Fleshly (dis)figuration, or how to make the body matter

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The dermographic focus on the mark of fleshly disfiguration as an index to the truth of the subject, is apparent in many psychological theses on bodily inscription. In such works the scar, cut, tattoo, are read as images of self-mutilation; as signs of a psychological disorder which impels the subject to disfigure the body. The skin, according to this model, functions as a communicative border between inside and outside, on which psychologically relevant themes are portrayed. Consequently, the role of the dermal diagnostician is characterised by a movement from surface to depth; from a focus on the image of disfiguration, to the disorder which 'causes' it. In effect, such analyses involve a movement from the material to the immaterial, from the fleshly to the conceptual. The body comes to matter only in so far as its matter or materiality is veiled over in and through the clinical extraction of abstract and essentially immaterial 'truths'.

This essay critically analyses the unquestioned assumptions which inform such theses and argues that they problematically reduce the other to an Economy of the Same. Drawing on the work of Lyotard – in particular the notion of figuration as that which affects both the articulation and disarticulation of meaning – I demonstrate that the matter of the body matters since it is this which complicates any attempt to fix the fleshly image, and allows a consideration of the duplicity of bodily inscription. Thus this paper endeavours to move beyond the limitations of dermographism which, as Didi-Huberman claims, produces a sentence which controls the destiny of the marked other and which incarnerates the corporeal to corpse, by exploring the intertextual affect of fleshly writing.

Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, with its great velvety plains, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails ... the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes – but open and spread, expose the labia majora, so also the labia minora with their blue network, bathed in mucous, dilate the diaphragm of the anal sphincter, longitudinally cut and flatten out the black conduit of the rectum, then the colon, then the caecum, now a ribbon with its surfaces all striated ...; as though your dress-maker's scissors were opening the leg of an old pair of trousers, go on, expose the small intestines' alleged interior ...; armed with scalpels and tweezers, dismantle and lay out the bundles and bodies of the encephalon; and then the whole network of veins and arteries ... the lymphatic network, and the fine bony pieces of the wrist, the ankle, take them apart and put them end to end with all the layers of nerve tissue which surround the aqueous humours, and the cavernous body of the penis, and extract the great muscles, the great dorsal nets, spread them out like smooth sleeping dolphins (Lyotard 1993: 1).

So begins Jean-François Lyotard's Libidinal Economy. But how are we to engage with, understand, or respond to, this repugnant yet compelling image of what at first glance appears to be a graphic account of dissection or corporeal mutilation? Perhaps more importantly, what would we expect to dis-cover if we carried out Lyotard's bidding? In peeling away the skin, the membranes, the muscles, would the speculative gaze render transparent the essence of the body or the subject who supposedly animates it?

In a paper entitled 'Psychodynamic Implications of Tattoos', published in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry in 1983, Gerald Grumet, whose aim is to finetune the clinical task of 'dermal diagnosis', claims that 'the human flesh has proven itself a suitable canvas on which to portray psychologically relevant themes' (1983: 487). The task of the dermal diagnostician, at least as Grumet sees it, is to interpret images of 'self-mutilation' – whether they be scars, burns, cuts, or tattoo – as signs of a psychological disorder which compels the subject to disfigure his or her body. This task is characterised by a movement from surface to depth; from a focus on the image of disfiguration to its
source; from the fleshy to the conceptual; from the material to the immaterial. True knowledge is attainable, it seems, when surface is peeled away (whether literally or metaphorically) to reveal an essential depth (Taylor 1997: 17). Such a relation between surface and depth, phenomena and noumena, representation and reality, is an all-pervasive presence in Western ontology, but like Yukio Mishima, I want to consider why it is that ‘thought, like the plumb-line, concern[s] itself exclusively with vertical descent’ (Mishima cited in Lingis 1994: 84).

‘If the law of thought is that it should search out profundity ... then it seem[s] excessively illogical to me that men should not discover depths of a kind in the “surface” ... Why should they not be attracted by the profundity of the surface itself?’ (Mishima cited in Lingis 1994: 84-5). But it seems that not everyone is obsessed with a logos of vertical-descent, which is why, when we follow Lyotard’s account of dissection, we find that what appears to be depth supporting surface is perhaps nothing more than an endlessly complex (con)figuration of surface(s).

