

**‘Freak’? The Social Politics of Body Modification:  
Gender, Culture and Stigma.**

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## Introduction

From an early age, I remember begging my parents to let me pierce my ears. To my pre-adolescent mind, it seemed a kind of bejewelled initiation into maturity - a decidedly 'grown-up' act that would mark my transition into a 'big girl'; literally and metaphorically puncturing my childish self. My mother justified her denial of permission by telling me that little girls with earrings looked 'tacky' and 'common'. Despite my protestations, her rule was upheld, and it was not until I was thirteen that I was finally able to undergo the coveted procedure.

Fast forward five years: my eighteen year old self is embroiled in a furious row with my father, who has forbidden me from getting a tongue piercing. "You'll be part of a nasty class of people!" he warns me. True to petulant, teenage form, my conservative parents' objections to my burgeoning love of body art only spurs me on. I wish to be marked. Distinct. I want to be a part of that wickedly enticing, bohemian 'class of people' that supposedly exists on the margins - artful, independent and romantically exiled. Except now, I am not convinced that such descriptions or distinctions are entirely accurate.

At twenty-seven I walk into an enormous showroom for the Australian Body Art Expo. The biggest public exhibition of body art in the Southern Hemisphere. At this point I have amassed quite a collection of tattoos and piercings, and I am keen to meet some more of 'my tribe'. I am greatly disappointed to find an enormously commercialised, hyper-masculine, middle-class travesty of a gathering. Instead of riot grrls and performance artists, I found bikini-clad women astride motorbikes and one company advertising their services to the 'fraternity' of tattooists. This is not what I had hoped for. What went wrong?

This research is the result of many years of trying desperately to be 'unique', only to realise that there is no such thing. It is the amalgamation of academic curiosity, feminist frustration and a deep fascination for that which is abjected, ignored and obscured by mainstream culture. There already exists a wealth of information concerning the psychological reasons why an individual may wish to voluntarily undergo painful, permanent cosmetic alterations to their bodies – the work of Victoria Pitts (2003), Nikki Sullivan (2001:2009) and Michael Atkinson (2003) being of particular value in this instance. Continuing on from this work, it is my intention to understand how body modification is used as a method of social, gendered subversion and as a means of affirming subcultural identities - successfully or otherwise. It is here that there appears to be something of a gap in academic literature concerning body modification. Victoria Pitts writes about the potential for feminist re-evaluation of bodily norms, for 'queering' an essentialised social construct of the ideal cisgendered, heterosexual adult form (Pitts, 2003: 6-7). Teresa Winge speculates upon the significance of the deliberate 'Otherness' of subcultural body-modifiers, rejecting the banalities of a mainstream culture that has scorned them (Winge, 2012: 112). Sullivan (2001:2009) examines the tattooed body as the site of constantly changing meanings and communicative potential within a pathologising environment. Some approach the issue from more critical perspective: Margo De Mello (2000: 11) echoes Bourdieu in discussing the classed divide that determines the value of 'high' and 'low' body art (eg: Murdock, 2010) while Sweetman (1999) favours Baudrillard in describing the post-modern, hypertelic market of empty signifiers, the mindless trendiness, appropriation and commodification that has replaced that which was initially intended to be counter-cultural (Sweetman, 1999: 52) (See Tseelon, 1995). My research has lead me to believe that all of these theories are valid parts of one multi-faceted whole – and that it is not enough to simply state that body modifications are or are not inherently subversive, feminist or any other politically pithy label; but rather they

are forms of bodily communication imbued with potential and constantly evolving meanings. I am interested in whether or not that potential may still be subversive, or if the very concept of subversion has lost all meaning.

Therefore, in order to better ascertain what remains of the counter-cultural, queer, feminist potential of body modification, and how the experience of gender or sexuality-based social marginalisation or stigma may reinforce an individual's desire to modify themselves. I have formulated the following question, which will frame the focus of this project:

*“How does the role of the social 'Other' influence body modification practices?”*

In this context, the 'Other' refers to individuals ostracised by contemporary culture as a result of their non-normative lifestyle, appearance, gender or sexuality. Erving Goffman (1963: 4) used the term 'discredited', while Howard Becker (1963: 3) identified such 'deviant' individuals as 'Outsiders'. I will be using the term 'Other', as this not only denotes a degree of social marginalisation or exclusion, but is also indicative of a level of uncertainty; the social 'Other' represents more than just a social pariah, they function as the embodiment of that which is unknown, mistrusted or feared within a particular culture – often fetishised, but more frequently misrepresented. The 'Other' is everything that 'normal' people are not, and thus reaffirms what is normal (Thomas, 2012: 3)

Given that this research is located within feminist sociology and contemporary cultural studies concerning gender and the nature of social change – there are two sub-questions that will be addressed throughout the text: How does gendered and/or sexual stigma play a role in subcultural identity? And can body modification still be subversive?”

## **Locating the research: The sociology of the body and symbolic interactionism.**

This research sits at the intersection between queer-feminist sociology and cultural studies. Given the topic of this text, this is an ideal pairing of disciplines. It combines the empirical, pragmatic processes of studying human interaction and behaviour that sociology provides (Burawoy, 2005: 6-7) with the newer, pluralistic scope of social and political inquiry that the field of cultural studies covers (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 2010: 2). Feminist sociology specifically concerns the way in which gender and its associated assumptions, inequalities, abuses, behaviours and identities are implicated into systems of social, political and economic power, as well as the resultant implications of historic gendered inequalities (Lindsey, 2011:12). This specific area of sociology also intersects with LGBTI discourses and research, with a strong emphasis upon the intersectional nature of sexual and gendered oppression (Rosenberg & Howard, 2008), thus the use of the hyphenated sub-discipline.

This research exists within a social semiotic and symbolic interactionist frame of reference. Advocates of this form of embodied symbolic interactionism such as Goffman maintain that the semiotic, creative power is equally important as the discourses that it may generate, positing the body as an active, agentic and reflexive form that is consistently interacting with its environment, thus defining embodiment as a practical process of semiotic production (Waskul & Vaninni, 2006:10).

## **Literature**

In order to establish a stronger contextual framework in which to discuss the nature of embodied rebellion and marginal identities, it was first necessary to 'go back to the beginning'

as it were, and investigate the sociological roots of stigma, identity and the evolution of social norms and relationships. Erving Goffman's (1963) *On Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* has proven to be an invaluable resource – providing a thorough analysis of the way in which stigma interacts with identity and culture in order to create and maintain hierarchies of power and credibility, as well as being highly influential in the formation of personal and community identity.

Similarly, Howard Becker's (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* has been particularly useful in contextualising social 'othering' as a system of relationships, responses and actions. This text has allowed me to establish a sociological basis for discussing the nature of 'deviant' identity as it relates to subversion and counter-cultural activity.

Goffman and Becker's work provided the basis upon-which I could build up a sociological framework for my research, eventually applying more abstract theories of gender, embodiment and subcultural identity through the use of cultural critics such as Stanley Cohen (1972), Michel de Certeau (1984) and Judith Butler (1990). These authors provided the epistemological 'bridge' between classical sociology and the contemporary, specifically focussed work concerning subcultural style and identity (eg: Winge, 2012) and the politics of body modification communities. Sullivan (2001) explores the bio- discursive potential of tattoos, addressing the often polemic, essentialising debates surrounding the 'marked Other'.

Michael Atkinson's text *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of A Body Art* has a distinctly psychoanalytical flavour – exploring the nature of modified subcultural identities and motivations, while examining their place within a broader social context. This introspective work is complemented nicely by De Mello's *'Bodies of Inscription'* (2000), which offers more outwardly-focussed account of the working-class origins of American body modification practices, detailing the mainstream, middle-class appropriation of tattooing that has radically altered the visual narratives associated with what was once a liminal and stigmatised practice,



emphasising the distinctly classed and cultural divides within contemporary body modification subcultures (2000: 11). Victoria Pitts' (2003) *In the Flesh* has been a highly comprehensive text in terms of my current research; using a combination of respondent interviews and pre-existing Feminist and Queer literature to examine the more subjective, personal discourses surrounding contemporary body modification. These texts are not an exhaustive list of all literature concerning body modification, but they make up an important part of the central literature on the subject.

## **Methodology**

This thesis is largely the re-examination of existing academic literature to explore discourses of bodily expression and subversion. As discussed, I will be comparing the theories of classical sociologists and more contemporary cultural studies and feminist texts.

However, I am keen to create an adequate and fair representation of body modification practices and subcultures. Therefore, I have also included the responses of four individuals who consented to in-depth interviews about their modifications and experiences. The respondents were all over the age of eighteen, and were either employed or previously employed as body modifiers (piercers, tattoo artists, performers and so on) or have undertaken academic study on the subject – all were moderately to heavily modified. They were specifically chosen on account of their own experience and expertise within body modification subcultures, rather than their modified status alone. As stated, part of this thesis is based upon gathering qualitative data that emphasises

detail and depth of subcultural experience, rather than the amount of information gathered. The research respondents were contacted because of their knowledge of body modifications and its associated communities and discourses, and thus would be able to provide more useful information than simply interviewing subjects that happened to be modified. Indeed, as Neville (2005: 43) states, not all individuals that have body modifications may identify with a subculture. The commonality of procedures like tattooing and piercing within contemporary culture suggests that it is necessary to refer to industry professionals and others that have specialised experience and knowledge of body modification procedures and subcultures.

Once the primary research had been completed, I was able to compare the data to the pre-existing academic literature and thus formulate new ways of discussing subcultural identity and communities.

This small sample is not intended to be representative of all within body modification subcultures, but the responses of the individuals are still relevant. Indeed, Crouch and McKenzie (2006: 485) advocate the benefits of small sample groups in qualitative research, believing the understanding of a particular idea or experience being of a higher priority than simply collecting a large amount of information. This research will prioritise the ideas and concepts raised, rather than the commonality or frequency of experiences relayed, prioritising depth, rather than the scope of qualitative research (Crouch et al, 2006: 488-489). I am also acutely aware of the dangers of misrepresenting communities and practices that are already marginalised; Sullivan (2001:16) warns of the risk of pathologising modified individuals by framing their practices as indicative of inherent deviance, criminal inclinations or psychological sickness, while simultaneously

denying members of that particular subculture the opportunity to speak for themselves. This fear of misrepresentation is likely a contributing factor in the hesitancy of modified individuals (particularly professionals) to participate in academic research. This thesis is a small contribution to a rapidly emerging and important field of sociology and cultural studies that has significant potential for the development of new discourses and understandings of embodiment, gender and contemporary culture through the exploration of bodily inscription and subcultural identity. It is my intention for this thesis to function as a preliminary study on which to base future research, providing an initial examination of the literature, as well as a small sample of primary qualitative data. From here, future research projects will have a wider scope, with more respondents and will have a basis in grounded theory.

### **Structure of the Text**

This text is divided into five chapters:

Chapter One provides a brief explanation of the history of body modification practices within the Western World and set the parameters and definitions for the text to come. This will lead to a discussion of the changing rhetoric and cultural narratives surrounding tattoos, piercings and other forms of body art and how they have interacted with the process of cultural and social 'Othering'. This chapter will also discuss social definitions of body modifications and the seemingly arbitrary distinctions that are made between different ways of altering the human form.

Chapter Two concerns the nature of social stigma and identity. This part of the project will

address the issues of social exclusion and marginalisation, and how they influence the ways in which both individuals and communities navigate their sense of self, and associated forms of bodily expression. This chapter investigates how body modification may be used as a means of solidifying 'freak' identity, community solidarity and the redefinition of aesthetic and moral values through the use of non-normative body art and alterations.

Chapter Three concerns the subject of deviance and gender as they are represented through the medium of body modification. This chapter examines 'deviance' as a series of social relationships, reclaimed identities and an active form of social subversion, as well as the ways in which body modification has been utilised to explore and celebrate gender non-conformity and the discursive, 'monstrous' forms that it creates.

Chapter Four addresses the issue of subculture and the concept of the 'carnavalesque' describing the phenomena of supposedly counter-cultural communities that continue to perpetuate heteronormative, gendered, racial or classed norms, despite claiming to reject the prejudices of 'the mainstream'. This chapter discusses many of the deeply problematic behaviours that erode the subversive potential of body modification subcultures, cultural appropriation and the freak/norm binary.

Chapter Five continues on from Chapter Four by discussing the nature of subversion itself; the effects of commodification, essentialised identity and the subjective, elusive nature of social change and de-construction. Functioning as a summary of previous chapters, this last section of the text details a possible alternative to the reactionary, binary nature of the broken carnival – concluding instead with a series of propositions concerning the potential of risk, exploration and transcendence.

This research is by no means an attempt to formulate objective or definitive ideas concerning the socio-political nature of body modification, nor is it intended to represent the entirety of what is an enormously varied collection of subcultures and people. Rather, it is a preliminary study that will ideally act as a stepping-stone into further academic investigation into the nature of subcultural identity and gendered subversion. Instead of reaching an objective, finite conclusion that provides absolute answers to the questions raised by this research, or simply emphasising dichotomous, oppositional tactics and discourses, I seek to gain greater insight into the ways in which contemporary body modification subcultures and practices exist as a conduit for social meaning and change, as well as potential arbiters of oppression. The end goal of this research is not to arrive at one singular conclusion, but rather to contribute an on-going academic dialogue concerning the way that we understand counter-cultural bodies and actions.

