The Artful Stigma

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Abstract

Most forms of body alteration, from dressing to the most
extreme forms of soft tissue body modification, are
mechanisms of social communication that have clearly defined
and broadly understood aesthetic and cultural meanings. The
presence of disabled and tattooed people, however, violate
social norms and call into question basic cultural
conceptions of the body in Western society. The author
maintains that tattooed and disabled people have much in
common. Historically, both have been exhibited as freaks and
been the subject of derision and pity. Likewise, the last
decade has witnessed sweeping changes in both communities
and because of this represent an ideal metaphor for
understanding core elements of human culture. That is, they
represent society reduced to its simplest expression and
highlight the fact they are in a constant battle against
social and personal invisibility.

For the past 20 years I have used a wheelchair and,
according to my six-year-old son, I am "one cool wheelchair
dude." My daily social experiences are curious and echo many of
the autobiographical vignettes recorded by John Hockenberry in
his insightful memoir *Moving Violations*. Being disabled in
American society has created many social barriers, given me a
stigmatized identity in the eyes of some, and been an advantage
in certain social situations. My disability has created a social
position that is both aggravating and enlightening.[1] Social
anonymity is virtually impossible. When I went out with my son,
especially when he was an infant, I regularly noticed solicitous
stares and smiles. As he has grown older, however, those looks
and comments have changed significantly. On any given day
unsolicited remarks made to us range from, "Riding on Daddy's lap
looks like fun" to "When you grow up you need to take care of

your crippled Daddy." Here I can not help but applaud my son's response to the latter was "You are an ignorant bigot."

I believed my unique position in American society was as permanent as my paralysis, a fact that was at once depressing and empowering. Yet I was wrong. For the past couple of years I have been conducting research at tattoo studios in the New York metropolitan area. My interest was piqued by a dedicated student who wrote a term paper on tattooing. Her interest was sincere and she wrote an excellent paper. In my office when handing back her work at the end of the semester I felt I had established enough of a rapport to ask if she had a tattoo. She appeared to be the last person on the face of the earth who would have a tattoo. She was petite, nondescript, and dressed very conservatively, preferring to wear loose slacks, baggy shirts and usually tied her long brown hair in a bun. After my request she closed my office door turned her back to me and raised her shirt to reveal a tattoo that covered her entire back.

I was shocked by the enormity of the tattoo and its beauty. This was the first "back piece" I had ever seen. The tattoo was of traditional Japanese design. This is characterized by a limited number of motifs - fish, water, lotus flowers - that are quite large, often covering the entire body and are well planned out, sometimes the product of a single artist.[2] Despite the fact I experience bigotry first hand, I realized that day I too had preconceived ideas about the "type" of people who had tattoos, i.e., prisoners, gang members, people in the military and bikers. Inspired by this experience, and by the fact my son's best baby sitter had just gotten a tattoo, I decided to try and understand the reasons why young people, in particular those of college age, were getting tattoos in record numbers. I was especially interested in why women were attracted to this phenomenon. I was also intrigued by the similarities between the stigma associated with those who were tattooed and those who were disabled.

My first foray to a tattoo studio left an indelible impression. I had never heard the high pitch buzz of the tattoo machine and was taken aback by the sites and sounds of a tattoo studio: the flash (drawings of suggested tattoos prominently hanging from every wall), music, smoke, and heavily tattooed people working and milling about. I felt as though I was being exposed to another culture for the first time, one filled with exotic sites, sounds, and people totally unfamiliar. I truly felt like Bronislaw Malinowski, marooned in a place with people I hardly knew existed. When my initial shock wore off, and as I visited more tattoo studios, my respect for tattooists and the vast majority of people becoming tattooed grew immeasurably. Yet at the same time I was becoming increasingly frustrated in that I did not feel entirely welcome.[3] No one was ever unfriendly, but by the same token none were open. I had assumed my stigmatized identity as a disabled individual would provide me with an immediate understanding or brotherhood with those who shared a similarly stigmatized identity. I was obviously wrong.

Eventually I met a tattooist whom I liked and with whom I

seemed to have a rapport with who upon hearing my concerns
suggested I either get a tattoo or grow my hair long and pierce
my ear. He said I looked too conservative, that I looked like
someone who would work for a town authority interested in closing
the studio. The reservations on the part of tattooists were well
founded. Local municipalities in Westchester County, N.Y. where I
live have in some cases aggressively passed bans on tattoo
studios. Although these bans are dubious legally, they
effectively discourage studios from opening.

