Tattoo
Bodies, Art, and Exchange in the Pacific and the West

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Beyond Modern Primitivism

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Ever since the needles have entered my skin and the ink has settled, the existential dimension of tattooing has been clear to me. Born in France, I moved to Moorea, in French Polynesia, aged 20. There I became a friend of Chime, a Marquesan tattoo artist. During my first year-long stay, Chime gave me three tattoos of Marquesan design. It was thirteen years, and several tattoos, later that I started to study the practice officially as an anthropologist. It was then that I became fully acquainted with the literature on tattoo milieux and with the academic debate regarding them. One of the main critiques of contemporary neo-tribal tattooing identifies this subculture under the rubric of 'modern primitive', and suggests that its practice reproduces old primitivist ideas. However, many of those involved today in body modification do not identify themselves in these terms and, although it is important to acknowledge that the wider spectrum of contemporary 'tribal' references does, almost inevitably, include neo-primitivist understandings, the milieux at present are too diverse to be reduced to what is, in fact, a reductionist critique. I argue that the 'modern primitive' label has been seized upon by commentators who have not considered how aptly it captures the contemporary practices, personal histories and motivations of the protagonists, and the ways that these have changed since the publication of the now notorious anthology Modern Primitives in 1989. This chapter attempts to rebut the critique, in particular through a consideration of the commodification of tattoos. I defend the contemporary movement from the charge that it is embedded above all in normative definitions of consumer culture.

Since the publication of Modern Primitives in 1989 by the alternative arts press Re/Search, there has been some discussion among social scientists regarding the identity and motivations of European and American individuals involved in the body modification movement. One of the main criticisms has been that such movements are involved in the facile idealization of the exotic 'Other'. In consequence, so the argument goes, they perpetuate classic primitivist assumptions. Modern primitives are, according to Klesse, a 'legacy of colonialism in late imperial culture'. It is easy to feel confused about the identity of 'modern primitives', considering the multiple
assigned by non-body modifier individuals, 'in the know', rather than used as a self-expression of identity.

Rather than being rigid and inflexible, individual and group identities have always been involved in a constant dialectical process involving the other, as both the Polynesian revival and the changing global tattoo community shows. 'Individual identity is located within a two-way social process, an interaction of "ego" and "other", inside and outside. It is in the meeting of internal and external definition that identity, whether collective or individual, is created.' Therefore, 'identification is never a unilateral process; at the very least there is always an audience.' In that sense, publications from the 'modern primitive' movement could be regarded as internal definition, while academic work scrutinizing them is an external definition.

I would argue, however, that both should be conceptualized as external to the multiple body modification networks and to the individuals involved in these networks. Different features of these external definitions will coincide or differ from the internal definition of the individuals involved in body modification practices, giving rise either to negative or positive confirmation of the perceived internal identity. Therefore, considering that identification processes are constant, social scientists should be careful not to assign the label 'modern primitive' to any individual involved in body modification and who refers in some way or another to 'tribalism' or to an urge to modify their bodies.

Another aspect of the 'modern primitive' publications and term is that they are ironic. There is an awareness that nobody can be a 'primitive',

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17 Fakir Musafar, 1959, from *Modern Primitives*. networks of which the tattoo community is formed. It seems that if there is such a thing as a 'modern primitive' movement, it is likely to be localized, on the west coast of the USA, and within the context of a network evolving around particular individuals such as Fakir Musafar. In London, home to a dynamic body modification community, I am still to find someone who would define her or himself as a 'modern primitive'. I am not suggesting that people in London were not inspired by the *Modern Primitives* publication, and subsequent work in that field, but that the identity marker 'modern primitive' seems to be almost always
hence the addition of 'modern' to the term, and that the association of these two terms collapses a popular dichotomy. These publications are important media of self-promotion and self-expression rather than academically sanctioned arguments. Many of the contributors to *Modern Primitives,* do not refer to themselves as 'modern primitives' but share some sensibilities with some aspects of the agenda of this particular network. Therefore caution should be applied when categorizing such networks, and one should be aware of the danger of objectifying the Other and denouncing such processes in the past while, at the same time, participating in current categorization of 'others'. Furthermore, I do not believe that irony invalidates personal narratives and embodied experiences as scholars such as Turner seem to imply. If the ironists always hold their views of the world in doubt, it is because, as Beck argues:

> Doubt . . . which not only serves science but now, applied reflexively, disrupts and destroys the latter's false and fragile clarities and pseudo-certainties, could become the standard for a new modernity which starts from the principles of precaution and reversibility. Contrary to a widespread mistake, doubt makes everything – science, knowledge, criticism and morality – possible once again, only different, a couple of sizes smaller, more tentative, personal, colourful and open to social learning. Hence it is also more curious, more open to things that are contrary, unsuspected and incompatible, and all this with the tolerance that is based in the ultimate final certainty of error.  

The term 'modern primitive' was coined by an individual called Fakir Musafar in the late 1970s to describe himself and a few other people who were following a similar personal path. Born in 1930, Fakir Musafar has been a pioneer in the practice of body modification, such as piercing and branding, and has been involved in modifying his body for the last 50 years. Now called 'the father of modern primitivism', Fakir Musafar spent a great time experimenting in secret. 'Unfortunately, I was driven into deep isolation and shame . . . for lack of any social sanction . . . I knew that if I let it be known what I felt and what I was doing, I would probably have been institution-alised.' This led him to find, in past and present painful rituals from around the world, some form of sanction. He found social sanction in the fact that body modification behaviours were deemed acceptable, and often desirable, in diverse human cultures. In a way, this yearning for social sanction of types of behaviour considered too deviant in mainstream Western society could be interpreted as a plea for inclusion rather than exclusion. Body modification, then, could be seen not as a rebellious act but a confirmation of one's alterity. This is also a form of resistance but not a conflictual one.

Resistance has often been understood as a binary opposite of domination. However, if power is dispersed, multiple and relational, as Foucault argues, then resistance must also be diffuse, decentered – an integral part of power rather than its opposite. As Rosenblatt points out, resistance does not mean activities that 'escape existing systems of meaning'; acts are inevitably formed in relation to the society from whence they come.
He argues that so-called ‘modern primitives’ position themselves in a conflictual opposition to capitalist consumption and Christianity when in fact their beliefs reflect certain Christian ideas about the relationship of the individual self to society. I would disagree with Rosenblatt’s assertion that modern primitives’ own view is necessarily simplistically conflictual; it can also be seen as a plea for an inclusion of alterity within mainstream society.
This plea could also be perceived as a demand, a demand that the boundaries of what is civilized and what is primitive be collapsed into an ironic, contrary and problematic statement. Nonetheless, it is true that the discourse of Fakir Musafar reifies some popular Western primitive conceptions that are grounded in colonial discourse and gaze, as Klesse argues. It is also true that a lot of tattoo artists and tattooed individuals do have fairly naïve and simplistic ideas about what tribal tattoos represent and what a Euro-American person becomes by taking them on. In that sense, Rosenblatt is right to argue that most references to primitive in the West have more to do with a perceived lost social sense of the self, of Euro-American individuals, than with any non-Western cultures. It is, however, also important to note that the Western concept of the primitive has sometimes been taken as an identity marker by colonized population themselves. Furthermore, the tattoo and body modification milieu is heterogeneous. There seems to be a gulf between an
individual who is getting a pseudo tribal tattoo in Europe, in the absence of much knowledge of its origins and meanings, and who probably holds a fairly naïve set of New Age motivations, and the smaller network of people who are more actively part of a genuinely cross-cultural community, and who are engaged in something different from consumerist appropriation.