## **Chapter one:**

### **The Modified Body and the anatomy of the 'Freak'**

Body modification is hardly a new phenomenon. From the intricate swirls of Maori Tā Moko, to the elongated necks of the Burmese Kayan people – almost every human culture has engaged in some manner of deliberate alteration of the physical form for cultural, aesthetic, sexual and spiritual reasons. Yet, there are still many within the Westernised world that are inclined to think of body modification as ostentatious or barbaric perforations of the flesh; indicating a primitive or anti-social nature that is contrary to all that is civilised and reasonable (Werner, 2008:15). Here we betray the presence of our cultural bias. What is the distinction between a stretched lip of a Mursi tribeswoman, and the plump, collagen-filled lips of a television presenter? How many tonnes of body fat or unwanted skin and cartilage are shed every year under the knife of the plastic surgeon? How many babies are circumcised at birth? We draw such stark distinctions between ourselves and 'Others' whose marked bodies provoke such wonder, that it often becomes necessary to be reminded of how arbitrary those bodily boundaries actually are.

When we begin to consider the ways in which social and cultural narratives surrounding our bodies (and the alterations that we make to them) change and adapt, it becomes harder and harder to draw any real or meaningful barriers between 'us' and those that we designate as 'them'. As this thesis intends to show, the definition of what a 'normal' human being should look like is entirely ephemeral, being largely embedded in social and cultural context (Randall & Polhemus, 1996: 2). This chapter provides a brief history of body modification within a Western context and an analysis of its various social and cultural implications, including the ways in which 'marked' bodies and their associated discourses interact with societal norms

and hierarchies of power. It aims to provide a context and parameters for the discussion to follow, as well as emphasising the ways in which the ever-changing narratives associated with body modification and 'non-normative' identity interact with hierarchies of classed, gendered and racial power. This will include an overview of the colonial roots of the (re)introduction of body modification into the Western world and its evolution through the public spectacle of the freak-show to its adoption by counter-cultural under-classes during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It details the complex process of social 'Othering' as both an autonomous identity, and an enforced, stigmatising label. The end of the chapter will discuss how recent appropriation of body modification by fashion and media industries has changed the way in which subversive or 'freak' identity has been altered, and what this means for those who remain as 'Other' within contemporary culture.

To begin, it is first necessary to describe what is meant by the term 'body modification'. Providing a precise definition of such a broad range of practices is difficult, as it requires the establishment of categories or exclusions that are arbitrarily constructed, given the subjective nature of bodily adornment and alteration. For example, we might easily argue that the removal of body hair or muscular sculpting through weight-training - although certainly forms of body modification - are distinct from other modifying procedures such as tattooing, or scarification because their commonality normalises them, thus lending a status of near-unanimous social acceptability (Atkinson, 2003: 25). Perhaps as an unavoidable side-effect of attempting to classify practices whose meanings are constantly in flux, this places an objective meaning upon the term 'normal'. Commonality must not be confused with normality, and it is with recognition of this that Atkinson's (2003: 26) method of categorisation of body modification procedures has been utilised throughout this text.

Atkinson provides a useful means of categorising the different 'types' of body modifications according to their level of permanence, their invasiveness as well as their purpose and associated cultural meanings. Following Atkinson, this research concerns the kinds of modifications defined as *redesigning body projects*; modifications that literally transform, reshape or reconstruct the body in permanent and semi-permanent ways. This does include some medically necessitated procedures (such as limb amputation or the insertion of a pace-maker), but those that are done for aesthetic (rather than life-preserving) reasons are characterised as outward displays of an individual's creativity, experience, belonging or political affirmations (Atkinson, 2003: 26-27). These modifications are deliberately differentiated from *adapting body* procedures such as breast enhancement, botox injections or laser hair removal in that redesigning body projects are not typically utilised as a means of complying with dominant social standards of physical appearance or signs of health. Instead, when undertaken voluntarily, they are intended as a means of dramatic reinvention and often artistic endeavours (Atkinson, 2003: 27). Given that this research does not concern the use of adapting body projects, this text will henceforth use the term 'body modification' to refer to the following procedures: Piercing, tattooing, scarification, branding, subcutaneous or subdermal implants (not including breast implants or medical prosthetics), non-normative reshaping of body parts (.i.e: ear-pointing) filing or reshaping teeth, bisection or 'splitting' of body parts, gauged or stretched piercings ('plugs' or 'tunnels') and non-permanent performative modifications such as 'play piercings', suturing of the eyes, lips or labia, suspension and hook-swinging (which both utilise the piercing and stretching of the skin in order to suspend the body). These specific parameters were influenced both by Atkinson's provision of sociological distinctions between forms of body modifications, but also by the limits of this research. There is a great deal more opportunity for academic exploration into other forms of body modification that is relevant to this research, but cannot be adequately or



appropriately addressed within the confines of this thesis.

## **A Brief History of Body Modification**

The Pacific voyages of Captain Cook were largely responsible for re-introducing tattooing to the colonial West, returning to Britain with reports of tattooed natives – accompanied by newly-inked crew members. Cook is said to be responsible for the adoption of the word 'tattoo' (from the Tahitian word '*tatau*') into the European lexicon – but the imperialist legacy of his colonial expeditions had significantly greater impact upon the nature and conception of tattoos – and, by extension – all other forms of non-Western body modification (Werner, 2008: 14). From the time of the enlightenment, Europeans held a largely essentialist, dualistic view of the human body, viewing it as a base and earth-bound entity, distinct from the 'transcendent', 'rational' mind (Pitts, 2003: 26). Thus, the philosophy of the so-called 'Age of Reason' combined with the racialised descriptions of tattoos utilised by Cook and his contemporaries resulted in discourses that perceived the act of tattooing as a disturbing cultural metaphor: the 'tawny, exotic savages' (Werner, 2008: 15) with their marked skin came to exemplify an uncivilised 'Other' that served as a juxtaposition for the 'cultured' Europeans, proof of their own cultural superiority that helped justify their imperialist expansions (Werner, 2008:17). Thus, tattoos became synonymous with the unenlightened, the savage and the strange and began to figure as curious demarcations of stigmatised 'Outsider' identity that has lingered long into modern discourses:

By introducing the term [tattooing] within an explicit context of European expansion and exploration, Cook was responsible for embedding the European use of the term within the discourse of colonialism. Within this discourse, tattooing and, perhaps more

significantly, tattooed people took on meaning that was far more complicated than just a suggestion that the person in question had permanently marked skin. Though it was not immediate, and Cook was not single-handedly responsible for the meaning that was to emerge, 'tattoo' quite quickly came to denote primitivity, savagery and, more generally, Otherness (Werner, 2008: 14).

It is this 'Otherness' that was to carry through into the circus side-show. One of the first major manifestations of tattooing and body modification in modern Western culture, the deliberately modified human form was publicly exhibited as a sign of freakishness as a part of a range of other marginal human curiosities (conjoined twins, bearded ladies etc.) (De Mello, 2000: 52). The dual role of the side-show as an exploitative spectacle, as well as a community and sanctuary for society's outcasts provides an interesting metaphor for the Janus-faced nature of stigmatised subcultures and identities (Russo, 1994: 91) (see also Chapter Four). While it is certainly true that there were many 'freaks' within circus side-shows that found a strong sense of belonging and acceptance amongst their similarly 'abnormal' comrades (as well as a livelihood) , the display of non-normative bodies to the curious, scrutinising public is eerily reminiscent of the exhibition of the tattooed bodies of kidnapped Pacific Islanders centuries earlier – a deliberate portrayal of the alien and abjected for the entertainment of the 'normal' majority (Russo, 1994: 80-81). In fact, the use of tattooed Westerners within side-shows was the result of a growing distaste for the exhibition of captured (and almost certainly enslaved) natives (De Mello, 2000: 53). Even after the ownership of slaves was officially outlawed in Europe and the US, it was common practice for 'freakish', deformed or disabled children to be sold to freak-shows, to be literally owned as money-making exhibits. The public demand for such coercive endeavours indicates an inextricable link between the 'freak' and the 'cultural Other'; shown tamed, domesticated and ultimately stripped of their threatening, disruptive

potential, they reassured audiences not only of their safety, but reaffirmed their 'normality' (Russo, 1994: 79-80).

Inevitably, the popularity of the tattooed side-show freak (particularly of tattooed women) led to a decline in the shock-value of tattoos. Their exotic status was diminished, and the demographic of inked populations shifted. Tattoos came more and more to represent classed rather than racial boundaries, becoming almost entirely worn by labourers, sailors and convicts (Atkinson, 2003: 36). As the divide between rich and poor increased during the depression of the 1930's, tattoos maintained their status and gained dual meaning: they came to denote the increasingly marginalised and stigmatised members of society, while simultaneously imbuing those that wore them with a mark of under-dog pride and solidarity. The 'exotic' allure of inked (and therefore, 'Othered') skin was replaced with a far more patriotic set of iconography (especially within an American context), typified by crude imagery and hyper-masculinity that affirmed pseudo 'tough-guy' dispositions and characterised the rejection of upper-class niceties (Atkinson, 2003: 36).

The emergence of counter-cultural identities during the 1960's ushered in a re-negotiation of sexual, gendered and cultural identities, with many seeking to reject the conservatism of previous generations by voluntarily adopting alternative lifestyles and the intentionally 'Othered' moniker that came with it. 'Freaking out' gained new, subversive meaning, channelling the rage and frustration of disenfranchised youth, and providing new opportunities to navigate one's own apparent 'Otherness' (Russo, 1994: 76). However, for those that were already stigmatised by mainstream society – non-white people, the disabled, non-heterosexual, transgendered or intersexed individuals - the voluntary adoption of 'freakishness' presented a problematic situation. The idealisation of the 'Other' did little to

change the systematic disempowerment that had already designated non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered and non-able-bodied individuals to the unwanted status of 'Outsider'. Thus, the relationship between 'freak' and 'norm' was, and remains a largely tenuous one (Russo, 1994:76). So, by extension it became necessary for those that genuinely wished to express their disdain for or rejection of mainstream norms to adopt ever new, and ever more unusual means of representing their outsider identities.

The advent of the feminist and GLBTI rights movements coincided with a renaissance of body modification practices. For many that felt disconnected or maligned by dominant society, the deliberate and non-normative marking of their physical selves represented more than just a dermatological curio; it became a way of re-negotiating bodily boundaries and meanings, of actualising and affirming 'Othered' identity through the discursive canvas of the skin (Pitts, 2003: 87-88). This expression of identity through body modification held particular significance for those that felt restricted by the narrow confines of heteronormative, essentialist bodily norms. The intentional, voluntary marking of the human form for aesthetic, sexual or spiritual reasons violated the Western ideal of the unmarked, unblemished, uniform body. The body came to represent a site of change, signalling the transcendence of gendered and cultural boundaries. For women seeking a means of escaping the oppressive male-defined edicts of passive, feminine beauty, the process of deliberately piercing, cutting or inking the skin (supposedly reserved for the desiring male-gaze) became an act of rebellion (Thomas, 2012: 7). The permanence of 'unfeminine' bodily adornments like tattoos or multiple, non-normative piercings contradicted ideas of conventional, 'natural' femininity. The intrusive and visible marks worked as an aesthetic disruption of male-defined standards of idealised womanhood, while the almost-ritualistic process of receiving these marks was often regarded as a means of reclaiming the female form from patriarchal control as a form of healing from

sexual abuse, rape and gendered coercion (Atkinson, 2003: 43-44).

For similar reasons, the use of tattooing, piercing, scarification and performative 'play piercings' have also been extensively utilised within Queer and Fetish communities as a means of exploring sexualities and sensations deemed 'perverse' or forbidden by a heteronormative and often sexually repressive mainstream culture. For those that do not wish to conform to bodily norms embedded in an essentialising, hegemonic culture of gendered and normative sexuality, the deliberate, painful and permanent marking of the human body may function as a means of defiance, transformation and solidarity (Winge, 2000: 5).

Body modifications have largely been constructed (by modified and unmodified individuals) as representing some form of disruption: as dissent, deviation; as a means of solidifying or affirming identity and experience using the body as a discursive canvas (Atkinson, 2003: 36). This defiant 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959: 17) functions as a form of creative expression, an artistic endeavour for those that wish to demonstrate their difference. However, the way in which modified individuals are perceived by a largely non-modified public also has the potential to evoke negative societal discourses concerning their bearers' motivations and psychological health. Sullivan (2009: 131) illustrates the ways in which tattooed individuals are frequently pathologised by non-modified academics or medical professionals (eg: Edgerton & Dingman, 1963), describing them as 'dermal diagnosticians' that attribute the deliberate marking of the physical form to an inherently damaged or deviant personality. This denial of personal agency may be regarded as a form of cultural 'Othering' that is reinforced by the authoritative and respectable veneer of scientific professionalism. Although many body modifiers do intend to mark themselves as distinct from the mainstream, the dismissal of body modification as symptomatic of moral degeneracy and social inferiority is a deeply

condescending means of actively misrepresenting dissenting acts and further silencing those that are potentially already marginalised for reasons other than their aesthetic differences (Thomas, 2012: 5).

