

The Illicit Touch: Theorising Narratives of Abused Human Skin

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Skin is the largest sensory organ of the human body. It touches the world around it and it feels the world touching back. The outside world's touch is often non-directed, allowing the recipients to subjectively evaluate the ensuing sensations, such as, for example, those caused by a brush of the lift doors. Directed touch, in contrast, objectifies the recipients. A loving touch makes them objects of adoration; a hateful touch makes them objects of disdain. The objectification is taken to extremes with the specific kind of directed touch that is at the centre of my project here. It is the one that violates the boundaries of what a given society considers to be morally, ethically or legally right: an illicit touch. When perpetrators touch human skin in such a way, they counteract norms in order to lay claim to the lived bodies of individuals.

Their boundary-transgressing touch marks those individuals as weak, inferior, subhuman. An exploration of such illicit touch, however, shows that 'what is right' is relative and unstable as ever. To those who touch illicitly, there is always their own right, their own justification for doing so. It is construed as emerging naturally from their race, their gender or their social status. In denial of the fluidity that enabled its very nascence, this right is even conceived as stable enough to be documented on the skins of the victims, in the form of visible and (or so the perpetrators like to think) permanent marks. However, these marks, the traces of the illicit touch, are anything but permanent and are instead met by counter-inscriptions and narrative appropriations that once again shift and reframe 'what is right'. The narratives of abused and marked skins in which our culture abounds, I argue here, are key to understanding the manifold valences of touch in connection with norms, normativity and law.

I start from two 'boxes' into which I gather such narratives. One box is about books that are bound in human skin instead of animal-derived leather, the other box is concerns Auschwitz number tattoos. In the first case, individual bookbinders crossed the boundaries of what twenty-first century European and American societies (and probably the bookbinders' contemporaries, whose responses we lack) consider to be right. This becomes evident in the shared abjection of those who narratively engage with such books. In the second case, a regime purposely crossed those same boundaries in order to objectify and dehumanise its victims. But the victims, their descendants, and generations of writers have narratively

challenged the perpetrators' supposed right to do so. By telling their own stories about the marks it left on the victims' skins, they have reframed the Nazi regime's illicit touch as such. The narratives in the two boxes stem from autobiographical accounts, fiction, film, news reports, blog posts and court documentation. I happily allow myself to abandon the stance of academic detachment inside the boxes, adding my own narratives of encounters with abused skin to the others. There can be no aiming at completeness, neither inside nor outside the boxes, where I propose a number of theoretical entry points for discussing those narratives. Both my selections of those entry points and of the narratives are but fragments towards a theory of the ways in which skin, touch and law connect.

BOX I: BOOKS BOUND IN HUMAN SKIN

Sometime around 1900, medical doctor and bibliophile Ludovic Bouland of Strasbourg (1839-1932) apparently thought he had every right and a good reason to bind a small book in his private collection in human skin. On this winter morning in 2012, as I inspect the volume that is now *Closed Stores EPB Bindings 14* of the Wellcome Library in London, the white cotton gloves available in the rare materials reading room seem to me to acquire an additional function. Usually meant to protect a delicate object from the touch of its readers, they now protect me from feeling the book's unusual binding. Without the gloves, I would be forced to perform an illicit touch, mimicking Bouland's boundary-transgressing objectification of this specific piece of human skin. I wonder about the unceremonious way in which the librarian has just handed me the small brown box: does she even know

what this is? What about the other three readers in the room: how would they react if I now told them what this is? And what about myself? Inadvertently, I find myself taking notes not about the object in front of me but about my reaction to it.

Michelle Lovric fictionalises her encounter with the same volume in her novel *Book of Human Skin*.¹ In her 'Historical Notes,' she explains that narrator Gianni Boccole's reactions to finding a book bound in human skin in his master's collection are based on her own reactions when examining the volume at the Wellcome Library. The servant Gianni, clumsy in his language and manners but not in his emotions, expresses his horror as follows: 'In what way was I fit to touch sich a thing? In what way was I fit to touch anyone else, now that I had toucht that filthy thing? Is anyone insent what touches a book of humane leather?'² In contrast to Gianni and Lovric, I am not particularly disgusted by the human leather. On the contrary, I am irritated to find that the book looks, feels, smells and sounds just like the many leather-bound books I have touched before, all of which, of course, were bound in the processed skin of dead animals. It makes me wonder whether Gianni's question should be rephrased: 'Is anyone innocent that touches a book of leather?' Is not our own seemingly innocent touch of any leather-bound book part and parcel of the ongoing carnage of our fellow creatures? How have we human animals come to think of our skins as different while, when it comes down to it, our skins are tangible proof of our own animality?

¹ Michelle Lovric. *The Book of Human Skin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 146.

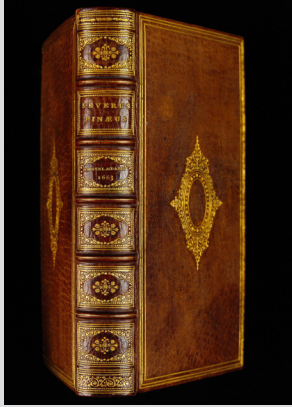


Figure 1A. *Closed Stores EPB Bindings 14*. 'S. Pinaeus, De integritatis et corruptionis virginum...' Credit: Wellcome Collection.

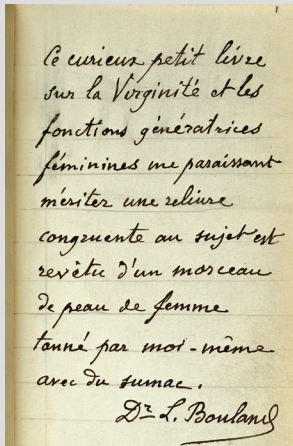


Figure 1B. Bouland's note in *Closed Stores EPB Bindings 14*. 'S. Pinaeus, De integritatis et corruptionis virginum...' Credit: Wellcome Collection.

