Referred to as “slash and burn” by Raelynn, the fire event was repeated two more times as the audience oohed and aahed. Finally, Raelynn rubbed black ink over the entire design and the wound was covered with a protective surgical wrap. In a few days, the excess ink would be scrubbed away, leaving the lines of the cutting colored black.

Kay, the second prearranged volunteer, wanted the fish cutting already on her back touched up. The original cutting had been done by Raelynn 9 months earlier, and although the design was still easily discernible, Kay liked the idea of having it redone. Raelynn prepared the area, unpackaged a new scalpel, and recut the design in less than 10 minutes. No ink was rubbed into the wound as Kay preferred the natural look.

Raelynn ended the workshop with a discussion of different body reactions to cutting, explaining that some people scarred nicely, well enough that there was no evidence of any cutting, whereas some keloided into large amorphous bumps.

While people were socializing after the session, I talked with a woman I recognized from earlier workshops. She told me Raelynn had pierced her labia, navel, and both nipples. She also compared Fakir Musafer and Jim Ward unfavorably with Raelynn:

Those guys are out on the edge! They’re an embarrassment. I mean, bones through the noses, the branding, the fleshhooks, the pain. You heard them—“If a client is in pain, you just keep on pushing and jabbing. It’ll be over before you know it.” Raelynn
is great because she is gentle and looks for any special aspects of your personality that will help her do a better piercing or cutting.

**MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE**

Why do certain people in American society involve themselves in nonmainstream body modification? Considering the physical pain and the stigma attached to the behavior, what is the lure? Seeking answers to why people involve themselves in a given behavior is the life blood of the social sciences, but I learned early in my fieldwork that introducing the "why" question was a turn-off for some people and as such threatened rapport. As one person explained to me,

I get tired of people asking me why I do it. They always get that dumb creaked-out look on their face when they see someone with a nose ring, or maybe they've heard that the office receptionist had her clit pierced and they can hardly wait to ask her why. Unless you've thought seriously of doing it, don't come around and ask why we do it.

Armed with this cautionary advice, I let people choose their own moment to express their thoughts on what motivated them. Fortunately, most of my informants volunteered their feelings without my having to ask them. Not surprising, there are no clear-cut, monolithic answers to the question. The reasons why people are motivated to have their bodies altered are extremely diverse as are the attempts of scholars to account for the behavior.¹³

The responses I received allowed me to construct several categories of individuals based on their stated motivation and rationale for being attracted to nonmainstream body modification.¹⁴ A brief analytical commentary follows each category.

**SEXUAL ENHANCEMENT**

A dick without a ring is like a sausage without spice... Oh yes, just the slightest tug on any jewelry I'm wearing puts me on cloud
nine... My labia piercings look good, but it’s my clit piercing that makes sex infinitely better... The weight of the two rings on my clit always puts me in the mood for sex... If all this stuff I’m wearing didn’t make fucking better, I wouldn’t be wearing it.

Sexual enhancement proved to be one of the most compelling reasons behind people’s desire to alter their bodies. Even though sexual enhancement is presented here as a discrete motive, it cut across and joined with all eight categories. Thus whatever the motivational category, there was typically a sexual interest lurking somewhere behind the individuals’ decisions to alter their bodies.

Although the high number of sadomasochists in the study population may be a skewing factor (one doesn’t have to be around SMers long before realizing that sex is an all-consuming interest), it is clear that sexual enhancement was also a primary motive for the “vanillas” (non-SMers). Indeed, a perusal of the “Letters to the Editor” section of Piercing Fans International Quarterly confirms the sexual enhancement motive, regardless of the letter writer’s sexual preference and practices. Vale and Juno’s (1989) Modern Primitives contains interviews with several piercers, branders, and burners, most of whom identify sex as a prominent motivating factor among their recipients.

Jim Ward remarked that 90% of modern people are inspired to get a genital piercing so as to enhance their enjoyment of sex. “This is the primary reason—it definitely takes sex up a higher octave” (Vale and Juno 1989, 161).