I followed this tattooist's advice. I pierced my ear and as
my hair grew longer I learned a number of things, some trite
others significant. As to the latter, the implications of having
long hair for a man in New York are social.[4] Once my hair grew
truly long, for instance long enough to put into a pony tail, a
curious thing happened. No one asked me why I was disabled, a
question that was routinely asked when I had short hair or a
traditional masculine haircut. People were far more curious about
why I had long hair. In fact, since I have had long hair I cannot
recall a single individual who has asked me about my disability,
yet countless individuals have buzzed me about why I have long
hair.

Since my hair has grown long the stigma of my disability has
been masked. I say masked for I am still disabled and that fact
remains unchanged. What has changed is the direction of society's
gaze. Rather than looking down upon my body sitting in a
wheelchair my long hair seems to be near irresistible to stare
at. By being so different, by being a male with long hair, by
tying that hair in a pony tail, I have seduced society into
staring at an aspect of my body that is totally different than
what was once stared at. I wish I could say I knew this would
happen but that would be dishonest. More to the point, this
social phenomenon fascinates me. Why is having long hair more
socially problematic than being disabled?

Social Impact of Body Modification

In growing my hair long, much like those who are modifying
themselves in a nontraditional manner, i.e., getting a tattoo or
piercing, I too am violating conventional norms. As Ted Polhemus
has noted:

> ... because of the fashion-conscious, pro change nature of
> the West since the Renaissance ours is a world where to have
> permanent body decoration such as a tattoo or a collection
> of facial piercings is, ipso facto, to be different from the
> norm" (Polhemus 1988:50).

Many cultures stigmatize those who deviate from the norm or,
at best, pressure them to "fix" what is perceived as deviant.
This pressure, identified by Leslie Fielder as "the tyranny of
the normal," is keenly felt by a wide variety of people whose
bodies are somehow different. Those who are stigmatized, and here
I use the term in a Goffmanesque framework, have no choice in the

matter. For instance, disabled people do not choose to become disabled while those who are tattooed made a conscious decision to deviate from societal norms. Obviously there are differences between the stigma encountered by the disabled and the tattooed, however my focus is on what Goffman identified as "one of the primal scenes of sociology" (Goffman 1963:13). That is, what do "normals" and the "stigmatized" do when they come into immediate contact with one another? For such encounters reveal not so much about the "other" but about societal conceptions or, perhaps more accurately, misconceptions about those who do not fit within the norm.

Disability, tattoos, piercing, and even my long hair all underscore the argument that culture is inscribed on our bodies. A host of scholars have examined the connection between the body and society. Among those worth noting are Mary Douglas (1966), Michel Foucault (1980), Elaine Scarry (1985) and Emily Martin (1992).[5] Given the strong reactions irreversible body modification provokes, its antiquity, and central place culturally, one would think it would merit more attention than it has for none of the aforementioned scholars have delved into the subject. This is odd given the fact body modification is ripe with cultural symbolism. According to Arnold Rubin, there is a tremendous gap in the literature on the meaning and significance of irreversible forms of body modification. Rubin maintains body art, tattooing, cicatrizations, piercings etc. are not bizarre forms of deviance peripheral to society. Instead body art represents what Rubin suggests is:

> the quintessential imposition of conceptual-cultural-order upon nature. Given their heavy loading of cultural values, the media of irreversible body art are typically taken for granted by insiders and arise strong (predominately negative) feelings among outsiders - usually fascination blended with distaste or even repugnance. Institutionalized repression is one frequent reaction (Rubin 1992:16).

Although the cultural symbolism and institutional repression of tattooing is an interesting source of theoretical discussion, it still leaves unanswered the question as to why so many people get tattoos.[6] Everything involved with getting them, the pain, the mixture of blood and needles, the exhibitionism, the permanence, is part of what makes the art and practice so intriguing. Some argue that tattoos, with their primitive associations, signify a desire to escape modernity (Taylor 1995). Others such as Rosenblatt (1997) argue tattoos are indicative of a quest for knowledge of another culture. Perhaps, but I believe there is much more to tattooing than primitivism. Indeed, my observations over the last year at various tattoo studios in the New York City area have convinced me that people are unaware or simply not concerned with the cultural symbolism being etched on their bodies.