So what if, as Lyotard claims, the skin is a surface without depth, which is why ‘when we open [the body] we affirm only that which is, the vast coiled skin, where slits are not entries, wounds, gashes, openings, but the same surface following its course after a pocket-shaped detour’ (Lyotard 1993: 21-2). If the body is not, as Grumet assumes, the surface expression of an inner essence, then is knowledge (of the body) any longer possible? If the response to this question is negative, then what we find ourselves faced with is the problem of writing or speaking after – as Lyotard puts it in The Differend – that is, the problem of writing or speaking without any pre-given rules.

The task of this essay is to critically examine the dominant psychological model of self-mutilation or fleshy (dis)figuration as I want to call it, as a figure for the understanding of understanding. In so far as the term ‘understanding’ implies the grasping of that which stands under – of depth or essence – then any attempt to critique a representational model of the body and of subjectivity necessarily involves a (re)consideration of the production of knowledge and the textual effects such a process generates. What I hope is already clear at this point is that dominant ontological accounts of the body and of subjectivity and social relations are (in)formed by, and (in)form, binary oppositions such as the distinction between surface and depth, representation and reality, mind and body, self and other, and so on. Rather than simply reiterating the postmodern claim that dualisms are inher-

ently problematic, my aim is to analyse how and why this might be so; to discuss the lived implications of the logics of this particular language game or discourse, at least as they function in regards to attempts to respond to fleshy (dis)figuration.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first section examines the psychological representation of self-mutilation as a form of disfiguration. In the second section I turn to the work of Lyotard, in order to consider the notion of figuration as that which disrupts representation but is not opposed to it. The final section evokes the figural within the psychological representation of disfiguration and thus disfiguration becomes (dis)figuration; that is, the ‘unknowing’ of knowledge as truth, as abstract, static, disembodied and graspable.

Disfiguration

In an interesting analysis of various body-modifier practices and the ways in which they are understood in psychiatry and in other cultural contexts, Armando Favazza raises the issue of self-mutilation and illustrates – albeit inadvertently – the difficulties involved in the application of classificatory and evaluative terms. Favazza defines self-mutilation as ‘the deliberate destruction or alteration of one’s body tissue without conscious suicidal intent’ (1996: xviii-xix). In the introduction to his text Favazza claims that unlike Kraft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis, Bodies Under Siege, which he describes as his magnum opus, ‘goes beyond mere description to search for meaning’ (1996: xix), and herein lies its value, since as he sees it, ‘the first steps in doing something about a problem are giving it a name and a classification’ (1996: 232). And this is exactly what Favazza proceeds to do.

Favazza begins his analysis by dividing self-mutilation into two types, the first of which he refers to as culturally sanctioned self-mutilation. This includes practices such as eyebrow plucking and ear piercing, and cultural or community specific rituals such as circumcision and, for example, the Sun Dance of the Plains Indians in which young brave gaze at the sun and struggle until the skewers that have been inserted under the muscles of their chests and backs break free. The second type of self-mutilation he refers to as deviant or pathological self-mutilation. Favazza then divides this latter phenomenon into three categories: namely, major self-mutilation which he associates with psychosis; stereotypic self-mutilation which he claims is often a symptom of acute psychosis, schizophrenia, autism and congenital
disorders such as Retts disorder, Tourette Syndrome, Lesch-Nyhan Syndrome and so on; and moderate or superficial self-mutilation. This last category – which includes practices such as scratching, cutting, burning, and carving – appears he claims, as a symptom or associated feature of a great many disorders including impulse control disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, disassociation disorders, depression and personality disorders. And it is this category which is of interest to me in this essay.

In his obsessive compulsion to know Favazza not only compiles a list of possible causes or factors which influence fleshly disfiguration, but goes on to plunder the depths of these disorders themselves for that which presumably causes them. What he finds is a combination of childhood abuse, infantile illnesses and biological under-pinnings such as low levels of serotonin. To cut a long and rather dry story short, Favazza, like Grummet, believes that 'the skin may ... be thought of as a sort of message centre or billboard' (Favazza 1996: 148). In both accounts the (self-mutilating) subject is assumed to be the origin of writing, and the body-text is read as a form of corporeal confession. Moreover, writing is understood and/or constituted as a 'message passing from an addressee to an addressee whom are independent of it' (Lyotard 1988: 11). I will return to these points in due course.

