

Skinning the Surface:  
Exploring the Textuality of the Skin through Figurations of  
Wounding and Healing

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## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the textuality of the skin, and how we approach and read wounds and scars. My discussion approaches the skin through the frame of surface reading to address three interconnected but seemingly disparate areas; namely American slavery, atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army, and self-mutilation. These areas all share the trope of the wound, and my approach is thus interdisciplinary in nature. I begin my discussion with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, focusing on the manner in which the extreme violence the characters suffer plays an instrumental role in their ability to reconcile themselves with their pasts. I focus specifically on the scars on Sethe's back that resemble a tree, and how this tree links all of the characters together in their desire to re-member themselves. I then move to the Lord's Resistance Army and how their mutilations of the civilian population serve a communicative function. I explore how we read images of atrocity, and how many of these images are framed and manipulated in order to garner attention. From there, I move to *Kony 2012*, the viral 'documentary' that drew the world's attention and criticism for its gross misrepresentation of Africa and its indulgence in the stereotypes that present Africans as passive victims in need of saving. Finally, I discuss the phenomenon of self-mutilation and how the cuts and scars reveal how language is rendered incapable of expressing the inner pain and suffering of cutters. Often, these wounds and scars are misinterpreted as failed suicide attempts, an interpretation which completely ignores the expression of the symptom revealed on the surface. The negative stigma attached to self-mutilation hinders communication between those who cut and those who do not. In order for communication to be successful, all preconceived notions of what self-mutilation is need to be abandoned.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis is 'n verkenning van die tekstualiteit van die vel, en hoe ons wonde en littekens benader en lees. My bespreking benader die vel deur die lens van oppervlak-analise om drie onderling verbonde dog uiteenlopende areas aan te spreek, naamlik, Amerikaanse slawerny, gruweldade wat deur die Lord's Resistance Army gepleeg is, en self-mutilasie. Dié areas deel saam die troep van die wond, en my benadering is dus interdisiplinêr van aard. My bespreking begin met Toni Morrison se *Beloved* met die fokus op die manier wat die uitermatige geweld waaraan die karakters onderwerp word 'n integrale rol speel in hul vermoë om vrede te maak met hul verledes. Ek fokus spesifiek op die littekens op Sethe se rug wat soos 'n boom lyk, en hoe dié boom al die karakters aan mekaar skakel in hul begeerte om hulself te 'her-versamel' en her-onthou. Ek beweeg dan aan na die Lord's Resistance Army en hoe hulle verminking van die burgerbevolking 'n kommunikatiewe funksie vervul. Ek verken hoe ons beelde van gruwel lees, en hoe baie van dié beelde geraam en gemanipuleer word om aandag te trek. Van daar beweeg ek aan na *Kony 2012*, die gewilde web-dokumentêr wat die wêreld se aandag en kritiek uitgelok het as gevolg van die totale wanvoorstelling wat dit van Afrika getoon het, asook die onnadenkenheid van die dokumentêr in terme van Afrikane wat as passiewe slagoffers wat redding benodig gestereotipeer word. Oplaas bespreek ek die fenomeen van self-mutilasie en hoe die snye en littekens 'n openbaring maak van die ontoereikendheid van taal om innerlike pyn en lyding van snyers uit te druk. Dikwels word die wonde en littekens verkeerd geïnterpreteer as mislukte selfmoordpogings, 'n interpretasie wat die uitdrukking van die simptome wat op die oppervalk blootgelê word ignoreer. Die negatiewe stigma wat aan self-mutilasie gekoppel word belemmer kommunikasie tussen snyers en nie-snyers. Kommunikasie kan net suksesvol wees as alle vooropgesette idees van wat self-mutilasie is agtergelaat word.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated, with love, to Adriaan Oosthuizen.

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## List of Abbreviations

HSM – Holy Spirit Movement

HSMF – Holy Spirit Mobile Forces

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

LDU – Local Defence Units

LRA – Lord's Resistance Army

NGO – Non-governmental Organisation

NRA – National Resistance Army

NRM – National Resistance Movement

SM – Self-mutilation

UPDF – Uganda People's Defence Forces

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Opening the Skin

Throughout human history, the skin has been the site of inscription for a wide variety of cultural and societal beliefs and ideologies. Cultural and social markings (tattoos, scars etc.) can be read as signifiers that speak to cultural norms and practices, religious and spiritual beliefs, rebellion, violence, mental illness, to name but a few. Marilee Strong argues that “in a thousand different societies – ancient and modern, technological and preliterate – the skin has been manipulated, decorated, scarred, revealed, hidden, tattooed, cut, and branded to communicate standing, prestige, status as a warrior or wife or slave, and attainment of adulthood. Skin communicates. Skin signals. Skin tells a story” (17). The skin is the largest of the body’s organs, and it is through the skin that we experience the world. Michel Serres argues that skin forms the basis of all our other senses; without the skin, we would be unable to feel, to hear, to see, and to smell. As he eloquently notes,

[t]he skin comprehends, explicates, exhibits, implicates the senses, island by island, on its background. They inhabit the tapestry, enter the weaving, form the canvas as much as they are formed by it. The sense haunts the skin, pass beneath it and are visible on its surface, the flowers, animals and branches of its tattooing, eyes that stud the peacock’s tail; they cross the epidermis and penetrate its most subtle secrets. (Serres 60)

Strong notes that “[e]ven while still in the womb, at less than six weeks in development, an embryo has been found to respond to a delicate touch. In a fascinating way, the skin and the brain are intimately linked because they both grow from the same embryonic cell layer, the ectoderm” (17). Skin contact between a mother and her child is essential in forming a perception of self and world, inside and outside, and also as a way of defining the boundaries of the self in relation to the world. This contact is necessary for the child to form a coherent self-image and perception of the self as separate from the world. In *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, Didier Anzieu theorises that the skin is crucial to the development of the Ego. As he notes, “[b]y Skin Ego, I mean a mental image of what the Ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body” (Anzieu 40). For Anzieu, skin and Ego are inextricably linked; the Ego cannot develop without the skin and that the body experiences the world through the skin. Anzieu argues that “[e]very psychical activity is anaclitically dependent on a biological function” and that

“[t]he Skin Ego finds its support in the various functions of the skin” (40). He then goes on to define three primary functions of the skin:

The primary function of the skin is as a sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function – which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often – is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is, moreover, an ‘inscribing surface’ for the marks left by those others. (Anzieu 40)

It is evident that the skin plays a fundamental role in personal development. Without the sense of touch that is so crucial to defining the self, we would be unable to establish the boundaries between ourselves and the world around us.

The skin is the primary site of recognition and our perception of others. Maryrose Cuskelly notes that

[o]ur skin is integral to our identity. Without it, we would be unrecognisable. Literally and figuratively, our skin defines us. [...] It is what others see when they look at us; it is what is touched when we are touched by others. It is entangled and entwined with our sense of self. The body without skin is reduced to mere flesh and bone, identity torn from it, an unmitigated horror. We cannot see the person if we cannot see the skin. (151-152)

It is clear that the skin is essential, not only to our psychic development, but also to our ability to live. When the human body is burned, or when patches of skin are removed, the breaking of the boundary between inside and outside must be closed in order for the person to survive. Skin is taken from other parts of the body to cover the exposed flesh; the body cannot survive when the boundary is kept open. As Cuskelly notes, “[b]urns inflict severe damage to blood vessels, disrupting cell walls, and causing fluids to seep out, which results in blisters and swelling. The body generates a largely uncontrolled inflammatory reaction in response to the amount of debris created by the destruction of tissue, which needs to be removed and leads to scarring. It then becomes a circular effect, with the inflammation contributing to the scar, and the scar provoking more inflammation” (197). Severe burn victims who have lost large parts of their skin have also lost a part of their identities. Consider a burn victim who has suffered severe burns to her face. She would need new skin to cover what was lost, but new skin cannot replace the damage she has suffered. Her face will forever be disfigured. In this scenario, identity undergoes a significant shift. Previously, people would see a normal face, maybe insignificant or average, maybe beautiful. However,

after surviving facial burns, people will recognise someone whose subjectivity has been usurped by the violence she has suffered; a disfigured victim who has no identity apart from her disfigurement. As Cuskelly notes,

[b]urns are perhaps the most brutal assault that can be suffered by the skin, and the suffering doesn't end when the injury heals – nor does it, necessarily, grow less over time. The initial damage is just the beginning of a long ordeal. The aftermath of disfigurement, disability, and ongoing trauma can continue for the rest of a burns survivor's life. [...] To be burnt is to have some part of you irrevocably destroyed, to fall into a place that can never be fully escaped from. (194-195)

Severe burns are one of a myriad of examples of how the skin is essential to individual identity, and how severe disfigurement dominates the perception of who a person is and what they have survived.

The skin is a canvas upon which various ideologies are inscribed. As Marilee Strong notes,

[b]ody modification is a uniquely human obsession. In every culture throughout history, men and women have decorated their skin and altered their bodies for many of the same reasons people do so today: to make themselves more sexually desirable, to seek favour from God, to denote social status or tribal membership, to test their endurance, to intimidate their enemies, or to ward off evil or sickness. (139)

Tattoos are but one of a myriad of examples of how meaning is inscribed on the skin. Consider the intricate facial tattoos of the Maori of New Zealand. Strong notes that “[t]hey are like psychological fingerprints – no two are alike – designed to communicate the personality and history of the bearer. Maoris consider their tattoos to be the equivalent of their personal signature, even sometimes signing legal documents by drawing their facial pattern rather than writing their name” (140). For the Maori, individual identity is located in the broader cultural practice of tattooing; it is an essential component of their culture. For many populations across the globe, facial tattoos indicate social deviance and delinquency; however, this is but one side of an intricate story. Tattooing is a deeply meaningful and richly symbolic practice for those who tattoo their skin, as tattoos are permanent, and removing them is a painful and expensive process. In westernised culture, it was initially believed that tattoos indicated social deviance, but the practice has become more socially acceptable over the years as more and more people began tattooing their skin. Certain kinds of tattoos are no doubt shocking to a great many people, but in recent years the practice has been divorced from social delinquency. This is not to say that tattooing has achieved total social acceptance, but the fierce opposition to the practice has waned.

Scarification is another example of inscribing meaning upon the skin. For many cultures – for example the Nuba in Africa - scarification is a rite of passage, marking the transition from childhood into adulthood, and indicating social prestige or status. Robert Brian argues that “[s]carification, perhaps more than any other body art, tends to indicate social status and social structure, emphasising the continuity and way of life of a particular tribal group or class” (70). Brian further argues that

tattooing and scarification are ideal for marking important status changes where at critical moments in life, such as puberty, the necessity for courage plays a large part in operations which demand proof of the initiate’s fitness and endurance. And along with the pain there is the blood. Some societies stress the importance of the piercing of the skin and the drawing of the blood, the blood carrying away imperfections or the evil contained in a body. (75)

Scarification places more emphasis on the role of blood in a community, as there can be no scarring without blood. Scarification is a vastly complex practice, with multiple layers of meaning. There are the actual scars and what these signify. There is the blood and the cleansing aspect that this practice takes on, as well as the endurance and pain tolerance of the initiates. Scarification is far less acceptable in Western society than tattooing. There are many piercing and tattoo artists who also scar their clients, but the clientele is a much smaller group. However, the practice is just as meaningful and symbolic as tattooing, perhaps even more so, as tattooing is aesthetic whereas scarification is injury.

I have given a few examples of where body modification is voluntary and accepted, but this is not the only aspect. Many people have suffered and survived extreme violence, and are forced to live with the markers of this violence for the rest of their lives. Consider the practice of female genital mutilation. Widely practiced in Africa and the Arab world, many women are subjected to this contested practice, which is considered obligatory in their cultural groups, but widely and vocally criticised across the world. Strong describes how

[t]he painful and medically dangerous procedure [...] involves removing the clitoris and the surrounding tissue and sometimes sewing up the vagina – leaving an opening the size of a matchstick, only large enough for urine and menstrual blood to pass through. Female circumcision is meant to ensure chastity until marriage, when the husband has the prerogative of cutting or tearing open his wife’s vagina on their wedding night. It is also a means of controlling a woman’s sexuality even after marriage by removing the organ that gives her pleasure. (141)

Female genital mutilation may have cultural significance for the men who perpetuate the practice. This is a contested issue for women who undergo this practice; many are opposed to it, but many women within these cultures support the practice and ensure that their children go through the initiative rite that they did (Strong 141).

In this thesis, I extend a discussion of the skin's textuality, exploring the ways in which the skin functions as a signifier through figurations of wounding and healing. My analysis focuses on three areas: American slavery, atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army, and self-mutilation. These seemingly disparate areas are connected by the shared human experience of wounding. As Jeanette Winterson notes, "[t]he wound is symbolic and cannot be reduced to any single interpretation. But wounding seems to be a clue or a key to being human. There is value here as well as agony" (221). The experience of wounding is universal, but it is still subject to numerous categories. Every body is vulnerable and susceptible to touch, violent or tender, with or without consent. The wounded body is constricted by many categories, whether political, social, domestic, sexual, or gendered, and it cannot be divided from the experience of life; the wound marks a historical event, and its scar serves as a reminder of the suffered violence. No one is able to escape the wound, as it is integral to the development of subjectivity. The trope of the wounded body appears in different forms in every genre. However, reading the wound, and its memory, the scar (Slattery 43), as a negative signifier limits interpretation. When the body is wounded, it immediately attempts to heal itself. Whilst it may be unable to do so without medical assistance, this bodily process cannot be ignored. In this way, the duality of the wound as both a negative and positive signifier becomes apparent. However, I would like to make a distinction between wounding and mutilating. 'Wound' is a soft word, in comparison to 'mutilate', and encompasses small cuts and larger injuries, accidents resulting in a wound, and violence inflicted by someone else. To mutilate a person is to disfigure them, inflicting permanent damage that can only be healed by invasive surgery, which, in itself, is an act of wounding. The process of healing differs significantly for a person who is wounded when compared to someone who has been mutilated. Regenerative healing follows wounding where the body can heal itself (with or without medical assistance) and retain its integrity. The healing process that follows mutilation is far more complex and invasive, as mutilation results in disfigurement. The mutilated body can be healed with corrective surgery, but the integrity of the body is lost and will always be marked by permanent disfigurement; thus, the process of healing is one that retains absence. For example, if a limb or a body part is removed, the injury can be healed, but the body cannot recover what was lost.

I begin my exploration of the textuality of the skin with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which follows the story of a freed slave, Sethe, and her battle to reconcile herself with her past. Morrison brings together the horrific and the beautiful in an exquisite novel about the brutality

of slavery in nineteenth-century America. As Slattery notes, “[s]lavery as a national and communal wound marks all the characters in the story, white and black, with the taint of shame. Slavery had the power, as did the Holocaust for the Jews, to wound an entire nation, a wound that runs so deep that its scar tissue will [...] never disappear” (207). Morrison’s novels have won numerous awards, and in 1993, she became the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. As Susan Bowers argues, “Morrison’s most revolutionary – and most defining – act has been to write for black readers about black people” (40). As a result, “she has challenged white hegemony” and “credited the complexity and originality of African American life by working within its intricate and rich system of meaning, language, and art” (Bowers 40). Both Morrison’s literary and critical work “[recognises] the needs that had not been addressed by the civil rights period: the need to end America’s amnesia about slavery and to foster black community in the postsegregation era” (Bowers 52). Slavery and community are two recurring themes throughout Morrison’s work. Based on Margaret Garner, a historical figure who killed her two year old child to save her from a life of servitude, Morrison beautifully reimagines the story, recreating the interiority of Garner through Sethe, giving readers the opportunity to understand why a mother would kill her child rather than have her live her life as a slave. My focus in this chapter is the ‘tree’ on Sethe’s back, and how these scars speak to the brutality and horror of slavery, but also the healing and re-membering process Sethe undergoes in the novel. In order for Sethe to reclaim her subjectivity, she must come to terms with her past in all its horror. However, she is reluctant to do so, and as the narrator notes, “[t]o Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison 51). By refusing to acknowledge and address her past, Sethe stunts her personal growth, and it is her connection with the ‘tree’ on her back that enables her to reconnect with her past and overcome the horrors she experienced. Morrison positions the scars on her back, which were a result of a brutal beating, as a tree with numerous branches and blossoms that links Sethe to the brutal violence she suffered in the past, but also as a link between herself and the other characters in the novel.

In my second chapter, I make use of the trans-Atlantic link to Africa and explore atrocities committed by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda and the surrounding countries. The LRA are notorious for the brutal mutilations they inflict upon the civilian population, such as cutting off lips, noses, ears, and hands. Despite the involvement of many aid organisations, local and international, the world was unaware of the conflict that had continued for years. The aid organisation, Invisible Children, catapulted Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, to international stardom with *Kony 2012*, a short ‘documentary’ film that

went viral within days of its release. However, the narrative of the film was severely flawed, and it was slammed by critics from across the globe for its gross misrepresentation of the conflict, for its indulgence in the white saviour narrative, and for the representation of Africans as victims who were stripped of agency and had to rely on western intervention to 'save' them. In this chapter, I explore the textuality of the LRA mutilations and how this horrific violence inscribes the ideologies of the LRA onto survivors of their attacks. From there, I move to *Kony 2012* and the various criticisms it received to examine the ways Africa is perceived in the western imagination, and how photographs of atrocity inform and indulge these stereotypes. How do we read images of atrocity? Whose voice do we hear, the photographer or the subject? Do these images challenge our readings of other countries? Atrocity photography is riddled with ethical and moral concerns, and I explore these concerns in relation to the advent of social media. In an age when we are so 'connected' to each other, why is it that these stereotypes and misrepresentations persist when technology has enabled us to address and eradicate these dated constructions of African subjectivity.

After following the trans-Atlantic link from the United States to Africa, my final chapter takes a step back from the punished black body to explore the phenomenon of self-mutilation; a behavioural practice that is found, in various forms, throughout human culture. My analysis focuses on two memoirs, *Skin Game* by Caroline Kettlewell and *Sharp* by David Fitzpatrick. Many memoirs have explored self-mutilation, but Kettlewell's stands out for its eloquence and honesty. Armando Favazza praised the memoir, arguing that Kettlewell "is the first to present a detailed personal account of cutting herself in which abuse and anger are supplanted by reasoned insight" (477). Kettlewell takes readers into her state of mind and enables them to understand what motivated her to repeatedly cut herself for such a long time. I chose *Sharp* specifically as it is the first memoir about self-mutilation written by a male author. Whilst both men and women cut, there are marked differences between the sexes; men are more likely to inflict deep and severe wounds, whilst women tend to make smaller cuts<sup>1</sup>. One of the reasons why self-mutilation is believed to be more prevalent in women than in men is that women are more likely to disclose than men are (see Taylor), and this is evident in the number of published memoirs by female authors. Fitzpatrick is brutally honest throughout his memoir, giving readers a frank and sometimes disturbing view into his life and his addiction to self-mutilation. My focus in this chapter is the narrative function of self-mutilation: what do these wounds and scars mean? What and how do they communicate? How might we interpret these signifiers without imposing our own meaning

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<sup>1</sup> See Taylor "Exploring the Perspectives of Men who Self-Harm." *Learning in Health and Social Care* 2.2 (2003): 83-91.



onto them? My previous chapters explore mutilation inflicted by other people, but what happens when the wounding is self-inflicted? How does this influence and inform our reading of the skin's textuality?

## **Theoretical framework**

My aim in this thesis is to explore the legibility of the skin in both its ruptured and resealed state, drawing attention to the structures that influence the frames through which we read and approach the mutilated body. As Judith Butler argues, “the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power” (1). How do these frames influence our understanding of the wounded body? When an image of a mutilated person is published on the internet, how do the various political structures and social norms change the meaning of the image? What do readers use as a frame of reference when they interpret the mutilated or scarred body? The way we read influences the conclusions we draw from various texts. Katherine Hayles argues that “people in general, and young people in particular, are doing more screen reading of digital materials than ever before” and that “people read less print, and they read print less well” (62). Whilst the internet supplies us with an almost unlimited amount of information, it has stifled our ability to critically engage with the material we are reading. This lack of critical engagement is evident, and, as David Shields argues, “[t]he lifespan of the fact is shrinking” (21) so there seems to be a lack of critical engagement with the information we are exposed to. In 1999, James Sosnoski introduced the idea of hyperreading, which he defines as “reader-directed, screen-based, computer-assisted reading” (cited in Hayles 66). As Hayles notes, “[e]xamples include search queries (as in a Google search), filtering by keywords, skimming, hyperlinking, ‘pecking’ (pulling out a few items from a longer text), and fragmenting” (66). She updates his model to include “juxtaposing, as when several open windows allow one to read across several texts, and scanning, as when one reads rapidly through a blog to identify items of interest” (Hayles 66). With the vast amount of information available online, new reading practices are undoubtedly necessary. However, this distracted form of reading fosters a lack of critical engagement, with the result that information is accepted at face value without questioning its validity.

Symptomatic reading has dominated literary studies for the past few decades. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue, “this practice encompasses an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses, and that, as Fredric Jameson argued, interpretation should therefore seek ‘a latent meaning behind a manifest one’ (60). The [reader] ‘rewrite[s] the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code’ (60) and reveals truths that ‘remain unrealised in the surface of the text (48)’” (Best and Marcus 3). This reading practice fosters a top-down approach to the text, where critics impose meaning on a text through interpretation. Commenting on Michel Serres’ philosophy, Bruno Latour notes that “[c]ritics are much stronger than the text they dominate and explain, establish and analyse. The mastery is so complete, Serres argues, that the texts, the novels, the plays, the myths, slowly disappear, buried beneath stronger and more powerful commentaries” (86). The ‘analysis’ (or interpretation) thus rewrites the examined text with the reader’s interpretation, replacing the author’s voice with the critic’s voice. In recent years, surface reading has emerged as an alternative to the excavation that characterises symptomatic reading. Susan Sontag advocated this approach to textual analysis in 1966, arguing that “[t]o interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’” (7). She rejects the notion of interpretation as excavation, arguing that “[t]he modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one” (Sontag 4). Obsessed with ideological demystification, symptomatic reading associates the surface “with the superficial and deceptive, with what can be perceived without close examination and, implicitly, would turn out to be false upon closer scrutiny” (Best and Marcus 4). Best and Marcus argue that the surface “is what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (9, emphasis in original). The focus on the ‘hidden’ meaning of a text overlooks what is evident, and obscures the text through interpretation. As Anne Cheng argues “[s]ometimes it is not a question of what the visible hides but how it is that we have failed to see certain things on its surface” (101). She advocates a “hermeneutics of susceptibility [...] a reading practice that is willing to *follow*, rather than suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface” (Cheng 101-102, emphasis in original). In this approach, the latent is disregarded in favour of the apparent; the critic looks at what the text says, as opposed to what it *hides*. This is not to say that interpretation itself is disregarded. Symptomatic reading by itself misses much of what a text has to say, but surface reading runs the same risk; instead of approaching texts through a top-down approach, critics should consider appropriating both of these practices. As Sarah Nuttall argues, “it seems as if we

must increasingly read both down and across, underneath and surface, and that the surface might require a new kind of critical attention” (410). To use but one interpretative method runs the risk of losing what a text has to offer. Perhaps it is time to combine surface and symptomatic reading in order to see how much more we can learn from a given text.