It is not solely the pathologising attitudes of Sullivan's 'dermal diagnosticians' that effect the ways in which body modifications are perceived by dominant culture. The mainstream appropriation of tattooing and piercing has irreversibly changed the narrative of what was once a marginal and divisive practice. De Mello (2000) describes the process by which the mainstream appropriation and commodification of subcultural practices (in this case, tattooing and piercing) affectively alters its narrative meanings. By transforming an act that had previously been solely associated with 'deviant' identity into a trendy fad, two things occur: firstly, the meanings associated with that act become neutralised and artificially imbued with 'middle-class' values that, while maintaining the appearance of 'edginess', represent none of the counter-cultural significance of their original form. Secondly, (and consequently) by altering these signifiers (and their associated meanings), it becomes possible to nullify and even erase the meanings and identities of the culture from which they originated: frequently white-washing any potentially subversive or 'untidy' elements that may threaten or contradict the normative status quo (De Mello, 2000: 11).

The 'exotification' of body modification is not new, however, the way in which we understand the contemporary significance of these distinctive marks must be re-examined. While the process of 'Othering' a modified body was initially a social impulse to weaken and control the 'cultural outsider' (Werner, 2008: 14), the implications of the present, market-driven context must also be taken into consideration. Instead of tattooed bodies being displayed as uncivilised or alien, the recent incarnation of 'cultural Othering' is one deeply ensconced in

consumer culture. Rather than providing a juxtaposition to 'proper' society, the sanitised, socially acceptable 'freak' has now become the 'new black' - a trendy, collection of jumbled aesthetics that have been largely divorced from their prior significance (Sweetman, 1999: 53). What was once the realm of the circus-freak, the working-class man, and the sexual rebel may now be safely and fashionably worn upon the skin of the least marginalised or oppressed; provided they have money and a reasonable tolerance for pain. One interview respondent felt particularly strongly about the changed culture of body modifications:

*...the whole thing with tattooing, it used to be a rebellion thing saying 'we don't want to be a part of this society' that forces us to be, and acting this kind of way – we don't want to conform. Nowadays, everybody conforms. And tattooing is just another thing that has been appropriated by the machine so to speak – you know. Mainstream...[.] So nowadays people look at someone else's beautiful tattoo and they'll say 'I want something like that..' So you end up doing – I don't know how many owls I've done in the last couple of months for example. They seem to be really popular – everyone likes owls right now. It's kinda like a fashion. – ('S', 47).*

Here we are faced with something of a conundrum: does this mean that all modern body modifications are now wholly without social significance or subversive potential, given that they exist within a globalised, consumer culture? I suggest that the situation is more complex. Theorists such as De Mello are arguably right to be concerned at the appropriation of previously significant subcultural signifiers, however, the widespread adoption of practices once considered marginal may be an indication of shifting cultural attitudes towards 'non-normative' bodies, to the extent that the mainstream perceptions of what constitutes a 'normal'

body have altered considerably since the Enlightenment. Therefore, it may not be wholly unreasonable to suggest that this 'normalisation' is merely a part of an ongoing social process – an evolution of our understanding of what constitutes an appropriate and acceptable means of bodily expression. One may mourn the loss of counter-cultural signifiers, but is it not also important to recognise the cultural change that has accompanied it? What use is counter-cultural intent if it exists solely to occupy the margins of society, rather than to instigate change? (Mouffe, 1995: 265).

There is merit in both responses to the normalisation and fashionable-commodification of body-modification. But it is not the purpose of this thesis to argue specifically for one attitude towards normalisation over the other. Rather, I focus upon those that do not wish to be 'normal', who value their 'Othered' status within the modern marketplace of aesthetics. Maintaining a continued state of counter-cultural intent requires a constant re-evaluation of the ways in which modified bodies are marked and displayed, obliging modifiers to look further afield for inspiration, and to work harder to challenge fashionable (yet still socially 'safe') trends (Atkinson & Young, 2001: 136). The rise in popularity of sclera and facial tattooing, branding and bead implants as well as procedures such as tongue-splitting or bisection of the penis may be attributed to the need to remain subversive in the face of consumer-driven appropriation of older techniques (De Mello, 2000: 11); thus a question arises: what happens when these newer procedures themselves fall victim to the same fashionable treatment as their predecessors?

This chapter has demonstrated how the process and implications of 'Othering' non-normative bodies has evolved over two centuries, the ways in the cultural 'Others' of society have utilised body modification as a means of affirming their counter-cultural identities and allegiances, and how that process has altered within a modern setting. It is evident from this



history that the use of 'distinguishing marks' as an indication of cultural capital and privilege is not always imposed from above – but rather may be utilised as a means of demonstrating a disdain for essentialising social hierarchies. Chapter two will further investigate the relationship between the experience of social marginalisation and identity formation, and the use of body modification as a means of negotiating the trauma of stigmatisation and establishing marginal communities. There will always be those that either cannot or will not conform to the mainstream. The question of 'how' is limited only by the imagination. The question of 'why?', however is far more intriguing, and will be investigated in the following chapters.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Stigmata Martyr<sup>i</sup>: Stigma, Identity and Body Modification.**

Humans are by nature social creatures – there are few of us that would remain sane or functional without the presence of friends and allies. We have evolved to crave community and sympathetic company. However, this need for like-mindedness also applies on the macro as well as the micro scale; communal living requires the adherence to certain facts and ideologies in order for the group as a whole to survive, suggesting potentially grave consequences for those that violate established norms and expectations<sup>ii</sup>. So what happens to the rule-breakers?

The previous chapter detailed the manner in which body modification has developed alongside practices of social ‘Othering’ over the past two centuries. The process by which one particular individual or subgroup may come to be considered as socially undesirable or inferior to another is the result of evolving norms and social expectations which generate public perceptions of what are and what are not appropriate ways to behave or to appear within a given setting. This chapter concerns the ways in which these perceptions affect both status and identity, examining the relationship between social stigma, identity, and the use of body modification. I will introduce the concept of stigma, described by Goffman (1963:4) as a series of credible or discreditable social interactions and demonstrate how his theories have been influential in explaining systems of social control and the formation of ‘Othered’ identities. In discussing the genesis of body modification subcultures, I will refer to the work of Howard Becker and his theory of the subjective construction of deviance and its relevance to stigmatised groups as a potential method of re-imagining social norms. Consequently, the chapter will discuss the adoption of body modification by marginal and counter-cultural groups as a method of re-imagining social norms. Hence, in that section of the thesis I will

explain the ways in which many non-normative or extreme forms of body modification still exist on the margins of contemporary Western culture, and why this is not necessarily a universally disempowering position. I suggest instead that non-normative body modifications present an opportunity for the potential re-evaluation of embodied and gendered norms, and reclamation of stigmatised identity.

Goffman (1963:1) gave the following definition of stigma:

Stigma – Bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. Signs being cut or burned into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places.

While Goffman was utilising the term for the literal, punitive branding of flesh by Roman society as a metaphor for a myriad of marginal identities or traits that may manifest either physically or psychologically, the original meaning is not without significance in the current context, given that the act of body modification frequently involves the cutting, burning or deliberate marking of the flesh to convey some significant social meaning, although the motivations and contexts for doing so differ greatly in a contemporary context than Goffman's. In a more general sense, stigma may be initially understood as a 'deeply discrediting attribute that reduces a person in the minds of others to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963:3). Goffman's main focus was upon the interactions of stigmatised individuals with unstigmatised 'normals', with the intention of positioning the experience of stigma in interpersonal relationships (Hannem, 2012: 18). Goffman described stigma not as an individual attribute, but rather as a social process, whereby a stigmatised person experiences

social loss as the result of stereotypes imposed upon them by others (Goffman, 1963: 4).

Thus, stigma must be understood not solely as an isolated characteristic but rather as an ongoing relationship between an attribute and a stereotype, exacerbated by social stratification that allows a dominant 'us' to distinguish themselves from a stigmatised 'them' (Link & Phelan, 2001: 365).

Goffman's approach is useful in understanding the way in which body modifications relate to processes of social stratification and marginalisation. He defines three 'kinds' of stigma. The first being 'abominations of the body', physical characteristics considered to be violations of conventional bodily aesthetics, including physical impairments. The second is a 'blemish of character' : being weak, untrustworthy or possessed of 'unnatural passions'. The third is the stigma of lineage, passed down through family, including race and religion (Goffman, 1963: 4). The first two kinds of stigma are the most relevant to the present discussion, given the power of body modifications to physically convey social meanings onto the bearer, being at once an 'abomination of the body' that is frequently interpreted as a visual indicator of 'a blemish of character' (Thomas, 2012: 3).

De Mello describes the effect of tattooing (or otherwise permanently and deliberately marking the flesh) as being a means by which humans become social creatures, decorating the skin of the wearer with signifying marks transforms one's identity from 'raw' to 'cooked' (De Mello, 2000:10) A human being becomes marked not only physically, but also psychologically and socially through the acquisition of ink, piercings, branding or perforations. De Mello's statements may be understood as a literal interpretation of Butler's (1990: 177) description of bodily inscription as a form of biography that extends meaning beyond the physical limitations of the body. By

being visually and publicly marked in an extraordinary way (that is, one not typically accepted by dominant culture) the modified body not only reflects an individual's identity, but it also amplifies and accentuates it (Winge, 2000;1). Furthermore, the presentation and perception of a non-normatively modified body affects more than just the marked individual themselves; they may also become extensions of their particular subgroups and communities, which in turn may fuel public ideologies and stereotypes (Winge, 2012: 12). According to Neville (2005: 44) it is the meanings that these stereotypes convey that contribute to the continued stigmatisation of non-normative body modifications and the people that wear them.

Hence, while tattooing and piercing may have achieved a degree of normalcy within mainstream Western culture, those that deliberately alter their body in extreme or unusual ways still occupy socially liminal positions. A discreet tattoo that may be covered by work clothing, or a subtle facial piercing are unlikely to be perceived in the same manner as a tattooed sclera or a split tongue – partly because the latter two procedures are newer and less common, but also because of the social meanings that are frequently attached to them as the result of stigmatising stereotypes (Thomas, 2012: 5). The proliferation of discrediting social labels imposed onto a particular social group not only applies arbitrary and stigmatising attributes, but also creates a lack of accurate social representation (Winge, 2012: 12).

Pitts (2003: 24) describes the sensationalised manner in which non-normatively marked bodies are represented in mainstream media, whereby body modifications (particularly those worn by youth) are constructed as indicative of juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, homelessness and unemployment. Furthermore, women that mark themselves in

non-socially sanctioned ways are vilified both by the male-dominated mainstream and also by some radical feminists. Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin both perceived women's modifications as a kind of mutilation, a form of internalised misogyny re-enacted upon the body that was comparable to practices like foot-binding. They described the pain that women inflicted upon themselves in order to alter their bodies as symptomatic of a masochistic desire to conform to patriarchal beauty ideals (cited in Pitts, 2003: 53-54). Conversely, body modifications that violate traditional gendered norms or indicate 'inappropriate' sexual inclinations (such as pierced genitals, overtly sexual tattoo imagery or location, the use of body modifications by BDSM practitioners etc.) are stigmatised as indicative of perverse or even dangerous desires (Pitts, 2003: 94-95).

Some professionals such as psychologists are similarly keen to dismiss body modification as a form of self-harm or anti-social behaviour. Sullivan (2001:16) is highly critical of the assumptive view of the motivations of modified individuals taken by theorists such as Edgerton and Dingman (1963). According to her, they fail to deconstruct the broader social contexts in which these modifications occur and opt instead to reproduce discourses that uncritically maintain the bodily status-quo, that is, the psychological instability and somatic 'difference' of the modified 'Other'. Sexual perversion, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, criminality and unemployment are arbitrarily associated with extreme or non-normative body modification (Pitts, 2003: 24). These misrepresentations are significant because they have come to insinuate a certain 'wrongness' about the wearer: a level of social undesirability that is associated with those that do not conform to social expectations; their unusual bodies becoming 'proof' of their refusal to participate in mainstream society (Neville, 2005: 44).