Tribal or neotribal tattoos are particularly popular among

college age people, yet I have observed few are knowledgeable about their cultural significance. For instance I met one very bright and articulate young woman who had a large Kwakiutl sisiyutl or double headed serpent tattooed on her thigh and buttocks. When I asked her why she chose the design she was unaware it had anything to do with the Kwakiutl or the Northwest Coast in general.

Most forms of body alteration, from dressing to the most extreme forms of soft tissue body modification, are mechanisms of social communication that have clearly defined and broadly understood aesthetic and cultural meanings. It is my belief that young people, such as in the example above, have rejected Western cultural biases about the nature and adornment of the body. They are also creating a new set of cultural and social meanings ascribed to the body. To borrow the slogan from Venus Modern Body Arts piercing studio in the East Village of New York City, people are "redefining beauty." Amidst an overwhelming sense that they cannot "change the world," individuals are changing what they have power over, their own bodies. According to one individual:

> My tattoos are an affirmation of my cultural independence. You have them carried out on your body in the full knowledge that this is your body to have and enjoy while you're here. You have fun with it - nobody else can control what you do with it unless you let them. It is one of the few remaining freedoms we have. I was tattooed as an act of personal choice and as a demonstration of my social independence (In Robinson 1998:197).

In part, the views quoted above are why *Modern Primitives* has had such a profound impact on young people. Not for the faint of heart, this text contains visual images of tattooing, multiple piercings, ritual scarification, and interviews with the foremost figures in the body arts. For those interested in using their bodies as a site of self-expression *Modern Primitives* provided them with role models and archetypes for previously forbidden or stigmatized forms of body modification. Since its publication in 1989 *Modern Primitives* has been reprinted six times and there are currently more than 60,000 copies in print (Musafar 1996:327). Obviously this book touched a nerve among those interested in modifying their bodies. In much the same way, Robert Murphy's The *Body Silent* deeply touched disabled people because it helped them realize there was nothing wrong with them, that the social problems they encountered were not their fault. Thus both texts are seminal in that they demonstrate that the history and art of tattooing and the social position of the disabled are a unique American cultural phenomenon.

Since the late 1980s the demographics and imagery of tattoos has undergone profound change and reflect the economic, political, and social upheaval that has taken place. Tattooing has become a way for people to alter their appearance that can be of significant importance to the individual and can publicly

express a rite of passage as well as break accepted cultural codes. As such, tattoos are a primal form of self-expression and a reflection of cultural reality. Body modification therefore impacts not only the individual modifying their body, the person performing the modification itself, but those who will observe the change as well. In part, people are using their bodies to reject the homogenization of popular capitalist culture.

In an era in which large multinational corporations dominate the socioeconomic landscape, tattoos can not be mass-produced and are an intensely personal expression of one's self. I have had many college students tell me time and again that the reason they chose to get a tattoo was due to the fact they wanted to "have something of their very own," i.e., their lives have been marked by a never ending sea of change and they crave permanence. According to one such individual:

> Nothing in my life has had any lasting power. My parents are divorced, when I was a kid I moved from house to house and school to school. My father worked for a large company and after they were bought by an even larger company he was fired or what they politely call downsizing. My Mother can barely make ends meet and I have learned you can not buy anything from a car to a toaster oven that is not preprogrammed to break or become obsolete. For once in my life I wanted something that would be with me forever, an expression of who I was as a human being; something that I would not see in the Gap or on another person. I wanted a tattoo because it could not be duplicated and had a lot of significance to me (Personal Interview).

In my visits to tattoo and piercing studios I have been impressed by the emotional and physical openness of the clientele. The focus is clearly applied to the art being put on the body rather than a voyeuristic glance at the opposite sex.[7] Although acutely sensitive to a woman's concern for privacy, I have seen women walk to a full length mirror with little clothes on in a tattoo studio and observed that the gaze from the males in the room is directed squarely on the tattoo being applied.