Surface reading is a useful interpretive method when approaching the body and the skin. The skin is first and foremost the protective cover of the body. It is also a literal surface. In *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, Cheng argues that “idea of ‘skin’ [has an] inherently complicated relation to essence versus surface. Skin is, after all, by nature a medium of transition and doubleness: it is at once surface and yet integrally attached to what it covers. It also serves as a vibrant interface between the hidden and the visually available” (28). When we read the skin, we read it as a text and as a surface. Skin markings function as signifiers; for example, a scar represents a historical event, one that is recorded by the skin. Interpretation relies on information one can gather from the scar; where is it situated on the body? Is it a cut or a burn? Is it large or small? What can one learn about the nature of the injury by reading the scar? My use of surface reading when approaching the body is primarily a figurative appropriation of the theory. I treat skin as surface, and apply the theoretical precepts of surface reading to inform my interpretation and analysis.

The various contributions in Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey’s collection, *Thinking Through the Skin*, has contributed greatly to my overall theoretical approach to the skin’s textuality, and Steven Connor’s *The Book of Skin* has also influenced my theoretical framework. Hortense Spillers’ notion of the ‘flesh’, while focused primarily on slavery, has been invaluable to my analysis, not only on *Beloved*, but also in my later chapters. Another author whose work has been crucial to the development of this thesis is Dennis Patrick Slattery, whose book, *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of the Flesh*, revealed how versatile the wound is in critical analysis. This literary analysis progresses from Homer’s *Odyssey* to Morrison’s *Beloved* and reveals how the wound as a trope has been present in literary texts over the centuries. Strong and Favazza have been instrumental in my understanding of both self-mutilation and body modification practices, highlighting the manner in which skin markings serve a variety of social and religious functions.

My analysis of atrocity photography has been greatly informed by Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, as well as *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Furthermore, the various contributions in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen, Mick

Gidley, Nancy K. Miller and Jay Prosser have been instrumental in my reading and understanding of how we approach and read images of atrocity. The collection covers the history of atrocity photography and moves forward to examine the impact photographs of atrocity have in the digital and online world. It addresses the problems of separation between photographer and subject, and then moves to explore the ways in which digital photographic technologies are able to address this discrepancy.

## Literature Review

The critical literature available on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is vast and ever growing. The novel is expansive, and has generated a huge volume of scholarly literature on the many themes and concepts that the novel explores. One of the recurring themes and images throughout the novel is the tree on Sethe's back that is actually a clump of scars that Sethe received after a severe beating. This tree has numerous interpretations and has been the topic of numerous articles and analyses. Jean Wyatt discusses the symbolism of the tree and how it functions as the link between three generations. Caroline Rody and Lorie Watkins Fulton both explore the function of the tree throughout the novel, and Michele Bonnet discusses the tree and its various interpretations, but links this discussion to the broader conversation of the tree imagery that Morrison employs in the novel. In "Object Written, Written Object: Slavery, Scarring, and Complications of Authorship in *Beloved*", Anita Durkin discusses the many interpretations of the tree in relation to scarring and wounding, and Susan Corey's "Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" holds a discussion of Sethe's tree in conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the Grotesque, exploring the similarities of Sethe's mutilation to the grotesque body.

*Beloved* is a violent novel, and many of the characters have suffered numerous atrocities. Many critics have explored this aspect of the novel; Barnett discusses the sexual violence of the novel; El Hafi compares the "punished bodies" in *Beloved* to those in Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*; Keizer focuses on how slaves were stripped of all agency and transformed into 'flesh'; and Babbitt discusses how slaves were considered as a zero entity in white hegemonic discourse. However, *Beloved* is not only a novel of violence and violation. In order for the characters to reclaim their subjectivity, they must come to terms with their pasts. Lawrence, Powell, Fuston-White, Moglen and Davis focus their research on the various characters and their journeys to full subjectivity. My research takes Sethe's 'tree'

as its primary focus, and I expand the ongoing discussions and interpretations of this trope in the novel.

Much of the research into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has focussed on its use of child soldiers. Peter Eichstaedt's *First Kill Your Family: Child Soldiers of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army* provides an overview of the conflict, and then explores the effects the war has had on the civilian population and the many troubles aid workers face with the reintegration of former child soldiers. *The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the LRA in Uganda*, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) publication, is a compilation of interviews with various children who were abducted by the LRA but managed to escape. The report consists primarily of the children's words detailing their experiences and suffering. Similarly, HRW have published numerous reports on LRA atrocities in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other areas affected by the conflict, for example, *Trail of Death*, which focuses solely on LRA atrocities in Northeastern Congo, and *The Christmas Massacres*, which was a special report on civilian casualties during December 2008 and January 2009. In 2004, The Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU) published *Nowhere to Hide: Humanitarian Protection Threats in Northern Uganda*, which detailed the conditions civilians had to endure in the wake of numerous LRA raids on rural developments. All of these reports firstly highlighted the atrocious conditions of civilians in both Uganda and the DRC, and went on to recommend possible solutions for the protection of the civilian population.

However, research on the LRA is not restricted to its use of child soldiers. Whilst this is an essential component of addressing LRA atrocities, there is much more that must be taken into consideration if the rebel group is to be disbanded. In *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army*, Tim Allen evaluates the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its ability to bring Kony and his rebels to justice. However, the ICC is powerless to arrest the key leaders of the LRA without the support of neighbouring countries, and this support has been severely lacking. In 2010, Allen collaborated with Koen Vlassenroot to publish a collection of articles in *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, which provides an overview of the conflict as well as the devastating results of this ongoing war. Many of these contributions have greatly informed my understanding of the LRA and its internal structure and organisation, as well as the media's supposed disinterest in the conflict that has persisted for over two decades. In "The Strategic use of Fear by the Lord's Resistance Army", Anthony Vinci discusses how LRA mutilations and killings serve to

inspire fear in civilian populations to ensure that they will encounter little resistance when they attack rural villagers for supplies and manpower. Quaranto, van Acker, and Finnström focus primarily on the organisation and structure of the LRA, and how it has developed and evolved over the years.

The impact of Invisible Children's *Kony 2012* cannot be underestimated. The film has been dismantled by numerous critics for gross inaccuracies and the misrepresentation of the conflict. The various contributions in Amanda Taub's collection, *Beyond Kony 2012: Atrocity, Awareness and Activism in the Internet Age*, focus on social media and the impact it has on raising awareness about atrocities across the globe. Whilst the collection focuses primarily on the *Kony 2012* phenomenon, the arguments open up discussions that are relevant not only to Uganda and the LRA, but also to broader issues of global atrocity. *Kony 2012*'s impact has created the trend of "clicktivism"; a concept that Drumbl explores from its genesis to its current implications. Despite the overwhelming support of the *Kony 2012* campaign, numerous critics and academics have voiced concern over the campaign, as well as harsh and insightful criticism. Waldorf, Daley, Schulthesis, Hickman, Meek and Gregory are but a few of the voices who have spoken out against the gross inaccuracies of Invisible Children's representation of the conflict. Given the online nature of the campaign, dozens more have criticised the video, but these are too numerous to include here.

Whilst self-mutilation or self-harm has existed for centuries, its proliferation in the public sphere has rendered it the object of study in recent decades. I discuss two memoirs in this chapter, namely *Skin Game* by Caroline Kettlewell and *Sharp* by David Fitzpatrick. The earliest research on self-mutilation as a mental disorder was in 1938 with the publication of *Man Against Himself* by Karl Menninger. In this ground-breaking work, Menninger argued against the popular understanding that self-mutilation was merely a half-hearted suicide attempt, and rather an attempt at self-preservation and self-healing. Unfortunately, it was only in the 1960s that self-mutilation became an area of academic research, led by psychiatrists Henry Grunebaum and Gerald Klerman who attempted to profile the similarities between various cutters. The 1970s saw an increase in scholarly literature as the behavioural practice became more prevalent in the public sphere (Strong 33), and the 1980s saw a drastic expansion of research in the field. Armando Favazza's *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation in Culture and Psychiatry*, published in 1987, was the ground-breaking work that placed self-mutilation in the public eye. Since then, many psychologists, psychiatrists, and journalists, among others, have published extensively on the topic, delving into the

causes and functions of the behaviour, as well as treatment options. Marilee Strong's *A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain* approaches the topic from a journalistic perspective. Strong interviewed cutters from all walks of life, as well as psychologists and psychiatrists in order to present a well-argued and encompassing overview of self-mutilation, drawing on research into body modification practices around the world. Strong describes how "[a]s a journalist rather than a therapist, [she] was not bound by any one particular school of thought. [She] was free to draw broadly from any and all research that could share light on the theoretical underpinnings of self-injury, whether from psychology and psychiatry, sociology and anthropology, or the hard sciences of medicine and the rapidly advancing field of neurobiology" (xxii). Strong's approach is interdisciplinary in nature, and was thus instrumental in bringing what was deemed a secretive behaviour to light. Kathryn Harrison was also one of the writers who was courageous in her effort to debunk the myths surrounding self-injury, as well as working to eradicate the negative stigma attached to the behaviour. She unflinchingly spoke of her experience of cutting in her memoir *The Kiss*, and also published a short article in *Vogue Magazine*, which highlighted the prevalence of self-injury in the public sphere.

In the academic sphere, much of the research into self-mutilation focuses specifically on causes and treatment options, as well as the various functions of self-mutilation. Matthew Nock, Karen Suyemoto and Margaret McAllister have written on the various functions of self-mutilation in an attempt to shed light on this seemingly counterintuitive behaviour (if injury is something one wishes to avoid, why would certain people willingly harm themselves?). Gloria Babiker and Lois Arnold, Karen Conterio and Wendy Lader, Lori Plante, and Digby Tantum and Nick Huband have published books that focus on treating self-injury and building an understanding of the behaviour to help family member and friends, as well as those who cut. David Klonsky and Jennifer Muehlenkamp's "Self-Injury: A Research Review for the Practitioner" provides a broad overview of the behaviour, and presents a summary of the findings of various academic publications. Research on men who cut is quite limited, largely due to the fact that the behaviour was believed to be more prominent in women than in men. However, women are also more likely to admit to self-injury than men, with the result that many cases of male self-injury go unreported. Ben Taylor's "Exploring the Perspectives of Men who Self-Harm" was useful in addressing this apparent discrepancy between men and women. In "The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Language", Janice McLane presents a theoretical approach to understanding self-mutilation and interpreting the language of injury that is written on the skin.

## Chapter overview

My second chapter explores the various interpretations of the scars on Sethe's back, and how these scars function as a family tree and provide a genealogical link to the millions of slaves who were taken from Africa. I then extend my discussion to the manner in which violence strips the characters of their subjectivity and individuality, thereby rendering them mere 'flesh', to use Spiller's term. From there, I move to the re-remembering of the slave body and how subjectivity can only be reclaimed by acknowledging and reconciling the violence of the past with the future. I end my discussion by looking at Baby Suggs' sermon in the clearing, where she calls upon all those present to love their bodies, inside and out.

In chapter three, I discuss how the brutal mutilations inflicted by the Lord's Resistance Army function as operations of power. The mutilations suffered by the survivors of LRA atrocities serve as warnings to their villages; the removal of lips warns the population that speaking out against the LRA or warning the army about their presence is a punishable offence with dire consequences. I then move to the *Kony 2012* viral sensation and the criticisms it has received. I unpack the numerous problems with the campaign, and then extend my discussion to the implications of online activism that divorce participants from direct involvement. I end my discussion by exploring the evolution of atrocity photography and how these images no longer have the impact they once did. Modern society is saturated with horrific images of atrocities committed *elsewhere*; can atrocity photography reclaim its ability to encourage people to become aware of the violence that dominates our world, and can this motivate viewers to take action.

I begin my discussion in chapter four by exploring self-mutilation in culture and psychiatry. I explore the various functions of self-mutilation, for example, how wounding functions as an expression of inner pain that is barred from finding expression in language. For cutters, scars have significant meaning; their scars are signifiers that speak to their experience and inner pain. My analysis then moves to two memoirs, one by a female author and one by a male author. As I have mentioned previously, there are significant differences between cutting by men and cutting by women, and this chapter is thus an overview and comparison of these two elements.



## Chapter 2

### Re-membering the Dis(re)membered: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Without individuals we see only numbers: a thousand dead, a hundred thousand dead, "casualties may rise to a million." With individual stories, the statistics become people—but even that is a lie, for the people continue to suffer in numbers that themselves are numbing and meaningless. Look, see the child's swollen, swollen belly, and the flies that crawl at the corners of his eyes, his skeletal limbs: will it make it easier for you to know his name, his age, his dreams, his fears? To see him from the inside? And if it does, are we not doing a disservice to his sister, who lies in the searing dust beside him, a distorted, distended caricature of a human child? And there, if we feel for them, are they now more important to us than a thousand other children touched by the same famine, a thousand other young lives who will soon be food for the flies' own myriad squirming children?

We draw our lines around these moments of pain, and remain upon our islands, and they cannot hurt us. They are covered with a smooth, safe, nacreous layer to let them slip, pearllike, from our souls without real pain.

Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. And then in the tale we stop before we die, or we die vicariously and unharmed, and in the world beyond the tale we turn the page or close the book, and we resume our lives.

(Gaiman 322-323)

One of the major themes in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is the marking (wounding and healing) of (slave) bodies. The narrative follows the story of Sethe, a former slave who killed her child in attempt to 'rescue' her from the horrors of slavery. The child returns, first as a ghost, and then as a flesh-and-blood breathing woman, the age that her child would have been if it had lived. *Beloved* is both an interesting and volatile text that explores the experience of violence and violation under American slavery, and positions the (slave) body as a thing that can be repeatedly marked.

Sethe's back is severely scarred, and is referred to throughout the novel as a 'tree'. This 'tree', given to her by the sadistic second master of Sweet Home, Schoolteacher, is a richly symbolic and productive site to examine questions relating to scarring and marking. Fleeing Sweet Home after receiving the lashing and pregnant with Denver, Sethe meets a white

woman who saves her life and describes her mutilated back as a tree: “It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk – it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom” (Morrison 93). In the vast scholarly literature available on *Beloved*, there have been numerous figurations of the tree and of what it represents. Caroline Rody argues that “Sethe carries the family tree on her back [...] Morrison’s portrayal of the lost mothers of African-American history inscribes indelibly the daughter’s reckless willingness to bear the mark of the mother’s pain” (cited in Durkin 546). Michele Bonnet argues that “the most convincing evidence that Sethe’s tree is of the genealogical type is the strategic importance of the family theme in the novel, one of whose major, if not essential, messages is that the individual is not self-sufficient” (47). Through these constructions of the tree as emblematic of family, both Rody and Bonnet articulate a positive figuration borne out of traumatic experience. As Durkin notes, “the scar acts as an emblem of community and connection, not the isolation and separation forced on African American families by slavery” (546). It is important here to note that the ‘family’ alluded to in these figurations is not only Sethe’s immediate family, but also the collective consciousness of black experience under American slavery; thus her ‘tree’ is metonymic in its representation. As Bonnet argues, “the genealogical tree does not represent the family in the narrow sense of the term [...] It should be given the much broader extension it is given in the African culture Morrison claims as her own which is understood as the clan, the community, what the author calls ‘the village’” (47). Sethe’s ‘tree’ extends beyond the familial to the communal; its branches reach out to encompass the countless generations of Africans who were stolen from their home and enslaved.

However, to limit the interpretation of the tree through this lens disregards the depth of its symbolism. Susan Corey argues that, “like many grotesque images its effect is both repulsive and attractive, signifying the complexity of Sethe’s relationship to the past” (cited in Durkin 546). Sethe’s scar, whilst marking her collectively, also marks her individually, linking her to her mother. As Patrick O’Donnell argues, “Sethe’s mother bears a mark – the brand of a slaveowner – that both proclaims her as one of an unnumbered, nameless mass, and identifies her historical specificity as Sethe’s mother, the only one” (cited in Durkin 546). Sethe’s scar not only marks her individually, but also as a part of the collective flesh of American slavery, where her individual identity is discarded in favour of an identity imposed upon her by the proponents of slavery. She is, along with all other slaves, transformed from an individual person into a collective thing, and her scars bear witness to this. Ultimately

though, Sethe's 'tree' is nothing more than "a revolting clump of scars" (Morrison 25); as Amy Denver says, "[m]aybe I ought to break them blossoms open. Get that pus to running" (Morrison 94). The description of her scars as a tree attempts to reconfigure a traumatic event into something more bearable. Francois Pitavy argues that "to those who have been deprived of language, those scars are precisely the words they have to tell, the unerasable site of their memories. The slaves' narratives are inscribed on their bodies, it has become the text of their stories and the most powerful signifier of their personal and communal histories" (cited in Durkin 543). Thus, as Durkin enunciates clearly, "[i]dentifiable, yet nameless, individual, yet communal, living, yet dead, engrossing, yet repulsive: all of these (non)dualities resonate simultaneously from Sethe's scar" (546).

## Family Tree

As mentioned, the tree can be interpreted as representative of Sethe's immediate family and close friends. If interpreted thus, each branch can be said to represent a family member, the blossoms sharing their identity and linking them to Sethe. In this way, Sethe bears the burden of keeping her family together through the trauma of the ghost that haunts the house. Ultimately, she is unable to do so. Her sons, Howard and Buglar, fled "the moment the house committed what was for [them] the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time" (Morrison 3). They are unable to cope with the trauma of living with a ghost; Sethe's past intrudes upon their present, and they flee. As the narrator notes,

Howard and Buglar had run away by the time they were thirteen years old – as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy wanted to see more [...]. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods; the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. (Morrison 3)

There is a link here between the running pus and her fleeing children. The blossoms on Sethe's back are essentially pus-filled blisters, yet these represent each member of her immediate family. However, in order to heal, the pus must be released. In this way, Howard and Buglar seek to define their own subjectivity away from Sethe and the baby ghost, and run in an attempt to escape their mother's past. The welts on Sethe's back represent branches, leading to the pus-filled blossoms; Amy Denver's logic of "[getting] the pus to running" (Morrison 94) reveals a dual rupture: the burst blossoms provide relief and generate healing, yet the stable identity of family is ruptured at the same time, and the coherent narrative of her children is thus broken. This also suggests that in order for Sethe to come to

terms with her past, her sons must flee; she must accept her failure to keep her family together, which ultimately contributes to her utter devotion to Beloved.

Baby Suggs welcomes Sethe after she had escaped Sweet Home, and nurses her back to health after the beating and the birth. She helps to heal the wounds on Sethe's back, and in this way cements herself in Sethe's life. She notices how "[r]oses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders" (Morrison 109); once again, the image of blossoms covering Sethe's back is reinforced, but these are no longer the pus-filled blisters. The infection is gone and the wounds have begun their process of healing. Baby Suggs is family by marriage, not blood, but this image creates the blood bond of family directly linking Sethe to Baby Suggs by blood. Baby Suggs' branch on Sethe's tree is topped with a rose, once again finding beauty in damage. These descriptions of Sethe's mutilated back construct an alternative for trauma; the violence and violation enacted upon Sethe's body is modified in an attempt to reconstruct subjectivity after a profound bodily inscription of trauma. However, Sethe's (attempted) murder of her child(ren) completely disrupts Baby Suggs' construction of her identity as a freed slave. It is interesting though that Baby Suggs focuses on the violation of her property. In a conversation with Stamp Paid, she repeats how "they came in *my* yard" (Morrison 211, emphasis added). For Baby Suggs, her freedom came with her own property and personal space, thus allowing her to claim ownership of herself separate from white domination. Her yard is a symbol of her identity and freedom, and Schoolteacher's entry into this space enacts a violation upon her identity. Baby Suggs "could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. [...] The whitefolks had tired her out at last" (Morrison 212), revealing how the traumatic experience of slavery forces former/escaped slaves to do everything in their power to escape their past and to prevent the violation they experienced from passing on to the next generation. Baby Suggs continues to stay with Sethe after the murder of the unnamed "crawling already?" baby, but her will to live disappears. However, because she could neither approve nor condemn Sethe's actions, an interesting paradox emerges here, exemplified in Stamp Paid's observation of "[w]hat *are* these people? You tell me Jesus. What *are* they" (Morrison 213, emphasis in original). The motivation for Sethe's actions is placed on the white slave owners who "believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. [...] But it wasn't the jungle the blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread" (Morrison 234). Blame, for lack of a better word, was not placed on Sethe; rather, it was placed on the white slave owners who had constantly and unrelentingly planted the "jungle" inside of their slaves, forcing them to conform to a narrative imposed upon them through beatings and vilification.

Paul D links himself to Sethe's tree through touch. When Sethe shows him the scars, "he saw the sculpture her back had become [...] And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years" (Morrison 21). Paul D's tender kissing of Sethe's scars counters the violence she experienced at the 'planting' of her tree. Touch reveals the vulnerability of the body; it can either be tender, or violent, with or without consent, but touch itself opens the body and places it in a vulnerable position. Thus, through Paul D's intimate exploration of her scars, Sethe is able to open herself up to the intimate vulnerability that can be shared between two people. Although Sethe could not feel Paul D's caresses, it is his touch that allows her to feel again; it acts as a precursor to them having sex. The narrator describes that "though she could remember desire, she had forgotten how it worked" (Morrison 24). Through Paul D's touch, both he and Sethe are brought together and linked to each other. Furthermore, her scars allow him to understand her past trauma: "[h]e rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (Morrison 20). It is as though the embodied trauma of Sethe's past is transferred to Paul D through his touch; exploring her tree allows him to explore and understand her past. The narrative implies that seeing and reading her scars is insufficient. They must be touched and explored, not only with his hands, but with his mouth. What this means is that coming to terms with the past is more than just speaking about it. Rather, it requires an active bodily (self)exploration in order to "lay it all down, sword and shield" (Morrison 203). As the narrator notes, "[f]reeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 111-112). Sethe is able, in part, and with Paul D's help, to claim ownership of herself.