Taking a similar approach Janice McLane, in a paper entitled 'The Voice on the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Language', defines self-mutilation as 'the deliberate cutting, burning, or otherwise injuring of one's body in reaction to psychological and/or physical trauma'. It is primarily done, she claims, 'by women, and its practitioners are usually survivors of some kind of childhood abuse' (1996: 109). McLane suggests that self-mutilation can be understood as an inaudible form of speaking one's pain. She says:

For McLane, then, self-mutilation is 'the creation of a voice on the skin' (1996: 115); the creation of a mouth-like wound which can speak what the actual physical mouth has been forbidden to utter. She describes the bizarre and disfiguring expression of the lived contradictions of abuse in this way:

The voice is so appalling that even the self speaking in wounds cannot stand to hear it. For who can really bear to be their own torturer? Who can look into their own eyes and see the three-headed-baby nature of themselves, such a freak that they carve their own body into wounds? Some people can look into a mirror and call their own wounding tattoo-art, body piercing, religious ecstasy, a drug trip ... But these terms themselves are an artful arranging of cooked bits on a plate to disguise the fact that one is eating pieces of bloody dead animal ... The voice is too terrible to contemplate. But we must (McLane 1996: 111, emphasis added).

As McLane sees it, the wound tells the story of the subject's history, of her psychosomatic state, the uncontrollable and chaotic nature of which she cannot bear to face, or to speak, directly. According to McLane, whilst the pain of abuse is impossible to discern as such, it nevertheless (in)forms the psychophysical integrity of the so-called abuse survivor, and creates an enforced silence which must be broken if 'healing' is to be possible. Drawing on the work of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she argues that the possibility of an openness to others and to a world, which is the pre-condition of (inter)subjectivity and of communication, is what recedes when a person is silenced in and through abuse. Both the corporeal schema and the structure of the world are 'experienced' as pain. Yet pain, and thus the abuse survivor's sense of self, are impossible for her to discern as much, and therefore to express. However, McLane argues that the abuse survivor's bodily being-in-the-world, her corporeal and psychological schema, is a lived expression of her embodied history. She says:

When hidden pain starts to speak, it will speak silently. Its voice may appear as a cut on the leg, a burn on the arm, skin ripped and scratched repeatedly. There will be no sound, not any, only unfelt and silent pain which makes its appearance in another pain, self-inflicted, and when that second, collateral pain emerges, it will articulate in blood and blisters the open definition you desire, although it may not be in a language you care to see. This, it says, is pain, and this is real in any language you care to speak (1996: 111).
Due to the lived contradictions of abuse, the subject cannot openly communicate her dilemma, not even to herself, and thus ‘through her body, [must] learn to speak again’ (McLane 1996: 110), since in McLane’s reading of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language, ‘speech is a lived structuring of what is new’ (McLane 1996: 109); the possibility of an openness to others and to a world – hence McLane’s characterisation of self-mutilation, irrespective of the form it takes, as ‘the creation of a voice on the skin’; a mouth-like wound which ‘can speak what the physical mouth has been forbidden to utter’ (McLane 1996: 115). This bodily-speaking, it seems, both articulates – albeit silently – the carnal ‘experiences’ of the abuse survivor, and at the same time literally rewrites the material (existence), or psychophysical schema, of the body-subject. Thus McLane sees self-mutilation as an ambiguous ‘speaking through the body’ which does not simply express subjectivity, but more importantly, (re)formulates bodily-being. In other words, McLane is wary of the tendency to unthinkingly pathologise fleshly disfiguration, and instead, attempts to reconceptualise it as a less than negative practice which, in a perhaps unconventional way, has emotional and political import. On the one hand then, McLane moves beyond a simple positing of the subject of self-mutilation as pathological, and attempts to elaborate an anti-essentialist analysis of the constitution of subjectivity and experience. At best, her analysis demonstrates, firstly, that the subject does not precede experience, but rather, is constituted in and through it, and secondly, that experience is what we seek to explain and thus is complicit in the production of knowledge rather than being the origin of knowledge. On the other hand, McLane’s assumption that self-mutilation is the effect of some kind of childhood abuse, and that the abuse-survivor is in need of ‘healing’, tends to impose limits on the possibility of critically exploring the ways in which knowledge is produced, and the culturally and historically specific assumptions which inform its production.