Link and Phelan (2001) expand upon Goffman's examination of the structural and social implications of stigma to investigate its origins as a tool of institutional power. They take their lead from Goffman to investigate the relationship between structural power and the cyclic nature of stigma and the discrimination that it creates. In order for a particular attribute to become a recognised and accepted stigma within mainstream society, it is necessary for those that perpetuate its associated negative stereotypes to be in socially 'credible' (i.e: powerful) positions (Link et al, 2001: 375). This credibility lends the privilege of social power, and thus the ability to determine and disseminate social narratives. Those that are already discredited by nature of their stigmatised status do not have the same ability to similarly affect public opinion. Thus, they are at a significant disadvantage in representing themselves and neutralising negative stereotypes that contribute to status loss and negative social consequences. Consequently, publicly linking body modification with psychological impairment or undesirable natures not only undermines a subject's autonomy and subjectivity (Pitts, 2003:18), it also functions as a means of diminishing their credibility and social power, thus encouraging and reinforcing negative social stereotypes that contribute to status loss and maintain dominant hierarchies of power (Link et al, 2001). This is symptomatic of residual, systematic stigma pertaining to gendered and bodily transgressions (Hannem, 2012: 23)

The process of applying such stereotypes is significantly easier when the group applying these labels is already wholly distinct to or separated from those that are being discredited, given the improbability of personal consequences for a powerful 'us' (Link et al, 2001: 370). This demarcation of social boundaries is particularly significant in terms of the identity formation of those labelled as a stigmatised 'them', who become increasingly isolated from mainstream society – sometimes to the point that their 'Otherness' is understood as a dehumanising

feature, even by the stigmatised themselves (Link et al, 2001: 373). Goffman (1963: 7-9) warns of the risk of internalisation of stigma, frequently manifesting as low self-esteem or as resentful defensiveness that further alienates those discredited by it, often leading to harmful psychological and social consequences, particularly in terms of self-identification. Thomas (2012: 9) illustrates how the pathological misrepresentation of 'Othered' individuals reduces an individual's identity, their stigma labelling the person themselves (rather than their characteristics) as undesirable. Instead of existing as a person who has 'freakish' attributes, they themselves become a 'freak'. Thus, modified individuals may come to be understood (and to understand themselves) as wholly distinct from mainstream culture, establishing the dichotomous notion of 'us' and 'them' that fosters animosity on both sides, a largely self-defeating response to social stratification (Sullivan, 2001: 17).

This presents dark prospects for those that wish to change their bodies in extraordinary ways. So, why do these forms of modification still exist if they carry such negative public receptions? The problem lies not in the modifications themselves, but rather how they are conceptualised sociologically. Like Sullivan, Link and Phelan (2001) identify a problematic understanding of stigma within academia, whereby many theorists (Goffman included) are frequently not themselves marginalised in the same way as the stigmatised subjects of their research – thus potentially misrepresenting groups that are already subject to negative stereotypes and disempowerment (Link et al, 2001: 366). For example, in his introduction to the concept of stigma, Goffman uses the collective term 'we' to refer to unstigmatised 'normals', making the assumption that both reader and author are somehow distinct from the stigmatised subjects of the text (Goffman, 1963: 5). Thus, it is crucial that dialogue concerning stigma is not dominated by the assumptions of the unstigmatised. Developing academic practice to actively engage and involve those that experience stigma will lead to a



more representative and accurate body of work concerning social marginalisation and ‘Othered’ identities (Hannem, 2012: 12). Goffman’s interpretation of stigma was a largely ‘top-down’ process, whereby powerful social hierarchies were maintained by the existence or non-existence of social credibility (Link et al, 2001: 365). It is at this point that it is helpful to introduce the concept of deviance.

In the same year that Goffman published his work on stigma, Howard Becker also produced a similar work on deviance, that is, the social consequence of the violation of established group rules (Becker, 1963:18). Just as Goffman described stigma as the social interactions and processes that lead to the hierarchical distinction between one social group and another (Goffman, 1963: 127-128), Becker conceptualised deviance as a series of social relations, rather than the presence of specific individual attributes or behaviours (Becker, 1963: 10). Becker uses the term ‘Outsiders’ to refer to individuals that were found by others in a given group to be ‘deviant’ and thus ostracised (Becker, 1963: 15). In this regard, deviance and stigma may be understood as occurring concomitantly, both contributing to the ‘Othering’ of unfavourable individuals.<sup>iii</sup> However, Becker also maintained that the exclusion of deviant individuals could often be a dual process; that those that were ostracised from conventional society as the result of their discredited status may feel that they were done so wrongly, and may consider themselves ‘normal’ and their oppressors as the ‘deviants’ (Becker, 1963: 14). In so doing, Becker demonstrates the relational nature of the violation of social norms, thus positing a significant idea: that the process of disempowerment is not a uniform experience, even the marginalised ‘Others’ may well have agency and thus the ability to redefine their sense of identity and place for themselves in a manner that is not dependent upon the auspices of the ‘credible’ elite, and may even render them redundant (Hannem, 2012: 12).

It is this agentic understanding of social deviance that provides great potential for the re-imagining of non-normative bodies. Waskul and Vannini (2007: 6-8) build on Goffman's conceptualisation of the body through symbolic interactionism – the process of social communication through the exchange of symbols. In this understanding, the body exists as a *product* of social action, performance and communication, being constantly defined and redefined through a series of social interactions and interpretations (Waskul et al, 2007: 7). This suggests that the body has no essential ontology, being defined instead by the narratives, discourses and stereotypes that are produced by social action, therefore having the potential to wholly erase and re-write the norms and ideologies imposed upon the body by a dominant culture (Thomas, 2012:10). Thus, the deliberate and personalised modification of the body may simultaneously be recognised as a process of re-writing and reclaiming individual agency, and to re-imagine bodily discourses, aesthetic style and personal identity (Pitts, 2003: 28).

Through this process of reclamation, small groups may be formed that dedicate themselves to exploring their identities and bodies through the communicative medium of body modification, with similarly marked individuals creating communities and new identities for themselves that may evolve into what are now referred to as subcultures. Winge (2012) defines a subculture as any minority within a society that is differentiated by their choice of media or style, their cultural expression and traditions. Thus a subculture exists as a smaller 'subset' of society that, while being differentiated from the 'parent' culture, is not necessarily antagonistic towards it. A counter-cultural community differs from this, in that its existence is a *deliberate* attempt to counteract or subvert

dominant social norms or discourses that exists as both a community and an identity<sup>iv</sup> (Winge, 2012: 5). The barrier between the two is permeable, and it is certainly possible for some elements within subcultures to have distinctly counter-cultural intentions (Winge, 2012: 5). Given the overlap between countercultural and subcultural communities, and the presence of body modification in both, I shall use both terms interchangeably, but I shall emphasise counter-cultural communities.

It is common for those that have experienced similar forms of stigma to be drawn together to form like-minded and similarly stigmatised groups and communities, finding consolation and support from those that may share and understand their experiences and traumas (Goffman, 1963: 23) In and of itself, this is not wholly remarkable – birds of a feather will often flock together. What is particularly relevant to the formation of counter-cultural communities is how this process may present an opportunity for social critique and subversion. If the constructed modes of deviance attributed to individuals (in this instance, non-normatively presented bodies) becomes a focal point of identification and discourse within their similarly stigmatised communities, then it stands to reason that it is possible to witness the genesis of new culture, and thus an emerging resistance to oppressive social norms that are perceived as oppressive (Becker, 1963: 83). At this point it is necessary to point out that identification with counter-cultural subcultures should not be considered as synonymous with becoming wholly divorced from society. While contemporary theorists may critique classical sociology's somewhat depressing notion of the individual as being largely acted upon rather than acting on (Durkheim's interpretations being particularly severe in this regard, (Pluviez, 2012: 429) the presence of new ideologies does not imply total autonomy from the outside world. The body is still being grounded within specific times and contexts that will produce certain social messages and meanings that limit its subjectivity (Pitts, 2003: 34). It is important to

understand that even within the most radical of counter-cultural communities, our bodies and identities are still subject to the same processes of symbolic interaction described by Goffman (Waskul et al, 2007:10). The chief difference in a subcultural context is that the norms of what constitutes a 'normal' or a 'good' form of bodily expression have shifted, the redefined boundaries of a sub-group present new (but not limitless) avenues of expression (Pitts, 2003: 35). By tattooing, branding, piercing, stretching or inserting material underneath the skin, we are infusing it with our own narratives about our identities and experiences that will interact with surrounding cultural discourses, thus influencing the ways in which those around us will relate to us (Pitts, 2003: 38). It is therefore important to understand that like stigma, body modifications do not have a static, objective reality. Rather, they exist as part of the extended boundaries that are impacted by culture (Sullivan, 2009: 132-133). These modifications will thus generate a new multitude of meanings as their surrounding contexts change.

It is this potential for symbolic evolution that facilitates the re-imagining of supposedly stigmatising imagery, transforming the visual signifiers of undesirable 'Otherness' to marks of pride and in-group affiliation within that emerging sub-culture (Neville: 2005: 49-50). This potential was illustrated during an interview with a former tattoo artist, who discussed the way in which embodied deviancy may be worn as a defiant badge of honour:

*“ The western suburbs [of Sydney] are a funny place. I used to tattoo around there, especially Campbelltown and around there – funny people some of them. But, down to earth and truthful [...] you've gotta be tough too. It's that sort of attitude. Like, one guy for instance at Mt. Druitt – he used to have 'Mt. Druitt Scum' tattooed on him. That's a statement! And he'd never get that covered up.*

*[..] Yeah, I'm here! I'm here for good, fuck you Jack! I can't do any better than what I'm doing, I'm not going to get any further! Yeah! I'm Mt. Druitt scum!"*  
(‘K’, 50).

This deliberate use of supposedly stigmatising imagery and language as a means of confronting the systematic inequalities that they reflect may be understood as an act of resistance, if not outright subversion. For those that have experienced the pain and isolation of social exclusion, there is great comfort in redefinition. By re-appropriating ‘deviant’ imagery, language and practices, non-normatively modified individuals may regain a level of self-determination over their identities (Galinsky, Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2013: 2021).

This chapter has detailed the way in which stigma functions as an expression of hierarchical power – the arbitrary labelling of ‘Othered’ individuals by a dominant majority that maintains uneven systems of privilege and contributing to misrepresentation and loss of status (Link et al, 2001: 371). This form of stigma is literally represented by non-normative and extreme body modification, colourful and abjected bodies functioning as a visual confirmation of social disgrace (Neville, 2005: 44). However, as Becker has demonstrated, ‘Otherness’ is nothing without context – deviance exists in a constant state of uncertainty. The act of altering the social setting of a norm simultaneously alters its subjective meaning. Thus those that are ostracised as a result of their violation of conventional body norms are not wholly without agency, having the ability to redefine and reclaim notions of what constitutes a healthy, beautiful and appropriate body within autonomously defined parameters (Thomas, 2005:10) The next chapter explores both the limits and potential of these emerging communities,

continuing the discussion of deviance as a reclaimed, subjective, subversive performance; encapsulating the pleasurable, the monstrous and the explorative potential of the sub-cultural body.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **The monsters in your bed: Gender, Deviance and body modification**

*“There's a monster under your bed. A monster at your window. A monster any place you imagine one. You project your monsters onto the world.”*

*- Welcome To Nightvale.<sup>v</sup>*

Our culture's relationship with difference is defined by power. Who has power also has the ability to convey the label of 'Other' onto others. How such a label is negotiated, and how this process of labelling is understood by wider society is largely determined by their position within social, political and economic hierarchies. This chapter focuses on the intentional reclamation of 'deviance' as a counter-cultural practice (rather than the social processes that create it), and how this reclamation examines dominant structures of power. Here I return to Howard Becker, and how more contemporary theorists have come to critique his concept of deviance, suggesting the need for more representative reflections upon marginalised subcultures. By describing the use of extreme or non-normative body modification as a means of exploring 'Othered' identities, I will demonstrate the subversive and empowering potential that lies in the act of reclaiming deviance. This chapter specifically discusses the feminist and queer potential of body modification, and the ways in which bodily and gendered essentialism may be understood and rejected through extreme body modification practices, performances and communities. In particular I will examine the use of body modification amongst feminist, queer and counter-cultural movements, theoretical interpretations of the bio-discursive potential of the marked human body, and the ever-signifying, abjected, forms of 'monsters'.

The creative potential of deviance can be considered as a form of cultural bricolage (De Certeau, 1984: 29), a means of ‘making-do’ amongst marginalised communities that creates new ways of thinking and being for those that do not fit into the confines of mainstream society (Sweetman, 1999: 55). By embracing difference rather than pathologising, patronising or eschewing it, we may see the genesis of new social discourses that disrupt and potentially destabilise dominant structures of power that contribute to marginalisation.