The most commonly expressed belief about the sexual value of genital piercings and erotic jewelry is that they provide the wearer constant stimulation. Sheree Rose, a Los Angeles photographer active in West Coast tattoo and piercing communities, offered her feelings on the subject in Vale and Juno’s (1989) Modern Primitives:

You feel stimulation all the time. Those of us who like vibrators find it’s incredible because you put the vibrator on the metal and the metal starts vibrating and—it just blows you away. (P. 110)

A married, heterosexual female in her mid-30s told me,
They feel wonderful. Just the feeling of that metal in my skin keeps me constantly aroused. It's like a little buzz in my body all the time.

In referring to the sexual value of his “ball weights” (not a piercing but stainless steel rings through which one pushes his scrotum so that the weight on the rings press down on the testicles), British body modifier Genesis P-Orridge observed in *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989),

once it's on, it feels like having your balls licked and sucked and being played with by someone's hand. . . . . If someone pulls up on your cock, this weight pulls down on your balls, so you get this incredible interplay of up-and-down. You tend to have a semi-hard-on all the time when you wear them. (P. 177)

In addition to the basic “turn on” of simply having the piercing and jewelry in place, myriad manipulations and tricks are available to resourceful individuals and their partners. For example, depending on the type of jewelry and its location, it may be tugged, stroked, rotated, pushed, or bedecked with sundry devices of either an ornamental or functional nature. Certain piercings and jewelry may be used as tethering points for bondage enthusiasts. A chain or cord connected to one or several pieces of piercing jewelry presents numerous erotic possibilities: A strategic chain tug during sex may intensify pleasure or delay orgasm; a continuous network of delicate chains may interconnect several piercings on an individual (e.g., ears, nipples, navel, and labia), thus maximizing the number of erogenous zones that may be stimulated with a single pull; in an SM scene, a chain or cord may be attached to a slave’s penis piercing or labia ring, allowing the master to “take the reins.”

There is much discussion (and often spirited disagreement) among genital piercers as to which partner derives benefit during intercourse from a given piercing. Ostensibly, the ampallang (horizontal piercing through the penis head) favors the insertee; the apadravya (similar to ampallang, but the piercing runs vertically through the penis head) is commonly believed to increase sensation for both partners during intercourse; the
Prince Albert (piercing through the urethra at the base of the penis head) is said to enhance pleasure for the wearer; labia and clitoris piercings are regarded as primarily beneficial to the wearer but also capable of intensifying a partner’s pleasure.

Some individuals opt for piercings and jewelry that temporarily prohibit sex. A ring through the foreskin or a ring connecting the labia majora are examples of contemporary piercings that prevent sexual intercourse. Although most “chastity” piercings in the United States today are done for fantasy and/or erotic reasons, Jim Ward’s exotic jewelry firm, Gauntlet, does a brisk business in manufacturing two types of rustless locks designed for fitting on genitalia: a purely decorative model called “The Imposter” and a functional version that requires a key. For the serious chastity-minded individual, a device called a Franey cage is available. The Franey cage involves two piercings, one at the base of the penis and the other through frenum, the effect of which even prohibits masturbation.

Piercing devotees believe that one’s imagination and resourcefulness are the only limitations to the various sexual pleasures that may be derived from piercing.

PAIN

Anything as good as this has got to hurt—that’s the icing on the cake . . . All my little baubles are pretty, but the real head trip is anticipating the delicious pain that got them there . . . . Of course it’s painful! Why else would Darcy want me to get pierced? . . . I look forward to the pain because it keeps my mind on the importance of what’s happening to my body.

It would be incorrect to conclude that the SMers as a group were lured to nonmainstream body modification solely because of the likelihood of pain. Indeed, many SMers do not regard pain as necessary for their masochistic experience.

After observing how the tattooeees in his study stoically accepted pain while receiving their tattoos, Sanders (1988b) concluded that it was difficult not to see the “ritualized initiatory aspects” of tattooing (see also St. Clair and Govenar 1981). The same logic may be extended to the nonmainstream body mod-
ifiers in my study. By identifying the body modification event as an initiatory event, or a rite of passage, the importance of pain in the process becomes readily evident.