What does disgust me is the handwritten note that Bouland rather irreverently glued into the then 250 years old volume to explain that he found the book an appropriate binding consisting of a piece of female skin tanned by himself.³ The hand is a quick and sloppy one, the piece of paper not cut specifically to fit the size of the book's printed pages.⁴ The note reads: 'This curious little book on the Virginity and the female generative functions seemed to me to merit a binding congruent to the subject is [sic] bound in a piece of woman's skin tanned by myself with sumac. Dr L. Bouland.'⁵

There is a striking incongruity between Bouland's objectification of the woman's skin, the skin's removal, tanning and use as bookbinding, and the jovial tone he adopts in reporting it. To refer to the volume as 'this curious little book' belittles both it and the transgressive nature of its production. To focus on the specific technique of tanning suggests that this is no more than a harmless little experiment. The academic title in front of Bouland's signature presents him as the medical doctor in the exclusive position of obtaining

³ Annabel Geddes, founder of the London Dungeon, bought the book as a possible exhibit in 1979; the Wellcome Trust acquired it from her in 2001. John Symons, 'Ce Curieux Petit Livre', Wellcome Trust *News and Features*, 2001.

⁴ Michelle Lovric comments in a personal communication that she was also 'offended by Bouland choosing such cheerful carnival coloured marbling for his endpapers'.

⁵ 'Ce curieux petit livre sur la Virginité et les fonctions génératrices féminines me paraissent mériter une reliure congruente au sujet est [sic] revêtu d'un morceau de peau de femme tanné par moi-même avec du sumac. Dr. L. Bouland', my translation.

human skin for his bibliophile interests.⁶ Apparently, Bouland's social and professional standing enabled him to think of his illicit touch as a justified one.

Together with the book's human-skin binding and the note, the contents of the volume bring to the fore a number of farther-reaching gender issues. Printed in Amsterdam in 1663, the book contains five medical treatises on virginity, female diseases, pregnancy and childbirth dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷ The five treatises were all written by men and in Latin. Latin was upheld as the exclusive language of the male-dominated medical profession, thus effectively barring most women from access to medical book-knowledge about their own bodies. Men controlled that knowledge and, by extension, women's bodies. This may well be why, 250 years later, Bouland's obvious choice for his anthropodermic bibliopegy was a woman's rather than a man's skin. Bouland's note throws these connections of medicine and gender into sharp relief: a male medical doctor with a name and a title obtains the skin of an unnamed woman. Bouland's irreverence and the fact that this woman's skin was available to medical students for experiments clearly outside the medical curriculum sug-

⁶ Paul Combes in 1910 relates that he personally saw the book and learnt that Bouland had acquired the skin during his medical studies in France. Paul Combes. 'Peau Humaine Tannée', *Intérimédiaire des chercheurs et curieux* LXII, 30 October 1910. gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k73420v/f337.image, 661–662.

⁷ Séverin Pineau. *De integritatis & corruptionis virginum notis: graviditate item & partu naturali mulierum, opuscula*; Luigi Bonacciuoli. *Enneas muliebris*; Felix Platter. *De origine partium, earumque in utero conformatione*; Pierre Gassendi. *De septo cordis pervio, observatio*; Melchioris Sebizii. *De notis virginitatis*.

gest that her body was an unclaimed one, that she was probably a woman on her own and of low social status. In clear contrast stands the social and professional status of the medical doctor that was almost exclusively accessible to men. Such a gender-based power structure is symptomatic of a patriarchal society, in which the female body is always already inscribed by its cultural construction.⁸

Have you seen this? Another one! – a short, hurried email from a friend on 6 June 2014 with a link to the latest news: ‘Harvard University book bound in human skin.’ ‘Reader warning: Harvard experts say book is bound in human skin.’⁹ Heather Cole had just published the findings of Harvard conservators in a Houghton Library blog. Having ruled out the possibility that the binding was primate skin from great apes or gibbons, she reported, ‘they are 99% confident that the binding is of human origin.’¹⁰ CNN

⁸ See e.g., Susan Bordo. *The Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 41. Also: Judith Butler. ‘Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 11 (1989): 601–607; Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Elizabeth Grosz. ‘Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal’, in *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*, ed. Anne Cranny-Francis and Terry Threadgold (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990).

⁹ ‘Harvard University Book Bound in Human Skin’, *BBC News*, 5 June 2014, accessed 1 March 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-27721571>; Jethro Mullen. ‘Reader Warning: Harvard Experts Say Book is Bound with Human Skin’, *CNN*, 5 June 2014, accessed 1 March 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/05/us/harvard-book-human-skin/index.html>.

¹⁰ Heather Cole. ‘The Science of Anthropodermic Binding’, *Houghton Library Blog*, 4 June 2014, accessed 6 April 2018, <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/houghton/2014/06/04/caveat-lector/>, n.p.

headed their online report with the trigger warning ‘It’s reading matter not for the faint of heart.’ The headlines, as well as my friend’s email, prove that to US Americans and Western Europeans in 2014, a human-skin book-binding was clearly far away from what they considered to be right. However, many of the reports followed Cole’s suggestion that the book ‘serves as a reminder that such practices were at one time considered acceptable.’¹¹ Quite to the contrary, the Harvard volume shows the opposite: I was both shocked and somehow relieved to realise that none other than Ludovic Bouland was the binder of the Harvard volume, too.

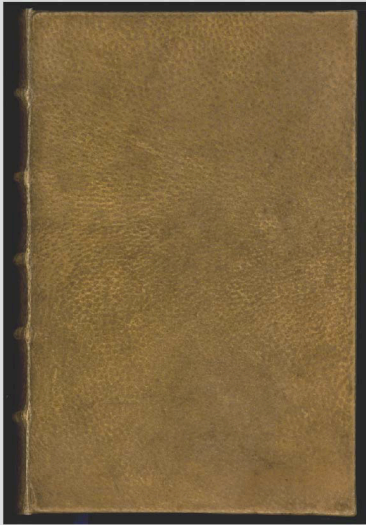


Figure 2A. *Des destinées de lame*. FC8.H8177.879dc, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Credit: Houghton Library Blog.