According to McLane, the creation of a voice on the skin as a disfiguring form of corporeal confession functions as a quasi-therapeutic attempt to reinstate what she describes as ‘a unified lived structure for the abuse survivor’ (1996: 112), which it achieves, she claims, in three connected ways. Firstly, self-mutilation reestablishes the difference between pain and the pain-free by localising pain in one particular injury ‘thus allowing the rest of life to stand in temporary contrast as that which does not have wounds or pain’ (McLane 1996: 112).

Secondly, self-injury reconstitutes the boundary between the existence and non-existence of the self since it constitutes an act which renders the subject’s existence present to itself: ‘I cut, I feel, therefore I am’. Thirdly, fleshly disfiguration distinguishes self from other by a literal carving-out of self-possession: it is the self, rather than another, that mutilates the self. In effect then, the disfigured subject heals her ‘self’, becomes unified, through the (re)construction of her ‘self’, the world, and the relation between them, in terms of dualities: self/other, pain/non-pain, existence/non-existence and so on. In short, self-mutilation as the creation of a voice on the skin is therapeutic insofar as it generates ‘the possibility for another, more authentic voice [to] emerge’ (McLane 1996: 117, my emphasis).

In each of the analyses briefly outlined, fleshly disfiguration could be said to be understood as a form of corporeal confession. Cuts, scars, burns, tattoos and so on, are read ideographically. That is, as graphics which tell the story or the ‘truth’, of the subject’s psychic interiority. This is not, however, to suggest that the analyses are theoretically identical. Unlike Grumet and Favazza, McLane does not ‘forget’ the corporeal engagement of the body in the production of meaning and in the constitution of identity and sociality. Indeed, her reading of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of gesture as the basis of language, and at the same time as that which is distinct from language, allows her to claim that the flesh is voice – a corporeal voice which does not speak in language, but vibrates in wounds, cuts, burns, tattoos. However, whilst this voice is literally inaudible – which is not to suggest that it cannot be sensed – it metaphorically, and by a process of substitution, makes heard what the physical mouth has been forbidden to utter, what has been silenced by abuse – that is, the abuse survivor’s embodied history, her subjectivity, the uncontrollable and chaotic nature of which she cannot bear to face, or speak, directly. Thus, whilst for McLane the marked body is not simply a canvas on which psychological themes are intentionally expressed, it is nevertheless the site of a confession, albeit a complex and ambiguous one.

These various renderings of the body of the other as readable, and the interiority of the other as an object of knowledge, involve a number of connected assumptions that, I would argue, are highly problematic. Firstly, as I’ve already suggested, subjectivity is assumed ‘to consist in a sort of [autonomous] inward depth, which can be seen exteriorised, expressed, on the articulations of the body’ (Lingis 1983: 25).
Secondly, and connected to the first point, the body is conceptualised and/or constituted as nothing more than the site of an expression ‘moment by moment, of an inward spirit, or a person belonging to him [or her] self’ (Lingis 1983: 25). The role or function of the marks of fleshly disfigurement, then, are merely to signify, ‘to efface themselves [and thus the body] before the meaning, or ideality, or logos’ (Lingis 1983: 23). Thus the body comes to matter only insofar as its matter or materiality is veiled over in and through the clinical extraction of abstract and immaterial truths. Moreover, this effacing of the materiality of the body in the pursuit of truth is a structural necessity, for as Mark Taylor points out in a critique of Hegelian dialectics, it is ‘o[n]ly when the body is under-stood as being finally grounded in spirit [that] knowledge becomes secure’ (1997: 18). Lastly, implicit in each of the accounts discussed is the assumption that it is imperative that we listen to the voice on the skin, that we read the textual body of the self-mutilator, interpret it, and pronounce judgements upon it. I will return to this point in the final section of the essay.