Cross-cultural ethnographic literature has long recognized pain as an essential element in rites of passage (e.g., Brain 1979; Brown 1963; Ebin 1979; Gould 1968; Trigger 1969; Van Gennep 1960). Recognizing the process of inflicting and receiving pain in public as part and parcel of a rite of passage ceremony, Bilmes and Howard (1980) concluded that such ceremonies represent ingeniously constructed cultural dramas involving three classes of participants—inflictor, victim (initiate), and audience. Although Bilmes and Howard supported their argument with non-Western examples of ritual pain infliction, their rite-of-passage-as-cultural-drama thesis is particularly relevant to understanding the role of pain in body modification in contemporary United States. For example, all three classes of participants were evident in the piercing, branding, burning, and cutting events I observed. The inflictor reigned supreme during a given body modification drama, not only as the skilled practitioner who performed the modification but as a model representative of the cadre of people who already possess some form of nonmainstream modification. The victim (or initiate) was the sine qua non of each event, having decided to endure the pain in order to become incorporated into the aspired ranks of body modifiers. As in all rites of passage, the initiate’s comportment while undergoing pain is of paramount importance. The third class of participants, the audience, is also critical in the drama. Because a change of status frequently underlies a rite of passage ceremony, it is important that the drama be acknowledged by others. Sanders (1988b) observed that 69% of the tattooees in his study received their first tattoo with an audience of family or friends. Having witnesses enhances and validates one’s transformation into the desired status, either as a first-timer or a repeating enthusiast. As Wickland and Gollwitzer (1982) pointed out, the acquisition of identity requires social reality—in other words, an audience (also see Gollwitzer 1986).

Thus pain, like sexual enhancement, was an underlying theme that was never far from the minds of those involved in the
process. Although only a few individuals in the study stated that pain was a primary motive, everyone, SM or not, recognized its inevitability and importance, and greeted it with a gamut of emotions that ranged from eager anticipation to trembling fear, with most people simply registering a stoic acceptance of the fact.

AFFILIATION

It’s not that we’re sheep, getting pierced or cut just because everyone else is. I like to think it’s because we’re a very special group and we like doing something that sets us off from others . . . You see all the guys at the bar and you know they are pierced and tattooed, and it gives you a good feeling to know you’re one of them . . . Happiness is standing in line at a cafeteria and detecting that the straight-looking babe in front of you has her nipples pierced. I don’t really care what her sexual orientation is, I can relate to her.

Potential nonmainstream body modifiers frequently decide to alter their bodies because of a desire to identify themselves with a group of people they have deemed significantly important (for the importance of the tattoo as a mark of affiliation, see Sanders 1988b). Through the acquisition of a genital piercing or a brand for instance, individuals obtain a badge of admission—a visible record that affiliates them with others of similar interests and beliefs. Cross-culturally, clothing and hairstyles are the most obvious identifying mediums, and although important to the body modifiers in the study, neither carry the emotional wallop of the irreversible body mark. Whether one wishes to announce affiliation with the Hell’s Angels, the Army or Navy, a youth gang, or any specific group, such body marks visually proclaim a sense of camaraderie to others so marked.

Although affiliation with a desired group is typically a primary motivation for nonmainstream body modifiers, some individuals become involved because of the attendant disaffiliation from mainstream society. Similar to the tattooees in Sanders’s (1988b) study, these individuals revel in the stigmatic power of their
alterations. Genesis P-Orridge addressed this point in *Modern Primitives* (Vale and Juno 1989), noting

I think if you're honest, there is also the enjoyment of being separated from the despicable norm. I remember giggling and feeling an amused, almost smugness going up the escalator after having the first Prince Albert piercing done. . . . I enjoyed that mysterious separation from the everyday. (P. 178)

**AESTHETIC**

God made my nipples beautiful, but my piercings made them even more so . . . A brand on someone’s thigh is very attractive, but so is any kind of mark that shows the person likes to play with his body. . . . My cutting is like a piece of fine art . . . The brand I have now is on my back, but the next one I get will be on my arm so I can enjoy it all day.