¹¹ Ibid., n.p.

Ce livre est relié en peau
humaine parcheminée, c'est
pour lui laisser tout son
cachet qu'à dessein on n'y a
point appliqué d'ornement.
En le regardant attentivement
on distingue facilement les
pores de la peau. Un livre sur
l'Âme humaine méritait bien
qu'on lui donnât un vêtement
humain : aussi lui avais-je réservé
depuis long temps ce morceau
de peau humaine pris sur le
dos d'une femme. Il est curieux

Figure 2B. Bouland's note in *Des destinées de l'âme* (front). FC8. H8177.879dc, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Credit: Houghton Library Blog.

De voir les aspects différents
que prend cette peau selon le
mode de préparation au quel elle
est soumise. La comparer par
exemple avec le petit volume
que j'ai dans ma bibliothèque
Sever. *Pinceus de Virginitatis*
notis qui lui aussi est relié
en peau humaine mais
tannée au Sumac.
D^r L. Bouland

Figure 2C. Bouland's note in *Des destinées de l'âme* (back). FC8. H8177.879dc, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Credit: Houghton Library Blog.

Author Arsène Houssaye had personally given this copy of his *Des destinées de l'ame* to Bouland, who thought that this book on the soul, too, 'deserved to have a human clothing'. In addition, he points out, he had reserved this specific piece of skin 'taken from a woman's back' for a long time.¹² A memorandum inserted by J. B. Stetson states that the skin was taken from the unclaimed body of a woman who died of a stroke in a French mental hospital.¹³ The tag 'mental hospital', when I first read it, provided a split-second of relief, followed swiftly by the shock of realising that I had just dehumanised the unnamed woman due to her status as mentally 'abnormal'. I am myself guilty of shifting the boundaries of 'what is right'. So is Bouland. His note in this volume looks familiar: the hand is sloppy, the tone jovial, and again, he is more concerned with the differing effects of diverse tanning processes (he references today's Wellcome volume for comparison) than with his endeavour possibly violating any boundaries.¹⁴

Two of the very few books that are proven to be bound in human skin (while other claims have recently been

¹² 'Un livre sur l'Ame humaine méritait bien qu'on lui donnait un vêtement humain: aussi lui avais-je réservé depuis longtemps ce morceau de peau humaine pris sur le dos d'une femme'. My translation.

¹³ Object description in the Harvard library catalogue, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/005786452/catalog> (accessed 23 April 2018).

¹⁴ 'It is interesting to see the different appearances this skin takes depending on the method of preparation it is submitted to. Compare it for example with the little volume I have in my library, Sever. Pinaeus de Virginitates notis which is also bound in human skin but tanned with sumac' – 'Il est curieux de voir les aspects différents que prend cette peau selon le mode de preparation au quelle elle est soumise. La comparer par exemple avec le petit volume que j'ai dans ma bibliothèque, Sever. Pinaeus de Virginitates notis qui lue aussi est relié en peau humaine mais tannée au sumac', my translation.

refuted¹⁵) were bound by the same person. This problematises Cole's claim that human-skin bookbinding was 'at one time considered acceptable'.¹⁶ If at all, such a claim is only tenable with additional explanations of the kind I have tried to provide here, namely that the acceptability of anthropodermic bibliopeggy greatly depends on whose touch objectifies whose skin. Bouland's gender and status, weighed against the inferior gender and status of the unnamed women, seem to have given him enough justification. The fact that many news reports included the information about the unclaimed female body from the mental hospital without tracing it back to its source – Cole does not refer to the relevant library catalogue entry in her blog post¹⁷ – suggests that such a provenance seems not only likely in accordance with feminist criticism but that it also has the potential to relativise the illicit touch to

¹⁵ Connor provides an overview of older findings, including potentially fictional ones. Steven Connor. *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 42–46. Several books that were long believed to be bound in human skin have in recent years been proven to have animal-leather bindings. Gerald Chaudron. "It's Not Human!" Another Example of Anthropodermic Bibliopeggy Discredited, *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 18, no. 1 (2017): 26–36, accessed 3 April 2018, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.18.1.26>; Karen Beck. '852 RARE: Old Books, New Technologies, and "The Human Skin Book" at HLS', *Et Seq: The Blog of the Harvard Law School Library*, 3 April 2014, accessed 1 March 2018, <http://etseq.law.harvard.edu/2014/04/852-rare-old-books-new-technologies-and-the-human-skin-book-at-hls/>.

¹⁶ Cole, 'Science of Anthropodermic Binding', n.p.

¹⁷ Heather Cole. 'Bound in Human Skin', *Houghton Library Blog*, 24 May 2013, accessed 6 April 2018, <http://blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/2013/05/24/bound-in-human-skin/>.

some extent, because it allows a conceptualisation of the woman as not fully human.¹⁸

The same mechanisms are at work with a number of other books proven or alleged to be bound in human skin, because the skin used is that of executed criminals. To make use of that skin is but a consistent extension into death of one person's legal right to lay claim to another person's lived body.¹⁹ Posthumously, the criminals are further degraded by the dehumanisation that is inherent in the treatment of their skin in ways that are normally reserved for animals. The degradation is heightened by ridicule when the criminals' skins are used as a binding for their own trial records or life-narratives.²⁰ What,

¹⁸ E.g. Heather Saul. 'Harvard Scientists Confirm Arsène Houssaye Book is Bound in Human Skin', *The Independent*, 5 June 2014, accessed 1 April 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/harvard-scientists-confirm-ars-ne-houssaye-book-is-bound-in-human-skin-9493448.html>; Eliana Dockterman. 'This Harvard University Library Book Is Bound in Human Skin', *Time*, 6 June 2014, accessed 1 April 2018, <http://time.com/2835499/this-harvard-university-library-book-is-bound-in-human-skin/>.