In California in the early 1970s Fakir Musafar went public and gave a performance of ritual piercing in a tattoo convention. From then on, his experimentation with body modification influenced and inspired different sub-cultural networks, sado-masochism (S&M) and punk, for example. That Musafar chose to give his first public performance at an event organized by the tattoo community is indicative of the strength of the tattooing networks at that time. From the 1960s onwards, as Benson argues, the tattoo community went through great changes ‘increasing international communication, technical innovation and the work of a number of key individuals, many from art school backgrounds, radically transformed the possibilities of the medium.’ Through the 1980s an increasing interest developed among some tattoo artists for traditional tattoo designs from places where a tattoo tradition had been, or was still part of the cultural array of symbolic expressions. By the late 1980s the work of the Filipino-American tattoo artist Leo Zulueta, among a few others, became an inspiration worldwide in the development of such styles, and although he appears in the publication Modern Primitives, he does not refer to himself as one. His work does not entail an underlying desire to be the ‘Other’. Rather, he equates his research into traditional designs as conservation of an aesthetic tradition: ‘all the old men having “primitive”-style tattoos are dead. . . . The last man to have a back piece like mine, who was over ninety years old, passed away a couple of years ago. This is why I really feel strongly about preserving those ancient designs.’ He also acknowledges the possibility that the ‘original’ meanings of these designs may never be understood in the contemporary setting. His work does not, however, entail a conservation of the designs in the butterfly collector’s manner. They are preserved on their original medium, the human skin. It would also seem that for some tattooists, at least, the search is not for a mythical primitive ‘Other’ but for themselves. Leo Zulueta, for example, is half Filipino and grew up in Hawaii, suggesting perhaps that the inner motivations of body modifiers are complex, varied, and often rooted in personal cross-cultural biographies rather than mono-dimensional ones.

While the ‘neo-tribal/black work’ tattoo styles were developing momentum in North America and Europe, other tattoo communities were also involved in major evolutions. Tattooing was a prominent procedure throughout Polynesia, before its colonization. In French Polynesia, for example, Christian missions and the colonial authorities stopped the practice of tattooing for more than a century. Since the late 1970s, however, tattooing has been revived by Ma‘oli (native Polynesian) cultural agents (traditional dance troupes and other artists). It is now highly visible and a growing aspect of the local tourist industry. The traditional Tahitian and Marquesan designs that are tattooed today in French Polynesia are also important cultural and social identity markers (see Kuwahara, this volume).
During the last fifteen years, Ma'ohi tattoo artists have themselves been influenced and inspired by different cultural tattoo designs and styles, including Samoan and also North American and European 'black work'. Polynesian tattooists also became regular guests at tattoo conventions in North America and Europe. They forged strong relationships and created global networks with 'tribal' practitioners. A great influence throughout the 1990s was that of the late Paulo Sulu'ape from
Western Samoa, where there has been a continuity of practice throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods (see Mallon, this volume). Sulu'ape introduced many tattooists to traditional methods of tattooing and inspired many others by communicating the meanings and context of the Samoan designs he tattooed in many non-Samoan skins. In Tahiti, however, it is paradoxical that the forms and meanings of contemporary Ma'ohi tattoos are reconstructed from representations produced by explorers and colonial agents in the nineteenth century. In my view, 'authentic' Ma'ohi tattooists are therefore involved in a similar process of recontextualizing symbols as are the 'inauthentic' so-called modern primitives.

**Tattoos and Commodification**

At this point, I would like to explore the involvement of tattoos in consumer culture since it is often used as a challenge to their authenticity. Through this discussion, I intend to develop further some of the points raised in this introductory section. It has been argued that tattoos, and body modifications in general, 'do not escape commodification',¹⁴ that they 'can be purchased for money like other commodities'¹⁹ and should 'be interpreted in the context of an increasingly trendy aestheticization and commodification of ethnic difference'.²⁰ On the other hand, it has also been argued that body modifications 'differ from other "free-floating" commoditities, not only because of their status as permanent or "semi-permanent" modifications to the body, but also because of the necessary physicality of their production' and the pain that accompanies such practices.³² The permanent aspect of tattoos render them 'the ultimate' in anti-fashion.³¹ In other words, there are two views regarding tattoos and commodity. The first is that tattoos have been commoditized. Anyone can walk into a tattoo shop, choose a design, pay and come out with a new tattoo. The socio-cultural context of the design is irrelevant; it could be argued that the tattoo as a product is alienated. The second perspective considers tattoos to be potent anti-commodity symbols due to their non-exchangeability, their permanence and their personal nature. Although divergent, these two views do not contradict each other since they both focus on different times in the biography of a tattoo. There is a popular belief in Western culture that things are either commodities or are not. At one pole are things that 'represent the natural universe of commodities' and 'the opposite pole we place people, who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization'. However, this is a relatively recent dichotomy.