The old adage “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is particularly relevant to this motive, as the vast majority of people in the study regarded their alterations as well as those of others as an extraordinarily appealing addition to their bodies. As one devotee explained while examining the newly installed white gold circular barbell on her labia:

Each time I get a piercing my boyfriend accuses me of gilding the lily, but I think my jewelry magically transforms a piece of flesh into a work of art.

Arnold Rubin, the editor of *Marks of Civilization* (1988), referred to body modification as “artistic transformation” and believed that the words “perfection” and “civilized” more accurately described the aesthetic quality and intentions of the phenomena than such popularly used negative terms as “deformation,” “mutilation,” and “disfigurement.”

Whether the alteration was a piercing, branding, cutting, or burn mark, everyone involved in the process regarded the new decoration as a piece of art. Thus the recipients, the practitioners, and the audience graced the particular embellishment with such aesthetically descriptive words as gorgeous, elegant, lovely, magnificent, stunning, delicate, and exquisite.
TRUST/LOYALTY

It meant a lot to me when Nathan fulfilled my wish that he get a Prince Albert. . . . Every slave I’ve had knew damn well he would have to prove his loyalty to me by getting pierced or branded. A good master would expect no less . . . I was always afraid to get pierced because I knew it would hurt. But when Mistress told me it would reflect my trust and love for her, I did it.

Trust and loyalty was an especially important motive for the SM body modifiers in the study. Because SM play ranges from gentle to rough, with some scenes becoming potentially life-threatening, there is constant talk about trust. No wonder, then, that the achievement of trust, and its companion, loyalty, are regarded by many SMers as the ultimate aphrodisiacs:

SM is the anniversary when your lover has a gold ring put through your labia (and no anesthesia); then she holds you and says you’re hers forever; and you’d do anything for her. (Miesen 1988, 37)

The irreversibility of a permanent body modification may be frightening to some people, but others find the prospects terribly appealing. Thus many couples, SM or non-SM, may regard a piercing or a branding as a love token, at once a test and a lasting symbol of trust and loyalty to each other. An interviewee expressed her feelings about the relationship between trust and her piercings this way:

The whole thing boils down to who do you trust? Do you think I trust my supervisor not to fire me if he learned about this stuff? Come on! My life-style can only exist on trust. When I find myself in a promising relationship, a mutual piercing with some distinctive jewelry pumps up the trust level.

RELIGIOUS/MYSTIC

This body is my sacred vessel and I love to adorn it . . . The overwhelming number of people I pierced or cut wanted it done for spiritual reasons . . . I believe in archetypes. My labia piercings put me in touch with my early Egyptian sisters . . . I like the way Fakir talks about mysticism and body play. That’s why I have him do all my piercings . . . Everything I do to my body is ritualistic.
It was not unusual to hear both the practitioners and the recipients of body alterations use religious/mystic reasons to account for their involvement in the process. Ganymede's description of his feelings about genital piercings is representative:

I know we are kin to those secret souls of so many cultures before. I know that this urge to pierce, to feel, to tattoo, to express with our very bodies in such primitive ways, is deep in the genetic memories, constant and strong as the tides. The chord it strikes resonates strongly for some of us, affecting our psyches, our spirits, our libidos. (Quoted in PFIQ, no. 3, 1989, at 31)

Fakir Musafer typically couches his “body play” activities in religious/mystic terms. Certainly, his flesh-skewering Sun Dance, his constant intertwining of permanent body alterations with talk of shamanic journeys, altered states, primal urges, Eastern religions, and so on serve as examples.