¹⁹ The gruesome list of abused skin in Nazi concentration camps that Czech inmate Dr Franz Blaha provided at the Nuremberg trials ('saddles, riding breeches, gloves, house slippers, and ladies' handbags') does not contain a book, but the principles of abused skin are the same as the ones outlined here: 'Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 5: Thirty-Second Day', Friday 11 January 1946, 170. *The Avalon Project*, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/01-11-46.asp>. I approach the Nazis' illicit touch through the Auschwitz number tattoos in the second part of this contribution.

²⁰ Connor and Thompson list several examples. Connor. *The Book of Skin*, 42–45; Lawrence S. Thompson. *Religatum De Pelle Humana* (Hamden: Archon Books: 1949), 137. The Bristol Archives, for instance, hold a volume that contains documents on the murder case of Eliza Balsum as well as of the trial and execution of her murderer John Horwood. The bookbinding made of Horwood's skin is embossed with the comment 'Cutis Vera Johannis Horwood'. Fay Curtis. 'The

after all, could a court official expect from those he showed such a book but amused remarks about how witty a punishment this bookbinding is? Behind the ridicule, however, lies a society's need to reinstate law and order. The criminal literally becomes an object that is ridiculously easy to handle, that cannot escape the touch of those who are in the right according to this society's moral, ethical and legal codes. In a similar vein, Steven Connor claims: 'Normally, it is the legal document that is binding upon the bodies it concerns; here, the body's own binding seems to underwrite and circumscribe the power of the official record.'²¹ Reactions between morbid fascination and revulsion, however, also characterise books bound in human skin as abject, as something that, according to Julia Kristeva, 'disturbs identity, system, order'.²² Binding books in human skin, the diverse narratives in the box show, is not usually considered right. Doing it in the name of justice, however, as is the case with the criminals' skins, can shift 'what is right' because a crime itself is likewise abject as 'it draws attention to the fragility of the law'.²³ To punish one abject deed (the crime) by another (the bookbinding) is to fight fire with fire. The crime, in this logic, justifies the abuse of the

John Horwood Book', *Bristol's Free Museums and Historic Houses* (blog), 17 April 2014, accessed 6 April 2018, <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/blog/archives/john-horwood-book/>.

²¹ Connor. *Book of Skin*, 43.

²² Kristeva. *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

criminal's skin and the otherwise illicit touch is thus reframed as a legitimate one.

Not all books bound in human skin, however, bespeak irreverence for another human being. Some on the contrary testify to a 'loving' and yet illicit touch. Lawrence Thompson documents cases of men and women who explicitly wished their skins to be turned into parchment or bookbinding for the continued use of their loved ones.²⁴ In this case, it is the subject's desire to be flayed that is abject in that it requires another to cross the boundaries of 'what is right'. As such, it is a request for the ultimate labour of love.

In Peter Greenaway's 1996 film *The Pillow Book*,²⁵ a publisher has the body of his deceased male lover exhumed and has his skin, including hands, feet and lips, turned into a book. Subsequently, he obsessively touches and kisses the pages of this book and wraps himself into the fold-out pages. The living skin itself seems to have invited its transformation, since it was previously inscribed by the now dead man's female lover, an author with the habit of presenting her works to publishers on the skins of living men. Through the illicit touch by which he has turned his lover's skin into parchment, the publisher has managed to obtain an embodiment of everything he loves. Man, literature, book, skin, parchment, have all merged into one object he will keep touching illicitly in his fetishistic desire.

²⁴ Thompson. *Religatum De Pelle Humana*, 144–145.

²⁵ Peter Greenaway, dir. *The Pillow Book*, produced by Terry Glinwood et al. (1996).



Figure 3. Still image from *The Book of Human Skin*. Credit: Moviestore collection Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

A fetishistic desire is also what Lovric's *Book of Human Skin* presents as the cause of protagonist Minguillo Fasan's passion for anthropodermic bibliopegy. Having grown up as a child who was so abominable that everybody in his household, including his mother, denied him all physical touch, he later starts collecting books bound in human skin. Both the initial acts of flaying, tanning and binding the books and Minguillo's subsequent caresses of the volumes cross the boundaries of what is considered right by the novel's late eighteenth-century Venetian society. The formerly lived bodies of humans are doubly objectified, first when they are made to envelop books and later when they become the defenceless objects of Minguillo's repeated illicit touch.

Fetishistic desire can only be surmised in the case of Bouland and his books bound in human skin, but the power issues at stake remain the same as with the two fictional fetishists. Behind the illicit touch that precedes (and sometimes follows) human-skin bookbinding lies a

desire to objectify a lived body. Material, tangible, workable surface that it is, skin invites its abuse as bookbinding in ways that the ‘deep body’²⁶ does not. It is possible that Bouland objectified the two unnamed women’s skins to the point at which they were just one of many material options to indulge in the fashion of ‘sympathetic bibliop-egy’, which saw collectors between the eighteenth and the early twentieth century envelope their volumes in materials that suited the book’s content (e.g. books on glazing in glass, on woollen mills in wool, Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book* in zebra skin, and Charles Darwin’s works in that of monkeys).²⁷

Other perpetrators pursue their desire to possess and dominate the body of another human by literally marking the human skin. The emerging field of skin studies has recently shifted the focus towards skin as the surface on which relations to others are inscribed both metaphorically and physically.²⁸ This allows for new theoretical perspectives which I propose to explore in the following section, provided for example by tattoo and body modification theories²⁹ or by human-animal studies, both of

²⁶ MacKendrick. *Word Made Skin*, 7.

²⁷ Lawrence S. Thompson. *Bibliologia Comica or Humorous Aspects of the Caparisoning and Conservation of Books* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1968), 15–40.

²⁸ E.g. Karmen MacKendrick. *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004); Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp. Introduction to *Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018); Didier Anzieu. *Le Moi-Peau* (Paris: BORDAS), 39–40.