In my research on tattooing, the women I have spoken to have all suggested one reason why they became tattooed had to do with control. Just as society stares at my unusually long hair, the willful act of modifying one's body for a female in American society is not a passive but a deliberate and successful attempt to direct the gaze of society where they want it directed. As Margo DeMello has pointed out, tattoos for women are a "political as well as personal statement in that heavily and publicly tattooed female bodies are an attempt to liberate the objectified body, liberating it with alternative forms of power" (DeMello 1995:79).

It is for this reason that attempts to explain the rise of tattooing and piercing among women with some sort of pathology or an anti-feminist backlash are unsuccessful.[8] All those I have

spoken with who are either pierced in a nontraditional location or tattooed report pleasurable results and sensations. Of course the experience of getting a tattoo is painful as are piercings but the end result is not. In fact, I have found most women I have spoken to who have become pierced or tattooed do so to a body part that is already pleasing to them. Margot Mifflin, in *Bodies of Subversion*, proposes some reasons why women get tattoos. I would maintain the following quote applies not only to women but also to many who decide to get tattooed.

> They trumpet angry independence and fierce commitment. They herald erotic power and purge sexual shame. They're stabs at permanence in an age of transience and marks of individualism in a culture of mass production. Collectively, they compose a secret history of women grappling with body politics from the Gilded Age to the present - women whose intensely personal yet provocatively public art poses a complicated challenge to the meaning of feminine beauty (Mifflin 1997:178).

The Methodological Significance and Cultural Identity of Disability

Let me return to my original observation that my own long hair has affected my social status among mainstream society and among those within the body art and modification community. This point was recently highlighted when a friend had a difficult piercing done at a piercing studio I have often visited. During the course of her experience she brought up my research and asked a well-known piercer if he knew me. In the past virtually everyone who described me would invariably mention the fact I use a wheelchair. Yet, in this case, the individual in question, after a pause in which he thought over the question asked, "Does he have really long hair?" Clearly, something about this exchange is socially significant.

Historically, the tattooed and disabled have much in common. They have been exhibited as freaks and been the object of derision and pity.[9] Throughout their lives they have existed on the border between public and private, aberrant and acceptable, conspicuous and discreet. The last decade has witnessed sweeping changes in both communities: the disabled have fought hard to pass the Americans With Disability Act (ADA) in an effort to provide a weapon against discrimination. Although the Supreme Court has too often failed to enforce the ADA, it remains one of the few legal recourses available to disabled people. The tattoo community, on the other hand, has experienced veritable explosion of interest and unprecedented gentrification. According to the U.S. News and World Report tattoo studios were the sixth fastest growing retail business in the United States - only internet and paging services, bagels, computer, and cellular phone stores experienced more growth (Lord 1997).

What I have discovered is that both groups face a daily battle to express their freedom and individuality. Like the

disabled, tattooed people invariably provoke a strong reaction among those who are not tattooed. On any given day a tattooed person can be perceived as beautiful or stigmatized. Lifelong and unchanging, the tattooed are marked for life both individually and socially. For those who are not tattooed it is this concept that is so hard to fathom. In much the same way, the disabled are a societal lightening rod - they elicit a primeval response which touches the core of who we are as people and a society. The presence of disabled and tattooed people violate social norms and call into question basic cultural mores in Western society. As such, they are an ideal metaphor for understanding core elements of human culture. That is, they represent society reduced to its simplest expression and highlight the fact that, like the tattooed, disabled people are in a constant battle against social and personal invisibility.

Living life in such a social situation, whether it is by choice or happenstance, has a profound impact on the concept of self. Robert Murphy (1987:108) has argued that all disabled people are affected by four major changes in their consciousness: "lowered self esteem; the invasion and occupation of thought by physical deficits; a strong undercurrent of anger; the acquisition of a new, total and undesirable identity." Murphy's observation that disability is a social malady was a major factor in the establishment of disability studies. More importantly, however, it was a liberating theoretical perspective for disabled people in the United Sates. The reaction disabled people had to the *Body Silent* was especially gratifying to Murphy who wrote in the second edition that the response to what he had written was overwhelming. Moreover, it was not until he began to receive phone calls and letters from disabled people that he realized he had imparted the understanding that:

> the avoidances and even the outright hostility so often manifested toward them by the non-disabled are not the natural products of their own deficits but, rather, expressions of deficiencies of perspective and character of those who so behave - in short, it is their problem, not ours" (Murphy 1990:vi-vii).