Works by Appadurai⁴ and Thomas⁵ emphasize, in their respective definitions of commodities, the importance of context. Appadurai suggests that 'commodity ... refers to things that, at a certain phase in their careers and in a particular context, meet the requirements of commodity candidacy'. The commodity candidacy here is understood to mean 'the standards and criteria that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context'. Anything, therefore, can become a commodity in the time of its existence as long as it meets the candidacy requirements of its context. When things do not meet the commodity candidacy, they become singular and have reached a different phase in their status. Thomas
presents commodities 'as objects, persons, or elements of persons, which are placed in a context in which they have exchange value and can be alienated. The alienation of a thing is its dissociation from producers, former users, or prior context. The alienability of things or persons is crucial to their status as commodities. If such dissociation cannot be attained, objects may become 'artefacts which tell a story'. Furthermore Kopytoff's definition of commodities emphasizes the importance of the discrete nature of the exchange. This is 'in order to stress that the primary and immediate purpose of the transaction is to obtain the counterpart value'. This is in contrast to gift exchanges where rules of relations of reciprocity should apply. At this point, however, it should be made clear that commodity exchange is not a feature of modern societies and gift exchange a feature of traditional societies. Both systems seem to exist, to varying degrees of popularity, in all human societies. The root of the commodity seems to lie in the action of exchange. Exchange, being at the root of human social life and a universal feature of it, makes commodities a universal aspect of culture. The commodity status is therefore a flexible one; a phase in a biography, and commoditization a 'process of becoming'. The commodity must be alienable from its origins and its exchange does not entail any further obligations or expectations. Moreover, there seems to be a constant conflictual relationship between the drive to extend the arena of commodity exchange, and widen the range of available commodity items, and a human need for the singularization of particular items or range of items. The former is inherent to the exchange technology, while the latter is motivated by individuality and culture.

The rise, in the nineteenth century, of new exchange technologies and of a materialist culture and new types of consumption, avid of products from all over the world, was instrumental to a rapid expansion of the process of commoditization and, in turn, to the capitalist system. Appadurai, quoting the work of Sombart, links this new type of consumption to the demands of the bourgeois and nobility classes for luxury goods. Luxuries should not be regarded as the opposite of necessities but rather as 'goods whose principal use is rhetorical and social, goods that are simply incarnated signs'. Luxuries are part of a particular register of consumption rather than a special class of things. Similarly, I would propose that tattoos are also part of a particular register of consumption. I do not want to argue that tattoos are luxury items reserved for the elites, but rather that they represent incarnated signs for marginal communities; a luxurious symbol of otherness.

There are five main attributes that should be displayed by incarnated signs as commodities. These are restriction to elites, complexity of acquisition, semiotic virtuosity, regulation by fashion, and a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality. While tattoos would not have to display all of these attributes to qualify as an incarnated sign involved in a particular register of consumption, I would argue that they do. Take, for example, the criterion of restriction to elites: although it is clear that they are not restricted to an elite per se, until recently their access was restricted to certain groups of people. Today, even if the restriction
seems have been removed to an extent, tattoos still have a certain degree of difficulty of access. To start with, tattoo artists' rates are not cheap. Another restriction can be the painful nature of the tattooing process, which may not appeal to all. And finally the prospective tattooee may consider the social restrictions imposed on future social interactions based on pre-conceptions of tattoos – for example, difficulty in finding employment. When the production technology of incarnated signs becomes more advanced and able to produce these articles in increased numbers and at a lower price, they become more accessible to anyone and therefore lose their restriction attribute. This shift, from different spheres of exchange value, seems to manifest itself as a shift from issues of exclusivity to issues of authenticity. I would like to propose that a similar shift has happened in the tattoo world.