However, Paul D contradicts himself after he and Sethe have sex, thus revealing another aspect of his response to the tree. When Sethe tells him that she has a tree on her back, he responds with "[w]hat tree on your back? Is something growing on your back? I don't see nothing growing on your back" (18). As Michele Bonnet notes, "Paul D's wording focuses attention on the fact that Sethe's tree is not only inscribed in her flesh, as his choice of the verb to grow and his insistence on it emphasise; it also takes root in her body. It is not merely an image or a mark bearing a resemblance to a tree; it is an active, living tree with an irrefutable power and reality of its own" (46). Paul D's words attribute agency to the tree, yet later his words strip this agency as he describes how "the wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a gold miner pawing through pay dirt was in fact a revolting

clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near" (Morrison 25). Paul D interprets trees as positive things, beautiful and comforting. When he escaped from the chain gang, he was instructed to follow the blossoming trees north to freedom, and here is the reason why he does not believe that Sethe's 'tree' is a tree at all. Rather, it appears to him as a perversion of the "inviting" aspect of trees. Paul D alienates himself from Sethe's tree, effectively distancing himself from Sethe's past, as he is the one who dispels the ghost from the house. However, his act of expelling the ghost from the house is instrumental in Beloved's enfleshment. His active distancing of himself from the past ultimately results in the past's intrusion upon the present.

Sethe's daughter Denver is inextricably linked to the tree on Sethe's back, as, in a manner of speaking, she was present when the violation occurred. Furthermore, her favourite story of Sethe's past is the story of her birth. As the narrator notes, "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it" (74). Her favourite story is of her birth, and how Sethe overcame the odds with the help of white woman, Amy Denver. However, this illustrates Denver's inability to grow as a woman; her life is lived in Bluestone 124, and she is fearful of leaving the property and encountering the world outside. Her focus on the past results in an inability to live in the present or consider the future, and as a result, she is prevented from developing into a woman. Denver "has no self" (Morrison 145); her subjectivity is stunted by her inability to mature into womanhood. She spends all her time in 124 and only leaves the house when she takes on the maternal role of caring for Sethe, who grows increasingly ill and weak at the hands of Beloved towards the end of the novel. When she asks for assistance from other families, the narrator notes how "[s]he did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (Morrison 292). Denver is hesitant to escape from her mother's past; when Paul D dispels the ghost, she longs for the ghost to return, as its presence was a form of contact with another, as opposed to living each day alone in the house while Sethe is at work. Denver is rooted to the house, just as the tree has taken root in Sethe's back. Her inability to leave and mature is linked to the roots of the tree.

The kindness shown by Amy Denver towards Sethe after her escape from Sweet Home binds the two women by a shared female experience of subjection under (white) patriarchal

domination that transcends the racial divide. Amy recognises Sethe's humanity as a woman; had she regarded Sethe as just another slave-animal, Sethe would have died. Rather, Amy identifies with Sethe's suffering; granted, she had never suffered as severely as Sethe had, but she is able to see a part of herself in Sethe's pain, and recognises the shared humanity through Sethe's suffering. Had she been like most other whites in the story, classifying Sethe as an animal, she would not recognise Sethe's ability to suffer in the first place. Their link reveals how kindness is able to transcend the racial divide; they share a bond of "female relatedness because it marks the positive interaction between Sethe and Amy" (Faris, cited in Fulton 198n). In this way, Sethe's scar functions as a marker of this kindness. Furthermore, Amy's 'naming' of Sethe's chokecherry tree links her to Sethe's family. If Amy had not 'named' her "pulped" back, the family tree would not exist, and Sethe's mutilated back would remain a "revolting clump of scars" (Morrison 25), instead of an "active, living tree with an irrefutable power and reality of its own" (Bonnet 46). Amy's role in Sethe's life is taken a step further through Sethe naming the daughter that Amy helped to deliver 'Denver'. In this way, Amy's naming is reciprocated through Sethe's naming of her daughter; Denver functions as the embodiment of Amy's kindness, a living and breathing testament to human compassion. Thus, Amy, Sethe, and Denver are linked more closely than any other family members through the tree. They are bonded together, all three signifying each other through bodily marking and naming.

In a similar way to Paul D, Sethe and Amy are also linked through touch. The passages describing the interaction between Sethe and Amy pay close attention to the relationship between touch and vulnerability. Sethe had (barely) escaped the violent touch of Schoolteacher and his nephews when she meets Amy. She is utterly vulnerable at this point in the narrative; unable to survive without help, she is forced to put her life in Amy's hands. Amy can either respond to Sethe with a violent touch, like that of Schoolteacher and his nephews, or she can respond with the tender and nursing touch, similar to Paul D's. When Amy asks if Sethe is in pain, Sethe responds with "[a] touch" (Morrison 92), and Amy's response of "[c]an't nothing heal without pain, you know" (Morrison 92) reveals that Amy's re-membering touch will heal Sethe, but it will also cause her immense pain. This is exemplified when she massages Sethe's feet: "[t]hen she did the magic: lifted Sethe's feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears" (Morrison 42). Amy's touch is the life-giving touch; her nursing of Sethe's feet (and dressing of her back) creates a bodily link between the two women. Amy gives life to Sethe's dead feet and dying body, thereby granting her the strength to survive. In "Scarification and Collective Sympathy: An Analysis of Rememory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Jason Campbell argues that

[i]t was not, simply, that Amy Denver recognised Sethe's discomfoting swollen feet, but that she intended on easing Sethe's discomfort. [...] This 'magic' is the power of sympathy, the power for the most mundane act, such as massaging someone's feet, to transcend the limits of Sethe's enslavement. Though their plight was not similar, Amy Denver understood and recognised Sethe's humanity, i.e., her ability to suffer. The 'magic', then, was encapsulated within a touch. (2-3, emphasis in original)

Given the impact Amy has on Sethe's life, literally and metaphorically, Campbell's argument of 'sympathy' seems superficial, for there is a deeper connection between these two women, despite the fact that they will never see each other again. Amy's touch goes further than sympathy; she actively pieces together and re-members Sethe through her touch. The bond they share is rooted in the flesh and embodied in Denver; Sethe realises that "while the whitegirl talked, the baby slept" (Morrison 40). This suggests a link between Sethe's unborn child and Amy Denver prior to the dual naming that takes place later. While it is true that Amy "recognised Sethe's [...] ability to suffer" (Campbell 3), Campbell's argument of "[t]he power of a sympathetic character, to cross the racial divide" (2) is insufficient and cannot fully explain the bond that binds these two women together. Amy had experienced the violent touch, and thus she was able, in part, to understand Sethe's suffering. This recognition brings forth the healing touch and bond that is able to transcend not only the racial divide, but also history, as Denver stands as the flesh and blood reincarnation of Amy's re-membering touch.

## Grotesque

Susan Corey's "Towards the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" provides an overarching and thorough exploration of the grotesque in Morrison's novel. Corey draws on a variety of sources in her discussion of the grotesque, and focuses on both the 'positive' and 'negative' features of this tradition in *Beloved*. Drawing on Robert Doty, Geoffrey Harpham and Mikhail Bakhtin, she defines the grotesque as

an aesthetic form that works through exaggeration, distortion, contradiction, disorder, and shock to disrupt a sense of normalcy and stimulate the discovery of new meaning and new connection. In its capacity to shock and offend, the grotesque exposes the depths of human vulnerability and the capacity for evil; in its capacity to evoke the realm of myth and mystery, it taps the resources of the body and the unconscious to open up new worlds of meaning and to expose the gaps in our conventional meaning systems. (32)



Her analysis focuses on how “the grotesque not only reveals the horror of slavery, but [...] also sets forth a vision of regeneration and healing” (Corey 33). In the negative mode, the grotesque is used “to explore the destructive nature of the slave system, exposing its damage to lives and communities over generations” and in its positive mode, it “suggests the possibility of recovery as the characters become connected to the resources of their bodies, their emotions, and their ancestral traditions” (Corey 33). Corey’s point of departure is the tree on Sethe’s back. She argues that

[i]t is a clear example of the qualities of physical deformity, degradation, paradox, and ambiguity typically associated with the grotesque” and that “its effect is both repulsive and attractive, signifying the complexity of Sethe’s relationship to her past. [...] The deadened scar tissue on Sethe’s back is emblematic of her repressed feelings [...] The scar [...] becomes a bodily sign of Sethe’s estrangement from her imagination and her inner life. (Corey 34-35)

As a reflection of degradation in the grotesque, “the scar and its link to the ‘experiment’ on Sethe degrades both the ideology of slavery and the ‘Christian’ society that upheld it by exposing the brutal consequences of those theories on the interior as well as the exterior lives of its victims” (Corey 35). In the positive construction of the grotesque, the scar’s resemblance to a tree “recalls the natural beauty and the qualities of comfort and renewal that Sethe associates with her former home”, also “suggesting the possibilities of renewal through the natural cyclical processes of the body” (Corey 35). Whilst Corey’s analysis is comprehensive and insightful, she overlooks one of the greatest images of the grotesque in the novel, namely Sethe’s wounded and opened body, prior to the healing of her wounds, rather focussing on Sethe’s body as a closed and completed unit. My analysis of the grotesque in *BeLoved* will focus on the scene directly after Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home when she is found by Amy Denver, drawing primarily on Bakhtin’s construction of the grotesque.

As Maryrose Cuskelly notes in *Original Skin: Uncovering the Marvels of the Human Hide*, “[o]ur skin fixes the boundaries of our physical selves and separates us from the rest of the world. [...] Pliant, elastic, able to heal itself, it is where we end and the rest of the cosmos begins. [...] Through our skin we contact the world; with it we touch and are touched” (4-5). Furthermore, “[s]urprisingly tough yet vulnerable, the skin is a frail and all-too- penetrable veil: blades can slice it, fire can burn it, and toxic substances can be absorbed through it” (Cuskelly 10). Sethe’s boundary between herself and the world is violated and penetrated by Schoolteacher’s nephews. When Schoolteacher discovers that Sethe has told Mrs Garner of

their 'nursing' of her, he subjects her to a brutal whipping that opens and mutilates her back, resulting in the 'tree' that Amy Denver describes. The "all-too-penetrable veil" of Sethe's skin is punctured, pierced, and opened; she is no longer a closed and separate body. Rather, the opening of her back results in a violation of the boundary that separates her from the world. She is open and susceptible to the fusion of her flesh and elements of the outside world. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin explores the grotesque image of the body, revealed in the works of Rabelais. Bakhtin argues that "the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one" (318). In this way, Sethe's "separate and completed" body is rendered grotesque through the beating she receives.

Whist *Beloved* is not written in the grotesque tradition that Bakhtin explores in his analysis of Rabelais, Morrison nevertheless employs many images of the grotesque body throughout her novel; the most obvious instance of this being the tree that is whipped onto Sethe's back. The scene between Sethe and Amy Denver is of particular significance for an analysis of the image of the grotesque body in *Beloved*. Wounded, bleeding, open, pregnant with Denver, and her breasts discharging milk, Sethe becomes the embodiment of Bakhtin's construct of the grotesque body. Bakhtin notes that "[t]he grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. [...] in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis" (24). The boundaries of Sethe's body are ruptured on both sides: her back is open and bleeding, and her breasts are discharging milk, "sticky and sour on her dress, [that] attracted every small flying thing from gnats to grasshoppers" (Morrison 36). Sethe's obsession with her milk is reinforced throughout the narrative. It is within this framework that Weathers configures Sethe's milk as her life force. Referring to the 'nursing' Sethe undergoes, Weathers argues that "[c]learly, her breast milk stolen, Sethe has had her life force literally and figuratively and forcefully stolen as well" (206). As I have previously mentioned, Sethe's milk is representative of her life force and her ability to give life to her children. Thus, when she meets Amy Denver, her life is seeping out of her, not only through the wounds on her back but from the discharge of milk from her breasts. As Bonnet notes,

[h]er obsession with her milk [...] [tells] us a lot about the way she envisions her relationship with her children, although one should not forget the milk's ambivalent function, its positive as

well as negative connotations: Sethe's being made unable to nurse her daughter is a powerful signifier of slaves' inability to feed and therefore nurture their children and bring them up into full-fledged human beings. (49)

Sethe's milk is representative of her life force, and this is visibly seeping out of her when, on the verge of death, she meets Amy Denver. If we examine Sethe's body in complete isolation, it is clear that she embodies many of the characteristics associated with the grotesque tradition. Her body is not a closed and limited "as a separate and completed phenomenon". Her skin is ruptured, and the barrier between her and the world is shattered. She is bleeding and discharging milk, thus the "inner features" of her body are open to the world. Furthermore, she is pregnant with Denver. As Bakhtin notes, "[o]ne of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born" (26). Whilst Sethe does not die, she was close to death, thus, when Denver is born, she is pushed towards the limits of her life. Narrowly escaping death, she gives birth to new life. Bakhtin argues that "[t]he stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (26). In this way, Sethe is opened through the act of giving birth. Multiple parts are exposed to the world and become one with them. There is also an act of lowering or degradation that occurs when the "afterbirth shot out" (Morrison 99). The 'sacred' act of reproduction is lowered to its base bodily elements: child, afterbirth, and "[t]wenty inches of cord" (Morrison 99). Sethe is in the process of transformation: her wounds are healing, her body containing a body has become a single being again, she has become a mother to another child, and thus the discharge of milk from her breasts has a purpose. Furthermore, she has made the transition from a slave to a free woman; she now has the opportunity to "[claim] ownership of [her] freed self" (Morrison 112). As noted earlier, "[t]he grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (Morrison 24). Sethe's traumatic experience grants her the ability to heal. Her wounds close, her body becomes whole again, and her scars are not only emblematic of her troubled relationship with her past, but also, through their formation as a tree, allow her to come to terms with what she has experienced, and draw her family close to her despite her traumatic past.

## Genealogical Link

As Michèle Bonnet notes, “the most convincing evidence that Sethe’s tree is of the genealogical type is the strategic importance of the family theme in the novel, one of whose major, if not essential, messages is that the individual is not self-sufficient” (47). Durkin asserts that “the scar acts as an emblem of community and connection, not the isolation and separation forced on African American families by slavery” (546). Once again, Sethe’s tree is interpreted as a positive symbol of familial bonds extending past the immediate nuclear family and spreading to the communal connection between slaves. Bonnet further argues that “

[i]t has permeable frontiers and extends beyond the individual proper, drawing substance and sustenance from the family and the community, for the genealogical tree does not represent the family in the narrow sense of the term, that is generally accepted in Western culture. It should be given the much broader extension it is given in the African culture Morrison claims as her own and which is understood as the clan, the community, what the author calls ‘the village’. (47)

In this interpretation, the ‘family’ represented by the tree reaches out to encompass the community. However, it does not stop there. This genealogical tree links Sethe to the entire African American population under slavery, and further, across the Atlantic, embracing the Middle Passage, and finally ending in Africa. The tree is thus ancestral as well as genealogical, as the tree is not limited by Sethe’s bloodline; rather, it is all-encompassing, and embraces the entire community of Africans forcefully taken from their native land and transported like cargo to the New World where they were stripped of individual identity and rendered flesh.

It is Hortense Spillers notion of the ‘flesh’ that becomes integral to a discussion of the genealogical tree. As she argues in “Mama’s baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”,

I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualisation that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. [...] If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, [and] ripped-apartness. (67)

Slaves had no social category; they were a “zero degree of social conceptualisation”, actively barred from inhabiting or even obtaining full subject positions. They were stripped of full life and rendered flesh. Flesh does not have a social category; it is excluded from, concealed and ignored by the dominant discourses of the time. In this construction, flesh does not have a place in the social structure; it is a non-category, shifted to the periphery of dominant discourses, and always stands outside of the social and symbolic order. Thus, the position of the flesh is a non-position. It is figured as a negative, an absence. This is evident in the way that African American history was destroyed and recoded through slavery. The flesh was stripped of its access to its own history, and was prevented from laying claim to a history. As Patricia Williams succinctly notes:

I, like so many blacks, have been trying to pin myself down in history, place myself in the stream of time as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future. To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well.  
(156)

The genealogical tree that Sethe bears on her back re-members the history that was denied. It embraces identity in community and actively works to re-member the dis(re)membered flesh of the collective slave experience. Morrison provides a version of a history, remembering and re-membering the forgotten stories of slaves through her narrative. Sethe’s tree provides a link to a greater collective history. Fuston-White argues that “the white man for generations silenced the black voice in official histories. Morrison bypasses the master’s history so that she might speak and her experience may be known” and further that “Morrison demands that these stories be inscribed, made a ‘present’ presence rather than an ‘absent’ presence masked by a people’s amnesia” (470). In *Beloved*, Morrison appropriates and aims to ‘write in’ the history of American slaves into the “master’s history”. To address the history of slaves concealed by cultural amnesia, Morrison writes history through her fictional history of Margaret Garner. In order to address the “‘absent’ presence”, history must be rewritten to undo this concealment codified in American discourse. Sethe’s genealogical tree is an attempt to bring these forgotten (his)stories to the surface. As Bowers notes, “Morrison [...] recognised the needs that had not been addressed by the civil rights period: the need to end America’s amnesia about slavery and to foster black community in the postsegregation era, for instance. Most important, she saw fiction as a means of working through the historical and political challenges that African Americans faced” (52). Fiction is able to provide faces, names, and stories to the statistics that reduce people to numbers.

Spillers goes on to say that “[t]hese undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin colour” (67). The visible marks of the suffered atrocities of slaves becomes embroiled in the “politics of melanin” (Spillers 71) through which they are rendered invisible; flesh, or the black body, is not worthy of the white gaze. Rather, it is overlooked and ignored. The signifiers representing black suffering do not have a place in the lexicon of white domination. Weheliye describes how “the techniques by which human beings are transformed into bare life is scripted onto the bodies of the abjected so that their expulsion appears both deserved and natural” (70). The visible markers of suffering borne by slaves are translated from suffering into signs of deserved expulsion from the social order. The slave’s experience of brutality under his or her master is thus recoded into a discourse that justifies and confirms his or her position as flesh.

In Spillers’ construction, slaves were constituted not as bodies, with the ability to live, but rather as flesh, a sub-human entity that did not possess or have access to life. Individual identity was actively destroyed, and the slaves were not regarded as human, but rather as animal, and, to a large extent, sub-animal. Thus, with individual identity eradicated, slaves became the collective ‘flesh’. Discussing Giorgio Agamben’s construction of the *homo sacer*, Weheliye argues that

[t]he *homo sacer*’s ban from the political community facilitates a double movement that is contradictory, but necessary: on the one hand, these subjects, by being barred from the category of the human, are relegated to bare or naked life, being both literally and symbolically stripped of all accoutrements associated with the liberalist subject. Conversely, this bare life stands at the centre of the state’s exercise of its biopower, its force of legislating life and death, which, in this framework, provides one of the central features of the modern nation-state. (67)

He further argues that “[r]acial slavery [...] reveals the manifold modes in which extreme brutality [...] frequently and peacefully coexist [...] within the scope of the normal juridico-political order. This is what invents the *homo sacer* as *homo sacer*, for bare life must be measured against something, otherwise it just appears as life” (Weheliye 68). Relocated to the periphery of society and constructed as Other, slaves, or rather, the flesh, was used as a measuring block in order to establish what life was; ‘I am not *that*, therefore I am human’, as it were. This measurement of (white) full life against (black) bare life manifests itself in a cyclical process that spirals as it circulates: as slaves are degraded, white superiority is intensified, which, in turn, leads to a further degradation of the slave, and a further raising of

white superiority. The cycle continues in this motion, forever increasing and forever degrading.

## **Reco(r)ding the Slave Experience**

It is as if identity, and its recognition, depended on the body having been marked with a special sign, which looks suspiciously like a linguistic signifier. The sign imprints the body, making it part of the signifying process. Signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. The signifying of the body is an allegory of the body become [sic] a subject for literary narrative – a body entered into writing. (Brooks 3)

Under the white gaze, slaves were viewed as animals, not fully human as they displayed an insufficient number of the ‘characteristics’ that constitute a full human being. Schoolteacher’s arrival at Sweet Home is instrumental in the degradation of Mr Garner’s slaves from humans to animals. The narrator describes how “[v]oices [reminded] Schoolteacher about the spoiling these particular slaves [had] had at Garner’s hands” (Morrison 267) and he decided it was his duty to re-educate them in their social standing. To this end, he charged his nephews to write profiles of the Sweet Home slaves. When he came to the nephew who was writing about Sethe, he instructed him to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (Morrison 228). Through this exercise, his nephews were taught how “to turn people into animals” and that “property is property because of its assigned properties” (Jesser 329). Under Schoolteacher, the Sweet Home slaves were recoded from ‘men’ and ‘women’ into ‘animals’; their ‘human’ characteristics were outweighed by their ‘animal’ characteristics, and thus they fell short of being full human beings.

As an enactment of this experiment, and lesson of racial inferiority, Schoolteacher instructed his nephews to take Sethe’s milk, whereby she becomes “the udder they drink from and the sexual body they work their pleasures on” (Jesser 329), while he records what transpires. This degradation haunts Sethe for years, and is arguably one of the most shocking images in the novel. The narrator describes how Sethe’s “brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (Morrison 83) and also that “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison 51). Sethe is unable to escape her past, as seen through the tree she bears on

her back, and is unable to forget the image of “two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on [her] breast the other holding [her] down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up” (Morrison 83). As mentioned already, Sethe viewed her milk as her life force, and the theft of her milk is far more traumatic to her than the beating she received for telling Mrs Garner what Schoolteacher had done. Sethe is fiercely maternal, and her desire to live and survive is characterised by her devotion to her children. She explains to Paul D that “[a]ll [she] knew was [she] had to get [her] milk to [her] baby girl” (Morrison 19), which explains why she was unable to escape that trauma from her past. The link between her and her child is stolen from her in a perverse embodiment of Schoolteacher’s theory of racial inferiority. She becomes a scripted body through which the ideologies of white superiority are inscribed upon. In this way, Schoolteacher’s recording of the ‘results’ of his experiment recode Sethe into an animal. However, there is a deeper violation that takes place. Sethe’s narrative voice is destroyed. She has no say in what happened to her, as the ‘recording’ that Schoolteacher made functions as the primary narrative of what took place. Schoolteacher holds the power through his ability to record and recode Sethe’s trauma. He rewrites her story, silencing and concealing her life from the dominant discourse thereby figuring her space in the social order as an absence.

Sethe considers herself to have played a role in her degradation. As she explains to Paul D: “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (Morrison 320). There are numerous references to the ink Sethe makes for Schoolteacher throughout the narrative. Even though it was Mrs Garner’s recipe, Schoolteacher “preferred how [Sethe] mixed it” (Morrison 44), and it was this ink that he used to (re)write Sethe’s trauma. Schoolteacher would always have his book with him, speaking to the slaves and writing down their responses. The book he carried “was a book about [them]” (Morrison 44), recording and recoding their stories. One of the reasons Sethe is unable to escape her past is the overwhelming guilt she feels for having provided Schoolteacher with the ink he used to denigrate them. She believes that she was somehow complicit in the reco(r)ding of their degradation.