²⁹ Victoria Pitts-Taylor. *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Margo DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Margo DeMello. *Body Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014); Jane

which offer entry points for approaching the dehumanisation of the victims of the illicit touch.³⁰

BOX II: THE AUSCHWITZ NUMBER TATTOOS

How are we to approach these metonyms for the atrocities committed against Jewish women, men and children by the Nazi regime? Deeply distressed by her readings on WWII, the protagonist of Emily Prager's novel *Eve's Tattoo*, a writer living in New York in the 1990s, thinks to have found a way.³¹ For her fortieth birthday, she has herself tattooed with the number of an unknown female Auschwitz victim whose picture she has found. In view of the gradual disappearance of the last generation of Holocaust survivors, she construes her tattoo as 'sacred' and as an act of keeping 'that event' alive.³² Her friends swiftly diagnose some sort of midlife crisis. Eve, by contrast, specifies: 'To me, this tattoo is about the fate of women. The tattoo will help me find out about it.'³³ She thus reframes her aging body as an entry point to an understanding of the fates of women under the Nazi regime. Eve's lack of knowledge about her own tattoo, however, becomes an embarrassment when she meets an Auschwitz survivor who not only reads her tattoo like a text but also sarcastically comments on her obvious lack of the actual experience: 'So ... you came to the kemp in 'forty-four about when Primo Levi came. Late in the war. Perhaps that's how you survived.'³⁴

Caplan. Introduction to *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³⁰ E.g. Charles Patterson. *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002).

³¹ Emily Prager. *Eve's Tattoo* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991).

³² *Ibid.*, 11–12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

While Eve does not choose the tattoo light-heartedly, she makes the mistake of conceiving of it primarily in the modern Western sense, as a voluntary mark. For her, the tattoo is a way to 'write oneself'.³⁵ A woman's self-willed tattoo, according to the feminist reclaiming discourse, can function to reclaim the body from its 'victimization and objectification in patriarchal culture', especially if it violates standard beauty norms as Eve's tattoo undoubtedly does.³⁶ The tattoo in this case functions as a 'counter-strategic reinscription'³⁷ of the always already inscribed female body, in the case of Eve as a body that is ageing, menopausal and childless. 'I am forty today ... I don't have children. I want to give someone life. I'm giving Eva life', she says about the number tattoo that was once also the number of the unnamed woman she chooses to call Eva, in an attempt to style herself as the alter ego of the victim.³⁸

Eve's tattoo is empowering to her because it is a self-chosen one, while the exact opposite is the case for the Auschwitz number tattoos. They, in contrast, stand in a long tradition of punitive and ownership marks throughout European history, from runaway Roman slaves, to adulterers or criminals in the Middle Ages, to British army deserters, to the French galley slaves of the

³⁵ DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription*, 12.

³⁶ Pitts-Taylor. *In the Flesh*, 49.

³⁷ Grosz. 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps', 64.

³⁸ Prager. *Eve's Tattoo*, 17; see also Rob Baum, "And Thou Shalt Bind Them as a Sign upon Thy Hand": *Eve's Tattoo* and the Holocaust Consumer', *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28, no. 2 (2010): 116–138.

nineteenth century.³⁹ These punitive and ownership tattoos are the marks of what we would perceive as an illicit touch, that the perpetrators, however, would have construed as justified through the purportedly inferior status of the slaves, sinners and criminals. In a circular logic, the Jews' constructed inferiority enabled the Nazi administration to justify their claim on the bodies of their victims and to inscribe that claim on their skins; the number tattoos, in turn, helped them further dehumanise the Jews and facilitated their objectification for those involved in their exploitation and killing.

Primo Levi describes in *If This Is a Man* the moment of the tattooing in Auschwitz as a baptism, and the number as his new name: 'My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die ... and for many days, while the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name ironically appeared instead, a number tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.'⁴⁰ The replacement of the wristwatch by the number tattoo is rife with symbolism: the subject that was once free to organise his time by looking at his own watch has become an object, dispossessed of both valuables and freedom. Almost thirty years later, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi theorised this

³⁹ DeMello. *Body Studies*, 247–251; Susan Benson. 'Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America.' In *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 234–254; Mark Gustafson. 'The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond'. In *ibid.*, 17–31.

⁴⁰ Primo Levi. *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York et al.: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1947]). 27. *Survival in Auschwitz* is the US title of *If This is a Man*.

process further: “The operation was not very painful and lasted no more than a minute, but it was traumatic. Its symbolic meaning was clear to everyone: this is an indelible mark, you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to the slaughter, and that is what you have become. You no longer have a name; this is your new name. The violence of the tattoo was gratuitous, an end in itself, pure offence: were the three canvas numbers sewed to pants, jackets, and winter coat not enough? No, they were not enough: something more was needed, a nonverbal message, so that the innocent would feel his sentence written on his flesh.”⁴¹

The degradation to slaves and cattle culminates in the dismissal of a previous identity (‘you no longer have a name’). Whatever identity he once had has been palimpsestically overwritten by the perpetrators’ inscription on his skin. They have made him into a number, an entity that can be moved around, changed and erased. To Orthodox Jews, the moment of tattooing must have been even more traumatic because it violated Mosaic Law. Since the prohibition of tattooing in Leviticus 19:28 was commonly interpreted as a way to distinguish Jews from barbarians,⁴² the Nazis’ transgressive touch forced the newly tattooed Jews into the role of barbarian, with which came the fear of losing the right to a

⁴¹ Primo Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York et al.: Simon & Schuster, 2017 [1986]), 104–105.

⁴² Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, 105.

Jewish burial.⁴³ The mechanisms at work here are similar to our treatment of animals, scholars in human-animal studies have claimed.⁴⁴ While the abuse and eating of animals constructs the human,⁴⁵ the dehumanisation of the victims reversely enabled the perpetrators to construct them as animals. Consequently, the perpetrators not only saw themselves in the right, they also sought to confirm and stabilise this constructed subhuman status of their victims by permanently marking them: 'this is an indelible mark, you will never leave here.'