Although Murphy's book provided the theoretical groundwork for understanding the social significance of disability, his work is now dated. Since the publication of the *Body Silent* a plethora of books have been published about disability related issues all of which highlight the fact that the cultural rift between the disabled and non-disabled remains immense. As a cultural anthropologist, in my research about people who are tattooed and in my life as a disabled individual I have found it impossible to remain unbiased - an anthropological ideal in terms of fieldwork and cultural relativism. Anthropology's long history of cultural relativism has come under fire from within and outside of the discipline - and for good reason - as it contains an implicit moral relativism.

Anthropology has in the past been used to oppress others and too often been the handmaiden of dominant Western cultural ideology. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, one of the leaders for an engaged approach to anthropology has argued it is morally necessary to denounce such practices and try to transform anthropology from an objective natural science into a critical anthropology which will help change the world.

The best example of such an activist approach is Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping*. In a significant departure from traditional fieldwork, Scheper-Hughes argued cultural relativism was no longer theoretically or methodologically appropriate. This is especially true because the fodder of anthropological discourse has traditionally examined disenfranchised groups that have been subjected to the basest forms discrimination, violence, and domestic intolerance. Calling for an empirically grounded ethnography that is morally committed and engaged, Scheper-Hughes forcefully argued:

> If we cannot begin to think about cultural institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak or useless. The problem is, of course, how to articulate a standard, or divergent standards, for the beginnings of a moral and an ethical reflection on cultural practices that takes into account but does not privilege our own cultural presuppositions (Scheper-Hughes 1995:21).

For Scheper-Hughes, anthropology is a field of knowledge and a field of action. The sort of anthropological engagement she envisions has met stiff resistance among her colleagues who are mindful of how anthropological scholarship has been used in the past by the West to exploit indigenous people anthropologists have traditionally studied. How then can one stand idle - especially in Scheper-Hughes' case when the people she studied - Brazilian women whose children were dying in shocking numbers - were suffering? After all, the people who are the subject of anthropological discourse provide us with a livelihood.

What Scheper-Hughes' critics fail to take into consideration is the obligation we have to those we are currently studying. Anthropologists are accountable to not only record what they see but must also weigh very heavily what their response is. Does an anthropologist standby and do nothing when the people he or she is studying are suffering, being exploited, or put out of business?

In my own research I have not been able to remain dispassionate nor do I want to. Like Murphy before me, I feel I have the moral obligation to not only observe but to act. Elsewhere I characterized this as the need to go against the grain and disrupt expected academic roles (Peace 1997). Thus, militant activist ethnography can be a form of resistance to dominate ideology and be politically effective. For instance, as already mentioned, when a nearby town tried to pass a local law

prohibiting a tattoo studios from opening, and closing the lone studio that was already operating, I wrote letters to the mayor and spoke out in support of the tattoo community at town hall meetings. Similarly, at public school board meetings and at Cub Scout councils I have forcefully argued for the inclusion of physically and mentally disabled children. The public school system and the Cub Scouts are two systems that have a long history of discrimination and have shunned not only the disabled but all those who are different (Peace ms).

Conclusion

    Although there are no texts written within disability studies that embrace the sort of approach encouraged by Scheper-Hughes, there are a number of fine biographical texts about the social significance of disability and the impact it has on one's cultural identity. A few are written by anthropologists such as Murphy, but most are written by non-anthropologists.[10] These biographies exhibit a wide range of views, yet one text reflects not only my personal experience as a disabled person but the cultural perception of disability in American society. Here I refer to John Hockenberry's insightful memoir *Moving Violations*. Although easily categorized as a biography, Hockenberry's book is really a series of related vignettes about disability. It accurately demonstrates that no matter how successful a disabled person may be within their chosen profession, within mainstream society they remain socially stigmatized. It is this paradox that Hockenberry eloquently explores: knowing that one's life is radically changed physically by a disability but that the real change, the one that dramatically alters social interaction and the trajectory of life, is social.