The presence of institutionalised and social power is crucial in determining who is and who is not an undesirable ‘Other’, and to creating the negative stereotypes that perpetuate the marginalisation of the ‘discredited’ (Link et al, 2001: 373). Becker’s definitions of deviance are remarkably useful in identifying a generalised idea of the relational nature of social ‘Othering’ and the way in which those without social prestige and power are able to label others. This is not dissimilar to Goffman’s conceptualisation of the process of stigma – with the exception of Becker’s ‘social unfortunates’ being granted the ability to subjectively reject their ‘discredited’ status (Sagarin & Robert, 1987: 16-17). However, the ability to understand the re-negotiation of deviance is limited while described by theorists not actively marginalised in a similar fashion to the subjects of their research. While illustrating the nature of social deviance in everyday situations, Becker (like Goffman) writes from a largely top-down perspective. Despite his label as a symbolic interactionist, there is little emphasis in his writing upon the role of the individual as an agentic arbiter of meaning in their daily interactions and situation within broader social structures. That is to say, Becker’s focus was largely upon the prevailing social structures and institutions that created and maintained stigmatising hierarchies of power, rather than the ability of ‘deviants’ to create autonomous discourses from their interactions themselves (Hannem, 2012: 14). Indeed, after the publication of *Outsiders*, Becker was criticised as being a ‘liberal zoo keeper’ by fellow



academic Alvin Gouldner, who described Becker's 'school of deviance' as follows:

*It expresses the satisfaction of the Great White Hunter who has bravely risked the perils of the urban jungle to bring back an exotic specimen. It expresses the romanticism of the zoo curator who preeningly displays his rare specimens. And, like the zookeeper, he wishes to protect his collection; he does not want spectators to throw rocks at the animals behind the bars. But neither is he eager to tear down the bars and let the animals go. The attitude of these zookeepers of deviance is to create a comfortable and humane Indian Reservation, a protected social space, within which these colourful specimens may be exhibited, unmolested and unchanged.” (Gouldner, 1975: 37-38).*

Harsh criticism, but important nonetheless. The marginal nature of 'deviant' subcultures can render them less powerful than the theorists that describe them, leaving them vulnerable to condescending misrepresentation (Link et al, 2001: 365-366). In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen demonstrates the way in which the identities and practices of undesirable social 'types' are largely considered as public property; their 'abhorrent' or 'dangerous' practices subjected to consistent (and frequently hyperbolic) scrutiny and misrepresentation (Cohen, 1972: 2). Cohen explains the problematic nature of this form of social labelling by referring to Becker's construction of deviance as a series of social relationships, rather than an inherent aspect of a person or group. In so doing, Cohen explores the hierarchical cultural ideology that produces hysterical moral panics, emphasising the importance of understanding the interactive nature of deviance and how mass-media contribute to the erasure of the narratives of 'Othered' subgroups – disembodied objects of social scrutiny, rather than agents of their own identities (Cohen,

1972: 13-15). Thus, it is necessary to establish newer understandings of deviance that allow for active and positive processes of reclaiming 'Othered' identities that function as a source of personal growth and social critique, rather than a defensive coping mechanism (Hannem, 2012: 12).

The ability of marginalised individuals to critically re-examine and redefine the terms of social 'Othering' is an important aspect in social justice movements. Of particular relevance here is the issue of language (Galinsky, et al, 2013: 2020). Derogatory labels are intended to intimidate and cause humiliation and disempowerment on both a personal and a communal label, functioning as auxiliary linguistic features of stigma and stereotypes. However, some members of stigmatised groups have chosen to use them self-referentially. This is a controversial action that is by no means a wholly accepted practice. However, Galinsky et al (2013) maintain that the reclamation of certain terms ('queer', 'faggot', 'tranny', 'slut', 'bitch' etc.) may actually reduce their harmful potential. By taking possession of terms previously utilised by dominant social paradigms and imbuing them with new (if ironic) significance, stigmatised individuals may be able to nullify their stigmatising effects on themselves, and disrupt the hierarchies of social power that initially created them. The parallels between reclaiming derogatory language and reclaiming deviance are particularly relevant for those that have been arbitrarily defined as 'Outsiders', the ability to use the term as a positive and self-referential moniker is significant (Hannem, 2012: 23).

It is this potential for cultural critique (both linguistic and embodied) that is particularly relevant in this discussion. Goffman described the process of stigmatisation in terms of whether an individual was deemed by broader culture to be 'credible' or not, that is,

whether or not they abided by particular social values and expectations (Goffman, 1963: 5-6). Becker (1963:16) expanded upon this by noting that those that are deemed as deviant by their inability (or refusal) to conform feel that they have been so ‘discredited’ unfairly, their exclusion standing as more of a moral judgement upon the society rather than on themselves. <sup>vi</sup> This relationship between social respectability and personal integrity constitutes a delicate balancing act. How much ‘deviance’ can an individual get away with before being utterly eschewed from ‘decent’ society all together? (Becker, 1963: 83). Brauenberger (2000:12) maintains that for some, the ‘respect’ of a deeply misogynistic, heteronormative culture is not worth having, the use of extreme body modifications functioning as demarcations between conventionality and autonomous redefinition, marking the ‘point of no return’ for those that wear them. Through the deliberate rejection of the mainstream we may witness the birth of the self-made freak (Russo, 1994: 76).

This reclamation of ‘freak’ identity suggests not only an individual shift away from conventional society, but also the formation of subcultural communities that share a common form of embraced deviancy, finding communal support and encouragement in their expressions of their marginal identities. Here arises the allure of the carnival. Theorised by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1965) as a form of utopian social critique, emerges an egalitarian space and time where the stigmatised inhabitants may revel in their freakery, free from the judgements of the prejudiced mainstream (Weese, 2000: 350). The carnival is a heterogenous, topsy-turvy collaboration of spectacle and cultural redeployment; parodying, exaggerating and destabilising arbitrary distinctions that maintain hierarchies of power and privilege

(Russo, 1994: 62). The carnival functions as a form of critique as well as a space of equality, 'making strange' the often oppressive cultural norms made evident by its liminal status (Gardiner, 1992: 32). It is within this disruptive, discursive state that the subcultural body may begin to take shape – the redefinition of aesthetics, identity and social power being constantly redefined upon the carnivalesque flesh of the self-made freak (Weese, 2000: 351).

Butler's (1990: 177) analysis of the body suggests a fluid, interactive body that is wholly at odds with the static, animal form envisaged by enlightenment philosophy discussed in Chapter One. This fluidity extends to conceptions of gender – being conceptualised by Butler as largely performative, echoing both Goffman's (1959: 3-4) arguments in *Presentation to Self*<sup>vii</sup> and Becker's (1963: 14-17) labelling theory<sup>viii</sup>. One does not 'have' a gender, one *performs* a gender – daily presentations to others of one's unconsciously constructed identity or another constituting a form of 'drag'. The practice of essentialising gender not only restricts 'maleness' and 'femaleness' to uniform and mutually exclusive categories, but also blurs the lines between the distinct entities of 'sex' and 'gender' (Butler, 1990: 7-9). This process erases the existence and experiences of those that do not conform to traditional standards of masculinity or femininity, and denigrates their bodies and identities to the status of the abjected 'Other'. Given the repressive environment that this forced binary entails, body modification has hence become popular as a means of expressing and affirming non-normative, gender-fluid and non-heterosexual/cisgendered identities, forming new cultural narratives that contradict the essentialist categorisation of gender and sexuality (Pitts, 2003: 189).

This contradiction takes on many forms: the multiplicity of interpretations and experiences of

gender indicating a similarly diverse scope of potential for non-normative embodied communication and expression. The ostracism of 'Othered' bodies within a deeply heteronormative culture offers some insight into the enthusiastic manner in which body modification has been adopted by Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered communities; viewing the body not only as a site of inscription and communication, but also a source of non-normative sensations, creation and spiritual growth (Pitts, 2003: 91). Using visible and public bodily performances, non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered individuals are able to challenge conventional notions of what a 'normal' body should look like, and by extension, demonstrate its potential beyond the boundaries of sexed and gendered essentialism (Pitts, 2003: 90). This visible, voluntary 'self-Othering' was also a part of a movement in which 'deviant' and 'taboo' sexualities and pleasures were constructed as positive affirmations of queer identity, as opposed to pathologised indicators of sickness or moral degeneracy. The ability to reconstruct and re-define the boundaries of bodily sensation, pleasure and aesthetics is an important part of the process of 'queering' the body and progressing beyond outdated, erotophobic and queerphobic social pressures, presenting a politicised aesthetic of deviance (Pitts, 2003: 91) These approaches have become particularly salient within more radical queer communities and activists wishing to reject more modern assimilation by the 'cis/het' mainstream – presenting bodies indicative of lifestyles and experiences wholly alien to heteronormative conventions (Pitts, 2003: 109). For example, the performances of openly gay artist Ron Athey make extensive use of piercing and suturing procedures, utilising flesh hooks and suspension as a means of portraying the queer, HIV positive body in an autonomous, unrepentant manner, obliging audiences to confront their fears concerning the supposedly 'degenerate' homosexual form (Pitts, 2003: 87-89).

The essentialising of sex and gender creates a very limited spectrum of 'acceptable'

expression. Venturing outside of the realms of conventionally accepted ways of being 'male' or being 'female' is to risk becoming 'Other'. For women, the act of non-normatively marking their bodies is to indicate a transgression of the culture of silence that has been imposed upon them, their ostentatiously decorated skin acting as an autonomous communication of independence and excess (Braunberger, 2000: 7). The spectacle of the heavily modified female body is significant because it speaks of self definition, of the disregard for cultural protocol and disapproval. Women marking their bodies in a fashion not sanctioned by mainstream, male-dominated society is apt for misrepresentation, because this particular form of bodily inscription has historically been one defined by and for men. By modifying themselves, women are 'stealing' a form of expression, their public, self-determined markings functioning as a kind of Promethean fire imbued with the opportunity for reinvention (Brauenberger, 2001: 4). It is this reinvention that Sandra Bartkey (1990: 42-7) refers to when she articulates the need for a 'revolutionary female aesthetic'- an autonomously determined, self-gratifying, shamelessly narcissistic alternative to male-defined standards of beauty, allowing for the exploration of embodied possibilities that do not value one standard of womanhood over another. For many women, the 'deviance' that accompanies the transgression of bodily and gendered boundaries is not simply a form of contrarian rebellion – it is a means of re-imagining female aesthetics and bodies, therefore re-examining women's position in society. The possession of a body that violates patriarchal norms is to question the validity of patriarchal control (Thomas, 2012: 9). While the presence of non-normative modifications will not nullify the effects of gendered oppression, they are a means of re-gaining individual ownership. A modified body acknowledges the male gaze and may decide to return it, granting the ability to 'write back' to a larger culture of embodied norms (Brauenberger, 2000: 14).

This transformative, disruptive, communicative potential of body modification coincides with theoretical discourses concerning the female grotesque and the role of the monstrous. Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994) describes the transcendent, confronting form of the female monster – the provocative, excessive and disruptive embodiment of abjected female identity. Russo (1994: 29-30) conceptualised the monster not so much as a gendered category, but rather as a discursive tool, a fluid construct and a process by which gender, identities and embodiment are constituted and explored. The use of body modifications to create 'monstrous' bodies likewise holds significant promise of transcendence – the deliberate identification with the 'abject' allowing self-identified monsters to redefine their bodies, fulfilling a position that disturbs normative ideas and boundaries (Shildrick, 2001:80). The carnivalesque body of the female monster is untidy, vulgar, disruptive and jarring; by occupying the spaces 'in-between' conventional social and gendered boundaries; she represents a mockery of a status-quo obsessed with binaries and clear definitions (Russo, 1994: 62).

During my first year of research, I interviewed an academic and performance artist known as Zoo. Having undergone extensive body modifications, Zoo identifies not as male or female, but rather as 'monster'. During our interview, Zoo explained the significance of many of their modifications, the need to reclaim and redefine their bodies in a manner that reflected the fluidity of their gender. Their performance art also reflected a desire to re-imagine bodily processes outside of the confines of essentialist, binary gender; including a project to induce lactation:

*So, this gender thing just hit me you know, the way that some queers have their way of working through 'breast issues' through binding and hiding them, I was doing the*

*opposite! I was making them huge, I was doing drag! I was this big caricature – like, I'm lactating but I don't have any babies, so like, what am I? [....] I think it was also because I've considered chest surgery – because they're big and ridiculous. I mean, they're fun – but they're also kind of annoying. I will never pass as particularly masculine – but it was at the back of my mind that I wouldn't have them for long, so it was like trying to get as much use of them as possible. It's taking breast-feeding out of that maternal area, something that is so quintessentially 'female' and putting it in an environment where it's Queer. It's nothing to do with babies or maternity – it's taking this bodily process and putting it in a totally alien environment - (Zoo, 39).*

Zoo's performances and myriad of modifications demonstrate the boundaries between bodies and their socialised functions, the monstrous being gleefully vulgar yet, always significant.

However, Shildrick (2001: 80) points out that this transgressive revelry may ironically contribute to the solidifying of the dichotomy it is supposed to transcend. In fulfilling the role of manifest abjection, the monster confirms its own part in a dualistic distinction between 'freak' and 'normal' which maintains these rigid categories. Brauenberger's analysis of this 'freak/norm' paradox is somewhat more forgiving. She maintains that while the monster certainly represents the boundary between normal and abnormal, this marginal position does not necessarily reinforce the dichotomy between them. By 'sitting at the crossroads' as it were, the monster this way obliges the viewer to acknowledge the arbitrary existence of these boundaries, confronting practices of strict categorisation by signifying their tenuous nature (Braunberger, 2000: 11-12). The ever-signifying nature of the monster is indicative of the dual role of Bakhtin's carnival; by witnessing social transgressions, we are reminded of the nature of the norms that are being violated, the utopian ideal 'laying bare and making



conspicuous the major divisions of interest within society' (Bauman, 1976: 15-17) thus demonstrating social inequities and mobilising agents of social change (Gardiner, 1992: 33). In the case of the monstrous, the 'deviancy' that accompanies the transgression of embodied, gendered norms is not so much a source of shame or resentment, but rather is demonstrative – pun intended. The very existence of the monster holds up a discursive mirror to both dominant and marginal cultural practices (Brauenberger, 2000:12). While Becker (1963: 81) emphasised that deviance was not strictly a one-way process, his approach suggests very little in terms of dialogue between the 'Othered' and conventional society, save for the defensive response of 'Outsiders'. The marginal position of monsters and the monstrous may therefore be understood as an intermediary between the two, signifier of two-way boundaries between 'norm' and 'freak' that may create simultaneous discourses of resistance and reconsideration (Shildrick, 2001: 90).