Levi reminds his readers that this message of the number tattoos was felt physically long after the sting of the needle. In a passage in which he reflects on the differing treatment of political prisoners as opposed to Jewish prisoners, he relates that in moments of obvious inequity the Jews 'felt the tattoo burn like a wound.'⁴⁶ The minor momentary pain ('it was not very painful') is perpetuated and intensified by the highly symbolic presence of the tattoo exactly because it is perceived as the mark left by an illicit touch ('so that the innocent would feel his sentence written on his flesh').

⁴³ See also the explanations of Rabbi Benjaminson on chabad.org. The fear that a tattooed person cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery is still very present. Chani Benjaminson, 'Can a person with a tattoo be buried in a Jewish cemetery?', *Chabad.org*, accessed 1 April 2018, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/533444/jewish/Can-a-person-with-a-tattoo-be-buried-in-a-Jewish-cemetery.htm.

⁴⁴ Patterson. *Eternal Treblinka*.

⁴⁵ E.g. Karl Steel. *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

⁴⁶ Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, 90.

The moment of tattooing and of ‘becoming a number’ is presented as such a decisive one in numerous survival narratives that it almost appears to have become a literary motif. Ulrike Landfester suggests that the singling out of this specific moment as a threshold experience, which ‘metonymically prefigures the horrors of things to follow’, is owed to the fact that the new, abhorrent realities of life in the camp that come after this moment are impossible to express in words.⁴⁷ The importance this moment is thus given in so many narratives stands in stark contrast to the fact that the number tattoos seem not to have been of any specific legal relevance during the Nuremberg trials.⁴⁸

I have proposed elsewhere to think of tattoos as having a multi-layered spatial and temporal existence.⁴⁹ A tattoo is more than a mark on skin. It begins its existence in a virtual form, as a thought that later becomes a plan. Once it is etched in the skin and becomes visible, it starts to signify. The process of decoding requires readings through others, which are subjective, or explanations by the tattooed person, which likewise are formed by narrative choices. Such a tattoo narrative, however, not only evolves from the tattoo, but in turn also shapes the tattoo; without the narrative, the tattoo would not signify in the same way.⁵⁰ Finally, the tattoo also has a performative

⁴⁷ Ulrike Landfester. *Stichworte: Tätowierung und europäische Schriftkultur* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2012), 255–357, 360.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Nicole Nyffenegger. ‘Saint Margaret’s Tattoos: Empowering Marks on White Skin’, *Exemplaria* 25, no. 4 (2013): 267–283.

⁵⁰ DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription*, 12.

quality, when it is shown or hidden, when it is combined with a specific gesture or sound. The tattoo, in other words, is made up of diverse virtual, visual, narrative and performative realisations.⁵¹ Together, they form the layers that make the tattoo. The meaning of Eve's tattoo, for example, is what she relates it to be. Since she tells several different tattoo narratives about it, at different moments and in different places, the tattoo consists of these diverse temporal and spatial layers.

This concept of the tattoo's multilayered spatial and temporal existence is applicable also to tattooing in Auschwitz, which started in 1941 when the number of prisoners increased rapidly and the death rate was high. With the introduction of the practice of stripping the dead, identification numbers sewn onto clothes became useless. The Nazi camp administrations replaced them by numbers permanently etched in the skin in order to identify the bodies of those who had previously been registered.⁵² But while they thus clearly struggled to make the tattooing reflect their own constantly shifting categorisations of their prisoners,⁵³ the tattooed victims already began to read and interpret the tattoos in ways the Nazi regime could not have foreseen.

⁵¹ I first proposed this theory based on the specifically medievalist concept of textuality that Paul Zumthor has called *mouvance*. Paul Zumthor. *Speaking of the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 96.

⁵² *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz', accessed 1 April, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007056>.

⁵³ Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, 100, 104.

The websites of Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provide a heart-breaking wealth of documentation, including historical footage, photos and personal reports on the tattoos made in Auschwitz. In the early years, only those deemed fit for labour were tattooed, while the others were killed immediately. Jakob Frenkiel describes how the tattoo, consequently, became his chance for survival: 'The day after we arrived [in Auschwitz], my brother Chaim and I were lined up with kids and old people. I asked a prisoner what was going to happen to us. He pointed to the chimneys. 'Tomorrow the smoke will be from you.' He said if we could get a number tattooed on our arms, we'd be put to work instead of being killed. We sneaked to the latrine, then escaped through a back door and lined up with the men getting tattoos.'⁵⁴ In this cynical way, the tattoo already became a symbol of survival at this early stage. In the prisoners' readings of the tattoos, low numbers also incited respect from the other prisoners because they symbolised having managed to survive for a relatively long time.⁵⁵

Similarly, Szlamach Radoszynski reports that he reinterpreted his number as a symbol for life: 'Day after day my job [in Auschwitz] was to shovel dirt over discarded, still-smoldering ashes of cremated victims. I kept wondering whether I, too, would end up the same. But I was sustained by the fact that the number tattooed on my arm –#128232– added up to 18, the Jewish mystical

⁵⁴ *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Jakob Frenkiel', accessed 1 April 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/idcard.php?ModuleId=10006316>.