As mentioned previously, Brooks comments on how bodily markings resemble linguistic signifiers. In this way, Sethe’s marked body is scripted by white domination and comes to resemble a linguistic sign. As Durkin notes, “[i]n scarring, the human body thus becomes the site of writing” (543). The marking of the slave body, through beatings for example, transforms that body into a textual body. These bodies become the site of cultural



inscription: the ideology of white superiority was literally written on the bodies of slaves. As El Hafi argues, “White oppression renders itself visible upon the enslaved person by means of physical violence” (90). In this way, the skin of a slave was transformed into a text. Scars became signifiers, but the signified position was open to redefinition by white masters. Both black slaves and white masters bore scars, but the unity of signifier and signified was disrupted by white racist rule. Thus, scars on white bodies were interpreted in one way, while the scars on black bodies were interpreted in another. Whilst the signifier remained the same, the signified position became the site of cultural redefinition. For example, the signifier ‘scar’ on a white body could have a signified of ‘pain’ or ‘bodily trauma’; however, on a black body, the signifier remains the same, but the signified would be redefined to ‘slave’ or ‘property’. Meaning was not stable for a slave; it was always subject to interpretation and redefinition under the white gaze.

Schoolteacher succinctly notes that “definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined” (Morrison 225). There was no way for a slave to claim any form of identity under white oppression. Mr Garner bragged to other farmers, claiming that “[his] niggers is men every one of em” (Morrison 12), but Paul D later realises that “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race” (Morrison 147-8). He understands that the power to label still belonged solely to the white master: “Garner called and announced them men – but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. [...] Did a white man saying it make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away” (Morrison 260). The white master could raise them and label them men, but he also possessed the power to strip them of that identity and degrade them. Michel Foucault’s theory of Power/Knowledge is useful here to understand the power of language implicit in white domination. ‘Truth’ is determined by power relations (Holloway, Byrne and Titlestad 254); those in power are able to construct and define what is true and what is not. ‘Labelling’ becomes a tool of domination when exercised by hegemonies. Power exerts influence over knowledge, and through this, hegemonies are able to manipulate and control knowledge to oppress those who are objects of derision. The meaning created by hegemonies is disseminated throughout society and achieves normalcy, which furthers the domination of the objects of hegemonic derision and, in turn, increases the power of the hegemony. Translated into 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, white hegemonic rule resulted in black subjugation. Knowledge about slavery was manipulated to construct the meaning of ‘slave’ as ‘animal’. This labelling was codified into language and achieved societal normalcy, which, in turn, empowered white hegemonic rule. White slave owners had the power to label their slaves; this power was not reciprocal. A slave could only assume an

identity if that identity was bestowed upon him/her by a white master. In this way, Garner has the power to label his slaves 'men'. However, because this was a deviation from white hegemonic rule, his slaves could only carry this label on his property. Outside his sphere of power, his slaves became subject to white discourse and were transformed into 'animals'. This is the power that Schoolteacher exercises over his slaves. Rejecting Garner's label, Schoolteacher strips the Sweet Home slaves of their identity as 'men' and re-labels them 'slaves'. He further inscribes this label upon their flesh; Sethe's tree is a marker of her subordinate position under white hegemony.

## Ownership

As the ideology of white hegemony was carved and beaten into the flesh of its objects, another realm of degradation and commodification emerged, namely the surface. The skin, and its place in the visual, became the field upon which the politics of melanin and identity production were located. It was melanin that divided slaves from masters, the primary site of recognition; categories of difference were seen on the surface. Black skin was always subject to the white gaze, however, it was deemed unworthy of *notice*; slaves were "all-too-seen and not seen at all" (Cheng 99). The first site of racial difference is the surface, or, more specifically, the skin. Power over knowledge production and meaning meant that the attributes of melanin could be codified into discourse and used to objectify and commodify. Skin colour was appropriated and categorised, its features manipulated, to secure white dominance over black slaves. Access to this knowledge production in official discourse was restricted to those with white skin; black skin was an unstable category that was always subject to redefinition, and was barred from exerting any influence over its meaning. Under the white gaze, reading 'race' meant reading the surface. A deeper or symptomatic reading of race was considered redundant, as what was 'under' that skin was common knowledge. Stamp Paid astutely articulates this when he reflects that "[w]hitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle" (234). Power over knowledge production meant that this particular understanding of black subjectivity achieved cultural normalcy; black slaves could never be anything other than 'savages' in white racist discourse. Stamp Paid continues by saying that "[t]he more coloredpeople [sic] spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside" (Morrison 234). This characterises the expulsion of black slaves from white discourse; any attempt to change or

influence the meaning of skin colour was seen as insubordination, and was severely punished.

Under white dominance, skin became the first marker or signifier of property. Black skin meant that the body it covered was the property of white masters. The white gaze recognised black skin as inferior and therefore subject to domination and commodification. The categorisation of individual ownership was achieved through branding; each brand signified that the slave was the property of a specific white master. In this way, black skin signified collective ownership, whereas brands signified specific ownership. Slave owners inscribed their own signifiers on the flesh of their property. Scars received from beatings were ambiguous. They could signify the slave's position as property, similar to the signified positions of skin and brands. They could also signify deserved punishment for insubordination and transgressing the social order. Finally, they could also signify the slave's rebellion against commodification; these scars signified that the body carrying them rejected its position as property. In Sethe's case, she did not accept that the violation she suffered was deserved or justified. Schoolteacher's logic dictated that this 'violation' was not a violation at all, merely a social experiment. Sethe rebelled against classification as 'animal' by informing Mrs Garner of what Schoolteacher and his nephews had done. This act of rebellion was severely punished, resulting in Schoolteacher's nephews "planting" the tree on her back. In this way, her scars came to signify her rebellion against the social order and her deserved punishment for doing so. By reading her skin, white masters could deduce that she was property that rejected her status as property, and as a result, she was marked as rebellious.

Sethe's mutilation functions as a mark of ownership. She is considered property and is thus subject to unrelenting violence and violation under her sadistic master, Schoolteacher. Speaking on the subject of the African slave trade, Ronald Segal notes that

Those who lived long enough to be sold were duly branded with the mark of ownership. Usually in Africa, this was done once. Those passing through Luanda were more unfortunate. The Afro-Portuguese who were the suppliers impressed their personal brands on the arms of the slaves before consigning them to agents or shippers. Early in the eighteenth century, a further brand was added as evidence that the export duty had been paid. From at least the late seventeenth century, an official slave brander burned the royal arms onto the right breast of slaves as a sign of their vassalage to the Crown. Overlaying this was added a cross brand,

as proof of compliance with the requirement that black slaves be baptised before embarkation. (31)

In this explanation, slaves were not only branded to indicate ownership of a master, but also to show that the transaction of their lives had taken place. The brand that was added “as evidence that the export duty had been paid” reveals that slaves were branded to reveal that the business between white masters had been concluded. Their skins became a ledger indicating that various fees had been paid and were fully accounted for. Their skins were rendered a visual text, subject to interpretation by the white man.

The branding of slaves became one of the ways in which a slave’s humanity was not only denied, but actively destroyed. Susan Sontag argues that “violence turns *anybody* subject to it into a thing” (11, emphasis mine). Sontag’s word choice is indicative of the ability of humanity to be ascribed to animals as well; *any body*. Thus, when cattle and other animals are branded or marked/mutilated, they too are transformed into things. Here, then, is the central process that must take place before a body can be subject to violence: humanity must be actively eradicated by the perpetrator of violence; the body must be a body and nothing else.

Ruth Gilmore argues that “racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanisation achieves ideological normality, while, at the same time, the practice of dehumanising people produces racial categories” (cited in Weheylie 70). “In other words,” Weheylie continues, “the barring of subjects that belong to the species of *homo sapiens* from the prefecture of humanity depends upon the workings of racialisation (differentiation) and racism (hierarchisation and exclusion); in fact, the two are indistinguishable” (70 emphasis in original). Slaves were differentiated and then excluded from humanity, by decree of the white male. By doing so, slaves became things to which anything could be done; no violence was too extreme, no violation too barbaric. (Barbarism would imply that the victim was human. Slaves did not count as human; therefore the violence inflicted upon them by their owners could not be classified as barbaric.) Sethe’s trauma and subsequent marking classify her as exactly that; a thing. Her ‘tree’ functioned not only as a marker of survival, but also a marker of ownership.

Sethe did not remember her mother well. When speaking to Denver on the topic, she tells her that

One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. *This*,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' (Morrison 72 emphasis mine)

This interaction between Sethe and her mother is revealing in several ways. Firstly, Sethe's mother reveals her 'mark' as a marker of her individual identity. What essentially was designed to dehumanise ultimately resulted in her stable individual identity. The words "[t]his your ma'am" reveal that her identity rests solely on her mark which is further emphasised by her repetition of the word "this". What once marked her as a thing has become a marker of individual identity, as she is the only one who now possesses the mark; "the rest dead". Secondly, the interaction reveals the resilience of the black body under slavery; Sethe's unnamed mother is able to appropriate an identity through a violation that was supposed to dehumanise. She essentially subverts white authority through her self-identification. This, however, does not mean that we, as readers, have more access to her; in fact, we are denied any knowledge of her apart from her mark. She lives and dies thus, her brand the only identifying feature.

When telling the story to Denver, Sethe explained how she wanted a mark as well, so that she would be linked to her mother:

'How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.' Sethe chuckled.

'Did she?' asked Denver.

'She slapped my face.'

'What for?'

'I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own.' (73)

Sethe only understands later that the mark comes at a price. Sethe's mother had to endure a trauma in order to be marked, and Sethe's question inadvertently makes light of that trauma. Sethe was too young to understand, but when she received "a mark of [her] own", she understood the profound violation that occurs through the marking process. Sethe's own mark functions in a similar way to the brand her mother received; it marks her as property, but at the same time marks her as an individual: no other slave has a 'tree' growing on their back. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues, "both Sethe and her unnamed, enslaved, rebellious, hanged mother have markings that map their histories upon their bodies, at once imposing identity and differentiating them from the unmarked" (cited in Slattery, 213). "Their

wounds are their names," Slattery argues, "the words of their biographies" (213); Sethe's biography is irrevocably embedded in her flesh.

Slattery goes further in his interpretation of Sethe's mark, building on Thomson's argument:

'[a]s with each marked female character,'" Thomson argues, "'Sethe's bodily reconfiguration is paradoxical, embodying simultaneously the terrible price demanded and the extraordinary character produced by her history and identity' (121). The body the Schoolteacher denied as a person has become, through the whippings, a body individually and uniquely marked by the image of a 'chokecherry tree'. (213)

The image of the tree, however, transcends the trauma Sethe suffered in order to become symbolic of growth and escape. "It is Sethe's witness to her drive for freedom;" he further argues, "the tree on her back blossoming with dots of blood and pus is her signature of freedom, as are the blossoming trees that Paul D is instructed to follow north to freedom when he escapes [...] the chain gang. Within the scars and pains of our wounds is the blossoming flower of freedom; the wound has the capacity to open up to liberation, even when the origin of such freedom is so tender and vulnerable" (213). In this manner, Sethe's tree functions not only as a marker of property, but also a marker of freedom, granting her the ability to escape.

## Re-membering the Flesh

Morrison suggests that for slaves to build a coherent sense of self, they had to first claim ownership of their bodies. She illustrates this beautifully through Baby Suggs' sudden awareness of her own body:

Something's the matter. What's the matter? What's the matter? she asked herself. She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, "These hands belong to me. These my hands." Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud.

Mr. Garner looked over his shoulder at her with wide brown eyes and smiled himself. "What's funny, Jenny?"

She couldn't stop laughing. "My heart's beating," she said.

And it was true. (Morrison 166)

It is only when Baby Suggs “[steps] foot on free ground” (166) that she is able to connect herself with her own body. Despite being uninterested in her appearance, she looks at her hands and is finally able to realise that they are *her* hands and hers alone; no one owns her, and she is free to establish a sense of subjectivity and identity that had been denied by her various owners. As Lawrence notes, “[a]fter she experiences the wonder of possessing her own body, of recognising the pounding of ‘her own heartbeat’ (141), she renames herself ‘Suggs’ (her husband’s name), forcefully rejecting Garner’s uncomprehending defence of the ‘legal’ name on her bill of sale, Jenny Whitlow” (235). For Baby Suggs, freedom grants her the ability to divorce herself completely from her identity as a slave. She does not only inhabit her body; she also creates a ‘freed self’ that she can lay claim to. By embracing her own body parts, external and internal, she re(-)members her self, and it is this message that she preaches to her community in the clearing.

Before Sethe’s attempted murder of her children, 124 “had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (Morrison 102). The house was a hub of activity and community, and Baby Suggs established herself as an “unchurched preacher” (Morrison 102) believing that “because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once” (Morrison 102). She sought to restore a sense of subjectivity and individual identity to the many lives that had been devastated by white hegemonic rule, and her sermon in the clearing resonates quite strongly with Hortense Spillers’ construct of the flesh. I quote the passage at length:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that

they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver-- love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize."

Baby Suggs' sermon calls for a reclaiming of individual identity from collective flesh, but, at the same time, she calls for a recoding of the collective identity imposed upon slaves. As I have discussed previously, 'flesh' functions as a collective term and refers to an entire people who were devastated by white hegemonic rule. Flesh is stripped of subjectivity and individual identity; it is a "zero degree of social conceptualisation" (Spillers 67), devoid of agency or identity. Within this frame, slaves are not people, they are flesh. Baby Suggs' sermon of healing calls the people to reject the ideologies of masters forced on them by white hegemony by actively re(-)membering themselves and claiming ownership of their bodies. She begins by identifying the people as flesh, but she distorts the dismembering aspect of the term by contradicting the very notion of the flesh: "'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass'" (Morrison 103). In the racist construct of the term, flesh would be incapable of weeping, laughing, or dancing. Baby Suggs' sermon starts by bestowing human characteristics to something devoid of subjectivity. In doing so, she rebels against the dominant discourse and subverts the terms used to dominate and dismember. She goes on to identify the many body parts that white masters had taken pleasure in abusing and destroying, and calls the people to claim ownership of these parts. As Fuston-White argues,

[i]n the Clearing she tells the people to love their flesh, demonstrating an opposition theory of the body as she embraces that very site of her oppression. [...] As slaves, flesh had been all they were, their sole identity. Likewise, that flesh had been the source of their victimization. But, in freedom, they have room to own and to love that flesh. (468)

Baby Suggs calls upon the people in the clearing to identify and name the many parts of their bodies that had suffered immense violence. By naming the parts, the people in the clearing are able to claim ownership of their bodies and then actively work to re(-)member themselves. This act of re(-)membering is rebellious in nature; it is a powerful act of contradicting the dominant discourse forced upon slaves by white hegemonic rule. However, this is also an act of healing; slaves who were beaten, broken, and violated are able to claim ownership of their individual body parts and then piece together the dismembered self, thereby bestowing the flesh with full identity and subjectivity. As the narrator succinctly notes, "[f]reeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 111-112). Despite their freedom, many slaves were haunted and tormented by their time as property. Moving beyond this construction is a difficult and traumatic process,



but through Baby Suggs, Morrison suggests that in order for healing to occur, former slaves needed to reconnect with every part of their bodies, internal and external. Baby Suggs rediscovered her body as her own body when she gained her freedom, and sought to share this message of embodied healing through her sermon in the clearing. As such the sermon in the clearing is perhaps the most potent image of healing in the novel.

The devastation wrought by slavery on an entire population completely obliterated any sense of self-definition for slaves. Stripped of their humanity, any attempt made by slaves to redefine themselves as autonomous subjects was not only stamped out but punished. Slaves were things to which anything could be done; no beating was too severe, no violation was too brutal. Slaves existed outside of the sphere of the human. *Beloved* works to give names and stories to the people who were stripped of identity.

## Chapter 3

### **Mutilating the Surface: The Lord's Resistance Army, Atrocity Photography, and *Kony 2012***

The previous chapter examined figurations of wounding and healing in the era of American slavery through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This chapter makes use of the trans-Atlantic link to Africa to examine the atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and how images and messages about this conflict change as they enter the digital sphere. The digital era has brought about a profound change in the way we read and understand 'atrocity', but despite the effectiveness of our highly connected world, the notion of 'atrocity' has become subjective. Photographs depicting torn and mutilated bodies frame their subjects as victims and subsequently strip them of all agency. There is a complete lack of reciprocal exchange in an era where it is easier than ever to share and spread information, discussion, and communication. The previous chapter focused on the slave as sub-human, the atrocities committed by slave owners, and how we read these atrocities. This chapter focuses on photography and social media to ground a discussion of the way we read the skin in postcolonial Africa. I begin my discussion by focussing on a photograph of a woman who was mutilated by the LRA and what the implications are when we 'read' this photograph. How do we 'read' a photograph of atrocity? What do we see when we look at a survivor of such atrocity? I then move on to the controversial *Kony 2012* and examine the implications of this film that trivialised the suffering of survivors of LRA brutality. What happens to a survivor's story when it is appropriated and retold by someone else, specifically, someone from a completely different context?

A distinction needs to be made here between 'victim' and 'survivor'. This chapter focuses on how the label of victim strips its subject of agency, and relocates him or her to the sphere of passivity. Survivor, on the other hand, delineates a subject that has not undergone this stripping of agency. Survivors are not defined by the atrocities they have experienced, but rather by their ability to move on from such experiences. However, 'victim' does not always refer to this transference of power. Survivors of LRA atrocities are only victims during the act of violation. They are powerless to do anything to stop the violence being inflicted upon them, and thus have little agency. This does not mean that they are only victims. Victims who survive LRA atrocities become survivors. They have endured atrocious violence and lived. A problem emerges here in news coverage of such stories. Media focus on the

violence that survivors have suffered, not the lives they have lived after such violence. Western media are especially guilty of framing survivors as victims, thereby revictimising them through the very language that is meant to tell their stories. Violence becomes the only story, and survivors can be nothing more than victims.

Consider the following image:



Photo by Marcus Bleasdale CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US

This is a photograph of Mbonih, who was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) outside Niangara, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Marcus Bleasdale describes how “[t]he rebels cut off her lips and ears and sent her back to her village with a warning to the population that the LRA rebels were nearby” (online). We cannot look at this photo and not see the LRA's narrative. Whilst this photo is meant to convey LRA atrocities, it also frames this woman as a victim. As Elizabeth Abel argues,

[w]hat falls out of the picture [of atrocity] is intentionality. Unlike earthquakes, floods, famine, disease, destitution, and other sources of human misery, atrocity is characterised by intentionality, a deliberate breach of the social contract, a knowing violation of a shared humanity. Its defining characteristic is a radical asymmetry of agency: massively pooled on one side, brutally drained from the other. (105)

In relation to the photograph of Mbonih, the narrative voice of the LRA completely dominates the subject of the photograph: when looking at her face, the viewer's eye is not drawn to her individual narrative voice, but rather to the enforced voice of the LRA. As a result, the photograph does little to help reclaim its subject's narrative voice. The caption offers little information about Mbonih herself; we are told that she is being treated at a hospital and that her children are being looked after by a relative, but apart from this, we learn nothing about her. This photograph presents a single story, one of violence inflicted on a victim. The violence she suffered is undoubtedly important, but this is but one event in her life. The narrative offered by the photograph is restricted and limited; we hear one narrative voice at the expense of the other. We do not see a person, we see a victim. The photograph appears on Human Rights Watch's website, an organisation dedicated to the unearthing and documenting of human rights violations, so it will be primarily viewed by a Western audience, and thus subject to a particular frame of interpretation. This interpretation would reinforce the stereotype that Africans are in need of saving by westerners. By no means is this a condemnation of Human Rights Watch and the work they do. My argument is that the single story is prevalent in Western discourse on Africa, and this ultimately reinforces the stereotypes associated with the continent.

The photograph is taken by a professional and is clearly framed. We are told that her ears were also cut off, but the side of her face is in shadow, so we cannot see the full extent of her mutilation. It is unclear whether or not this was done to make the photograph less shocking. Viewers see her as she cannot see herself; as her mutilation occurred on her face, she will only be able to see her scars in a mirror or in a photograph of herself. Susan Sontag argues that "there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). Our ability to see Mbonih as she cannot see herself enforces her vulnerability. The act of cutting off her lips silences her, and the photograph, in its own way, also silences her, as we rely on the image to understand her experience. However, her body cannot be silenced, as her scars speak to her survival. Her wounds were horrific, and whilst her scars do speak to the trauma she suffered, they also speak to her resilience and survival. So often, scars are viewed as negative signifiers; they are read as a memory of the inflicted wounds (Slattery 43). But the scar is an ambiguous signifier. Whilst it does speak to the event of wounding (it impossible for it not to), it also speaks to the healing of the body. The photograph, like the scar, speaks to the 'pastness' of the event. Sontag notes that "by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (15).

Mbonih's narrative is frozen in the past. By photographing and framing her as a victim, only one narrative is offered, namely that of LRA atrocities. However, the past is only one aspect of her life, because she *survived*. As such, the focus on her past powerlessness reinforces that powerlessness in the present. International readers will see her in one way, and few will pause to wonder what she is doing now.

Atrocity photographs are not self-evident. Sontag argues that “[w]hat the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it do what no photograph can ever do – speak. The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached” (108-109). In this way, the caption provides a context for the photograph, but it remains an interpretation. Later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag argues that “all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by the captions” (9). As such, captions wield a descriptive power over the photographs to which they are attached, and can be interpreted in different ways in different contexts. Atrocity photography differs from other forms of photography in that it attempts to elicit a moral response from its reader. If the (entirely accurate) caption is an interpretation, then a moral responsibility on the part of the reader exists to spend more time with the photograph in order to fully understand it and its context. Jay Prosser argues that

‘[r]eading’ means at the very least attending carefully to the image, spending more time with it than we may tend to when it appears in our newspapers or on the internet. Atrocity photographs are not self-evident and thus require this kind of close reading. In images of atrocity, as in other images – but with far greater repercussions for the subjects and for our understanding and conscience – the meaning is not obvious” (10)

Atrocity photographs require close reading, but this seldom occurs as the notion of atrocity has become embedded in our culture and part of the everyday. Prosser discusses the different ways of reading atrocity photographs:

Sometimes atrocity is in the medium, in the representation. [...] There can be a failure of seeing and understanding in the atrocity photograph, or in the way it is used or understood or captioned, a gesture of shading, of holding back, of controlling. Or, conversely, of making the meaning of the atrocity photograph too full and closed and not seeing the people violated in the photograph in the rush to say what the atrocity photograph means. Both modes of under-seeing and over-seeing suggest that representation is part of atrocity. This is also to widen the concept of atrocity to include the processes of photography itself. (12)

Framing and representation are thus inextricably tied to atrocity and photography. As Sontag argues, “the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace [...], cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (41). It is these frames that influence the manner in which we read and understand images of atrocity.