To many contemporary body modifiers, intentional body marks serve as a sacred chronicle to the individual's spiritual commitment. As Victor Turner (1987) aptly concluded,

It is clear that the body, whether clad or unclad, painted or unpainted, smooth or scarred, is never religiously neutral: it is always and everywhere a complex signifier of spirit, society, self, and cosmos. (Pp. 274-75)

SHOCK VALUE

I love it when they stare at me and their eyes scream “Deviant!” . . . Half the fun is walking down Powell with a big bone through my nose and watching those straight fuckers' jaws drop . . . Frankly, the biggest kick for me is watching my friends' faces when I casually tell them my cock's got a ring through it . . . Some of my so-called cool acquaintances try to look calm while we're talking, but I can tell they're blown away when I'm wearing my monster 4-gauge septum ring. I love it.

There were several opinions expressed regarding one's body modifications and the degree of shock they caused when viewed by others. No one professed that shock value was the primary motive for their involvement, but almost everyone had
an observation or story about the reaction their alterations caused in one person or another.

Sanders (1988b) noted that tattooeees gauged the reactions of strangers or casual associates in order to categorize them as compatible or noncompatible. Multiple piercers and branders use their body marks or piercings in a similar fashion.

Depending on the degree of association or the context of the encounter, some body modifiers were genuinely tickled when someone registered shock, whereas others were embarrassed. Among strangers, a few brandished their marks and accoutrements like a feisty porcupine, purposely inviting a gawk, leer, or odious comment. Yet in the company of friends or other body modifiers, someone with outlandish "jumbo jewelry" or a particularly salacious tattoo would garner admiring glances and appreciative comments.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken as a whole, the responses from my informants portray a group of individuals who for a variety of reasons enthusiastically involve themselves in nonmainstream body modification. They readily admit that their body modification interests are statistically outside the average range, but none transfer this conclusion to a statement regarding a deficiency in mental health. The medical literature on the topic presents a picture of deeply disturbed individuals engaging in self-mutilation for various psychopathological reasons (for an understanding of the medical interpretation of self-mutilation, see American Psychiatric Association 1987; Eckert 1977; Greilsheimer and Grover 1979; Pao 1969; Phillips and Muzaffer 1961; Tsunenari et al. 1981). This view is supported by the general nonparticipating public. My empirical observations lead me to disagree with the latter assessment. The overwhelming number of people in my study appear to be remarkably conventional sane individuals. Informed, educated, and employed in good jobs, they are functional and successful by social standards.
Given the motivations and rationale for body modification provided by the respondents, and their awareness of the ceremonial nature surrounding the bestowal and receiving of such nonmainstream alterations as branding, cutting, and genital piercing, it is possible to generate some conclusions regarding the phenomenon in contemporary United States. The worldwide practice of rites of passage, the rich body of ritual symbolism accompanying such rites, and the use of body ornamentation as a symbolic language provide the basis for such conclusions.

The individual and group dynamics of rites of passage in traditional non-Western cultures are strikingly similar to those I observed at body modification events in this study. In addition to Sanders’s (1988b) recognition of the ritualized initiatory aspects of tattooing in America, Musafer argued that some people are instinctively driven to undergo a rite of passage to the point that they will invent one if society does not provide one. He also stipulated that such ritual must be painful, bloody, and mark producing. The recognition of a need for an initiatory experience is one reason why the term “modern primitive” is popular with many contemporary American body modifiers.

Affiliation is one of the most important functions of a rite of passage. The unknown, untested individual needs to be introduced to the known quantity—the social group. In his seminal work on ritual and symbols among the Ndembu, Victor Turner (1976) observed that the Ndembu visualize ritual symbols as “blazes” or “landmarks,” “something that connects the unknown with the known” (p. 48). Turner also concluded:

One aspect of the process of ritual symbolization among the Ndembu is, therefore, to make visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot directly be perceived. (Pp. 49-50)

The body modifiers in my study, like Ndembu initiates, have determined the importance of making visible, audible, and tangible what may have been previously unperceived. In Turner’s reasoning, people getting a genital piercing would be using their bodies as symbolic conduits between their inner beings and the values, sentiments, and beliefs possessed by their desired
social group. For the purpose of affiliation with a desired social order, people surrender what is dearest to every human being: the body itself. When viewed this way, modification of the surface of the body is more than a visible badge of admission; it is also a primary connector of one’s psyche to one’s social group.