⁵⁵ Jodi Rudoren. 'Proudly bearing elders' scars, their skins "never forget"', *New York Times*, 30 September 2012, accessed 3 July 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/middleeast/with-tattoos-young-israelis-bear-holocaust-scars-of-relatives.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 28.

symbol for life.⁵⁶ An anonymous commentary on chabad.org dating from 2017 presents the same narrative as their mother's appropriation of the mark: 'she added the numbers up and realized that with this deplorable and demonic action by the Nazis, it was a sign from Hashem that she was going to live through the death camps.'⁵⁷

Ruth Klüger, in *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, describes such reinterpretations as a symptom of utter despair: 'Thanks to the dog tag under my skin, I was suddenly so aware of the enormity, the monstrosity, really, of my situation that I felt a kind of glee about it. I was living through something that was worth witnessing ... It tells you something about how beaten down and stripped of a sense of self I already was that I thus invented for myself a future based on the experience of the most abysmal humiliation yet, a future where precisely that abyss would appear honorable ... We'll be witnesses, we thought, meaning there'll come a future when this will be over, and the number will be a piece of incontrovertible evidence.'⁵⁸

These first interpretative and narrative appropriations show the inherent instability of meaning of the supposedly indelible mark on skin. The tattoos had certainly not been devised as symbols of hope but they were reinterpreted as such, either in a literal sense (when the tattoo

⁵⁶ *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Szlamach Radoszynski', accessed 1 April 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/idcard.php?ModuleId=10006723>.

⁵⁷ Yisroel Cotlar. 'Honor a Holocaust Victim by Tattooing Her Number?' *Chabad.org*, accessed 1 April 2018, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1739170/jewish/Honor-a-Holocaust-Victim-by-Tattooing-Her-Number.htm.

⁵⁸ Ruth Klüger. *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press at the University of New York, 2001), 98.

meant suitability for labour) or in a metaphorical sense (a number adding up to the Jewish symbol for life). The plural existence of this latter narrative attests to the multi-layered temporal and spatial existence of both tattoo and tattoo narrative. In Klüger's account, finally, the number symbolises the hope of its own reinterpretation in the future. The number tattoos were, however, not only met by such narrative appropriations but also by actual counter-tattoos etched in the skin of victims.

Stanislawa Leszczynska spent two years as a midwife-prisoner in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She describes the cruelty towards mothers and their newborn babies, the killings of newborns and, as of 1945, the abduction of blue-eyed children for 'Germanisation.' Jewish babies were tattooed with the identification numbers of their mothers right after birth and drowned in a barrel. The mothers were then made to witness the body being 'thrown out of the block and torn to pieces by rats.'⁵⁹ As for the non-Jewish, blue-eyed children that were selected for 'denationalization' (Leszczynska refers to 'several hundred'), the midwives used a counter-tattoo to increase the chances that mother and child could one day be reunited: 'With the intention to create possibilities that these babies may in the future be returned to their mothers, we organized a way of marking these babies with a tattoo, that would not arouse the suspicion of the SS-men. Due to this many mothers were hopeful that one day they may find their lost child.'⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The International Auschwitz Committee. *Nazi Medicine: Doctors, Victims, and Medicine in Auschwitz* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1986), 189.

⁶⁰ The International Auschwitz Committee. *Nazi Medicine*, 190.

The absurdity of tattooing newborn babies before killing them shows that towards the end of the war, the camp authorities had given up any logic in favour of pure cruelty. For the women witnessing the tattooing and murder of the newborns, it must have been evident that a tattoo no longer increased their chances of survival, as it may have done in the earlier years. The fact that the babies were not given their own number but that of their mothers further dehumanised both mother and child. The child and the mother were made a monstrosity of two bodies with one identity. However, as with the counter-tattoos described above, there was a very small minority of Auschwitz tattoos that were meant to inspire hope. The illicit touch of the perpetrator, in this case, was identified as such and counteracted by the same means but with the reverse aim. Similarly, Holocaust survivor Eva Kor describes the moment of her tattooing as a chance of fighting the imminent illicit touch by biting one of the Nazi officers.

In a text originally published on the question-and-answer site *Quora* in December 2014, Kor describes the moment as follows: 'I decided I was going to fight. I was not going to let them touch me. I didn't really know how much it would hurt, but it wasn't the tattoo that bothered me as much as my thought, *What right do they have to do anything to me physically?* And maybe it was my only way to make a stand against what had been happening to me all day long. When it was my turn, I began to really carry on ... The women were holding me down by my head and legs and arms and one of the Nazis grabbed my arm. The only thing I could do was bite. I don't even know how I managed to do that because they tried to keep me flat.'

But I snapped up and bit his arm ... From the way I was raised, to bite someone was so crude that I had to block it out of my mind to preserve who I thought I was ... Many survivors, when they read my account, they say there is no way anyone could get away with biting a Nazi. That was probably true. But I was not a regular prisoner - I was a "Mengele Twin".⁶¹

Kor frames her act of resistance along the lines of the 'writing back' paradigm posited by postcolonial studies, according to which the suppressed resist by subverting the colonisers' discourse. Hers is a biting back, a claim of another's body which not only transgresses the boundaries of what the Nazi officer would have defined as right but also the boundaries of what she herself defined as right. The illicit touch she is herself forced to administer in order to counteract the perpetrator's illicit touch becomes a threat to her own identity: 'to bite someone was so crude that I had to block it out of my mind to preserve who I thought I was'.

Personal accounts of survivors attest to the various ways of coping with the mark of the Nazis' illicit touch after the war. One of the first and visually perhaps most impressive acts of appropriation was, however, a performative one, of showing rather than of speaking about the number tattoo.

⁶¹ Eva Kor, reply to 'What do Holocaust survivors think of their tattoos?', *Quora*, 23 December 2014, <https://www.quora.com/What-do-Holocaust-survivors-think-of-their-tattoos>.

The gesture of rolling up the sleeve and presenting the outstretched arm to the photographer has become iconic by now, when the last generation of Auschwitz survivors can be seen identifying themselves as victims in photos that resemble the ones taken only days after the liberation of the concentration camps.