Fred Ritchin argues that “the subject of the photograph is often voiceless, unable to contest his or her depiction. Often the photographer barely knows the person, yet the image could be used to define the person or to represent a certain theme” (266). The image is subject to the photographer, and can be manipulated to suit a certain goal, or portray a certain message; the voiceless subject can make no objection to the appropriation of their image. Thus, the photographer wields a certain power over the subject through the photograph. In the past, photographs had to be developed before they could be viewed, and this distanced the photographer from the subject. Digital technologies have removed this distance; the image can be viewed immediately, and can thus encourage a reciprocal exchange between subject and photographer. Whilst atrocity photography as a discipline has evolved with digital technologies, there is still progress to be made. When the option of reciprocal exchange is available, but disregarded, the discipline runs the risk of re-victimisation through representation, the very medium used to expose atrocity. Ritchin asks, “why not also give the photographic subject a voice? Now that the photograph is immediately viewable on a camera or a computer, the subject can in many cases be asked to react to the image, or be asked to describe her own situation. Imagine a daily newspaper in which the reader can expect to hear the subject commenting on the photograph, including its merits, or articulating opinions on his situation” (266). The ability to do this is readily available, and is perhaps the next step the discipline of atrocity.

Prosser argues that

[p]hotography’s powers of representation can quickly harden into stereotypes. Inhering in what’s acceptable to show on Western media, whose consuming publics are concentrated in the global North, are the problems of sexism, racism, and imperialism. The conventions of atrocity photographs can require or even rely on showing people in a world apart from where we look at these photographs, suffering people whose condition is often emblematised in their states of undress, or nakedness, or other forms of bodily vulnerability. (8-9)

If photographs of atrocity run the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, and the technology to prevent this is readily available, then it follows that the discipline should make use of every resource to ensure that the representation itself does not victimise. Ritchin discusses an outsider-insider collaboration and how this enables a greater understanding of what is represented by combining the views and opinions of both the insider and the outsider. The viewpoints of insiders and outsiders are vastly different, and the inclusion of an insider's viewpoint assures that not only will the contest be clearer, but the power relation between photographer and subject will be equalised. As Ritchin observes, "[t]he fact that photographs can be evaluated not only by the photographers, editors, or readers but also by their subjects changes the power balance enormously. Now it is not only the professional outsiders depicting the insiders, but the insiders responding with their own points of view, which may amplify or contest images and captions that previously had considerable immunity from such criticism (267-268).

## **LRA Context**

British colonial rule had a profound influence on the inter-ethnic tensions which resulted in the numerous coups and violence of Uganda's postcolonial era. In order to gain complete control of Uganda and its resources, and to prevent other imperial contenders from exerting influence in Uganda, Britain adopted a 'divide and rule' policy "that split Uganda into functional regions for administrative efficiency, and maximum economic profit" (Lomo and Hovil 18). This resulted in the north-south divide that is still prevalent today. When Uganda gained independence in 1962, the proceeding years were dominated by violence and military coups as numerous leaders vied for control of the country. This persistent violence heightened the tribal tensions, where certain tribes were 'favoured' whilst others were ignored. The Acholi tribe in the north suffered tremendously under Idi Amin's horrific regime, resulting in a complete lack of trust in any southern government. This, in turn, provided the base from which Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony began their campaign against Museveni.

The genesis of the Lord's Resistance Army has its roots in the Holy Spirit Movement/Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSM/HSMF) founded by Alice Auma, who later became Alice Lakwena, in 1986. As van Acker argues, "Alice Auma, a spirit medium in Kitgum, proclaimed that the spirit Lakwena had ordered her in August 1986 to stop healing and raise an army called the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces to wage war against the evil overtaking the land, led by

a range of spirits, chief among them Lakwena” (346). Van Acker further argues that “[w]aging war was understood as an ordeal, but nonetheless a necessary instrument in the process of cleansing or purifying: separating the just from the unjust to create a healed rather than suffering community” (347), and Tim Allen notes that “[Alice ...] explained that war is a form of healing through which people could be purified. The healing is on both sides, as those that die are like the rotten flesh cut out by a surgeon. The pure, on the other hand, could not be killed” (8). Lakwena’s movement gained considerable support from the Acholi population, but was ultimately short lived. She was defeated in October 1987 after “she left Acholiland with several thousand followers, and led them south in a marauding crusade, overwhelming opposition on the way. They were finally defeated in the swamps to the east of Iganga, some eighty miles from Kampala” (Allen 9). Lakwena escaped and fled to Kenya, where she died in 2007.

Joseph Kony, a school dropout who later trained as an *ajwaka*, also claimed to be possessed by spirits and formed the rebel group that was to become known as the Lord’s Resistance Army. As Vinci notes, “[a]fter the HSM’s defeat and the signing of a peace accord by the UPDA, there were no other effective military groups to represent the Acholi against the NRM/A” (365). Initially targeting government forces, the LRA waged a campaign of guerrilla warfare against Museveni and his regime. However, this changed as Kony began to target civilians who were considered as government collaborators. Allen argues that “[l]ike Alice, Kony claimed that Acholi society needed to be purified by violence, but he has been much more prone to specifically targeting non-combatants, and his forces have specialised in performing shocking atrocities on a few individuals, spreading fear in the population as a whole” (10). Vinci notes that “[t]he period of the early/mid 1990s is considered to be a major turning point in the strategy of the LRA for two reasons. It was at this point that the Khartoum government began supplying Kony’s army with new weapons and equipment and allowed the LRA to establish bases in Sudan. In addition, Kony reportedly began to feel that the Acholi people had betrayed him” (366). Kony’s violent guerrilla campaign has displaced an estimated 1.7 million people, forcing them into Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps where living conditions and security are poor. Atrocities against civilians are committed not only by the LRA, but also by the UPDF (Uganda People’s Defence Force), who are supposed to protect the people from Kony and the LRA.

The LRA are notorious for the brutal mutilations they inflict on the civilian population; countless people have had lips, ears, noses, and limbs cut off. Often, the cut off body parts



are placed inside a letter that the survivor has to take back to his or her village. As Anthony Vinci argues,

Standard mutilation practices involve severing off lips, ears, noses, fingers and hands. Other methods include sewing eyes shut and padlocking lips together. A typical story, reported by Father Carlos Rodriguez, is of a boy of 17 who has had his ears, lips and fingers cut off by the rebels. They wrapped his ears in a letter which they put into his pocket. The letter read, '[w]e shall do to you what we have done to him' – referring to those who wanted to join the local defence forces (LDU). (370)

LRA mutilations thus have a communicative function: civilian bodies become texts upon which the LRA inscribe, or carve, their political ideology. People's lips are cut off because they use their lips to speak about the LRA, or to warn the UPDF. In this way, the 'offending' body part is removed as a punishment, as well as a warning. When survivors return to their villages, their bodies serve as a warning to the rest of the population. *In The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda*, Human Rights Watch describe how "[t]he rebels destroy bicycles (and often kill or mutilate their owners) because the bicycle is a relatively quick form of transport over poorly maintained rural roads. The rebels fear that the existence of bicycles enables civilians to warn government soldiers quickly of rebel activity" (16n). As Vinci succinctly notes, "

[s]uch LRA brutality is highly visible and symbolic. The LRA's brutality allows it to use mutilation as a method of communication and control over the population. Ears and lips are cut off as a signal to beware of informing on the LRA. Bicycle riders have their legs cut off because bicycles, a major mode of transportation, also bring communication. Rape is often public, as a way to humiliate both the victim and his or her family members. (370)

Civilians are made hyper-aware of the severe punishments they could suffer if they are caught. Mutilation used as a form of communication instils fear and enforces silence. These 'speaking' bodies tell the population not to speak. Okwango Alero, a former LRA combatant interviewed by Peter Eichstaedt, explained how "cutting off hands, lips, and ears was 'a soldier's recognised duty.' Such brutality was punishment for resisting or attempting to alert the Ugandan army to the presence of LRA units. 'To show [that] making alarm is bad, they cut off arms and lips so that the next time, they will not make [an] alarm'" (102). The mutilated bodies are scripted and serve as warnings to other civilians. The body of a survivor of a LRA mutilation is transformed into an easily readable text.

In *Nowhere to Hide: Humanitarian Protection Threats in Northern Uganda*, the Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda report that “[t]he LRA also threatens civilians by engaging in physical mutilation of victims as a part of the process of terror production. [...] In the past 2 years many victims have suffered from having their lips, ears and noses cut off with knives or pangas, while others have also suffered from having hands amputated, or from having eyelids or lips sewn together” (54). As previously mentioned, LRA mutilations are richly symbolic and serve a communicable function. Consider, for instance, the act of sewing eyes shut and padlocking lips together. The LRA cut off people’s lips as punishment for speaking about them or for alerting the authorities to their presence. The act of sewing eyelids shut is not as widely reported as other mutilations, but it is still richly symbolic, and open to considerable interpretation. The victim, in this instance, is temporarily blinded; the threads keeping the eyelids sown together can be removed, thus restoring sight. The act of temporarily blinding a person suggests that to look upon LRA fighters is forbidden; the victim has seen what he or she is forbidden to see, and the punishment is to have his or her eyesight taken away temporarily, provided the eye is not pierced or damaged during the mutilation. Similarly, the act of padlocking lips together temporarily silences the victim. This ties in with the practice of cutting off lips. Retribution for speaking about the LRA is brutal, and this instils intense fear in the civilian population. Latigo, another man interviewed by Peter Eichstaedt, argues that

It was a horrific practice, Latigo agreed. It had “a terrible psychological impact. People just would not talk about these guys. Even when they were suffering, they wouldn’t talk because the risk was too big.” It grew worse, however. “Later it even moved beyond this and [they] started killing. If they thought that the reason why they were attacked was because somebody from a village reported them, they would come wipe out the village, and villagers just kept quiet. (142-143)

By silencing members of the civilian population in brutal ways, the LRA ensures that people do not speak about them. Fear of retribution is so strong that civilians would rather suffer in silence than risk being mutilated. In doing so, a small group of fighters exerts influence over millions of people. The mutilated survivors of LRA atrocities serve as brutal reminders to the population of what the LRA can do to them. Thus, the act of silencing one person by cutting off their lips effectively silences entire villages.

## ***Kony 2012***

In March 2012, *Invisible Children* released *Kony 2012*, an advocacy video aimed at bringing warlord Joseph Kony to justice. The video went viral, garnering 40 million views on YouTube within four days of its release (Goodman and Preston online), making it “one of the most effectively distributed advocacy campaigns of the last decade” (Cavanagh online). In terms of awareness and dissemination, *Kony 2012* was undeniably successful; *Invisible Children* brought to light a conflict that had escaped notice in international media. All of a sudden, the (western) world was made aware of a conflict that had been going on for decades. *Invisible Children* did this by creating an emotionally charged video with a very specific target market. In terms of execution and effectiveness, *Invisible Children* was faultless. By targeting American youth through the social media platforms they use on a daily basis, *Invisible Children* was able to spread their campaign of awareness and social action to astronomical proportions. Youth were encouraged to share, tweet, and like the campaign, thereby ensuring widespread circulation.

Without a doubt, social media platforms are one of the most effective ways to share information worldwide. Jason Russell, the creator and narrator of *Kony 2012*, encouraged viewers to appeal to their favourite celebrities to share the video. Oprah Winfrey, Justin Bieber, and Kim Kardashian, each with millions of followers on Twitter, shared *Invisible Children*'s message, thereby spreading word to millions of people within a matter of minutes. Commenting on why the campaign was so effective, Danah Boyd notes that “[*Invisible Children*] create narratives that can be boiled down to 140 characters while still engaging people emotionally” and “[t]hey create action messages that can be encapsulated into a hashtag” (Goodman and Preston online). One of the side effects of social media's connectivity is that attention is difficult to attain, and even harder to maintain, thus, *Invisible Children*'s marketing strategy focuses solely on evoking an emotional response in viewers in order to keep them attentive. In doing so, viewers *skim* the video instead of *watching* it and questioning the validity of the information provided. Viewers will not question the representation of Ugandans as passive ‘victims’ in need of saving; rather by skimming the video, supporters of the campaign will accept the single story presented without question.

*Kony 2012* tells a story. Jason Russell introduces us to his son, Gavin, and tells us that he loves him and wants what is best for him. If his son were abducted, he would do everything

in his power to get him back, and the American public would support him, without question, because he is an American. The world is unaware of Joseph Kony, the LRA, and child soldiers, and because they are unaware, they do not care. Russell argues that in a world where we are so connected, it is our moral duty to speak for those who have no voice, and save those who cannot save themselves. Russell then introduces us to Jacob, telling us the story of his abduction and escape, and his brother's death. Russell frames Jacob as the innocent victim, thereby putting a 'face' to the thousands of children who have been abducted by Kony and the LRA. Russell proceeds to show us the conversation with his son, where he tells Gavin what he does for a living. He shows Gavin two pictures, one of Kony, and one of Jacob. The ensuing conversation frames Kony as the embodiment of evil, and Gavin's child-like distinction of Kony as 'bad' and Jacob as 'good' frames the narrative structure and message of *Kony 2012*. Viewers are introduced to a clear victim, and a clear perpetrator. Attention then shifts to American youth and how it is their duty to speak for these 'invisible' children. The solution is simple: share the video, buy the action kit, donate a few dollars a month, entreat celebrities to share the message, and write to government officials to motivate them to intervene and send troops to Uganda to help the Ugandan military capture Joseph Kony and thereby bring the conflict to an end. The ultimate message of *Kony 2012* is that the lives of these *Invisible Children* lie in your hands, the American public, and only you can save them. The narrative is simple; it provides viewers with a clear victim and a clear perpetrator, which is one of the reasons why it spread so widely. American youth were engaged with on their own level, through social media, and the film told them that they have an important and vital role to play, giving them a sense of agency. This simplicity, coupled with the strong emotional pull, was instrumental to the viral success of *Kony 2012*, but at the same time, it elevated American youth by making them the sole actors with agency. Africans were pushed to the periphery in their own story, and were effectively told that they cannot speak by themselves; they need Americans to speak for them if their voices were to be heard.

## Criticisms

Criticisms varied from questions regarding *Invisible Children* as an organisation and their finances, to personal attacks on Jason Russell (which resulted in his public meltdown), to the content and the message of the story itself. Critics argued that the story presented by *Kony 2012* was a gross oversimplification of the conflict, and that the message itself was not factually true. *Kony 2012* simplified the conflict to a single agent, and did not explore the

circumstances or the history that produced Joseph Kony and the LRA. Virtually no information was given on Kony himself, apart from his abductions, killings, and violent mutilations of the civilian population. This lack of information serves to reinforce the idea that Kony is the sole cause of the conflict, and it presents him as the embodiment of evil. In the film, Kony's picture is placed beside pictures of Hitler and Osama bin Laden, two figures that are guaranteed to evoke disgust and hatred in the American population. The film is lacking in any information on the inter-ethnic tensions and political history of marginalisation that culminated in the creation of Kony and the LRA. Critics also pointed out that the story presented in *Kony 2012* is dated, and that Kony had not been in Uganda for over 6 years. Furthermore, the solution offered by *Invisible Children* is not viable, as they propose that international leaders should support the Ugandan military to bring about Kony's capture, making no mention of the atrocities committed against the civilian population by the UPDF. Despite these criticisms, *Invisible Children* still maintains that "[n]o other LRA-affected country has a military that is equipped and competent enough to engage with the LRA" (online). As Kalinaki argues, "[t]he *Kony 2012* video is focused on treating a symptom – the LRA's campaign of brutal violence against civilians – rather than the underlying disease of political repression that gave rise to the rebellion and perpetuated it. The video portrays Kony and his men as 'bad guys,' without giving any further context for their origins, or motivation. There is no explanation of their ability to continue fighting for so long, unchecked" (22). Kony's capture is presented as a cure-all, but this 'solution' does not address the circumstances that created him, and, as Cavanagh argues, "*Invisible Children* does not explain how the demobilisation of Kony and the LRA will prevent similar conflicts from being fuelled by these very same factors" (online). Hickman observes that "what is missing from the film is any sustained first-hand exploration of the war itself, in the villages of northern Uganda and other places directly affected by Kony's atrocities. More broadly, *Kony 2012* is seriously lacking in any kind of examination of where things stand now" (477). In addition, the film made no mention of the living conditions of the IDP camps and the issues that many people currently face. As Branch argues, "the most serious problems people face today in northern Uganda have little to do with Kony. Rather, the problems people face today are the legacy of the camps, where over a million Acholi were forced to live, and die, for years by their own government as part of a counterinsurgency that received essential support from the US and from international aid agencies" (19-20). The failure of peace talks is mentioned, but the blame is placed solely on Kony, who "has repeatedly abused peace talks as an opportunity to regroup, restock, and abduct new recruits" (*Invisible Children* online). Cavanagh draws attention to the fact that "the International Crisis Group (2006, 2010, 2011) has repeatedly suggested that previous efforts to finally apprehend Kony have failed due to a lack of total commitment from Museveni's regime in Uganda, rather than a lack of

manpower, resources, or training, as *Kony 2012* implies” (online). *Invisible Children* have since acknowledged Museveni’s lack of commitment, but Kony is still implicated as the primary reason for the failure of peace talks. These criticisms point to the fact that, as Drumbl argues, whilst “activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would do well to harness the power of contemporary social media [...] the content of the message itself *still really matters*” (481, emphasis in original). If advocacy campaigns are motivated by emotion and attention grabbing alone, the stereotypical representation of Africans as passive victims with little or no subjectivity will continue to spread, ultimately resulting in the vast majority of the western world’s understanding that this is what Africa *is*. This stereotype will continue to grow and expand, and the multitude of voices opposing this construction of Africa will be stifled by sheer volume of misrepresentation in the online world.

Critics slammed *Kony 2012* for its unashamed indulgence in the white saviour narrative, and its portrayal of Africans as either passive victims or brutal killers. The driving narrative was that Africans needed saving, and this completely displaced their agency. Granted, the goal of *Kony 2012* was to spread awareness in the western world, but the only Africans to speak in the film were those who were paid by or allied to *Invisible Children*, and this lack of independent African voices is problematic (Moore 92). The film is an outsider’s interpretation of the conflict, and this in itself raises questions. When an outsider reports on a conflict, it is critical to acknowledge this distance, and portray the story as accurately as possible, something *Kony 2012* failed to do. Furthermore, Russell has not lived through the conflict; he is able to leave whenever he wants, a luxury that Ugandans displaced by the conflict do not have. TMS Ruge notes that “*Kony 2012*’s momentary blip of global fame didn’t just make Kony famous, it made African voices famous. For the first time, the world heard our voices rising in defence of our continent” (172). Whilst *Kony 2012* grossly misrepresented the African population, the proliferation of African voices responding to this misrepresentation proved that African were not the passive ‘victims’ *Invisible Children* made them out to be.

## **African Subjectivity**

Western discourse perpetually frames African subjectivity as either an absence or a lack. *Kony 2012* employs a colonial narrative, and thus configures African subjectivities as incomplete. As Achille Mbembe eloquently argues,

the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature.' Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind. (1, emphasis in original)

In this construction, African subjectivity is incomplete, and thus requires outsiders to reconstruct and redefine for the African what it means to be a human being with full subjectivity. Furthermore, this reconstruction can only be completed by an outsider, as the African subject is incapable of speaking for him or herself, which, in turn, reinforces the notion that Africa is in a perpetual state of need. The colonial narrative assumes that Africans are incapable of speaking for themselves, and thus require Western intervention in order to 'find' their voices. This act is an act of silencing; the African cannot speak for himself, thereby, his voice is unimportant or subservient to the colonial voice. Abena Busia takes this act of silencing a step further with regards to the African woman. In "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female", she argues that "one of the primary characteristics in the representation of the African woman is the *construction* of her inactive silence. She is not necessarily physically absent, [...] but she is actually constructed as being essentially absent from any locus of dramatic action or power" (86, emphasis in original). In the colonialist narrative, the colonised woman is stripped of all agency; she is constructed as silent, incapable of speaking for herself. Thus, it is the imperative of the coloniser to speak for her. Busia further argues that

[t]he African woman is conjured up out of a void, a fissure or space out of which there can be for her no coherent or comprehensible language: not because it cannot be uttered, but because, as Conrad makes quite clear, *her language either cannot be heard or cannot be understood* – and it is this singular factor which has had bearing on the representation of black women in imperial discourse. (88, emphasis in original)

Here Busia highlights the fact that the colonised woman is not barred from language per se, but rather, her language is either negligible or incomprehensible. She is still able to speak, but her utterances are of no import. The coloniser is incapable of comprehending her voice, and is thus obligated to speak for her in order to make up what she lacks. This in turn reinforces the stereotype of African subjectivity as absence or lack. As Mbembe argues, "[p]laced at the margins of the human, the native, with the animal, belongs to the register of imperfection, error, deviation, approximation, corruption, and monstrosity. Not having attained the age of maturity, natives and animals cannot stand on their own two feet; this is

why they are put firmly in the grasp of another” (236). Colonial power dominates, but presents itself as a civilising power that aims to restore or fulfil the absence and lack that is present in the native. This domination not only controls the native, but seeks to eradicate his/her subjectivity and replace it with the subjectivity of the coloniser, thereby ‘completing’ the native and allowing him/her so engage the world with ‘full’ subjectivity. In “Colonialist Criticism”, Chinua Achebe argues that “[c]ertainly anyone, white or black, who chooses to see violence as the abiding principle of African civilization is free to do so. But let him not pass himself off as a restorer of dignity to Africa, or attempt to make out that he is writing about man and about the state of civilization in general” (61).

A clear example of the white saviour/colonialist narrative is Russell’s interview with Jacob, which forms the basis of Russell’s determination to end the conflict. Jacob tries to tell Russell the story of his abduction, escape, his brother’s murder, and his desire to die because he can envision no future for himself. Jina Moore, a human rights journalist, argues that she is “troubled by Russell’s unwillingness to let Jacob speak for himself” (95), and goes on to critique the interview as a whole:

Three times, Russell interrupts Jacob. The tone of his interruptions is shock and dismay – emotions more about how Russell feels listening to Jacob than about what Jacob is feeling or trying to express. Russell is preoccupied with what he reflects back as Jacob’s death-wish. Jacob, on the other hand, is preoccupied with what his life is lacking. He can’t go to school; he has no one to take care of him; and in the absence of these two most basic features of a child’s life, he can’t imagine a future.