The presence of dichotomous social boundaries is particularly relevant when discussing deviance as a reclaimed identity. Becker (1963: 16-17) states that the way in which the label of 'deviant' or 'normal' is ascribed to an individual is frequently determined by the ability of the 'labeller' to make and enforce social rules. As discussed in the previous chapter, the creation of social narratives and credible/discredible labels and stereotypes is largely determined by access to social power. These hierarchies of power determine not only *who* is involved creating social and cultural boundaries and in what capacity, but they will also frequently dictate *how* that process is understood (and, by extension, what this implies for those that wish to change cultural discourse) (Link et al, 2001: 371). In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau (1984: 35-37) describes the difference between 'strategies' and 'tactics' in his advocacy of the practice of cultural bricolage. This social 'tactic'<sup>ix</sup> not only functions as a means of creating wholly new ways of thinking, but also of identifying; being

comprised of the bric-a-brac of older, re-appropriated forms of strategic protest and ways of being. The 'patchwork-quilt' nature of bricolage provides an alternative to the duality of the 'freak/norm' binary by combining elements of disparate discourse and practice to create new avenues of social support and subversion (De Certeau, 1984: 29). Bricolage allows for the conception of an identity that is not dependent upon the definitions and values of the essentialising elite. It opens avenues of possibility for those that do not or cannot fit within a convenient, imposed label. For those that engage in practices of deliberately altering the body in unusual or extreme ways, and those that wish to reject the discipline and limitations of mainstream culture, the potential of bricolage is invaluable (Pitts, 2003: 41). The creation of 'messy', 'demonstrative' bodies that transgress normative boundaries is reliant upon a multitude of creative and discursive influences. One may only think of the mismatched, disorderly and disruptive aesthetics of the punk movement to recognise the creative promise inherent in creating new bodies and identities out of the collective imaginings of an increasingly pluralistic environment (Pitts, 2003: 41-43). Monstrosity is reliant upon the refusal of neat parameters, and it is with this critical defiance that Bahktin's carnival becomes a possibility (Russo, 1994: 32-33).

In *Outsiders*, Becker describes 'deviant' subgroups and communities as a 'fantastic culture of unfortunates' (Becker, 1963: 80). A rather patronising summation from a 'non-deviant' describing a subculture from the exterior, but it also suggests a saccharine fantasy that recalls Bahktin's egalitarian, joyful carnival. An initial glance may suggest that subcultural spaces represent a positive step towards challenging the rigid boundaries of mainstream culture. Indeed, the transformative, critical potential of the 'queered' body, Russo's transcendent, gleeful grotesqueries, the Medusa-like, reciprocal gaze of inked female bodies and the exploration of forbidden bodily experiences and sexualities all burst with subversive promise.

It is not difficult to understand the allure of subcultural deviance, with its promise of exoticism and transcendence coupled with the comforts of camaraderie. It is nice to be an 'us' for once, instead of a 'them'. But what happens when our idealised utopias fail to meet our lofty expectations? What happens when the carnival exists in name only? After all, the illusion of social progress is all too easy to replicate (Kerchy, 2005: 176). The next chapter concerns the nature of the broken carnival; the unfortunate circumstances of failed subcultures and the corruption of counter-cultural identity. The freaks still live at the circus, but there has definitely been a change in management.

## Chapter Four – The Broken Carnival.

*“Every identity is destabilised by its exterior.”* – Chantal Mouffe (1995: 264).

The revelry of the carnival is marked by exteriority; it represents a public ‘airing of grievances’ as much as it is a space of disruption, excess and redefinition. It shows how we position ourselves in relation to others, and obliges us to consider our own status (Gardiner, 1992: 37). For those that have suffered the negative effects of stigma and ostracism the carnival offers catharsis and solidarity, a communicative site of protest against prejudice. It is not expected that oppressive or stigmatising behaviours would occur within the confines of an already marginalised community, and yet the divide between ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’ is wrongly assumed to be impermeable (Mouffe, 1995: 265). The previous chapter demonstrated the subversive potential of deviance and the renegotiation of power and identity within marginal subcultures – the idealistic and hopeful promise of carnivalesque bric-a-brac and fluidity. Now I turn to discuss the dark side of subcultures, a phenomenon that I call ‘the broken carnival’. I will begin by examining the result of subcultural self-segregation and the dangers of the essentialising of identity, as described by Mouffe (1995: 262) and Cohen’s ‘deviance amplification’ theory. Following from this, I shall demonstrate the way in which oppositional (as opposed to deconstructive) identity politics contribute to perpetuating, rather than eschewing oppressive norms and behaviours within body modification communities, providing examples from my own primary research and experience. It is the intention of this

chapter to demonstrate that ‘subcultural’ and ‘subversive’ are not necessarily synonymous terms, the dichotomies of the broken carnival functioning as a reflection of the ‘normal’ society that was so enthusiastically rejected by such communities.

Subcultures and communities of shared stigmas form as a basis for providing support and camaraderie to the unrepresented and the ostracised. One may expect a level of resentment towards the dominant culture from which they have been exiled (Weese, 2000: 351).

Similarly, a desire to disassociate oneself completely from that culture is not uncommon.

Becker (1963: 95) discusses the impulse for self-isolation from conventional society, his case study of jazz-musicians in the late 1940’s details the hesitancy of ‘deviant’ musicians to associate with ‘squares’, for fear of compromising their artistic integrity. This perceived creative compromise led to the formation of subcultural norms prohibiting certain behaviours thought to be indicative of such ‘squareness’, and indicate a wholly separate lifestyle constructed around protecting this marginal identity (Becker, 1963: 95-97). Here we may observe how members of a ‘deviant’ group may not only come to embrace their ‘Otherness’, but simultaneously reject the notion of conventional respectability, preferring instead to establish their own separate lifestyles (Braunberger, 2000:12). One example of this form of deliberate self-segregation was related during the interview with Zoo:

*I remember doing it [getting a facial scarification] at the time so that I couldn't run and get a job back in a bank. It was a really deliberate way of making sure I didn't become a conservative fuck-head. I don't remember what was going on – I was just feeling really boring, and like I was probably going to go and get some tedious job somewhere. And I wanted to do something to make sure that I couldn't.[...] I suppose it was of a ritualistic in a way. Like, I don't want the option to slip back into that thing*

*that was safe, but at the same time it was really destructive...[..]I didn't really think about what other people thought, it was more like, 'If you do that, you won't have the options that you cling to' like, it was a literal cutting of – you can't go back there, just fucking burn the bridge' - (Zoo, 39).*

In this instance, Zoo's scarification was largely a self-oriented act, designed to distance themselves from dominant 'safe' culture. But by their own admission, it was also a destructive act. Therein lies the rub. Where is the line between subversive rejection of an oppressive mainstream, and petulant contrarianism that solidifies (rather than eschews) arbitrary social boundaries?

Foucault describes the process of normalisation as a great instrument of power that functions as a modern replacement for nobility or social ranking (cited in Russo, 1994:10). That process suggests that within many subcultures - those that utilise non-normative body modifications included - the process of normalisation has taken on a newer, more esoteric mask, whereby 'weird' is the new standard by which others are judged. What may be considered 'the norm' does not appear to have to be uniform across demographics in order to be coercive. The appeal of opposition for its own sake is frequently prioritised over actual social deconstruction (Weese, 2000: 352). Here Becker's (1963: 16) observations concerning the subcultural power to question the legitimacy of 'deviance' is not only vindicated, but demonstrated to be a double-edged blade. A new perspective on the nature of 'Otherness' may be a cathartic, empowering experience for marginalised individuals – but it may also lead to the development of a sense of moral superiority or achievement over the 'normals' that have not been subjected to the same mistreatment (Weese, 2000: 351). Cohen's work on marginal subcultures is particularly relevant in this regard. He describes a phenomena called 'deviance

amplification' (Cohen, 1973: 136-7) whereby the hyperbole of mainstream responses to the presence of 'deviant' subgroups creates a positive feed-back loop that actually reinforces the 'offending' behaviours. This expands upon Becker's (1963: 11) assertion that public reactions to deviance are indicative of the severity of the violation of a given social norm, and may help to explain how a particular subculture may come to embrace *verboden* behaviours; those that wish to distinguish themselves from 'the normals' may feel vindicated by the outrage and disgust displayed by conventional society (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995: 565).

While there may be a certain adolescent glee in horrifying one's prudish neighbours with unusual body adornments, it is nonetheless a counterproductive approach to social critique. Goffman (1963: 110) describes a social process that he refers to as 'minstrelling', whereby a person will deliberately over-emphasise their particular stigma while in the presence of the unstigmatised, either through internalised notions of how they may be perceived by 'normals', or through a petulant bravado. The inherent risk in this being that it creates an environment that fails to adequately address the various intersecting oppressions and essentialist norms that encouraged the formation of the subculture in the first place, rather it encourages the perpetuation of discrediting stereotypes. Simply adopting a contrary position to an amorphous, dominant culture does not nullify its power. Rather, it succeeds only in flipping the hierarchy, so that the previously oppressed are now in positions to become the arbiters of power within that subculture (Weese, 2000: 351). Sullivan (2001:16) warns of the reliance upon binary systems of social and somatic classification in which one may exist solely as 'normal' (unmodified) or 'deviant' (modified). By both discursive accounts, an individual is marked and therefore 'Other', or they are unmodified and therefore supposedly given all the resented privileges of the 'norms'. This is overly simplistic. As Goffman (1963: 128) states, the vast majority of human beings will experience varying degrees of stigma (public or

hidden) at some point in their lives, and to attempt to create a neat, hierarchical duality of distinction between individuals on the basis of their stigmatised status would be futile. Such an endeavour also ignores the significance of the intersectional nature of social marginalisation and oppression, whereby systematic and social inequalities such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and classism interact with and reinforce one another (Rosenberg et al, 2008).

Mouffe (1995) is highly critical of this form of identity essentialism, describing the universalism inherent in such dichotomous and objective notions of society as indicative of their Enlightenment-era heritage, and not conducive to a thorough analysis of social identity and power. In her analysis of the construction of oppositional identity, she recalls Derrida's (1992) theories concerning the creation of the 'constitutional outside', whereby the creation of one particular identity simultaneously establishes a point of difference – that which is exterior to this identity. Hence arises the potential for antagonism between those labelled as 'us' and those labelled as 'them', assuming an antithetical nature to the differentiated identity ('Them') (Mouffe, 1995: 262). This is not a one way process argues Mouffe, and it is not without consequence: by placing undue and exclusive emphasis on self-segregating incommensurability, we become vulnerable to the same essentialising relational practices that lead to the subordination of difference. In neglecting to recognise the socially constructed nature of difference, we risk missing the opportunity to adequately de-construct and challenge such imbalances of power, perpetuating instead a symbolic mimicry of subversion (Mouffe, 1995: 263-264).

This calcification of identity not only reinforces arbitrary binaries between 'freak' and 'norm', but also prevents the further critique of other forms of oppression that may become prevalent



within minority communities. Elizabeth Grosz describes the way in which women are unconsciously subjected to cultural body norms, the 'grammar of body language' being constructed by dominant matrices of social power and regulation that become stealthily inscribed onto the psyche (cited in Pitts, 2003; 39). The gendered essentialism of mainstream culture (and the penalties for its transgression) has already been discussed in Chapter Two. However, what is not as well recognised is the repetition of this process within subcultural communities, whereby heteronormative, male-defined aesthetics and values are similarly disseminated. Kerchy (2005: 175-176) describes the way in which lip-service is paid to supposedly 'alternative' cultures (i.e: those not situated within white, middle-class, heterosexual, patriarchal contexts) by presenting the image of progress and diversity whilst maintaining the hierarchical structures of dominant heteronormative, male-defined culture. The great travesty of this is not simply the appropriation of female bodily protest for the creation of new, male-defined aesthetics, but also in the way in which this sterilised parody of bodily autonomy is adopted and reproduced by women, a process that Susan Bordo refers to as 'the pathologies of female protest'. The creation of new, fetishised, 'freak' bodies that are simultaneously abjected and normalised paradoxically reinforce and collude with cultural conditions rather than transform that which was initially being protested (cited in Kerchy, 2005: 178 -179).