Figure 4. A survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp displays his tattooed arm. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Stanley Moroknek. Reproduced by permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The meaning of the gesture has, however, expanded since it was first performed. While it stood for survival then, it additionally stands today for regained agency, for the freedom of making choices. Primo Levi reflects on how his performance of showing or hiding the number tattoo

changed depending on whether his audience was curious or incredulous: 'At a distance of forty years, my tattoo has become a part of my body. I don't glory in it, but I am not ashamed of it either; I do not display and do not hide it. I show it unwillingly to those who ask out of pure curiosity; readily and in anger to those who say they are incredulous. Often young people ask me why I didn't have it erased, and this surprises me: Why should I? There are not many of us in the world to bear this witness.'⁶²



Figure 5. Auschwitz Survivor Yeshiyahu Folman. Originally published in 'Auschwitz Concentration Camp Tattoo Shared by Father and Son' *Public Radio International (PRI)*, 19 April 2012. Reproduced by permission from Daniel Estrin.

The appropriation of the Auschwitz number tattoos has continued until today in narratives, whenever victims speak or write about their experiences of living with them. Their narratives of how they got the tattoo and of what it means to them reshape the tattoo. Some of the narratives suggest that the questions of whether to show

⁶² Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, 105.

the tattoos or not, whether to get them removed or not, whether to speak about them or not, matter less than the fact that the victims, once objectified by the number, have by now regained the agency to make these choices.

Ruth Klüger writes that she was happy to be able to say about her tattoo whatever she wanted, even to claim that it was her boyfriend's phone number: 'When I was a waitress, guests often asked what number that was. It made me laugh that they did not know ... I occasionally said that it was the phone number of my boyfriend. He is lucky, said one guest ... I was free to say what I wanted, that made me happy.'⁶³

The 2012 film *Numbered* traces such tattoo narratives of Auschwitz survivors. It also presents yet another act of appropriation and reinterpretation of the number tattoo that is taking place in today's Israel. In view of the imminent disappearance of the last generation of Holocaust survivors, young Israelis have begun to have their grandparents' number tattoos etched in their own skins as a token of remembrance. They see the tattoos as a new approach to a repetitive discourse.⁶⁴

It is an ongoing debate whether or not the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors have the right to appropriate these tattoos in such a way, and whether or not they have more right to do so than those who cannot claim a

⁶³ My translation into English (the English translation quoted elsewhere in this article cuts this passage) from Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben: Eine Jugend* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008), 207.

⁶⁴ Rudoren. 'Proudly Bearing Elders' Scars'; Dana Doron and Uriel Sinai, dirs., *Numbered*, produced by kNow Productions (2012); Eliran Rubin. 'Passing on Holocaust Tattoos', *DeutschlandWelle*, 28 November 2012, accessed 3 July 2014, <http://www.dw.de/passing-on-holocaust-tattoos/a-16397305>.

direct connection to the Holocaust, such as performance artist David Blaine or the fictional Eve in Prager's novel.⁶⁵ Prager presents her protagonist's attempt at appropriation as a failed one, although it is exactly the artificiality of the connection that allows Eve to tell, not one single narrative, but many, all of which are based on her thorough reading of women's fates under the Nazi regime.



Figure 6. The forearms of the young Israelis Jona Diamant and Eli Sagir. Originally published in 'KZ-Nummer als Tattoo' *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 February 2013. Reproduced by permission from Rico Grimm.

As the debate concerning such appropriations continues, further narratives complicate any simplistic equation of permanent marks with stable meanings: Klüger comments that she found it strange 'that the armpits of the SS were also decorated with tattoos. The same procedure for honor and shame, if one chose to choose these perspectives.'⁶⁶ Footage in the BBC series *Auschwitz*

⁶⁵ E.g. Rudoren. 'Proudly Bearing Elders' Scars'; WENN, 'Blaine Reveals Secret Of Holocaust Tattoo', Contact Music, 2 September 2003, accessed 1 April 2018, <http://www.contactmusic.com/david-blaine/news/blaine-reveals-secret-of-holocaust-tattoo>

⁶⁶ Klüger. *Still Alive*, 98.

shows that what Klüger in her childhood still identified as the SS symbol of honor turned against those bearing this mark after the liberation of the camps. Russian soldiers can be seen making half-naked Germans walk in line with raised arms so they can search for what have now become marks testifying to their crimes.⁶⁷

The tattooed SS men are one of the rare examples in which the illicit touch is originally a 'loving' one along the lines of the fetishist desire discussed above. The bodies of those deemed especially gifted were claimed for the Reich by the mark. These tattoos too, had an unstable meaning and were reinterpreted after the war. The Jewish victims' tattoos, to the present day, are shaped and reshaped in tattoo narratives. By way of numerous acts of appropriation and counter-inscription, these tattoos have come to stand metonymically for the horrors inflicted on the victims and for the Nazi regime's illicit touch. Instead of standing in for the dehumanised victims as intended by the perpetrators, they now, in Levi's words, stand for 'what man's presumption made of man in Auschwitz.'⁶⁸

The illicit touch, which I have here approached through abused and marked human skin, is not a thing of the past. The narratives that are an integral part of the abused skin, both in the case of books bound in human skin and in the case of the Auschwitz tattoos, reach into our present time. They inform our thinking about more recent cases

⁶⁷ *Auschwitz: The Nazis and 'The Final Solution'*, directed by Laurence Rees and Catherine Tatge, aired 11 January 2005, on BBC Two.

⁶⁸ Levi. *Survival in Auschwitz*, 55.

in which an illicit touch has aimed at objectifying the lived bodies of others. In 2019, as the #MeToo movement is still gaining impetus, we see the same mechanisms at work. Powerful white men in the recent past thought themselves in the right when they not only touched others transgressively, but openly boasted about the act. Like Bouland, they did it in a jovial tone aimed at justifying their deeds as harmless pastimes, and like him, some of them have not faced any consequences for their illicit touch.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ I thank Michelle Lovric for her support of this project at different stages and for drawing my attention to these instances of illicit touch in the recent past. I also thank Annette Kern-Stähler, Zoë Lehmann Imfeld, Rory Critten, Kathrin Scheuchzer for their comments on earlier versions of this article and Lara Portmann for her great work. Special thanks also go to my two anonymous readers for their invaluable suggestions.

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