What’s remarkable about Jacob here is his ability, at so young an age and with such recent trauma, to articulate this so well. What’s remarkable about Russell here is his inability to listen. (96)

She concludes by saying “[i]n those few minutes, Russell violates key principles of sensitive interviewing: He interrupts. He indulges cliché. He makes promises. For me, that destroys his credibility” (98). Whilst it is possible to argue that Russell’s interruptions merely illustrate his incredulity at Jacob’s desire to die, this could be acceptable only if these interruptions did not occur at the expense of Jacob’s narrative. Jacob is a key figure in this story. He is the only one who has experienced LRA violence first-hand, and thus his narrative voice carries considerable weight. However, this voice is overshadowed by Russell’s voice, who ultimately guides Jacob’s narrative away from the issues he currently faces, to his desire to die. Russell essentially silences Jacob as he is speaking, and rather than focusing on the reasons why Jacob wants to die, he focuses on himself and what he can do to help Jacob. As noble as this may be, Jacob highlights the key issues that many Ugandans face in the



wake of the conflict, but these issues are not addressed by the film. The focus lies not on the Ugandans themselves, but rather on the American youth. Sam Gregory, commenting on the white saviour narrative, argues that “Leshu Torchin (2012) has also framed this within a concept of the ‘narcissism of pity’, in which every struggle relates back to the experience of the advocates, not the victims or survivors” (465). Despite its claim to be a narrative about Africa, *Kony 2012* is a story about an American, and what Americans must do to help Africans who cannot help themselves. As Hamilton argues,

[t]he none-too-subtle message throughout much of *Kony 2012* is that the difference between life or death for children preyed upon by the Lord’s Resistance Army lies in the hands of you, the viewers at home. Without you, they are hopeless. With you, they can survive. That pitch is effective in moving people to action. But at the very same time, it undercuts the agency of the local activists for whom the children abducted by the LRA have never been ‘invisible’. (120)

*Invisible Children* is a prime example of a western NGO that elevates itself and its supporters over the people they are supposed to be helping. It displays the arrogance of external organisations that have little experience of living through a conflict that has spanned over two decades.

The film shows photos of six people who have been mutilated by the LRA, as proof of Kony’s crimes. The sequence lasts three seconds, and no information is given on these survivors. In terms of aesthetics, the images are horrific, and it is thus understandable that they appear in an incredibly short sequence of flashes. However, this is also an act of concealment; the images provide proof of Kony’s crimes, and any discussion of Kony and the LRA needs to take the brutal mutilations into account, however unsettling or disturbing the images are. If westerners are to engage with Kony and his atrocities, they cannot engage with certain aspects and not others. The mutilations form an integral part of Kony’s campaign of fear and violence, and cannot be ignored. The lack of any information on these people is also problematic. We do not know their names or their stories, and we do not hear their voices. In this way, the film frames them as silent victims, and it also silences them as they are given no space to speak for themselves. As Kouveld argues,

[t]he emphasis on the violent suffering of these victims reduces them to just that: suffering victims. Schröder and Schmidt argue that being confronted by these images more easily presents violence as just conduct against the perpetrators, in this case, Kony and the LRA. In other words, violent imaginaries, through their representation of violence subsequently work towards the legitimization of violence as accepted social conduct. (22)

This ensures that viewers will only see them (if they see them at all) as victims of Kony's brutality, and not as survivors who have suffered immense trauma and lived. These images frame their experience of violence as the only story; their lives are defined by the violence they suffered.

## Storytelling

Storytelling is an integral part of human culture; our lives consist of multiple narratives. Storytelling connects us, but often only certain stories are heard. History is written by the victor; a certain story emerges as the dominant story. In her *Ted Talk*, Chimamanda Adiche speaks of the dangers of a single story, where one particular narrative becomes the only narrative. A clear example of the single story is the stereotype of Africa, where the dominant story presents Africa as being in a perpetual state of need. This story presents Africans as passive victims in need of saving and it has been appropriated by many humanitarian agencies that use it to further their aims. Whilst there are many areas in Africa that do require aid, this is not true for the entire continent, as the stereotype presents. Adichie argues that "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (online), and they offer a single story. There are many parts of Africa that have been devastated by war and famine, but this is not true for Africa as a whole. However, this does not stop the spread of the stereotype. *Kony 2012* is but one example. *Invisible Children* had an opportunity to break down stereotypes about Africa, but chose instead to reinforce them. Thus, the story of Africans as helpless victims was told again.

Speaking on the subject of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Allen Feldman argues that

Many witnesses rejected the biographical nomination of 'victim,' with all the passive and depoliticising connotations this term implies, choosing instead the term 'survivor,' which allows for a sense of political agency. Submitting testimony was not therefore seen as wounded persons showing their scars in public, but rather as an act of political and historical intervention: setting the record straight after the systematic mendacity and disinformation of the former regime. (cited in Craps 47)

The distinction between victim and survivor becomes essential when narrating the stories of those who have suffered trauma. Moore argues that "[t]o experience violence is to be betrayed – by the perpetrator, or by bystanders who did not intervene, or by a system that

allows the violence to be perpetrated (or to go unpunished) [...]. To experience violence is also to be powerless. A primary obligation of a storyteller trying to convey others' suffering is to not reinforce that betrayal or that powerlessness" (88). To present survivors as victims reinforces the powerlessness they experienced; the violence they suffered becomes the sole narrative of their lives. On the subject of interviewing survivors of violence, Moore suggests that

[o]ne good method [...] is to talk about things other than the violence they have experienced. It helps to reinforce the idea that the interviewee is a whole human being, not just a person reduced to one experience of powerlessness. I think it's equally important for stories about survivors to convey this idea and to present survivors as people defined by more than the violence they have survived. (99)

In doing so, the survivor is not reduced to a passive victim devoid of agency; the survivor becomes a person rather than a thing of pity, something that enforces powerlessness by stripping the subject of agency. When it comes to photographs of survivors however, maintaining the subject's agency becomes difficult; so often, the survivor is framed as a victim of atrocity. Susan Sontag argues that "the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence" (74), and, as Judith Butler argues, "if there is no photographic evidence, there is no atrocity" (69). However, a problem emerges here with regards to the integrity of the subject in the photograph. The highlighted narrative voice is that of the perpetrator, not the survivor. Atrocity photographs seem to say "*this* is what *they* are doing", not "this person has *survived* extreme violence". Captions may offer the subject's name and information on the violence that was inflicted upon him or her, but it is rare that a caption offers an explanation beyond the act of violence itself.

## Surface Reading and Superficial Skimming

The past few decades have seen literary studies dominated by symptomatic reading, primarily influenced by psychoanalysis and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. Symptomatic reading distinguishes between the favoured symptom and the deceitful surface, ultimately creating a binary of surface/depth, two aspects that cannot coexist. This practice elevates the position of the reader or critic, and allows him or her to alter the text being read through the use of a 'master code' that rewrites a text as it is interpreted. However, recent years have seen the rise of a new way of reading. As Nuttall argues, "[t]he in-depth readings, the preoccupation with symptoms that have structured 30 years of literary work, seem incontrovertibly to be shifting into a critical landscape that opens onto questions

of the literal, the surface and a conceptual language that tries to move beyond the sharp image/text distinction we have relied on for so long” (408). Attention has shifted from the symptom to the surface, and the role played by interpretation is changing.

Susan Sontag advocated this position as early as 1966. In *Against Interpretation*, she argues that

[I]nterpretation [...] presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The situation is that for some reason a text has become unacceptable; yet it cannot be discarded. Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. (6)

For Sontag, interpretation destroys as it excavates; by ignoring what is said in favour of what is supposedly meant, the text is altered by the critic. Without directly stating it, Sontag is presenting surface reading as a response to symptomatic reading. By paying attention to the surface, and by allowing ourselves to be susceptible to it, we open ourselves up, as readers and critics, to what a text has to offer. But what is meant by ‘surface’? Best and Marcus describe the surface as “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (9, emphasis in original). The practice of reading down elevates the critic, allowing him or her to alter the text as it is read. Bruno Latour explains that the critic “is the one who provides the *metalanguage* that makes sense of the infra-language of the text” (86). In doing so, the critic dominates the text and adjusts it to suit his or her interpretation. What would the alternative to this be? Latour explains how Serres “[reshuffles] the cards on the commentator’s table [...]. First, *there is no metalanguage*. Second, it is impossible to distinguish who is providing the explanation; is it the commented text or the commentary? Third, and consequently, there is no precedence and no mastery either” (86, emphasis in original). This reading practice reads across rather than down and places the critic on equal footing with the text he or she is analysing. It pays attention to what the text is saying instead of attempting to impose meaning on it. As Best and Marcus note, “what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it” (18).

The overwhelming support of the *Kony 2012* campaign belies a lack of critical engagement on the part of its supporters. However, a distinction must be made between surface reading and superficial skimming. As a reading and interpretive method, surface reading does not advocate blind acceptance of information. Attention is paid to the surface, but this does not entail that the surface is not subject to scrutiny. In the case of *Kony 2012*, viewers watched the video and shared it without questioning the validity of the information it gave. As Paul Taylor notes, “in practice we tend to consume media content without the presumption that it represents relatively objective, neutral news reporting, or overtly fictional, ideology-free formats which can be enjoyed harmlessly” (97). As I have previously argued, the message of *Kony 2012* obscured reality in order to garner sympathy. It was a highly subjective film that appealed to audiences on an emotional level, thereby bypassing intellectual engagement on the part of the viewer. The vast wealth of information on the internet fosters a disengaged form of reading, as there is simply too much available to critically engage with what we read. Facts have become subjective, objects to be appropriated and manipulated to appeal to and reach a wider audience. Photographs of atrocity no longer carry the weight they used to in the past, and with the sheer volume of atrocity in the world, the very notion of ‘atrocity’ has become commonplace and banal. Shields argues that “[t]he line between fact and fiction is fuzzier than most people find it convenient to admit. There is the commonsensical assertion that while the novelist is engaged on a work of the creative imagination, the duty of the journalist is to tell what really happened, as it happened. That distinction is easy to voice but hard to sustain in logic” (65). Consider the subjectivity of news channels. CNN and BBC will report the same stories, but each channel will highlight certain aspects that suit their audiences. The objectivity of journalism is fading, and the accurate and factual representation of events with it. Joseph Kony’s war that has spread across the central African region has generated interest by many international aid organisations to showcase their ‘compassion’ and ‘interest’ in the lives of those affected by it whilst actually doing little to address the problems that created the conflict. Advocacy campaigns rely on emotionally charged messages to gain the attention of the viewer, but it does not follow that these messages should be factually inaccurate. It is a failing on the part of *Invisible Children* that they created a video that attempted to foster a surface reading, however, given the factual inaccuracies and misrepresentations of the conflict, the result was a superficial skimming of *Kony 2012* that misinformed viewers and manipulated them by relying on emotion rather than fact. The stories of the survivors were stifled by the film, and they were reduced to their mutilation and nothing else. A ‘skimming’ of a survivor’s mutilated body will see the mutilation and nothing else. A surface reading of a survivor’s body will see the mutilation, but also his or her humanity and subjectivity.



## Chapter 4

### (Re)markable Skin: Self-Mutilation, Symptom, and Surface

Skin has a good memory. Skin is like the ground we  
walk every day; you can read a whole history in it  
if you know how to look.  
(Kettlewell 1)

Chapters two and three have explored the mutilation of the body inflicted by other people. In this chapter, I take a step back and examine a different kind of mutilation; one that is done to the self by the self. Whilst my previous chapters share a link in the manner in which the wounding occurs, this chapter extends the discussion of the trope of the wound, focusing on how wounding is a universal experience and is something everyone will be subject to. Humanity shares a vulnerability, but this does not mean that each context is the same. There is a clear difference between survivors of LRA mutilations and people who cut themselves, but the wound itself is universal. I discuss two memoirs; *Skin Game* by Caroline Kettlewell and *Sharp* by David Fitzpatrick. Both memoirs offer distinct and insightful reflection on self-mutilation and discuss why someone would willingly injure themselves. Both authors textualised their skin by carving their pain on the surface of their bodies. Whilst Kettlewell and Fitzpatrick have distinct motivations, they both draw parallels in their discussions of self-mutilation. How do we read the ‘messages’ carved into a cutters’ skin? What do these messages mean, and how might we interpret and understand this ‘writing’?

One of the most provocative areas to explore the relationship between skin and language is self-mutilation. Self-mutilators, or cutters, wound or cut their skin for a variety of reasons, one of these being to convey internal hurts that are barred from language (Strong 44). The act of wounding becomes an act of speaking, whereby a new language is carved on and through the skin. These scars bear testament to the suffering that these individuals have endured, as well as their resilience and strength. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore self-mutilation in its entirety, as research on the subject is vast and varied<sup>2</sup>. The primary foci will be on the communicative aspect of self-mutilation, the significance of the skin as a scene of writing, and the role of the surface in the ways we read the body. But how

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<sup>2</sup> For a concise and descriptive review of the available literature on self-mutilation, see Klonsky, E. and Muehlenkamp, J. “Self-Injury: A Research Review for the Practitioner.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session* 63.11 (2007): 1045-1056.

do we read the body? What approach do we take when we explore something so complex and diverse? From what frame do we view the body? Do we examine it in isolation, or do we step back to allow our approach to include the multitude of social codes that are evident in its construction? Perhaps it is necessary to abandon all our preconceived notions about what a body is and how it is read and constructed in order to become aware of that site that is completely visible, yet hidden, namely the surface. But what would a surface reading of the body entail? Why is it relevant to approach the body through the surface? Perhaps it is time to draw our attention to the covering of the body, to its skin, not through the frames of race and culture, but rather as a complex site of contested meaning and debate. Instead of excavating the body for the hidden symptom, why not explore the surface without suspicion, seeing what is right in front of us? Perhaps it is time to abandon the symptom in favour of the surface, starting with the skin.

The skin is the most expressive of all the sensory organs. Of all the organs in the body, the skin is the largest, and it provides the base of all the sense organs. Sight, taste, smell, and hearing are all grounded in the skin; they are shaped by it, and are incapable of functioning without it. Through it, we touch and are touched by the world. The skin is textual by nature, and is subject to various modes of reading and writing. Ahmed and Stacey argue that “the substance of the skin is itself dependent on regimes of writing that mark the skin in different ways or that produce the skin as marked. The skin is a writerly effect” and that “we could consider the materiality of the signifier as produced by skin, by the weight of the bodies that are formed as they are marked, cut or written into the world” (15). The skin is profoundly susceptible to marking. As Serres argues, “Historiated skin carries and displays a particular history. It is visible: wear and tear, scars from wounds, calluses, wrinkles and furrows of former hopes, blotches, pimples, eczema, psoriasis, birth-marks. Memory is inscribed there” (24). The skin bears (bares) witness to our lives. Its marks are signifiers that speak to various events that have transpired. “It is a phenomenological function of skin to record,” Prosser argues. “Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. [...] Skin is the body’s memory of our lives” (Prosser 52). The skin becomes a kind of personal biography, where histories and events are recorded and revealed on the surface.

Our skin is the primary signifier of identity. As Steven Connor argues, “[t]he skin is [...] the body’s face, the face of its bodiliness. The skinned body is formless, faceless, its face having



been taken off with its skin” (29). Reading the body necessarily involves reading the skin, as, without it, the body becomes flesh, unrecognisable, and unreadable. Remove the skin, and all sites of recognition are removed with it. Whilst skin has been read for centuries, these readings have been dominated by racial discourse. Race was the first and only signifier that mattered, and even then it was subject to the search for depth. Race was coded to signify the depth, or lack thereof, of its subjects. White skin signified intelligence and depth, whilst black skin signified ignorance and ‘the primitive’, thereby eliminating the possibility of depth. In this way, depth is inextricably linked to the surface. In order to reach the depth, readers had to penetrate the surface, a process which ultimately discarded the penetrated surface, as it served only to hide its depths. Anne Cheng suggests that we replace a hermeneutics of suspicion with a “hermeneutics of susceptibility. [...] [A] reading practice that is willing to *follow*, rather than suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface” (101-2, emphasis in original). “Sometimes,” she argues, “it is not a question of what the visible hides but how it is that we have failed to see certain things on its surface” (Cheng 101). Sarah Nuttall argues that “Cheng aims to read not so much in terms of a notion of excavation, but of attention” (411). Attention to the surface “can carry as much perceptive force as the symptomatic can” (Nuttall 410).

Anne Cheng’s *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* is a powerful exploration of the visible, and how it is that we so often miss what should be obvious. She examines the connection between Modernism and Primitivism, arguing that it is not a matter of how we see racial difference, but rather “how racial difference teaches us *to see*” (Cheng 6, emphasis in original). For Cheng, race “is both more and less than biology or ideology. It wields its claim most forcefully and destructively in the realm of the visible, yet it designates and relies on the unseen” (13). Racial discourse fostered the coding of black skin as inferior, pushing black bodies into the realm of the visible, rendering them all too seen, yet not seen at all. Skin, Cheng argues, “is [...] by nature a medium of transition and doubleness: it is at once surface and yet integrally attached to what it covers. It also serves as a vibrant interface between the hidden and the visually available” (28). The skin cannot be divorced from the body, yet its double nature confuses the surface/depth binary, making it difficult to see what is obvious and what is hidden. This frame is useful to explore the relationship between self-mutilation and language, between wounding and speaking, and between depth and surface, psyche and skin.

## Self-mutilation: An Overview

Whilst the current form of self-mutilation is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is important to note that socially sanctioned self-mutilation has been a prevalent feature throughout human history. The rich spiritual and religious symbolism attributed to blood has been the basis of a wide variety of cultural practices involving self-mutilation and ritual scarification. Consider the symbolic position of blood in various religious and spiritual belief systems. In Judeo-Christian history for example, blood is a recurring feature, from the blood of the covenant to the symbolism of sinners being washed clean by Christ's blood, to the symbolism of drinking Christ's blood in Holy Communion. Self-mutilation was condemned by the Old Testament law, and was considered a heathen practice, seen in the way the prophets of Baal "cut themselves *according to their custom* with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them" (1 Kings 18:28 NASV, emphasis added). In the New Testament, self-mutilation was considered a sign of demonic possession, seen in the man who "[c]onstantly, night and day, [...] [gashed] himself with stones" (Mark 5:5 NASV). Favazza describes the spiritual significance of blood in Tibetan Tantrism and North American Indian Mysticism (10-12). Shamanic initiation, for example, "has five important moments: (1) torture and dismemberment of the body; (2) reduction of the body to a skeleton by scraping away the flesh; (3) substitution of the viscera and renewal of the blood; (4) time spent in Hell, during which the future shaman learns from demons and from the souls of dead shamans; and (5) an ascent to Heaven in order to be consecrated by God" (Eliade, cited in Favazza 26). "During wild trancelike dances," Strong describes, "Sufi Mystics [...] slash their heads, hammer spikes into their skin, swallow glass and razor blades, burn themselves, and feed their blood to others in order to drive out evil spirits and enable them to heal" (35). Throughout history, blood has been seen as possessing healing qualities and has been associated with vibrant and plentiful life.

Strong argues that "[b]ody modification is a uniquely human obsession. In every culture throughout history, men and women have decorated their skin and altered their bodies" for a variety of reasons (139). Initiation rituals and rites of passage, for example, are another area where blood and wounding play an integral role. Cuskelly describes a ritual scarring rite practiced by the Nuba tribe of the Sudan: "[a]t the onset of puberty, a first set of scars is made on a young Nuba woman's torso. She receives a second set, also on her torso, when she begins to menstruate. After the weaning of her first child, she is scarred on her back, arms, buttocks, and the backs of her legs" (65). In *The Decorated Body*, Robert Brian

explains this ritual in more detail, noting that “[a]fter puberty [...] the girls are taken by older women to the mountainside, where they remain in isolation until the scars heal” (70) and that the reason why this is done in isolation away from the village is “because the blood is considered evil and polluting” (75). This process is not just an initiation ritual, but also cleansing ritual; the body is cleansed through wounding, the healed scars a testament not only of the passage to maturity, but also of the purification of the body. For many tribes, scars “act as a social code as well as beautification” (Cuskelly 65); they mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, from immaturity to maturity, from ignorance to wisdom. Schildkrout notes that “in Eastern Nigeria, Igbo scarification denoted age, gender, and political authority” (332). Brian argues that “[s]carification [...] [indicates] social status and social structure, emphasising the continuity and way of life of a particular tribal group or class” (70).

It is clear that self-mutilation is not a ‘new’ phenomenon. Bleeding and wounding are integral features of human history. However, all of these examples are of culturally or socially sanctioned self-mutilation, and this is where the key difference lies. The self-mutilation we see today is socially unacceptable in Western culture. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the body is a malleable entity now more than ever, the vast majority of these practices seek to enhance appearance. Susie Orbach notes that “[d]ecorating and reshaping the human form have always been part of our civilization. [...] What is new today, however, is the way in which bodily transformation is no longer linked to social ritual within the family but is part of the individual’s response to wanting to produce what is an acceptable body” (82). Our society is obsessed with beauty and its attainment, which results in a profound dissatisfaction with our bodies as they are. Orbach calls this obsession with changing and moulding our bodies “body dis-ease” (12). As Kathryn Harrison notes, “[b]eauty is granted to but a few, and it rarely confers self-love or even self-acceptance to its owners” (182). This obsession with beauty has an overwhelming public dimension. Our senses are assaulted on a daily basis with advertisements for beauty products, fitness regimes, dieting, and plastic surgery. Beauty is a cultural construct, and its prevalence is reinforced through its domination of the public sphere. Orbach argues that “[o]ur bodies are deemed out of control and must be disciplined. Eating is one manifestation, sexuality another, drinking and drugs yet others. The flip side of this attitude is that we seem to believe that almost everything about the body can be changed by the individual” (24). Germaine Greer, in her angry and polemical work *The Whole Woman* argues that “[e]very woman knows that, regardless of all her other achievements, she is a failure if she is not beautiful” (23). Greer argues that Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), which is defined as an “abnormal preoccupation with a

perceived defect in one's appearance" (24), is considered pathological in men, but is "required of a woman" (24). She notes that a "bald man who wears a wig is a ridiculous figure; a bald woman who refuses to wear a wig is being stropky and confrontational" (Greer 24). All of the fitness regimes, diets, plastic surgeries, and beauty products seek to make the body desirable by conforming to a cultural construction of beauty, and can be seen as socially acceptable body modification. Self-mutilation violates cultural standards of beauty. Whilst other forms of body modification, such as piercing and tattooing, seem to contradict this, these are primarily done for aesthetic purposes and thus contribute to the obsession with beauty. Self-mutilation, on the other hand, is not done for aesthetic purposes, and thus stands opposed to social constructs of beauty. Many people do not understand the phenomenon, which has resulted in an incredibly negative stigma attached to the behaviour. Generating statistics on the incidence and prevalence of self-mutilation is difficult, if not impossible, because the behaviour remains a social taboo (McAllister 177). The behaviour remains underreported because of the negative stigma attached to it. People do not want to subject themselves to judgement under the critical eye of society, and thus remain silent. Self-mutilation is, by its nature, a secretive behaviour.