Turner’s belief that any complex or dominant symbol may stand for many things—“multivocality”—is also instructive in understanding why respondents in my study frequently provided several reasons for their involvement in body modification. For example, a clitoral piercing is a single dominant symbol, yet, as such, it carries with it a spectrum of referents—what Turner refers to as “significata.” A young woman with a newly installed gold lock on her labia may express a multiplicity of significata ranging from sexual enhancement to chastity, from aesthetics to shock value. Thus we see how a single body modification may announce that its possessor is in harmony with an entire system of beliefs and values.

In a similar vein, Terrence Turner (1969) concluded that body decorations have like functions in all societies. In his studies of the Northern Kayapo of Brazil, Turner observed that such body ornamentations and modifications as lip plugs, earplugs, penis sheaths, and body painting express a symbolic language that reveals information regarding a person’s social status, sex, and age. More profoundly, such body symbols “establish a channel of communication within the individual between the social and biological aspects of his personality” (p. 105, emphasis in original).

Anthony Seeger’s (1975) explanation of body ornamentation among the Suya of central Brazil has a firm base in the insights of both Victor Turner and Terrence Turner and confirms the important role that ritual symbolism plays in American non-mainstream body modification. Examining the human sensory faculties of hearing, speaking, and vision, Seeger sought to understand how the spectacular ornamentation of Suya ears and lips was related to the symbolic meaning that the society attached to each. Seeger’s observation that the body is “socialized” through such ornamentation agrees with the Victor Turner and Terrence Turner works cited above. In addition, Seeger’s
"organ importance" logic may be extended to the prominence that the body modifiers in my study placed on sexuality, as evidenced by their genital and nipple piercings. As surely as the Suya highlight the importance of hearing by wearing large wooden discs in their earlobes, so the genital piercers in contemporary American society celebrate their sexual potency by sporting a Prince Albert in the head of a penis or a silver heart on a labia piercing.

The number of contemporary Americans who have become involved with nonmainstream body modification is presently small. However, it is important to remember that the practices discussed in this article are a relatively new phenomenon in this culture. Each year, American society is bombarded with new body alterations, many of which are quickly assessed as unacceptable for one reason or another and fail to enter mainstream society. However, recent history also shows that some initially rejected alterations may take hold in a subculture and eventually catapult their way into the larger society. For example, ear piercing in American moved from nonmainstream to mainstream society in less than a decade and multiple ear piercing among both males and females is now relatively common. Lip and nose piercing is increasingly tolerated, but whether nipple piercing will follow suit remains to be seen.

A growing number of people in American culture believe that the penis and the clitoris are just as deserving of gilding as are earlobes. These individuals, like the style setters in earlier times who defied American society's strictures on body alteration by experimenting with such daring embellishments as lipstick, rouge, painted nails, eye makeup, and radical hairstyles, join human beings around the world in using their bodies to express a symbolic language that reveals their sentiments, dispositions, and desired alliances. Through adornment, the naked skin moves one from the biological world to the cultural world. As David Lévi-Strauss observed in Vale and Juno's (1989) book, The unmarked body is a raw, inarticulate, mute body. It is only when the body acquires the "Marks of Civilization" that it begins to communicate and becomes an active part of the social body. (P. 158)
APPENDIX
Piercing Descriptions

**Nipple:** Quite common among today's piercing fans. Nipple rings were purportedly worn by Roman centurians as a dress accessory for tethering their capes.

**Navel:** Not as common as nipple piercing. High rate of body rejection.

**Prince Albert:** Probably the most popular penis piercing. Named for Queen Victoria's consort, who allegedly had one. Piercing is through the urethra at the base of the penis head. Mild anesthetic recommended.

**Ampallang:** Indigenous to Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean. Piercing is horizontal through the penis head and above the urethra. Correct placement is critical. Anesthetic highly recommended.

