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## **Radical Body Modification: Bodies of Stories and Stories of Bodies**

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### **Summary**

This short essay plays with the notion that radical body modification is understood according to various types of stories. Popular normalizing stories that are rooted in Judeo-Christian religion, culture, and medicine often overlap to frame radical body modification in a negative light—such as a sign of immoral character, dangerousness, or underlying mental disturbance. However, these common interpretations are socially-constructed, political, and are based from a series of questionable assumptions. Body modification is common to all cultures, and there are many possible reasons why healthy, decent citizens may choose to modify their bodies in unusual ways.

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What might I share in few words about radical body modification that may be insightful and provocative to readers? Over the past half-decade I have come such a long way in my development. Indeed, my personal and social worlds have taken some unexpected twists and turns. In five short years my body has collected not only four tattoos, but also three large scarifications (one branding and two scalpel cuttings). There are numerous personal stories about each symbol and experience. However this little narrative happens to unfold, I hope readers will ponder the inextricable connections and political implications between bodies, social and personal worlds. That is my goal.

I look down at the large Aztec-type fire serpent (branding) that stretches across my left bicep. It was my first radical modification. Is there something in my childhood that influenced my choice for this permanent marking? Of course—no doubt there are numerous complex psychological, social and cultural forces that shaped this decision! I can recall being fascinated with Aztec civilization as a young child, and I spent hours reading about it. I was impressed that Aztecs apparently played a game similar to basketball—my favorite sport—but would use their hips instead of their hands to score goals. Far more amazing to me was that the result of the game determined who was sacrificed according to common religious practices. There are other stories regarding Aztec civilization that pertain to this body modification, too. Cultural sensitivity is an important ethical consideration, and I did not want to choose a symbol that would be blatantly disrespectful or demeaning. Granted, there are no clear ways around such issues.

Back to childhood—a time of adventure! I had a blast exploring the brush-covered hills near my home in rural Utah. My friends and I would go on short hikes, build crude huts and hunt for colorful rocks. Our world was interesting, magical and full of endless possibilities! One particular time we found and caught a harmless snake and took it back to town to surprise our parents and neighbors. After a showing off our new pet, we carefully let it loose in the hay-filled barn. My dad suggested it would reduce the number of mice there (the snake could be beneficial).

I glance again at the familiar serpent on my arm. The winding body connects its two heads, which move in opposite directions similar to a number line with an arrow at each end. The similarity with a common number line reminds me that my stories are embedded within a past and a future. The two heads of the serpent—one at each end of its body—suggest that opposing constructs (personal vs. professional, adult vs. child, male vs. female, “normal” vs. “deviant,” etc.) remain connected. One does not exist without the other, and they are very closely related. Even the serpent itself is a complicated symbol. In different cultures snakes have been associated with evil, deceit, and danger, but also healing, guardianship and wisdom.

The construction of this first radical modification was important. The thin, white lines of the serpent are made from scar tissue, and were formed in 2006 when I was finishing postdoctoral work at the University of Alberta. Originally, the conspicuous form was a charred black, created from the stinging tip of an electric pen heated to a temperature of several hundred degrees. The serpent quickly evolved to a swollen and painful red. Predictably, it has faded to its current color, and black tattoo ink around its exterior was added to reinforce its structure. There are many more stories that could be told about the tattooing around the scarred lines. Nevertheless, the serpent will remain with me for the rest of my life.

As an interdisciplinary social scientist, my research focused on topics involving leisure experience and deviance. While researching consensual sadomasochism and working with a highly respected Dominatrix, I was introduced to radical body modification practices. I gained new friends and enjoyed interesting experiences with them. My rich experiences in Canada had a profound impact, and I wanted a powerful and memorable experience to symbolize that wonderful period of growth and accomplishment. I purposely sought an intense body experience that would capture and symbolize growth, meaningful personal experiences and multiple stories that had become an important part of me. And, progress often requires pain.

Earlier while doing my doctoral work, I came to understand that human minds construct meaning of events and phenomena; that all knowledge remains situated within broader historical, cultural, social and political contexts; and that all accounts of knowledge are stories. There are various forms of stories, including scientific and religious ones, yet each is built from assumptions and situated within broader contexts. Stories refine meanings and each has potential value. However, all stories are limited, biased, and incomplete.

I came to realize many problems with popular dominant stories in western society that are purported to be objective and “correct.” These accounts often devalue and silence alternatives. People who conform to dominant, normalizing stories of bodies (including those that govern body appearance, gender, and sexuality) become privileged, while those who do not conform may be marginalized, dehumanized, and sometimes demonized. History is full of systematic oppression toward people whose bodies, according to popular accounts at the time, did not fit an established norm. A few centuries ago, tens of thousands of women in Europe were accused of being witches, based on widely accepted stories of bodies at the time, and were cruelly tortured and put to death. Besides gender, popular stories about bodies have discriminated against and devalued people according to race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

It might be tempting for some to argue that widespread oppression and discrimination in the past have been largely resolved, and that citizens are much more enlightened today. However, such thinking does not seem to be uncommon in any historical time period. People in every time period seem to be much more immersed in their social and cultural biases than they realize. The fire serpent reminds me that the same dominant stories of bodies that privilege some and harm others remain at work. Businesses today refuse to hire people with visible tattoos and piercings. Radical modifiers are assumed to be somehow psychopathological, untrustworthy, or lacking morality. At the same time dominant cultural stories welcome facelifts, Botox injections, altering gray hair (to a “natural” color), tummy tucks, and female breast augmentations. These widely accepted practices are often justified and standardized—the belief is that doctors are simply “fixing” bodies that are flawed and imperfect. Of course, the main issues here are about how and why certain bodies are judged as flawed or in need of being altered in the first place—and who decides these matters.

Dominant normalizing stories of bodies impact people of all ages and begin policing people very early in one’s life. There have been recent cases of elementary schoolchildren facing school suspension simply for having unconventional hairstyles or colors! So much for these schools professing a promotion of student creativity! Contrary to fearful adults who feel the need to police certain bodies, allowing kids to be creative or express a little creativity does not mean

all kids will express themselves with no limits. There are always boundaries, and there will always be plenty of people who will be comfortable with their own conformity.

There also have been horrific cases of dehumanization toward radical body modifiers. For example, in Amarillo, Texas, Brian “Sunshine” Deneke was repeatedly subjected to brutal violence by several high school classmates and eventually murdered—apparently because his body appearance was different (i.e., hair and clothing style, tattoos). The murder trial and surprisingly lenient verdict given to the perpetrator (who, according to many in the community, was “a good kid”) reflect further injustice rooted in dominant cultural stories. Since Deneke’s murder, significant efforts were made to improve local education concerning social diversity. More diversity education across America is needed.

My eyes wander back to the wise serpent. It reminds me that meanings are flexible and my research is important. It encourages more education and advocacy. It tells me that there continue to be injustices directed at people who simply prefer to express themselves creatively and a little differently. Finally, the powerful fire serpent teaches me that human lives are short, and that all people and their many stories should be heard, respected and appreciated.