Approaching the phenomenon is a difficult task, as in recent years, much time has been spent (and wasted) in debating the appropriate name for the behaviour. Some argue that the word 'mutilation' is too harsh, and carries too many negative connotations (Adler and Adler 1). Self-injury or self-harm have emerged as the two favoured names for this behaviour. But these names or labels have also been the subject of much debate, with arguments entailing that they refer to different behaviour patterns. Thrown into this mix have been labels such as para-suicide, and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Kilby lists a variety of terms that have been used and offered, such as "deliberate self-injury", 'self-inflicted violence', 'self-attack', 'self-cutting', 'deliberate non-fatal act', and 'symbolic wounding'" (126). The result is a highly confusing mix of labels and associated behaviours that is difficult to navigate, ultimately leaving a divided approach the only method available to explore the phenomenon.

Definitions of the phenomenon are as varied as the available names and labels. Some definitions include specific behaviour or acts, others are vague with regards to what kinds of acts constitute the phenomenon, still others insist on cultural or social aspects, and others include the social unacceptability of the act. One common thread throughout these definitions, however, is the inclusion of non-suicidal intent. This becomes paramount in distinguishing self-mutilation from suicidal behaviours. Self-mutilation is not about death.

Rather, it is an act or behaviour that is primarily concerned with life. For the purpose of this chapter, the terms 'self-mutilation', 'self-injury' and 'cutting' will be used interchangeably, and they are defined as the deliberate and socially unacceptable mutilation or wounding of the skin, without the intent to commit suicide (Plante 1; Conterio and Lader 16; Babiker and Arnold 2-3; Favazza xvi; Walsh 4). The inclusion of 'deliberate' refers to the fact that self-mutilation is intentional and not accidental. 'Socially unacceptable' refers to context, and distinguishes the current form of self-mutilation from socially sanctioned rites of passage. 'Mutilation or wounding' refers to the alteration or destruction of bodily tissue. 'Of the skin' refers to the site on which the wounding or mutilation occurs, and by specifically referring to skin, more extreme forms of self-mutilation, such as amputation or castration, are excluded. Furthermore, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between language and skin. 'Without the intent to commit suicide' distinguishes self-mutilation from suicidal behaviours, and refers to its life-preserving function.

The psychological motivations to engage in self-mutilation are varied, and are different for each individual. There has been much research into the functions of self-mutilation. Table 3.1 documents 9 functions of the behaviour, and what follows is a discussion of these functions. Affect regulation is by far the most common, thus resulting in the classification of self-mutilation as a coping mechanism. Cutting the skin helps to control overwhelming emotions, and a sense of calm or serenity commonly follows an episode. Cutting is a way of grounding a person, of bringing the swirling motion of intense emotions to a halt. The second most common function of self-mutilation is self-punishment. Often, cutters will feel that they are worthless or deserving of punishment. This is enacted through wounding the body. The wounding is considered a deserved and just punishment for a variety of feelings. Communication of internal pain is another common function of self-mutilation. Cutters feel that the pain inside is too difficult to express in words, or that language is insufficient in adequately describing the emotional turmoil they feel inside. In this way, self-mutilation is a marker of abstract pain made tangible; the symptom is revealed on the surface. Although self-mutilation serves a large variety of functions, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to adequately explore these. Furthermore, it is also beyond the scope of this chapter to explore self-mutilation in its entirety, ie to explore and discuss prevalence, demographics, psychological characteristics, associated diagnoses, and treatment. The primary focus will be on the communicative function of self-mutilation, how the skin is used to convey a variety of messages, and how these messages can be read and interpreted.

Self-mutilation was believed to be more prevalent in women than in men, with research in 1988 indicating that the “‘typical’ self-injurer was a white woman in her late twenties who began hurting herself at age fourteen” (Strong 26). Over recent years, however, research indicates that the number of men engaging in self-mutilation is increasing. The important distinction between male and female self-mutilation is the different types and manners of inflicted wounds. Men mutilate more severely than women, and are more likely to engage in destructive behaviour, such as excessive drinking and substance abuse. Behaviours more common in men are burning and punching walls, as opposed to cutting. Women are more likely to engage in what has been termed ‘delicate cutting’ or ‘delicate self-injury’, cutting less deeply and drawing less blood than men. Their wounds are generally smaller and more precise. Cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity contribute to the gender stigma attached to self-mutilation. Owing to the fact that self-mutilation is a behaviour borne out of emotional instability, it was widely believed that women were far more likely to engage in the behaviour. Women were (and still are) considered more emotional than men, and it is a slight on his masculinity if a man is considered emotional. This stigma results in profound feelings of shame for men who cut, and it also motivates them to keep their cutting resolutely secret. This, in turn, contributes to the difficulty in attaining statistics on the prevalence of self-mutilation in men, as women are more likely to seek help or treatment compared to men. Men are also able to detract attention from self-inflicted wounds by playing into the ‘macho’ construct (see Taylor).

Function	Explanation
Affect Regulation	SM helps to regulate overwhelming emotions, followed by a sense of calm
Self-punishment/Cleansing	Some cutters feel that they need to punish themselves, or ‘bleed the bad out’
Anti-suicide	SM helps to distract from suicidal thoughts
Anti-dissociation	SM helps to end a dissociative state, jolting the mind back to the body through pain
Control/Agency	SM is a way of exerting control over the body
Boundary Establishment/Maintenance	SM establishes boundaries between the self and the world, and helps to maintain these boundaries
Communication/Expression	Wounding the skin functions as a way of communicating internal pain that is too difficult to describe through language
Sensation-Seeking	SM provides a thrill, or high
Manipulation	Some cutters use their wounds to manipulate others to do what they want

Sources: Strong, 2009; Klonsky and Muehlenkamp, 2007; Nock, 2009; McAllister, 2003; Suyemoto, 1998; Taylor, 2003; Tantam and Huband, 2009; Babiker and Arnold, 1997; Conterio and Lader, 1998; and Plante, 2007.

Earlier research into self-mutilation was stifled by the cultural silence imposed upon those who cut. The rise of self-mutilation in the 1990s finally compelled many cutters to break the silence. Whether we like it or not, celebrity culture plays a massive role in shaping what is socially acceptable and what is not. Arguably, many celebrities were instrumental in the breaking of the imposed silence on self-mutilation. In 1993, Johnny Depp “rolled up his sleeve to show a reporter [...] the seven or eight scars he carved with a knife into his forearm to mark important moments in his life” (Strong 138). Two years later, in an emotionally charged interview with the BBC, Princess Diana “revealed to the world that she had been a cutter, in addition to wrestling with an eating disorder” (Strong 19). By admitting her struggle to the world, Princess Diana helped to break the stigma attached to self-mutilation, and to bring it to the attention of the world as a valid and complex expression of inner pain. The rise of the memoir has marked an increased interest in confessional literature. Memoirs about self-mutilation have risen in number over recent years, and have contributed significantly to the breaking of the stigma attached to self-mutilation, as well as the imposed silence. Many people struggling with self-mutilation feel isolated, as though they are the only ones who are cutting. Memoirs about self-mutilation not only prove this to be false, but also offer solace to those who struggle, showing them that they are not alone. David Shields argues that “[t]he best illness memoirs, especially those dealing with psychiatric illnesses [...], are written [...] not for the purpose of a peacock display but to offer solace” (34). Memoirs belong to the category of nonfiction, but Shields sees this as a problem. As he argues,

[h]ow can we enjoy memoirs, believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory? Many memoirs make a virtue of seeming unadorned, unvarnished, but the first and most unforgettable thing we learn about memory is that it's fallible. Memories, we now know, can be buried, lost, blocked, repressed, even recovered. We remember what suits us, and there's almost no limit to what we can forget. (25)

The memoir differs from the autobiography in that it is a reflection on past events, not a structured narrative moving in a linear sequence. Shields notes that “[a]nything processed by memory is fiction” (57) and believes that “[m]emoirs belong to the category of literature, not journalism” (40). Both memoirs explored in this chapter are reflections on past events that try to make sense of these experiences. In this way, the memoir is better equipped to explore and discuss self-mutilation compared to psychological and critical research, as it offers the individual's perspective and struggle, communicating a humanity that is lost in statistics. Furthermore, memoirs about self-mutilation create a public place for those who have been silenced and pushed to the periphery. By writing and sharing their experiences of cutting,

these authors are able to reach out to cutters who feel isolated and alone and trapped in the secrecy and silence imposed upon those who cut themselves. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner explores the idea of a 'public' and how it is constituted. Warner argues that

[a] counterpublic maintains at some level [...] an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. (119)

Owing to the stigma attached to self-mutilation and its imposed silence in public discourse, those who cut form a counterpublic who are aware of their subordinate status and their forced removal from public discourse. Warner further argues that “[c]ounterpublics are ‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity” (122). Memoirs about self-mutilation force the topic into the public sphere, and offer a discourse that is capable of addressing and helping those who cut. In doing so, the subordinate status of the counterpublic of those who cut is removed, and they are able to speak freely and openly about their experiences.

### **Insightful Cutting: Caroline Kettlewell’s *Skin Game***

Like many female cutters, Caroline Kettlewell’s self-injury coincided with an eating disorder. Her memoir, *Skin Game*, is a powerful testament to the struggles surrounding self-mutilation and anorexia. Favazza praises the memoir, and notes that Kettlewell “is the first to present a detailed personal account of cutting herself in which abuse and anger are supplanted by reasoned insight” (477). Kettlewell’s brutal honesty is sometimes difficult to read, but the strength of her voice commands attention. Central to her memoir is the feeling of empowerment and control her cutting gave her. She was unable to control her circumstances, but she was able to exert complete control over her body. Despite the destructive nature of her behaviour, both her anorexia and self-mutilation served to keep her sane in a world turned upside down. Like many memoirs about self-mutilation<sup>3</sup>, the descriptions of her cutting episodes are detailed and explicit, but she goes further than most

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<sup>3</sup> See Wurtzel, Elizabeth. *Prozac Nation*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002.; Kern, Jan. *Scars that Wound, Scars that Heal: A Journey Out of Self Injury*. Ohio: Standard Publishing, 2007.; Smith, Carolyn. *Cutting It Out: A Journey Through Psychotherapy and Self-Harm*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006.; Leatham, Victoria. *Bloodletting: A Memoir of Secrets, Self-Harm, and Survival*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2006.



authors, matching this detail with profound insight and reflection. Through this insight, it becomes possible to understand the elusive 'why' that is absent from so many memoirs and reflections. *Skin Game* is a detailed look into the mind of someone struggling to articulate her trauma and emotional pain. Similarly, *Sharp* by David Fitzpatrick is a harrowing exploration of his struggles with self-mutilation and Bipolar II disorder. *Sharp* is the first memoir about self-mutilation written by a male author, and thus bridged a gap. Fitzpatrick's cutting episodes were psychotic and far more severe than Kettlewell's, and illustrate the differences between male and female cutting.

Many cutters find language insufficient to communicate the emotional turmoil they feel within. In order to articulate their trauma, a new language must be found. Self-mutilation is a way of speaking through wounding. The wound is not only a mouthpiece, but a language. Wounds communicate a message that cutters cannot articulate in language. "The wound is symbolic and cannot be reduced to any single interpretation" Jeanette Winterson writes. "But wounding seems to be a clue or a key to being human. There is value here as well as agony" (Winterson 221). The agony of the wound cannot be denied, but the value is so often overlooked. Wounding is something humanity shares, but the discourse of the wound is dominated by the agony. Self-mutilation reveals the value of the wound. Dennis Slattery sees the wound as "a special place, a magical place [...] an opening where the self and the world may meet on new terms" (6). Wounding may reveal our vulnerability, but it also connects us to each other. We see a wound, and can feel the pain, knowing that we will share in the experience of being wounded. But what of the wounds people inflict on themselves? There seems to be a break in this shared experience at the sight of self-inflicted wounds. We cannot imagine wounding ourselves, and so we struggle to identify with this particular wound. This distance stunts the communicative ability of the wound, and a new approach must be found if we are to understand this language that is at once so visible, and yet so hidden.

A clue to understand the communicative aspect of the wound is to approach self-mutilation as a form of testimony. As Kilby argues:

The act of self-harm renders skin a deeply eloquent form of testimony, where a plea is made for social recognition. Indeed, the signature cuts and scars of self-harmed skin do nothing less than 'scream out' for this reckoning. It would seem, then, that bearing witness to self-mutilated skin should be only a matter of listening to this 'voice'; a simple response. Yet there is something particularly hard to witness here, something which makes contemplating the testimony of self-cut skin anything but simple. Indeed, it would seem that the act of harming one's own skin by cutting it up

and tearing it apart speaks with a 'voice' so sheer that it is virtually impossible for anyone to bear witness to it. Arguably, then, there is something about this 'voice' that defies witnessing, even as it insistently demands it; a not-so-simple response. (124)

How then is it possible to read this testimony carved on skin? Perhaps the answer is as simple as Kilby makes it out to be: their trauma is so severe that language proves incapable of articulating their inner pain in any way. The emotional turmoil is so extreme that inflicting pain and wounding themselves is the only way to communicate their agony. Virginia Woolf notes that "[t]he merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (102). Physical pain has no language. In her study of torture, Elaine Scarry argues that "[i]ntense pain is [...] language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (35). Interestingly though, Scarry maintains that emotional pain has a wealth of language available. "*Psychological suffering*," she argues, "though often difficult for any one person to express, *does* have referential content, *is* susceptible to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art, [...] there is virtually no piece of literature that is *not* about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us" (Scarry 11, emphasis in original). This assertion proves untrue in the context of self-mutilation. Whilst volumes of poetry and prose stand ready to assist cutters in articulating emotional pain, these ultimately prove useless in the search for a language that can adequately express their pain. Cutters feel that their pain is not only indescribable by language, but that it is beyond language. As Kilby notes, "[s]kin deliberately wounded and cut thus speaks violently of the failed promise of language to communicate trauma: it is a rupturing force that tears itself, and its significance, apart from language" (126). Thus, speaking is insufficient; trauma must be communicated in another way, and this has to be intelligible to another person. After all, communication fails if the other is unable to understand.

Self-mutilation is dangerously susceptible to misreading. If self-mutilation is a form of testimony, then this testimony fails if it is unintelligible. Kilby argues that "[u]ltimately, the testimony of cut skin requires the language that it displaces: it requires social and political language for its very own conditions of possibility" (128). If society is unequipped to read the language of self-mutilation, then the testimony of cut skin fails. Consider the phrase "my cuts speak for me" (Kilby 136). Kilby argues that there are two interpretations of this phrase. Firstly, the phrase "represents for the authoring hand a desire for a private, exclusive code, a means of reclaiming the self through an intimate, private language: 'my cuts speak for me'

as if 'only for me'. Seemingly unlike any other form of testimonial appeal, the language of self-harm conspires to keep the reader at a distance" (136). Secondly, she argues that

[t]he desire for testimony is, however, integral to self-harm. The cuts on the skin can and do speak publicly for the self-harmer. Hence, 'my cuts speak for me' equally carries the significance of social representation; 'they speak on behalf of me', 'they represent me.' Despite a desire for separation and distance, and precisely because it is a largely permanent testimony on the skin surface of the body, the testimony of self-harm does and can 'speak' to others; it does desire the ear of the reader, even if it speaks of this desire for the promise of language in a different idiom" (Kilby 136).

However, the testimony of cut skin is successful only if it is intelligible to another person. In her analysis of a series of cartoons drawn by Pembroke, Kilby concludes by saying that "the 'success' of any testimony depends on its relation to the reader and whether they will cite in response the speech act: 'I hear you'" (139). Self-mutilation as testimony may be meaningful to the person inflicting the wounds, but this testimony is dangerously reliant on its intelligibility by those who do not cut. The language of wounding is wrought with difficulties and is often hindered by the desire to 'interpret'. In this way, interpretation blocks the communicative ability of self-mutilation. Self-mutilation undeniably inscribes the symptom on the surface, but the perpetual focus on the symptom, and its interpretation, blinds us to the testimony that is all too seen, yet completely unseen.

Self-mutilation is an act of writing; it writes internal pain on the surface of the body through blood and wounding. Blood emerges as the ink of this writing; in order to write the message, enough blood must be drawn. The very phrase 'drawing blood' has a writing connotation. Furthermore, the rich symbolism of blood makes it a powerful tool of communication. Drawing blood was an integral feature of Kettlewell's cutting, and she draws attention to this fact on the first page of her memoir. "Is there nothing more fascinating than our own blood" she asks, "The scarlet beauty of it. The pulsing immediacy. The way it courses through its endless circuit of comings and goings, slipping and rushing and seeping down to the cells of us, the intimate insider that knows all the news, that's been down to the mailroom and up to the boardroom" (Kettlewell 3-4). Kettlewell does not see her blood as the harbinger of death, but rather the affirmation of her life. She further describes how "[t]he idea of the blood beckoned to me, hypnotic and seductive. How often do we know the blood of our veins? It reveals itself to us only as the herald of bad news: the injury, the illness, the sudden slip of the paring knife or the prick of the doctor's needle. Why should we meet only in disaster" (4). One of the reasons why self-mutilation is such an effective coping mechanism is the manner in which it makes abstract pain tangible. All of the emotional pain and turmoil that evades

verbal language is made concrete and real in one decisive moment. Kettlewell explains how after a cutting episode, “[t]he chaos in my head spun itself into a silk of silence. I had distilled myself to the immediacy of hand, blade, blood, flesh” (27). Self-mutilation is a crude but effective grounding tool; for someone who feels as though they are lost in their thoughts and losing their grip on reality, the pain and blood produced by cutting is a way of marking the difference between what is real and what is not. As Kettlewell explains:

I needed to kill something *in* me, this awful feeling like worms tunnelling along my nerves. So when I discovered the razor blade, cutting, if you’ll believe me, was my gesture of hope. That first time, when I was twelve, was like some kind of miracle, a revelation. The blade slipped easily, painlessly through my skin, like a hot knife through butter. As swift and pure as a stroke of lightening, *it wrought an absolute and pristine division between before and after*. All the chaos, the sound and fury, the uncertainty and confusion and despair – all of it evaporated in an instant, and I was for that moment *grounded, coherent, whole*. [...] I drew the line in the sand, marked my body as mine, its flesh and its blood under my command. (57, emphasis added)

For Kettlewell, cutting became a way of writing the divide between chaos and calm; the cut effectively marked the difference between two states of mind. Prior to cutting, Kettlewell would feel overwhelmed by emotions; cutting her skin focused her attention to a visible and tangible point. In doing so, all of her emotional turmoil was brought together in a breach between her body and the world, a breach that marked the passage of chaos to calm.

Klonsky and Muehlenkamp argue that “[s]ome who self-injure state that they sometimes feel unreal or feel nothing at all. These experiences can be frightening, and some may use self-injury to interrupt these dissociative episodes. The physical injury or sight of blood may jolt the system and help self-injurers regain a sense of self” (1050). Feeling numb is a common motivation for people to cut; when they feel as though they are incapable of feeling anything, self-mutilation makes them feel *something*, even if it is only pain. One cutter describes the effect of this state of perpetual numbness as though she were “a walking corpse” (Strong 73). Cutting herself and seeing her body bleed proved to her that she was in fact alive. Kettlewell cut for a similar reason; her blood proved her tangibility. As she describes, “I’d stare and stare at myself, and the longer I looked the more abstract and unfamiliar that reflection appeared to me. But the blood – that felt tangible. What is more essential than blood? When we speak of the lifeblood of something, we mean its essence, the life at its centre. I kept calling upon my blood to prove to me what was my essence” (Kettlewell 102), and later that “I cut to quiet the cacophony. I cut to end this abstracted agony, to reel my selves back to one present and physical whole, whose blood was the proof of her tangibility” (Kettlewell 111). In this way, cutting is life-affirming; a body that does not bleed when cut is

not alive. For cutters who feel that they are dead inside, self-mutilation is an effective method of affirming their existence.

Kettlewell opens her memoir with a description of her first cutting episode when she was twelve. She “was apprehended in the girls’ bathroom at school, trying to cut [her] arm with [her] Swiss Army knife” (Kettlewell 3). After being questioned by her teachers, her mother was called to collect her and she went home. The following day, she was insulted by her peers who “had a field day with the whole affair” (Kettlewell 22). The adults, however, “maintained an elaborate silence [...] and never mentioned the incident again” (Kettlewell 23). Kettlewell offers an intriguing insight on the imposed silence: “[w]hat that silence meant to me was that I had committed an act so appalling as to be literally unspeakable” (23). This is often what characterises the public dimension of self-mutilation; it is something no one wants to address or consider, and the resulting stigma makes it incredibly difficult for cutters to seek help. “The funny thing about silence,” Kettlewell reflects, “is that it always makes the thing not mentioned seem as though it must be so much worse than you imagined” (22). When Kettlewell reflects on her teachers’ silence, she offers a sharp insight into the dimensions of her public and private selves:

Why silence? I’m sure because the subject made everyone hideously uncomfortable. Because to speak of it would only be to give it shape and substance and permanence. Because no one could imagine that something might be seriously amiss with me – scrappy and sturdy and reliable me. [...] I felt an obligation to play my role as it was expected to be performed. I had a responsibility to appear responsible. (23)

We all mount a public self whose duty is to divert attention from the aspects of ourselves that we do not want others to know. For cutters, however, a perfect public persona is a necessity, because of the silence imposed on self-mutilation.

Kettlewell describes how “I mounted a public self whose job it was to distract attention from any evidence of that other me. [...] I assembled [elusiveness] piece by piece. I learned to smooth over the gaps, to skim the surface. It’s the storyteller’s art to present a coherent narrative, to omit the details that divert from the chosen trajectory” (95). This public self protected Kettlewell to an extent. She explains that “I kept my cutting so resolutely to myself not because I feared *its* discovery, per se, but rather because I knew it would be like the fatally ill-timed sneeze that gives the heroine away when she most needs to escape detection. It would be the signpost to a whole inner life I could neither justify nor explain” (94,

emphasis in original). The negative stigma attached to self-mutilation and the silence imposed upon it results in an awkward silence of sorts when it enters the public sphere. A behaviour that is essentially private becomes the object of intense scrutiny and consternation when it is discovered. Just as language proves inadequate for cutters, language, for those who do not cut, is ill-equipped to discuss self-mutilation. There seems to be no vocabulary for non-cutters to draw on when they discover that a friend or family member cuts. This is a result of the imposed silence and negative stigma attached to the behaviour. By silencing self-mutilation in the public sphere, there is no discourse to rely on when it becomes public.