Here it is possible to see how sexism within subcultures gives the false impression of transformation. By presenting the illusion of reinvention while simultaneously eschewing any potential for female-bodily agency, the tyranny of the male-dominated, mock-utopia is allowed to continue (Neville; 2005: 50). Within phallogentric orders, women exist as empty spaces, 'tabula rasas' that may only gain meaning by their observation by men (Brook, 1999:18). This is demonstrated almost literally within contemporary body modification

media. To exemplify: just before beginning work on this project, I attended the Australian Body Art Expo, the biggest exhibition of body modification in the Southern Hemisphere, an enormous show-room full of tattoo artists, piercers and other body art professionals. It became clear to me that the Expo was very much marketed towards the heterosexual male gaze. It is understandable that at a body-art exhibition, there will be some level of nudity – but the vast majority of the nude or semi-nude figures on display were slender, white, cisgendered females. Be it the promotional images of the glamour photography studios, the live burlesque performers, the body-paint models or the body art itself – the female body was on display everywhere I looked: as advertisements for a product or an artist, or for pure entertainment. Where there was male nudity, it was out of necessity rather than titillation; to display a particular modification, or out of a peacock-like, competitive desire to show off a heavily modified, muscular chest and back. There was nothing to cater to the preferences of anything other than what was assumed to be the norm for heterosexual, cisgendered males.

My observations at the Expo are not unique. One respondent (a tattoo artist) made the following comments concerning sexism in body modification media:

[Referring to 'Inked' magazine] *..But it's a fashion magazine. And this is the image of the industry, that magazine is illustrative of the type of industry that the mainstream and consumerism is pushing right? And that magazine, you open it up and what do you see? All the sexist stereotypes – women are just lumps of meat. They are sexual objects, and here they are displayed with their tattoos. It's all for the male eye. If you see any men in there, they're sitting next to cars or motorbikes, or they're drinking or smoking or – there's bands. Music. But you've got hundreds of young women want to be accepted, and they think that they can be accepted by propagating this male image*

*of women* . - ('S', 47).

Weese's (2000: 352) observes that the masculine manipulation and cultivation of 'freakish' art (at the expense of female agency) is considered a legitimate form of creative, subversive expression, and therefore legitimately countercultural, while women's attempts to autonomously transform and re-imagine themselves and their bodies is largely ignored or subtly discouraged. This is interesting when considered in conjunction with phenomena described by Goffman as 'in-group chauvanism' (Goffman, 1963: 113-114) whereby members of a stigmatised group may oblige others to be similarly stigmatised. Those that suffer the negative effects of a particular stigma may unconsciously form a desire to oblige others to share in their tribulations, an impulse potentially made all the stronger by a pervasive culture of patriarchal entitlement (Weese, 2000: 352). It is not unreasonable to suggest that for some body modification enthusiasts, the trauma, low self-esteem and resentment resultant from social marginalisation or exclusion manifests as a new essentialism, an inverted social hierarchy wherein the abject becomes a desirable norm, with little room for moderation or middle-ground. Ironically, this skewed dichotomy often reflects a deeply gendered sense of masculine entitlement that has survived within body modification subcultures. This entitlement and expectation reduces the modified female form to an abjected ideal, a malleable subject of 'subversive' desire created by 'freakish' men as a consolation prize for their own exile from 'normal' society (Weese, 2000: 357). Just as Frankenstein's monster demanded a mate created in his own image, some self-made freaks share a similar disregard for the autonomy of their own females. Thus, until body modification subcultures are able to appropriately address issues of entitlement and objectification; modified women exist within a persistent conundrum – either accept the compromise of a questionable camaraderie within a false and objectifying carnival, or remain as an outcast within a hostile 'normal' environment

(Brauenberger, 2000:15-16).

Appropriative behaviours are not limited to issues of gender or sexuality. In an ironic twist, body modification practices traditionally associated with Indigenous or non-Western cultures (tribal tattoos, some forms of scarification and even dreadlocks) are becoming increasingly popular means of inscribing oneself with 'exotic' meaning. The Neo-Primitive movement is primarily concerned with the rejection of Western consumer-culture and a deep, often spiritual appreciation of bodily symbols and emphasis on what is assumed to be a universally accepting, 'tribalistic' lifestyle (Atkinson, 2003: 45-46). However, this particular subculture frequently comes under scrutiny for its adoption of imagery that is often of great significance to their original cultures – some of which have been imbued with newer, resistant meanings for their wearers in the face Western cultural imperialism (Klesse, 2007:279). The use of Indigenous or non-Western symbols by white, middle-class body-modifiers has distinctly problematic implications (Klesse, 2007: 279-280). The simulation and appropriation of such symbology and tradition appears as little more than a parasitic travesty: the non-authentic reconstruction of sacred markings and rituals is intended to represent a post-modern, timeless and alien form, distinct from the uniformity of the banal, corrupted West (Klesse, 2007:277), but the reality is anything but that. Rather, it appears that the supposedly independent discourses and signifiers of non-conformity so favoured by many Neo-Primitives and others dedicated to the 'freak' cause are themselves symptomatic of the binary definitions imposed by cultural imperialism (Werner, 2008:14). The desire to remain outside of the apparently detested edicts of greedy, consumer-driven culture is ironically auspiced by the assumed duality of a dominant hegemony – if non-Western traditions and modifications function as inherently 'Other', then it is easy for them to become a highly desirable trait within a narcissistic, post-modern culture obsessed with the 'uniqueness' of the abjected, subcultural

self (Pitts, 2003: 33). In these instances, non-Western body modification traditions are reduced to little more than an exotic form of cultural drag; their 'Otherness' functioning as an exotic accessory and thus muting their cultural significance and rendering their potential for resistance as null and void (Klesse, 2007: 276).

De Mello (2000: 36) warns of the dangers of such re-appropriation of symbolic narratives. Her writings on the classed divide within tattoo and body modification subcultures (working class 'scratchers' juxtaposed with upper-class 'artists') demonstrate how easy it is to nullify the initially subversive intentions of a subculture from within. After all – no matter how stigmatised or oppressed - the denizens of the broken carnival are still only human, and thus subject to human foibles. It is understandable that after finally finding a welcoming community, one may be all too willing to overlook its failings. Marketability and complacency almost always trump intercultural awareness – we are fooled into believing that our baubles and brightly-coloured skin constitute an inherently subversive identity at the cost of isolating our peers (Kerchy, 2005: 176). For those that genuinely seek a community and a safe haven, it becomes more and more apparent that the carnival is broken – there is little that a bright new coat of paint can do, save only to whitewash an ugly facade. Therefore, where does this leave us? The fifth and final chapter of this thesis deals with this issue. Now that the gaudy lights of the carnival have been dimmed, we must struggle to find new meanings for ourselves, even if in so doing, we may lose the coveted status of 'us'.

## Chapter 5: Rebels with an ambiguous cause.

*“And yet... we possess one privilege, one rare privilege, that makes of our outcast and disregarded state something wonderful, something precious. We can invent our own faces! We make ourselves.”*

*- ‘Nights at the Circus’ – Angela Carter<sup>x</sup>.*

So far, I have demonstrated the colonial history of ‘Othering’ non-normative bodies and its implications for those that do not fit the essentialist edicts of the rationalist Enlightenment, as well as more recent cultural shifts that have seen these perceptions challenged. Using classical sociology and contemporary cultural and feminist theorists I have explained the link between stigma, exclusion and its impacts upon identity, as well as the subjective nature of deviance and the power of reclaimed labels and the re-examination of social boundaries. The subversive potential of body modifications and their associated communities has been discussed, and demonstrated to be something of a poisoned chalice; the masquerade of social progress frequently distracts from toxic identity-essentialism and the re-emergence of ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies that reduce potentially subversive actions and communities to defensive subcultural silos.

Thus, the process of subversion must inevitably involve some soul-searching; both on behalf of the individual, and the subculture that they are a part of. While there is certainly merit in consistently pushing boundaries and experimenting with hitherto unheard-of or taboo techniques and aesthetics, the emphasis must not be upon simply being more and more shocking or extreme vis-a-vis mainstream culture. Rather, what is required is a systematic ‘re-wiring’ of the way that we understand ourselves (either as individuals or as communities) in

relation to others, allowing for consistent communication across subcultural boundaries. To do this, it is necessary to examine not only our construction of identity and 'Other', but also the ways that we have come to express those identities, aesthetics, discourses and tactics. This is obviously no small feat, and is not limited solely to re-analysing mainstream, heterosexual, capitalist cultures – it is also necessary for those on the fringes. Subversion is not a singular event, but rather a consistently evolving process. It is far too easy to become comfortable and complacent in our understandings of ourselves and 'Other'. Every now and then, the carnival must have its cobwebs cleared away.

In order to 'fix' the carnival, we must first understand our current context. Body modifications have become near-ubiquitous in mainstream culture, highly fashionable and accessible to anyone with money and a reasonable pain tolerance (Sweetman, 1999: 51). Some theorists (De Mello, 2000: 36) in particular are concerned that the mainstream appropriation of body modification (tattoos in particular) has led to the commodification of a formerly marginal practice, altering the symbolic resistance to mainstream culture that marked bodies had previously represented. While it is understandable that one may feel frustrated at the cultural hi-jacking of what was once a meaningful, marginal practice, the normalisation of body modification within mainstream culture may be viewed in a more positive light when one considers the significant cultural shift that has allowed for practices like tattooing and piercing to become so commonplace. In describing early 20<sup>th</sup> century conceptualisations of tattooing, Braunberger (2000) provides a historical context of tattooing that illustrates the enormous change in social attitudes towards body modifications that has occurred in the past century (particularly for women). Having once been considered as indicative of an exoticised, primitive nature, sexual deviancy or of criminal inclinations, the now-fashionable nature of tattoos and piercings indicates a level of success on behalf of those that have used body

modification as a form of social subversion. The mainstream acceptability of tattoos and piercings suggesting that they have taken on newer, more positive associations that eschew former pathologising stereotypes (Pitts, 2003: 12).

Nevertheless, mainstream appropriation of subcultural body art has led to the development of newer and more extreme forms of body modification in order to further push the boundaries of bodily adornment and alteration and continue to critique conventional body norms. Procedures such as tongue-splitting, sclera tattooing, bifurcation of the penis and other bodily extremities, the insertion of beads or metal implants under the skin, reshaping or outright removing body parts and consistently larger and larger gauged piercings are becoming increasingly popular amongst many body modifiers who wish to remain distinct from those that have 'non-subcultural' body modifications (Thomas, 2012: 9). While one certainly may applaud the creativity (and pain tolerances) of these individuals as they attempt to push what boundaries appear to be left, it is entirely possible that even these 'extreme' forms of body modification may also eventually become normalised, if not commodified. There is no guarantee that an aesthetic will always remain underground or counter-cultural. This is symptomatic not only of fashion, but of a cultural obsession with 'uniqueness', and an emphasis upon individualistic differentiation from the mainstream (Sweetman, 1999: 57). Russo (1994: 76) notes that the popularity of 'freaking out' during the 1960's had little significance to those that were already marginalised, 'freak culture' being more an exercise of individualistic self-expression and cultural contrarianism rather than a cohesive form of social deconstruction. The same may be said of the popularity of body modification. It would appear that the on-going normalisation of increasingly unusual forms of body modification combined with a post-modern obsession with 'uniqueness' has resulted in a carnival not of Bahktian origin, but rather one imagined by Baudrillard (cited in Tseelon, 1995): an endlessly self-



referential parade of signs with no significance or meanings attached save their own existence, and the assumption of an appreciative (or scandalised) audience (Sweetman, 1999: 53). Although the carnival was constructed by Bakhtin as a form of demonstrative utopia, he was highly critical of more conservative imaginings of the carnival by theorists that sought to valorise the community of a bygone age (Gardiner, 1992:32)<sup>xi</sup>. This nostalgia is antithetical to the nature of the carnival, which is defined by the parodying of contemporary social hierarchies and symbols as a form of subversion and demonstration of possibility. To limit the carnival to the social auspices of a specific time or context is to calcify its discursive potential, 'freezing' it within a limited cultural context that restricts its powers of suggestion and critique (Gardiner, 1992: 33). In order for the carnival to function as it should – that is, as a constantly signifying, egalitarian site of social parody - it is crucial that its inhabitants not cling to the comforting edifice of outdated ideas and symbols (Mouffe, 1995: 264). Therefore, it is evident that the onus must be upon the nature of subculture itself, rather than upon its varied visual signifiers. Gottschalk (1993: 369) maintains that within an increasingly pluralistic culture, it is no longer necessary to cling so fastidiously to the 'pure' (yet often clichéd) styles and bodily signifiers of the past, for their subjective meanings cannot be expected to remain consistent with the passage of time and societal change. Thus, while one may resent the 'theft' of subcultural icons and practices by mainstream fashion, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these signifiers were already ephemeral – and that the expression of 'Otherness' must not be mired in adherence to antique practices.