**Dydoe:** Piercing is through both sides of the upper edge of the glans.

**Apadrayya:** Similar to the ampallang, but runs vertically through the head of the penis, or through the shaft behind the head. Not a common piercing.
Hafada: Sometimes called a "bag" piercing, the hafada is traced to puberty rites of various Arab groups in the Persian Gulf area. The piercing is inserted through the side of the scrotum between the testicle and the penis.

Frenum: Of European origin, this popular piercing is through the loose skin on the underside of the penis and immediately behind the head.

Guiche: Piercing is through the raphe perinei, the patch of skin between the scrotum and the anus. South Pacific origin.

Foreskin: Although originally a form of infibulation for Roman male slaves, today's foreskin piercing is usually regarded as a form of eroticism.

Labia: Originally a means of preserving a woman's chastity in Ethiopia, India, Rome, and other countries, labia piercing in contemporary United States is done for the enhancement, not restriction of intercourse. The piercing can be through the labia majora or labia minora.

Clitoris: Although not as common as labia piercing, clitoris piercing is increasing in popularity. The piercing may be either vertical or horizontal.

NOTES

1. Of course, most so-called “irreversible” body modifications are not truly so. Tattoos fade, scars may flatten, cutting may heal without scars, and piercings, if not tended, will close.

2. A Newsweek magazine article (January 7, 1991) recognized the current popularity of tattooing in the United States and noted, “It’s the most painful trend since whalebone corsets: tattooing, the art of the primitive and the outlaw, has been moving steadily into the fashion mainstream.” This same article also observed that in the past 20 years, the number of professional tattoo studios had jumped from 300 to 4,000.

3. With the exception of the professional body modifiers highlighted in this article (e.g., Jim Ward, Fakir Musafer, Raelynn Gallina, and others), all names of individuals are fictitious.

4. Interestingly, today many tattooed people regard piercing, branding, and scarification as repugnant. For example, the following warning was displayed prominently on the wall of a Northern California tattoo studio (it was apparently part of a registration form for a 1982 national tattoo convention):

This convention is for Tattoo Artists and Fans who care about the Tattoo Profession. Anyone breaking the following rules will be asked to leave with no refunds. Facial tattoos other than cosmetic (eyebrows, lines, etc.) not permitted. Piercing of the private parts of the anatomy not permitted to be shown at any time. Any facial piercing with bones, chains, etc. must be removed during entire convention.

5. I was accompanied at each workshop by Craig Moro, a Berkeley resident who had served several months as a volunteer for the San Francisco Sexual Information Switchboard (SIS), a call-in telephone service for people seeking sexual information.

6. The first occasion was a workshop on play piercing, a procedure that involves brief piercing with hypodermic or sewing needles, fishhooks, staples, and the like for fun and enjoyment and, unlike “permanent” piercing, is not done with the intention of installing some type of jewelry in the hole. After a lengthy introduction to the techniques, hygiene, and materials involved, the workshop leader divided audience volunteers into piercers and piercees. As a piercer, I selected an experienced partner to pierce, donned my rubber gloves, popped a hypodermic needle from its protective capsule using the recommended technique, and was within inches of making the jab when it suddenly occurred to me that I had some serious doubts about what I was doing. Even though the teacher was exquisitely clear on the need for care and safety during the “scene,” my congenital clumsiness and concern about the blood being splattered here and there caused me to back out as gracefully as possible at that late instant. Another volunteer happily replaced me, and I don’t believe my rapport was damaged by the event.

The second participation occurred during the workshop on playing with fire. Here it was simply a matter of overcoming my innate fear of being burned and joining the group of eager volunteers brushing each other with a lit small torch soaked in a 70% solution of isopropyl alcohol. To my surprise, the activity was enjoyable and caused some of my fellow volunteers to wonder if I was considering changing my sexual proclivities.
7. The intellect of many SMers who I interviewed and observed during my fieldwork was confirmed to me at one San Francisco workshop entitled "Playing with Fire." During the workshop, the instructor's knowledgeable discourse on the ignition points of various isopropyl alcohols was interrupted by several audience members who had extemporaneously launched into an animated conversation on such matters as flammability versus combustionability, chemical structures of alcohol and gasoline, and the medical definitions and implications of the various types of skin burns. After listening to the display a few moments, the instructor broke in by expressing her astonishment at the esoteric outpouring, only to be sharply reminded by one audience member, "There are no dumb SMers!"