    After reading Hockenberry, and in conjunction with Scheper-Hughes' theoretical perspective, I realized there was nothing wrong with being a rebel. Indeed, if anything I believe every disabled and tattooed person is obligated to rebel against ignorance and prejudice. Taking pride in one's tattoos and being, "Disabled and Proud," as a popular activist poster proclaims, is the only road to social equality. Tattoos and disabled blur the dividing line between those within and outside mainstream society, a continuum that engulfs all humanity in a lifelong decent into entropy. Thus, it is not simply that others are afraid, impressed, repulsed, or bigoted but rather are social entities reflecting what they have been taught and chosen to believe.

    When confronted with the able bodied or the non-tattooed I would argue there is nothing wrong with letting people know we are sentient beings, equal in every way. Nor should we be expected to make others feel comfortable who are upset by our presence. Hence, it is our moral duty to reject ignorance and bigotry. Disabled people are different, just as the tattooed are different, and there is no need to pretend those differences do not exist.

    The inability to walk and concomitant physical problems

associated with paralysis are minor problems in comparison to the social implications of disability. It is these social obstacles that I have spent the better part of my life trying to understand, that is to get people to look past my wheelchair and see the individual sitting in it. I am not an exceptional person or a role model nor am I one to be feared or pitied or blessed or damned. Hence, like my long hair or those that are tattooed, I live a double-edged life that has been molding and shaping me, for better and worse, since I became paralyzed. It is a position that I embrace and abhor at the same time. Accordingly, there is an irony in my paralysis that is an metaphor for the duality of my life - my legs, which I can no longer move willing, never stop moving due to intense muscle spasticity.

Notes

1. According to Robert Murphy, disabled people are liminal members of American society. In *The Body Silent*, Murphy was the first anthropologist to analyze the social situation of the disabled in American society. For a general discussion of disability studies see Davis 1997.

2. For a discussion of Japanese style tattooing see Ritchie and Buruma 1980; for a general compendium of artistic styles of tattooing see Ferguson and Proctor (1998).

3. My most humbling experience as an anthropologist occurred early in my research. I was speaking with a tattooist whom I assumed knew nothing about anthropology. During the course of our conversation I paraphrased Levi-Strauss in a condescending fashion. The tattooist immediately expanded upon my thought in great detail and suggested I read *Triste Tropic* in the original French edition.

4. The social implications of long hair in other parts of the United States are not significant. For instance in my experience there is no social significance to long hair in California and other parts of the Western United States.

5. It is worth noting here two recent studies that have examined female body building and the social implications of violating the norms of the Western conception of feminine beauty (Heywood 1998; Moore 1997).

6. Within the confines of New York City, tattooing was banned in 1961 due to a hepatitis B scare. The health department and New York City officials never enforced the ban but tattooists could not advertise and were forced to operate underground. During the 36 year ban on tattooing which ended in 1997 the health department had been unable to document a single case of hepatitis B transmitted by tattooing.

7. I have noticed the reactions nontraditional body modification arouses cuts across gender. I would even suggest there is a multi-gendered delight in the body that can be exaggerated to provoke a variety of responses. This is one reason why I think body modification is becoming androgynous. However,

there are some gender differences when it comes to the type and style of piercings and tattoos. For example, women are far more likely to have their belly button, eyebrow, or nose pierced and have tattoos placed on more intimate areas of the body. Generally speaking, women also get smaller tattoos. In contrast, men get tattoos placed on areas of their bodies that are prominently displayed. Men also have their nipple or nipples pierced more often than women though for different reasons. Both men and women routinely get their ears pierced, though women choose somewhat more elaborate designs.

     8. Two studies worth noting that examine tattooing from a deviant perspective include *Everything You Need to Know About the Dangers of Tattooing and Piercing* (Reybold 1996) and Armstrong (1991). The latter text is clearly judgmental and tries to scare young people by stating that tattoos and piercings are extremely painful, present a high risk of infection, and can leave permanent unwanted scars.

     9. There is a growing literature on the cultural significance of freaks particularly within cultural studies. See Cohen 1996 and Thomson 1996.

     10. Two biographies worth mentioning written by cultural anthropologists include Preston (1994) and Webster (1989). It is worth noting here there are a very small number of physically disabled anthropologists (this same point has also been made by Linton, 1998). The reasons for this are complex and have as much to do with the fact careers in higher education have traditionally been closed to disabled people as the dismal state of the academic job market.

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