Social identities are frequently determined by those that we wish to exclude – the 'Others' (Mouffe, 1995: 262-263). This research has largely used this term to refer to those that are systematically marginalised by dominant structures of social, political and economic power by virtue of their stigmatised or deviant status. The term 'Othering' is largely understood by

sociologists in terms of oppressive behaviours perpetrated by agents of social power against vulnerable minorities. This is most appropriate when discussing broad social, political and economic hierarchies of power and privilege, but it is also relevant to examine the term on a micro-level. Mouffe (1995:262) describes the establishment of points of difference between identities and cultures in terms of opposition; in the genesis of a new form of being or doing, there will inevitably be an 'Other' who is constructed as being diametrically opposed to one's own culture. Those that are designated in such an oppositional fashion will be imagined as an enemy and therefore ostracised (Mouffe, 1995: 263).

The previous chapter discussed the dangers inherent in self-segregation: a process influenced by the resentment felt by stigmatised individuals towards the mainstream (Becker, 1963: 97). The process of the 'ghetto-isation' of subcultures may lead to the solidification of 'us' and 'them' mentalities that maintain cultural segregation based on the erroneous, harmful notion that difference is dangerous, which can then have implications within the subculture itself. Pitts (2003: 195) explains the link between subcultural stratification and the calcification of identity in terms of its gendered implication; a 'vision' of a uniform and wholly isolated subcultural community frequently contributes to an idealised definition of what constitutes an appropriate means of expression and embodiment. This idealisation legitimatises myths that essentialise gender and sexuality, potentially marginalising those that do not conform to specific standards of 'male', 'female', 'queer' or 'straight.'

By recognising the fluid and socially constructed nature of the self, it is possible not only to eschew out-dated discourses and aesthetics, but also to learn to view 'Others' as adversaries, rather than enemies (Mouffe, 1995: 263). In this circumstance, Mouffe's use of the term 'adversary' suggests a rival rather than a maliciously opposing force: an individual or group

that presents a disruptive or contradictory standpoint. This is an important distinction in terms of interpreting difference. By allowing for communication and co-operation between subcultural communities, new forms of dialogue and critique may form, presenting newer intersectional representations of culture, identity and resistance. But simple inter-group co-operation does not equal social change. If a particular form of subcultural representation is to transcend, question or destabilise social norms, there must be an intent to signify some form of deviation from an accepted norm (Winge, 2012: 50). This process is rarely without some form of consequence; social ostracism, poverty, physical or emotional harm, loss of freedom - it is risky. In this context, the meaning of 'risk' is twofold. Firstly, it implies that an expression of subcultural intent may incur the derision, ridicule and danger associated with stigmatised behaviours or aesthetics (in this case, non-normatively modified bodies), and thus must be taken into consideration when deliberately marking oneself as distinct from the mainstream (Russo, 1994: 22). But 'risk' does not necessarily have to imply negativity and the sacrifice of social cohesion. Most significantly, risk also represents the unknown, the unexplored and that which is potentially unsafe or challenging. Russo (1994: 11) describes the nature of risk as '*leaving room for chance*', referencing Foucault's observation of the power of normalisation upon the individual by placing 'objective' measures of difference and gaps upon a culture and individuals (Foucault, 1979: 184). The potential of risk taking lies in the ability to make mistakes, to experiment and to 'play' with the possibilities that arise when one abandons the stifling comfort of the routine (Russo, 1994: 11).

Risk presents a viable alternative to the deeply limiting notions of 'normal' or 'abnormal', focussing instead upon that which is not yet immediately apparent or uniform, rather than simplistic contradiction or disobedience. By placing emphasis upon the explorative potential of risk and re-invention, we may outgrow our need for the comforting, yet limiting certainty

of the 'progress' promised by Bakhtin's fictional carnival, or demanded by essentialised notions of 'us' and 'them' (Russo, 1994: 13). Russo's theorisation of 'risk' echoes de Certeau's aforementioned 'social-bricolage' – the manifestation of autonomous discourses and ways of being out of pre-existing and potentially oppressive ideologies (De Certeau, 1984: 31). This 'bric-a-brac' of re-formed and re-appropriated ideas and practices is immensely valuable in terms of its creative, rather than destructive implications; its playful transcendence of social norms allows for the re-distribution of socially powerful imagery and practices in a manner that is empowering, rather than exclusive. By giving stigmatised individuals the opportunity to re-interpret social signs according to their own needs and proclivities (rather than the enforced binaries of the false carnival), it is no longer necessary to 'pick a side' – we are free to conceptualise aesthetics and identity that transcend social stratification (De Certeau, 1984: 31). Here we may extrapolate Bartkey's (1990: 42-47) call for a 'revolutionary female aesthetic' in a broader sense. By exploring that which is 'risky' and comprised of mismatched components of old 'ways of being', it is possible to creatively navigate the space between fashionable, heteronormative beauty ideals and contrarian opposition (Braunberger, 2000: 2). This practice should not apply only to bodily aesthetics, but also to our understandings of identity: by recognising the fluidity and subjective nature of identity, we may more successfully create ways to express and to communicate across communal boundaries (Mouffe, 1995: 261). Any subversive or counter-cultural movements and individuals must make a decision: either precariously position themselves on an imagined spectrum between 'freak' and 'norm' (and all the various dichotomous baggage that those terms may suggest), or – as Russo advocates – they may take a leap of faith. By exploring that which is abjected in its obscurity (rather than its opposition), we are granted an opportunity for transcendence that is limited solely by our imaginations and courage.

Perhaps it is our over-emphasis on being 'subversive' that undermines the entire process. Instead of focussing on what we wish to defy, or what we wish to distance ourselves from, we must instead imagine what it is we wish to create in its stead (Mouffe, 1995: 263). This means stepping out into uncharted territory and 'making-do' as De Certeau would have it; creating newer, better meanings out of the edifice of the out-dated and the irrelevant (De Certeau, 1984: 30-31). This ability is not limited to the lofty realms of theory or academia. Simply being visibly and publicly marked in an unusual way is a form of communication, body modification being a constantly evolving means of outwardly signifying (and galvanising) one's identity (Sullivan, 2001: 17). Earlier chapters detailed the potential stigmatisation that may result from this non-verbal communication, but I believe that the positive suggestive power of body modifications warrants further investigation. The ability to playfully disrupt (rather than simply confront) normative assumptions is significant. Shildrick (2001: 78-79) maintains that non-normative morphology should not be seen as an indicator of degeneracy, social isolation or deviance, but rather as a viable, alternative way of being. In presenting new possibilities for bodily and gendered expression, body modifications call into question the 'normalness' of what had been previously taken for granted. Indeed, for many within mainstream culture, the acquiescence to conventional norms is not necessarily borne out of a malicious fear of the 'Other', but rather an ignorance of its existence. The visibility and great diversity of body modification techniques provides a veritable cornucopia of creative potential and possibility, subverting the 'everyday' to make room for the risky, the liminal and the re-appropriated (De Certeau, 1984: 30-32).

It is this opportunity for re-creation that has defined much of my research process. What was initially a deeply defensive account of the 'uniquely' subversive practices of body modification has become a far more personal interrogation of the nature of subculture, and

what it means to be different. In understanding the fluid nature of identity, I have been able to analyse not only my own motivations for marking myself, but also how this is relevant on a broader social scale. The allure of the carnival is wholly understandable for those that do not wish to conform to arbitrary social norms, and the camaraderie of self-made-freaks is a comfort to the stigmatised and the strange. This is why it is frightening to relinquish the safety of a stable and fixed identity, for this implies the loss of our beloved defensiveness. Without enemies to compare ourselves to – who are we as individuals?

Thus, between the theories of Russo (1994), De Certeau (1984), Bahktin (1965), Mouffe (1995), and Pitts (2003), emerges a sense of necessity: We must create new ways of thinking and being from the remnants of the old, eschewing outdated and repressive binaries of identity and aesthetics. Revel in monstrosity instead of fearing it. Utilise difference as a tool rather than a weapon. These responses raise a broader slew of questions such as: How to facilitate open dialogue between apparently opposing subcultures? Where is the distinction between subversive, social critique and shock tactics? In terms of body modification, the next decade to come will likely see innovations in both society and technology that influence completely new styles and ways of understanding the body: Donna Haraway theorised the emergence of new conceptions of gender with the onset of technology (Brook, 1999:142) which Sullivan (2009) expanded upon in *Queering the Technologisation of the Body*. The development of new technologies opens the door to a myriad of new ways of thinking and identifying; this thesis constitutes only a tiny portion of a growing body of literature investigating the potential for social critique through subversive embodiment, and hopefully my contribution will serve as a springboard to further investigation of our re-creation of ourselves.

True autonomy and originality are luxuries that have been long since lost to us, if they were ever possible. But this is not such a loss - the carnival is not well suited to self-isolation. We cannot all be monsters, but perhaps with a little effort, we may instead become chameleons.

## Appendices

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- <sup>i</sup> Murphy, David, J & Ash (1980) Southern Studios.
- <sup>ii</sup> As initially described by Emile Durkheim as ‘social facts’ – norms determined by popular consensus that provide stability and structure to a given society (Pluviez, 2012: 430).
- <sup>iii</sup> Stafford and Scott (1986: 80) provide a useful, definition of stigma that provides a more coherent link to Becker’s conceptualisation of deviance, being ‘*A characteristic of persons that is contrary to the norm of a social unit*’. In this instance, a social norm is described as a shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time.
- <sup>iv</sup> It is important to remember that while there may be many individuals that intentionally self-identify with distinct community of body modifiers (artists, models, performers and so on) that form a specific body modification subculture, not all those with body modifications will identify as being specifically part of that subculture alone – many belonging to multiple social subgroups that utilise some form of body modification in varying degrees such as Goth or punk culture, skinheads and bikers, BDSM and fetish communities, as well as Queer and/or Feminist advocates (Winge, 2012: 7-8).
- <sup>v</sup> Fink, J & Cranor, J. (2014) *Welcome to Nightvale*. Podcast. Sourced September 20<sup>th</sup> 2014.



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vi This is related to Edward Lemert's description of 'secondary deviance' – whereby an 'Othered' person utilises their defiant behaviour as a means of self-defense; attacking the overt and covert problems created by society's responses to rule-breaking and non-conformity. The original causes of the deviation recede in importance to the disapproval of the community (cited in Sumner, 1994: 187).

vii Goffman (1959: 3-4) described human interaction as a series of near-theatrical 'presentations' that will differ according to social context. This form of symbolic interaction will be interpreted by others who will form ideas and interpretations of them based upon dominant cultural ideologies.

viii Becker (1963: 14-17) maintained that deviance was a relational process (rather than a specific attribute) that involved the attachment of negative stereotypes or 'labels' to individuals by agents of social power, thus contributing to their status as 'deviant'.

ix Tactics are methods of social and political manoeuvring determined by the absence of power in which they are contextualised, representing the formation of newer practices and discourses out of pre-existing ideas and methods. De Certeau (1984: 31) theorised them as a means by which those without access to social power and institutions may affect political and discursive change.

x Carter, A (1986) *Nights at the Circus*. Penguin Books. London.

xi Bahktin differentiated between the terms 'grotesque' and 'carnavalesque' – the former

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being indicative of a medieval tradition of social parody, whereby social norms and sacred symbols were replaced with vulgar, blasphemous displays and ‘topsy-turvy’ revelry in yearly celebrations (Russo, 1994: 61). The grotesque is conceptualised as the opposite of the classical, unchanging and rational body idealised by the ‘high’ culture of the Enlightenment: representing that which is abjected, animal, irregular and fluid, therefore representative of change and transformation. The grotesque is associated with the ‘low’ culture of the carnival (Russo, 1994: 8).

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The following is a copy of the email approving the ethics clearance necessary for the completion of the primary research of this thesis.

Ethics Application Ref: (5201400365) - Final Approval

Dear Dr Blatterer,

Re: 'Freak?' The social politics of Body Modification: Gender, Culture and Stigma'

Thank you for your recent correspondence.  
The Committee requested two small additional amendments:

(i) Interview questions: The following question is not sufficiently neutral: 'I've noticed something of a gendered divide within body modification communities. Do you think that there is still a difference between 'male' modifications and 'female' modifications?'  
You indicate that you want to be sure not to pre-judge or presuppose anything in the interview process (and you want to deploy grounded theory methodology). That is certainly appropriate, and for that reason the Committee requests that you remove the first sentence from this question, and also the word 'still' from the second sentence.

(ii) Info and Consent Sheet: Although not entirely in the standard format, the current form can be approved but only once you have included a brief introduction to your research (i.e. focus/ purpose/ aims) at the beginning. Please email an amended copy for the file.

Otherwise the amendments have been carefully made and the application is much stronger as a result.

On the condition that you make the two changes listed above, your response has addressed the issues raised by the Faculty of Arts Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval of the above application has been granted, effective 17/04/2014. This email constitutes ethical approval only.

If you intend to conduct research out of Australia you may require extra insurance and/or local ethics approval. Please contact Maggie Feng, Tax and Insurance Officer from OFS Business Services, on x1683 to advise further. This research meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The National Statement is available at the following web site:

[http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/\\_files\\_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/e72.pdf)

The following personnel are authorised to conduct this research:

Dr Harry Blatterer, Ms Katharine Emily Hawkins

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