**Figuration**

In *Discourse, figure*, published in 1971, Lyotard elaborates an analysis of the relation between what he calls discourse, and figure. For Lyotard, discourse is the ‘condition of representation to consciousness by a rational order or structure of concepts’ (Readings 1991: xxxi). Concepts operate as monads antithetically defined by their position and relation within a ‘textual’ system, and reason is the tool used to calculate such relational positions. Discourse grasps things solely in terms of the rules, linkages and conventions of representational logic, as ‘meanings or significations that discourse may speak’ (Readings 1991: xxxi). The figural, on the other hand, is the unassimilable heterogeneous other at work within and against discourse; it is that which disrupts representational logic, and which every representation must forget. Like ‘the Jews’ and/or *le différend* the figural is within representational logic and, simultaneously, resists this logic; it is ‘what never ceases to open the wound of the unaccomplished’ (Lyotard 1990: 22). In other words, the figural is not opposed to discourse, but rather, provides the very grounds of its (im)possibility. It takes place at the limit of representation, yet ‘persists not so much at the limits but rather at the heart of representation’ (Lyotard 1990: 5), and consequently ‘wounds’ discourse, opening up the system of representation to a radical heterogeneity, ‘a difference which cannot be rationalised or subsumed within the rule of representation’ (Lyotard 1971: 4).

Since the discursive and the figural are inextricably bound — despite the fact that the former’s status as knowledge is dependent on the display or ‘forgetting’ of figurality — then the relation, as Lyotard formulates it, is one of *duplicity* rather than *duality*. As Readings stresses, if it is *not* the case that representation is bad or erroneous, whilst figuration is good or true, then the task of reading is not simply to dis-cover the meaning of a text — in this case the marked body — but rather, to refuse to allow claims to know the truth of a ‘thing’ to forget the duplicity, the differences, that figurality raises (Readings 1991: xxxi-xxxiii).

Lyotard’s critical analysis of structural linguistics as the overlooking of the sensible in and through a focus on the textual, as the suppression of seeing by reading, exemplifies this task. Lyotard argues that Saussure develops an account of textual space as two dimensional, a space of absolute opposition. The process of reading, according to this model, is simply one of decoding, effected by a switching between the system of oppositions and the linguistic term.9

Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard claims that vision appears as a *figure* in the textual conception of space.10 Visibility, he argues, consists of something more than an active subject that looks, and a passive object that is looked at. Rather, the seeing eye participates in the world it views and vice versa. Seeing entails being a body that is itself capable of being seen. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in *The Phenomenology of Perception*:

> [H]e who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at. As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision ... be doubled with a complementary vision ... myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible ... He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it (1962: 134-5).

This corporeal intermingling is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the chiasmatic imbrication of subject and object in perception. Both the self and the world are affected in and through this intertwining. The self is always already bodily and as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘the body is neither subject nor object, neither in-itself, nor for-itself’ (1962: 212-3);
it is a gaping wound' (1962: 101), a liminal (non)site in which 'opposi-
tes' join and separate. The body, then, for Merleau-Ponty, can never be apprehended since it is less an object than an interlacing, a 'struc-
ture of implication' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 149). In The Visible and the
Invisible, Merleau-Ponty continues this line of thinking via the concept
of 'flesh', a term providing the preconditions and the grounds for the
 distinction between subject and object, self and other. Here he states
that 'we must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body
and spirit - for then it would be the union of contradictions - we must
think it as ... the concrete emblem of a general manner of being' (1968:
193). Whilst 'flesh' does not simply displace perception as the object
of Merleau-Ponty's later theoretical investigations, it has been des-
cribed by Elizabeth Grosz as 'a more elementary ... term ... the [pre]condition
of both seeing and being seen, of touching and being touched, and of
their intermingling and possible integration, a commonness in which
both subject and object participate' (1994: 95). Furthermore, in The
Visible and the Invisible the world is described by Merleau-Ponty, as 'uni-
versal flesh' (1968: 137); that is, an affective network of sensuous
relations in which everything is intertwined - but not conflatable, nor
entirely distinguishable, and thus not reducible to an Economy of the
Same. As Mark Taylor has noted, the intertwining of universal flesh
produces a text(ure), a weaving together that 'is' visibility (Taylor 1987:
72-3). Given this, it is not so much, as common-sense logic would have
it, that seeing precedes reading in a linear sense, but rather, that read-
ing and seeing are inextricably bound: thus vision could be thought of
as exemplifying the co-existence of mutually constitutive yet incom-
nensurable terms, of the discursive and the figural.