8. Because SM practices are so varied, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory single definition of SM behavior. Charles Moser, a psychotherapist who specializes in SM clients and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on sadomasochism, uses five criteria to identify people involved in SM (in Truscott 1989): (1) appearance of dominance and submission, (2) role-playing, (3) consensuality, (4) sexual content, and (5) mutual definition (i.e., people involved recognize that what they are doing is different from the "norm"). Townsend (1983) suggested "a short list of characteristics" that he believed are present in most scenes that he would classify as SM: a dominant-submissive relationship, a giving and receiving of pain that is pleasurable to both parties, fantasy and role-playing, humiliation, fetish involvement, and the acting out of one or more ritualized interactions (bondage, flagellation, etc.).

SM does not have to involve pain. There are many people who prefer a gentler approach to what otherwise would be considered SM; thus one sees the letters "D and S" for "dominance and submission," or "B and D" for "bondage and discipline." For an extended discussion of the pain issue, see Baumeister (1988), Gebhard (1969), Reik (1957), and Weinberg (1987).

For a scholarly presentation of SM behavior, see Weinberg's (1987) review of recent sociological literature on sadomasochism in the United States. For a nonacademic but informative introduction to SM behavior, I recommend two popular books by insiders: Urban Aboriginals (Mains 1984) and The Leatherman's Handbook 2 (Townsend 1983). Because these sources are male oriented (very little academic work has appeared regarding female SM), the reader interested in female SM will find helpful the Sandmuto-pia Guardian and Dungeon Journal or Dungeonmaster magazine. Pat Califia has also written knowledgeably of the lesbian SM community (see Califia 1987).

Not surprising, the SM people I interviewed were infuriated with the standard psychological characterization of SM as aberrant behavior. For example, the DSM-III-R, the official diagnostic manual for the American Psychiatric Association, lists both sadism and masochism as psychosexual disorders.

9. Other Powerhouse workshops scheduled during my fieldwork period were Creative Bondage, Electrical Toys, Clothespins and Staples, Male Tit and Genitorture, Tit Play, Cock and Ball Torture, Whipping and Caning, Mummification, and Equestrian Restraints.

10. The church's liberal reputation was confirmed to me one sunny Saturday afternoon as our group huddled over a spread-legged woman undergoing a clitoris hood piercing to the accompaniment of an a cappella choir rehearsing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" in a downstairs room—a surrealistic scene that would not have escaped Van Gennep.
11. It as not unusual to hear SM people remark on whether a particular body modification or play technique would produce a genital orgasm or an equal thrill in the mind ("head orgasm") or both.

12. A distinction may be made between two different types of burning that I witnessed during my fieldwork with the SM body modifiers. One type, as described in the Musafer burning demonstration, was intended to leave a mark. Another type, "play burning," capitalizes on the classic SM goals of trust and the threat of pain and/or injury, but does so without leaving intentional burn marks. The ritual use of fire in SM scenes is not uncommon. The cross-cultural use of fire as a means of "cooking" a person symbolically was discussed by Lévi Strauss (1970). See also Tonkinson (1978) on the use of fire on Mardudjara initiates and Warner (1964) on fire jumping among the Ngoni.

13. It is this penchant for scholarly analysis, and concomitant diversity of conclusions that caused J. E. Cawte (1973) to describe the phenomenon of subincision (penis slitting, or "whistlecock") among certain Australian aborigines as "complexly over-determined" (p. 390).

14. Of course, some individuals fell into more than one category. The quoted statements in each category were selected to represent typical responses for that category. Ellipses ( . . . ) indicate a separate response from a different informant.

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