A way to explain why self-mutilation seems to be so controversial is to compare it to skin diseases. In a culture obsessed with pure and unmarked skin, anything that breaches the boundary between self and world elicits a strong sense of revulsion. Connor argues that “[s]ince human beings have their skins on display, and since their skins display so openly and copiously the signs of their health or disease, it is no surprise that there are strong negative as well as positive feelings attaching to the visible condition of the skin” (95). As Cuskelly notes, “[d]iseases of the skin are particularly repellent; weeping, red skin that sloughs and flakes or oozing white pustules invite few physical overtures, let alone embraces. The ideal skin is free of blemish, glowing, translucent, clear. Bad skin, whether it be because of acne, eczema, or scabies, is a source, for the sufferer, not only of discomfort but also embarrassment” (108). Diseased skin violates the manner in which we experience and come into contact with the world. Our skin covers our bodies and is the basis of our interaction with others. A broken or disintegrating border allows the mixing of inside with outside, something that, in our culture, is considered revolting; bodily fluids must remain in the body, and if they are to be expelled, it must be done so in private. We do not want to touch diseased skin for fear of contamination. The person suffering from a skin disease is isolated and cut off from society, as the thought of touching him or her is, to a large extent, unthinkable. There is something ‘unclean’ about skin diseases, as though they are more contagious than any other illness or disease. Cuskelly argues that “[a] skin disease or disorder is difficult to hide and invokes a degree of disgust and discomfort that few other signs of disease do” (109). Few diseases elicit such a negative response because they do not violate bodily integrity. Cuskelly describes how “[a] friend who suffers from chronic psoriasis puts it like this: the skin is ‘the barrier between inside and outside ... it’s breaking down, you’re leaking out. It’s disgusting.’ The breaching of the skin, that which contains our body with all its messy fluids and pulpy viscera, is an abomination” (109). Public skin must maintain its integrity at all costs. Cuskelly argues that “[c]elebrities will admit to drug and

alcohol abuse before they'll put up their hand to a proxy skin" (112). Diseased skin is often pushed out of the public sphere; if a boundary cannot maintain its integrity, it has no place in the realm where contact can be made. Connor notes that "[s]kin markings, especially when they are associated with disease, have the flagrancy of the blatant; they blurt out what the tongue might prefer to keep decently veiled. They are shameful and disgusting, not only because they inspire fear, but also because they are shameless" (96).

Kettlewell's cutting also took on a cleansing aspect. She describes how "[i]t didn't take much to make me cut. Frustration, humiliation, insecurity, guilt, remorse, loneliness – I cut 'em all out. They were like a poison, caustic and destructive, as though lye had been siphoned into my veins. The only way I could survive them, I thought, was to keep draining them from my blood" (Kettlewell 63). Later, she describes how "I wanted to kill something *in* myself, wanted to bleed it out until I was left with the bare, clean baseline, the absolute zero from which point I could rebuild a better version of myself" (Kettlewell 139, emphasis in original). All of her emotional turmoil and pain was translated into blood; her blood took on all of those aspects of herself that she loathed. In this way, the wound becomes a mouth of sorts, speaking, in blood, what cannot be verbalised. This blood becomes what Julia Kristeva calls the abject; bleeding becomes a way of expelling alien elements from the body. Kristeva argues that "[t]he abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*" (230, emphasis in original). As previously mentioned, Kettlewell needed blood to prove she was alive; the wound did not deny life, but rather affirmed it. For Kristeva,

[a] wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. [...] No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [...] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me. (231, emphasis in original)

Through this frame, the abject is blood, but this blood is not 'normal' blood. It is blood that has been tainted by everything that cannot be verbalised – it consists of all of the negative emotions that need to be excised or expelled from the body for order to be (re)established. In this way, bleeding is a way of cleansing the body. Kettlewell describes how "[s]ometimes one cut was enough, and in the wake of it I felt washed clean" (68). Macey describes how "the experience of abjection establishes bodily boundaries by facilitating the introduction of a distinction between inner and outer" (1). The abject is liminal, and distorts boundaries. Kristeva argues that "[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (232). The wound is the breach between self

and world, and blood, the abject, flows through this breach, cleansing and life affirming as it exits the body.

## **Psychotic Cutting: David Fitzpatrick's *Sharp***

The abject is more clearly represented in Fitzpatrick's memoir. Fitzpatrick's intense self-loathing and self-hatred resulted in the belief that there was literally black liquid inside of him. He recreates a conversation with one of his therapists, Dr Collander, where he explains this:

Dr Collander exhaled, waving his hand at the comment as if it were a pesky fly. "Okay, easy," he said. "What we've established is that there's lots of crap inside."  
"No," I said, picking at my scars. "There's a coating of blackness that lives." [...]  
"So you feel there's literally black liquid inside of you?" he said.  
"Yes," I sighed. "That's what I've been saying – it needs to be lanced." (141)

For Fitzpatrick, all of the emotional pain he felt within was translated into 'black liquid', and the only way for him to process it was to bleed it out. Cutting was both speaking and cleansing; when he cut, his wounds 'spoke' the black liquid, both draining it from his body and speaking what he could not verbalise. As Janice McLane notes, "[t]he stopped voice becomes a hand lifting knife, razor, broken glass to cut, burn, scrape, pop, gouge. The skin erupts in a mouth, tongueless, toothless. A voice drips out, liquid. A voice bubbles out, fluid and scabby. A voice sears itself for a moment, in flesh. This is a voice emerging on the skin, a mouth appearing on the skin" (114). Fitzpatrick's black liquid defied verbal language; it was impossible for him to articulate the emotional pain contained within this black liquid through verbal language. Cutting created an alternative mouth that was fully capable of articulating this psychological pain translated into bodily discourse. For McLane,

self-mutilation [is] the creation of a voice on the skin. No matter whether cut, burned, scalded, or otherwise created, the wound which is a 'mouth' can speak what the actual physical mouth has been forbidden to utter. It creates a voice which can speak survivors' pain because it breaks through the false surface unity of her experience to express the violence and contradictions she knows, while controlling the expression and its effect on others. (115)

For recovery to begin, cutters need to learn how to articulate their emotional pain through language. Cutting is a familiar language; they need to see that verbal language *is* capable of expressing their pain. Fitzpatrick illustrates this in a conversation with Dr Laney, another therapist who worked with him:

"Let's try to work on the delusion of a black liquid that exists inside you."  
I looked at him warily. "You mean why do I feel that way?"



“Not exactly,” he said. “You’ve shared that already... What I mean is, how can we drain away the feeling?”

“Without slicing, you mean?” I said, and he smiled slightly.

“That would be the goal, David,” he said, scratching his cheek. “To convince you that it’s a large painful mass of feelings. Not something to cut into with a blade but to take apart, deconstruct, defuse with words.” (277-278)

For Dr Laney, a major step for Fitzpatrick to make in his recovery was to learn how to speak that which had remained unspeakable for so long. Instead of literally lancing the black liquid through cutting, Dr Laney wanted Fitzpatrick to learn how to “deconstruct” it through language. The translation of emotional pain into black liquid needed to be reversed so that an alternative method for articulating this pain could be found. Fitzpatrick would have to learn how to verbalise the pain that had eluded verbal expression. His mouth would have to resume its vocal function and learn how to speak in the way his wounds did. Interestingly, Dr Laney explained to Fitzpatrick how “[c]enturies ago many contended that a black substance caused the pain of depression. It was a standard medical belief” (278).

In one of the many treatment centres Fitzpatrick spent time in, he was introduced to Dr Presley, a psychiatrist whose views are useful to illustrate how self-mutilation can be misread. Dr Presley’s approach to mental illness was grounded in psychoanalysis. Fitzpatrick describes how “[h]e strode up to me, gripped my wrists, inspected my scarred arms and said, ‘Easy now, easy. We’re here to help you. No reason to hate David anymore.’ Then he patted my upper arms and said, ‘Good skin, good skin.’ Then he released me, pulled back, and said, ‘We can’t have you leaving those little harmful vaginas all over your body now, can we?’” (134). Dr Presley’s devotion to discovering the symptom resulted in a complete misreading and over-interpretation of Fitzpatrick’s wounds. This example also illustrates how Dr Presley had predetermined the causes of Fitzpatrick’s cutting. It was an approach that prevented any alternative interpretation or reading of self-mutilation. Fitzpatrick illustrates this in his description of a therapy session with Dr Presley. Speaking on the subject of Fitzpatrick’s sexual dreams, Dr Presley asks “who would you rather be masturbated by, your therapist or your father?” (190). The conversation that follows is both shocking and revealing:

“Come on, answer,” he said, his brow furrowed. “Would you rather have your father jerk you off or Dr Collander?”

“I don’t know,” I said, seriously pondering the query.

“Nothing seems to move you, son,” he said, placing his palms out so I could see them. “I go away for a month, try to have a goddamned vacation, and you nearly crucify yourself with razors on the grounds of my hospital. When I return, you stay silent as ever. I see you moping around here day after day. So I want to wake you up, okay?”

"I'm trying," I said

"Oh, bullshit!" he said, his face flushed. "Now, tell me. If you were in a room with your father and both of you were naked and erect..."

"What is this, Dr Presley?" I said.

"You got me so far, just listen," he said. "Imagine you both have hard-ons, and you're standing side by side in a room. Then, let's say a velvet curtain opens, and your naked mother enters the room.

Would you rather have her stare at your erection or your father's?" (190)

Dr Presley's questions illustrate how psychoanalysis is ill-equipped to approach self-mutilation. Psychoanalysis is concerned with the unconscious and the symptom, and is thus suspicious of the surface. Dr Presley is incapable of reading the language that is written on Fitzpatrick's skin, as it is a language that is written on the surface. His questions are focused not on Fitzpatrick's cutting, but rather on how Fitzpatrick's self-mutilation is a symptom of what he has repressed. Dr Presley tells Fitzpatrick that "[t]hose are little vaginas on your skin that you slice. [...] The only thing you're doing is having your mother menstruate on your body. Did you know the significance of that? The fantasy, the meaning behind it" (191). Dr Presley's questions position Fitzpatrick in an inverted Oedipal structure: instead of displacing the father to position himself as the mother's primary love object, Dr Presley suggests that Fitzpatrick wants to displace his mother to make himself his father's primary love object. In doing so, Dr Presley reveals his inability to read and treat self-mutilation, and shows a clear disregard for any narrative apart from his own. Fitzpatrick's individual voice is silenced and ignored, an action that is detrimental to successfully treating self-mutilation, as cutting is language that needs to be read in order to be understood.

Blood smearing seems to be a common feature of self-mutilation, yet its significance has been neither questioned nor explored in the critical literature on self-mutilation. Blood smearing was a common feature of Fitzpatrick's cutting. The majority of his cutting episodes were followed by him smearing his blood on his body and on walls, writing words or 'decorating' walls and statues with his blood. For Fitzpatrick, cutting was an act of writing, but he took this a step further and literally used his blood as a kind of ink. As Strong notes, "cutters attest to deriving a sense of comfort and security from their stash of razor blades, a vial of saved blood, or dried bloodstains they have pressed into a journal" (52). One cutter describes how

[t]he important thing was to see the blood. I would smear it around, making the injury look worse than it really was, and leave it to dry there. Then I would be constantly looking at it in the mirror and touching it under my clothes for the next few days. It was as if I had a hidden secret or strength that nobody knew about because I was in control of the pain, it wasn't inflicted from outside. (Strong 127)

Fran, another cutter interviewed by Strong, describes how “[c]utting without drawing enough blood is like having salad and yogurt instead of steak and potatoes” (6). Strong further notes that “[s]ometimes, for reasons she can’t explain, she even draws pictures with her blood, including crosses, Stars of David, swastikas, and ‘the mark of the beast,’ the numbers 666” (6). What is immediately apparent in this description is the religious symbolism of Fran’s blood ‘drawings’; each example draws on Jewish and Christian symbolism. Another cutter describes how “[w]atching the blood pour out makes me feel clean, purified. It’s almost religious, in a way. It feels like something bad or dirty is leaving with the blood, so the more blood spilled, the better” and Strong explains that “[h]e likes to make patterns with the blood on paper towels” (11). Some body piercing and tattoo artists also scarify and brand clients. Raelyn Gallina is one of these, who keeps a portfolio of blood impressions that she records after every cutting. She describes how “[she has] the paper towels with designs made from being pressed over the fresh cutting, so the image in blood is preserved in reverse” (105). In this way, Gallina’s portfolio is both a record of her work, and an act of writing or painting in blood.

*Sharp* is punctuated with numerous psychotic cutting episodes where Fitzpatrick’s fascination and obsession with his blood are clearly illustrated. He describes how “[a]s I saw it, I had failed at college, at relationships, at writing, and at life. I firmly believed I was destined for bleeding and carving” (113). Fitzpatrick refers to his failure at writing, but he goes on to develop another way of writing, namely through his body. Cutting is one aspect of this writing; blood smearing is another. Through smearing, blood literally becomes the ink used to write with, as well as a form of body paint. Blood smearing is another way of ‘writing’ internal pain on the surface of the body. In a commentary on one of her patient’s cutting rituals, Fiona Gardner, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, speculates on the function of blood smearing. Amy, her patient, used cutting as a way to comfort herself, and Gardner notes that “[t]he ritual around the cutting and the smearing of blood on her stomach and arms served as a displacement for her anxieties about relationships which always went wrong” (32). Gardner traces this back to her mother’s rejection of her and the neglect she experienced in her first foster family (33). Gardner continues by saying “[i]t seemed to me that there was a connection between the material that Amy brought about wanting a baby, and the cutting and smearing blood on her stomach. I thought that the actions were some sort of metaphoric representation in that she had fantasies about being pregnant, but the experience of being rejected was so strong that she needed to enact the anger and destruction on her own womb” (33). Gardner’s reading of blood smearing is psychoanalytic and places great

emphasis on the unconscious. Conversely, Fitzpatrick's psychotic cutting and blood smearing episodes do not seem to follow this logic.

During one of his psychotic cutting episodes, one where he "mutilated" (178) for over an hour and a half, he describes how his cutting took on an artistic aspect:

I started cutting again, smearing, picking up steam, my head feeling dizzy. Before long, I was panting and embracing the porcelain babies, hugging, yelling. Hanging off the top of the fountain. Splash, smear, laugh, giggle. I decorated everything that night—suddenly, I was an *artiste* who worked exclusively in plasma. It was hellish, but it also gave me a phenomenal rush, like a swirling, twisted dream. Mutilating and dreaming like that were the most illicit feelings I'd ever had, and it was what I was shooting for each time I hurt myself. (180)

Fitzpatrick often describes his blood smearing as 'decorating'; he would not only smear his blood on his body, but also on walls and statues and various other things. Another passage develops this theme:

I bought three packages of Treet razors and a large plastic drop cloth to cover the bathroom plus two medium-size paintbrushes. I listened to Malkovich's recorded, angry voice and spent hours there cutting my body up, taking breaks every now and then to watch MTV and to eat a ham and cheese sandwich and drink a glass of skim milk.

I used the brushes to paint broad strokes of crimson across the bathroom mirror, where I also created haunting, caveman-like faces and question marks. There were finger-painting swirls of blood, smeared curses, and messages to no one in particular. A phrase I recall smudging: "I BLEED THEREFORE I AM." And "THIS THING CUTS LIKE A KNIFE!" (222)

During this cutting episode, Fitzpatrick positions himself as an artist whose sole medium is blood. He offers no explanation of the faces and question marks he paints, nor does he explain why he felt the need to paint with his own blood. Body painting has been a common cultural feature throughout history, and carries with it both aesthetic as well as religious or spiritual significance. Blood smearing was decorative as well as soothing for Fitzpatrick; smearing his blood over his body contributed to the calming effect his self-mutilation generated. Here it is perhaps possible to read the pictures painted in blood as another expression of internal pain. If the wound can be read as a mouth that 'speaks' blood, then blood can be read as ink that writes pain. Blood has a dual function here: through cutting, it signifies internal pain, but when it is used as ink, it 'paints' or 'writes' other signifiers that also speak to internal pain. In this way, blood smearing becomes another form of internal pain spoken on the surface.

Earlier in his memoir, he describes a period where he “believed that [he] possessed holy gifts and could lend a hand to lost souls through [his] blood’s magical powers” (194). Fitzpatrick was raised in a Catholic home, and this influenced his cutting and reinforced his beliefs in the healing properties of blood. As he notes, “I believed vigorously that my touch, my blood, could make sick folks feel dynamite and reborn. I felt I could fly if only the staff had some faith and would allow me to leap off the stone roof. The only thing I needed to do was more smearing – that was the key” (194). He humorously reflects that “[t]he Christ complex will forever be popular on psych units around the globe, but when I fell under that spell in 1990-91, there were probably four or five of us on that ward who believed they were the Chosen One. God delusions zipped around the unit like a flu bug” (194). And yet, because blood is so prevalent in religious iconography, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the religious properties of blood from episodes of cutting. Fitzpatrick’s delusions and psychotic actions illustrate this significance in an extreme way. Smearing his blood became a way to anoint and heal. Whilst many cutters do not have god delusions, their cutting is ritualistic and cleansing. They too illustrate the religious significance of blood, but on a smaller scale. For many, cutting is a form of blood-letting that both heals and purifies; the wounds show them that they are alive, and as the blood leaves the body, so do all of the negative emotions and internal pain (see Strong 11; Favazza 11-12).

Self-mutilation and blood smearing illustrate how the skin is both text and surface; it can be read as a text, and it can be written upon as a surface. The skin is a canvas upon which identity is inscribed; however, it is anything but stable. Tattooing and scarification permanently alter the skin and its appearance. Plastic surgery aims to erase the marks of time and present the skin as a smooth, unmarked, and perfect surface. Make up and body paint both cover and display. It is clear that the skin is always subject to regimes of writing and is always under revision. As a canvas, the skin displays various stories, and these stories change and continue as time passes. But again, how do we read these stories? Reading these stories and attempting to determine what they mean bypasses the surface upon which they are written. This mode of interpretation imposes meaning on a text rather than exploring what it has to say. As Fitzpatrick’s conversation with Dr Presley illustrates, imposing meaning on a text distorts it and often results in a complete misreading. Dr Presley’s focus on the repressed symptom resulted in the complete breakdown of communication; his reading was one-sided and did not allow for a reciprocal flow of communication, which is essential when approaching self-mutilation. Self-mutilation is a complex language and requires an approach that seeks understanding through exploration. Whilst it is premature to completely disregard the symptom, it is essential that this does not

dominate reading. Because self-mutilation reveals the symptom on the surface, an approach that disregards the surface ultimately misses the symptom.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: Closing the Skin

The skin is undoubtedly one of the most expressive of the body organs, and has been used as a text to inscribe cultural, religious and social ideologies. From tattooing to scarification to body modification, the skin has functioned as a canvas upon which multiple messages have been inscribed. These messages are influenced by numerous factors, but the textuality of the skin is something that cannot be denied. The colour of skin, or the “politics of melanin” (Spillers 71), has a violent history of subjugation and violation which reveals how the signifier of skin colour has been codified throughout history as either superior or inferior, and this history has been discussed by a multitude of authors and academics. This thesis has explored this textuality by focusing on wounding and healing, two aspects that have not been adequately explored in the available critical literature on the skin. Wounding is a universal human experience, and the scars we bear refer to historical events that brought about these markings.

In *Beloved*, Sethe’s journey is one of coming to terms with her brutal past by re-membering what was dis(re)membered. She does this by firstly reclaiming her body that was not hers under white hegemonic rule and re-membering it, finally laying claim to full subjectivity and an identity. Throughout the novel, she prevented herself from doing this because she believed that “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Morrison 51), but ultimately she could only look to the future by remembering the past that she had disremembered. She carried her past with her on her back in the tree that Schoolteacher had ‘planted’ on her, and it was only through reconciling herself with what she had done and suffered in her past that she was able to establish a sense of community. Morrison’s novel is full of characters that had been violated and mutilated, their skins transformed into texts that spoke to the brutality of American slavery. However, wounding cannot be divorced from healing, and it is Baby Suggs’ sermon in the Clearing that highlights and celebrates the flesh that was devastated, but made whole. Under white hegemonic rule, black skin was stripped of agency and identity, and rendered flesh. Flesh has no social category (Spillers 67), which meant that anything could be done to a black slave, regardless of how horrific it was. Morrison’s novel addresses the history of the flesh, and seeks to re-member the history that was ignored by reinventing the life story of Margaret Garner.

The mutilations committed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are horrific, and in many cases, healing cannot be achieved without major surgery, which is, in itself, another form of mutilation. The LRA brutalise the civilian populations across the central region of Africa, and carve their ideologies on the bodies of their victims. These survivors then have to live with the legacy of their violation; their mutilated bodies will bear witness to the LRA, long after the rebels have left their regions. Similarly, photographs of these survivors more often than not frame them as passive victims devoid of subjectivity. The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that make use of these photographs in order to garner support for their various campaigns are primarily western, and thus viewers of these images of atrocity will see the African victim and little else. Atrocity photography is wrought with complications in terms of representation. Captions generally provide only basic information; where the atrocity took place, how many were killed, and so on. Furthermore, most subjects of atrocity photographs have little or no say in the representation of their image. They are the subjects of these photographs, but they have no voice. In the digital age, visual technologies exist that enable a reciprocal exchange between photographer and subject, however these technologies have not yet been adequately implemented. An example of this is *Kony 2012*, the viral video that had the opportunity to factually represent the LRA and the war that has spanned over two decades. However, the narrative was severely flawed and indulged in the numerous stereotypes and clichés about Africa. Added to this was the gross misrepresentation of the conflict, and the framing of Joseph Kony as the embodiment of evil, whose capture will bring the war to an end. *Invisible Children* had the means to raise awareness of the problems that many Ugandans face in the wake of the war, but these were ignored. Instead, *Invisible Children* created an emotionally charged documentary that appealed to the millions of people who supported the campaign without considering whether the film was factually accurate.

Initially, the highly contested phenomenon of self-mutilation that Strong calls "the addiction of the '90s" (57) has since received recognition as valid expression of inner pain. Cutters turn their skins into texts upon which they carve their pain that is barred from language. Earlier research focussed on the symptom; what was the cause of cutting and why would people willingly cut themselves? However, self-mutilation reveals the symptom on the surface; the skin is the medium through which cutters communicate. A problem that emerges here is one of translation. Many people who do not willingly injure themselves do not understand the phenomenon, which is one of the reasons why cutting was viewed as a failed suicide



attempt. However, numerous people have worked tirelessly to eradicate the negative stigma attached to self-mutilation and to create a safe space for cutters to find a way to express their pain through language. The rise of the memoir has seen an increase in memoirs about self-mutilation, and these have been instrumental in drawing attention to the phenomenon. Both Kettlewell and Fitzpatrick were courageous to share their experiences of self-mutilation with the world, and both memoirs actively worked to shed light on cutting and why people would willingly harm themselves. It is important to bear in mind that each cutter and cutting experience is unique, and there is no explanation that encapsulates self-mutilation in its entirety. However, by paying attention to the surface, or the skin, and 'reading' both down and across, cutters and non-cutters can find a mutual language that enables proper communication.

The skin has been and will continue to be a versatile canvas upon which people will adorn and decorate messages that speak to their beliefs and ideologies. The skin is integral to identity, and populations around the world will continue to make use of its textuality. This thesis has explored three areas in relation to wounding and healing, but there is much more that can be examined and scrutinised in relation to the skin and its textuality.

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