Up to three decades ago, tattoos were mainly acquired by marginal groups. These were, in the West, soldiers, sailors, criminals and people involved in body modification, such as tattoo artists themselves. Most incarnated signs symbolized belonging to particular groups and/or the partaking of particular activities, for example, military regiments, port of calls, time in jail and allegiance to a pimp. Tattoos were the quasi-exclusivity of these groups. However, in the last fifteen years, tattoos have become part of popular culture. They are used in advertising campaigns to portray, among other things, sexual attractiveness. There has been an invasion, of the high streets in the West, of roses, dolphins, yin & yang, and other small tattoos. I would argue that the exclusivity of tattoos was threatened by a shift

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towards a perceived common, or more mainstream, sphere of exchange value. The shift from different spheres of exchange value moved, similarly to the one mentioned above, from issues of exclusivity to issues of authenticity, or rather here of authenticities. The first authenticity I am referring to has to do with authenticity of commitment. It could be argued that as small tattoos became more popular, people involved in the body modification movement had to engage more extensively with these embodied incarnated signs. Bigger tattoos and body-suits, as well as extensive piercings, became a way to authenticate this commitment, one sign of this exclusivity being tattoos that cannot be hidden by clothes. The second authenticity has to do with the origin and provenance of tattooing itself.

As I noted earlier, an important aspect of tattoo revival is the tribal and traditional style and the tattoo artists involved in this style. Designs used as tattoos can be found worldwide and, in the late 1970s and '80s, some Western
tattoo artists started to use some of these designs as inspirations (for the longevity of this process of exchange and innovation, see Mallon, this volume). However, the cultural context of such design was mainly unrelated to its use in tattoo shops; the designs were alienated and therefore commoditized. However, some individuals involved in this revival wanted artefacts, designs that told stories, rather than alienated commodities, and travelled to encounter and engage with the places of origin of some of these designs. Oceania was one of the instrumental locations of these encounters. Authenticity became a question of context. Context includes here both the place in which, and the person from whom, one will get a tribal or traditional tattoo. Similar designs tattooed in Cardiff by a home-based tattoo artist; in London by a renowned tribal tattoo artist; in Auckland by a Maori tattoo artist; and in Madrid at a tattoo convention by a mixed race Polynesian tattoo artist with traditional tools all have greatly different degrees of authenticity.

It has been argued that ‘traditional Maori . . . signs are woven into global consumerism, where they are endlessly modernised, producing a complex hybridisation of signs and messages’. Rather than equating the presence of Maori tattoos with a destructive modernization, however, the development of the ‘neo-tribal’, also called ‘black work’, can be perceived as another period in that style. By this I mean that there can be no exact replicas of something. However rigid and static a ritual, a style or a practice may be to the outside observer, however rooted in tradition they may seem, the enactment will always be a reinterpretation of the past and therefore different from it. There is a change from the use of these designs in their original context, but there is a certain continuity regarding their use as modes of embodied symbolic expressions in varied contexts.

It may be that these abstract designs, rather than the personal statement, attract many people, because the latter can be easily (mis)read. Furthermore, Phillips and Steiner have argued that a possible way to define it may reside ‘in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both individual and collective memories’. The authenticity of a tattoo similarly may reside in that moment when, inscribed in the body, it acquires the character and qualities of the individual, and collective perceptions of the context from which it arose. In that sense, tattoos can be read adequately only through the context of their creation and the discourse used to convey the personal narrative attached to them, but this context does not rely on some originary, ‘tribal’ or traditional source. Furthermore, I agree with Sullivan's conclusion that

bodily inscription is not so much a writing with or on the body (both of which assume a body-subject that pre-exists writing), but rather it is an infinite (re)writing and (re)reading of the body-subject in and through its relations with carnal sensuousity of the Other and the world, and with culturally and historically specific social fictions.

It could therefore be argued that tattoos are in fact constant changing processes that can be ‘read’ synchronically.
The absence of reciprocity relations, inherent in the discrete nature of commodity exchange, does not mean that such exchanges will be non-personal encounters. For example, as Thomas explains,\(^4^9\) in New Georgia ritual knowledge, and to an extent ritual agency, can be 'purchased' from specialists. The names of these specialists are important to the purchasers and it could be assumed that there was an ongoing particular relationship between the two. However, although 'the practice of ritual may often have involved reference to the source of knowledge, to the empowering authority, \ldots in such contexts the allusion to the name figures as authentication and validation, rather than as the expression of longer-term indebtedness'.\(^9^9\) This is similar to the way that some tattoos gain authenticity. The name of the tattoo artist is important but does not imply that there is any relationship beyond the particular time spent acquiring the tattoo. The nature of the exchange can vary, however, according to context. There are a number of differences in the nature of the exchange depending on the identities of prospective tattooed individuals and their relationship with the tattoo artist. The price of a tattoo is usually a negotiation, and may or may not involve money. Furthermore, tattoo artists' rates do not seem to be influenced greatly by market forces. Thus it could also be possible that tattooing exchanges are sometimes more akin to Firth's 'exchange by private treaty', a situation in which something like price is arrived at by some negotiated process other than the impersonal forces of supply and demand.\(^2^9\) Therefore, it seems that the nature of the exchange of tattoos can vary, depending on context and individual perceptions, from commodity exchange to gift exchange via exchange by private treaty.
Individual perceptions of the nature of the exchange have a great influence, I believe, on determining the status of a tattoo in the commodity spheres. When the prospective tattooed individual chooses a template design and does not engage in any further exchange relations with the tattoo artist, except by name for authentication purposes, the tattoo can be perceived as commoditized. According to this view, a tattoo is a commodity at the time of its exchange and becomes a singularized symbol once de commoditized. The fact that it cannot be exchanged could also classify it as a terminal commodity; that is, not intended for further exchange. However, one of the interesting aspects of the exchange of tattooing is that, most of the time, it is not directly the tattoo that is valued, but rather the time of the tattoo artist. It could be argued that what is bought is the skill and expertise of the artist and that therefore it is these that are commoditized rather than the tattoo itself. Furthermore, in a sense, the tattoo as an object does not exist until after the exchange: until it is finished. Up to that point it is only the Platonic form of a tattoo. Once finished, it will become a singular entity and therefore will move out of the commodity phase of its biography. In other words, the tattoo is only a commodity during its own process of becoming a singular entity — prior to its birth. None the less, many people will use the financial cost of a tattoo as one of its defining markers. There seems to be no doubt that exclusivity is symbolized through financial restriction. This view, in a sense, assigns to the singular tattoo an identity marker normally associated with commodities, price being a primary symbol of a discrete transaction. Thus, my point is that a tattoo is never really commoditized. On the one hand, it is the skill and time of the tattoo artists that are commoditized, not the tattoo itself. And on the other hand, it is sometimes given the identity of a commodity, as a symbol of exclusivity on financial grounds, when it has already become a singular entity.

Complex societies are prone to yearn for singularization. It is interesting to note that the rise in popularity of tattoos, and of body modifications in general, coincides with different expansions of the spheres of values and increased momentum towards wider commoditization/ commodification. It seems difficult to decide if this is mainly due to a shift in the practice of tattooing towards a different sphere of value or if it emanates from an attraction towards a symbol of embodied singularization. The Western perspective that polarizes people and things, the singular and the commodity, considers the human body to be the most singularized entity. Tattoos will therefore assume a particular place in that polarity. Furthermore, 'power often asserts itself symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects'. Therefore, individuals can symbolically assert their power by their attempts to singularize objects. Thus, tattoos could be perceived as a relevant medium for such symbolic expressions. None the less, there seems to be a paradox in the sense that, however singularized the personal information contained in a tattoo may be, the mainstream use of this particular media will tend to pull it away from its regime of consumption, and lessen its potency as a symbol of embodied singularization.
My analysis therefore leads me towards a view that tattoos themselves are not commodities. However, a phase of their biographies is commoditied: that is, in the process of becoming. What seems therefore to be engaged in the battle between commoditization and singularization is the nature of the exchange; in a sense tattooing rather than tattoos. Depending on the context and on the protagonists involved, and their respective perceptions of the nature of the exchange, tattooing could be classified either as commodity exchange, gift exchange or exchange by private treaty. This flexibility seems to enable the tattoo communities to deal with the popularity of the practice, and offers an array of possible relationships to choose from during complex encounters with a wide range of individuals. This is why, I feel, it is futile to describe ‘traditional’ tattoos as expressions of ‘thick/hot’ social relationships, and contemporary tattoos as only able to create, and stem from, ‘thin/cold’ ones.94

Furthermore, tattoos, and body modifications in general, demand a positive engagement with pain and suffering. This, I believe, indicates that a particular type of relationship may be forged through such experiences. This is because the ‘particularly un-negotiable sensation which is pain when involved in ritual, ‘acts to embed . . . a connection within a larger network of interpersonal ties . . . a network of relationships’95 These webs of relationships involve multidimensional connections among people, places and the social, cultural and historical narratives attached to them, and evolve within the symbolic, aesthetic and political spheres at play in the human condition.

In the Euro-American world, body modification is considered a matter of choice, but body modifications are only optional, in fact, as long as one does not want to belong to a body modification network. Within those networks, they arguably remain a form of initiation ritual.96 In this context, however, the transformation of the person has to do less with coming of age and more with an acceptance of personal alterities and a symbol of a ‘capacity for intense experience’.97 In this, pain is instrumental because its ‘social signification . . . is to give a sharper dimension to memory by welding the community through the same references’.98 If, further, as Jackson has argued,99 the world of constant pain cannot be understood by non-sufferers, because pain ‘shatters language’100 it could be that these group references exist at the pre-objective level of experience, before it is expressed through language. It can be argued that pain, because it is experienced through the body, can be conceived as an emotion and as such ‘contains much that is indeterminate and inchoate, [and so] it is often poorly served by everyday-world language’.101 This experience, which can be said to be shared beyond any narratives, could act as a perceived inter-subjectivity across culture and time. This could also account for the ‘primal urge’ to modify their bodies often cited by body modifiers.

The last point I would like to make is that there is an important aspect of the relationship between pain and tattoos that is clear in the popular adage: ‘pain is unavoidable, suffering is optional’. This is a demand not only for the tattooee to engage positively with the painful experience, but also, I believe, a more general demand
of a shift of values away from those preached by
a form of Protestant humanism that denies the
individual its capacity to suffer. Therefore, ‘body
modification initiates its adepts into a cruel
ritual system incommensurable with mainstream
religious practice’. It is, however, crucial to
understand that the point is not solely in the pain
but also, and in some ways more importantly, in
its relief. There is a power, innate to all pain, after
the relief, an initiatic dimension, a solicitation to
live more intensely the consciousness of existence
... [pain] gives a sense of life’s price ... [and]
is a radical principle of metamorphosis." This
seems to be a recurrent theme raised by my
informants. As Stephen, one of them, puts it:
‘I feel a lot more alive after each tattoo session.
It is almost like a doctor, but not to make you
better but to make you feel alive. This is why I
get tattooed more and more. It is the sensation
of pinching yourself to know if you are awake.’

Finally, I would like to suggest that, although
some body modifiers’ discourse expresses a kind
of ‘corporeal absolutism’, their tentative assertions
of symbolic power over their suffering
bodies may have the effect that ‘by controlling
this violence, by sculpting it with devotion at
the heart of the self, [human beings] subordinate
their condition rather than submit to it.’

This article has shown that the ironic term
‘modern primitive’ cannot be used as a blanket
identity marker to describe these global cross-
cultural networks. Through the discussion on
issues of commodification, I attempted to show
the complexity and heterogenous nature of the
global tattooing community. The level to which
such networks are involved in consumer culture
and society as a whole tend to imply that, at least
for some body modifiers, the agenda is inclusion
of their ‘alterity rather than simplistic rebellion.'