What this suggests is that our sense of what reading the body might
c dismantling needs to move beyond the dominant understanding of reading as
a process of cognitive recognition, in which the sensible, the corpore-
ality of that which reads and that which is read (and the two are never
separate), is veiled over and/or reduced to mere signification. Reading
need not, as it does in the work of Grummet, McLane and Favazza,
simply claim to dis-cover the hidden meaning of the text or the other
who supposedly authored it. Rather, 'reading must pose itself as an act
which sets the text to work, as a work which deconstructs textual oppo-
sitions to testify to figural differences' (Readings 1991: 52).

This sort of logic informs Libidinal Economy in which Lyotard devel-
ops the notion of the libidinal band, the Möebian skin. The libidinal
hand is not so much a 'real' thing which Lyotard attempts to represent
in order to counter the depth model of the body and of subjectivity, but
rather, is a befitting fiction if you like, that allows Lyotard to gesture
towards what is excluded by representational thinking; namely, the
unassimilable, the figural. Unlike the dermal diagnosticians discussed
earlier, Lyotard states that libidinal economists 'are suspicious of the
separation allowed between inscription and its site' (1993: 16). It is ne-
cessary, he claims, that we

strengthen our ... palpative potential ... until we forge the idea of an
intensity which, far from setting itself up on a producer-body, deter-
nines it; the idea of a passage over nothing, which produces, one instant
beyond countable time, the being of its proper passing, its passage ... 
Therefore not a surface first, then a writing or inscription over it. But the
libidinal skin of which, after the event, one will be able to say that it is
made up of a patchwork of organs, of elements from organic and social
bodies, the libidinal skin initially like the track of intensities, ... the sur-
face crossed and crossing (1993: 16-17).

What this suggests is not that there is a body that is written on or
with, that disfigures or is disfigured, but rather, that 'the body' comes
into being in and through processes that posit it as an object separate
from that which surrounds it (ie represents it), but which at the same
is indeterminate insofar as it retains the trace of the other, of hetero-
genreity or figurality, as that which it is defined in opposition or relation
to, and therefore, as that which is internal to it but not reducible to it.

(Dis)figuration

In a paper entitled 'The Figurative Incarnation of the Sentence: Notes
on the "Autographic" Skin', Georges Didier-Huberman (1984) provides
a critique of what has come to be known as 'dermagraphism'; a clinical
procedure associated with the work of nineteenth century clinicians
such as Charcot, Barthelemy and Du Jardin-Beaumetz. Didier-
Huberman claims that dermagraphism was associated with patients
suffering from delusions, problems of vision, sensitivity to hypnosis,
and hysteria (1984: 69). Didier-Huberman tells how in 1893 Barthelemy
noted a pattern in which 'the patient suffers a crisis of vision, "falls"
into vertigo, and produces a text which "surfaces into the visible"
(Barthelemy cited in Didi-Huberman 1984: 69). But not only did the
clinicians concerned read these texts, but more importantly, they also attempted to reanimate this process by inscribing the bodies of their patients in various ways. Dermagraphic experimentation, for example, involved the writing with a rubber stylus of a doctor's name upon the body of a woman during hypnosis, and issuing suggestions such as the following one: 'This evening at 4pm ... you will bleed from the lines that I have drawn on your arm' (Barthelemey cited in Didi-Huberman 1984: 69). The anonymous patient discussed by Barthelemey did indeed bleed, if we are to believe his account, and the words, we are told, remained visible for more than three months. What we find in this and other accounts of dermagraphism is that the patient's body is appropriated as a 'work'; it becomes the (textual) product and possession, the voice if you like, of the subject (the clinician as author), and functions to reaffirm both his sense of self in opposition to the improper (body of the) other, and his status – as the subject of knowledge – within the clinical context.

The infliction of the clinician's palm upon the patient's flesh was another method used and discussed by Barthelemey. The following quote from Barthelemey makes apparent the violence endemic to the extraction of meaning and/or truth from the body of the other. He says: 'If one lightly touches the patient, the dermagraphism does not always manifest itself. If, however, one gives a quick slap or flick to the skin, one soon sees the entire finger or hand take shape as a swelling' (cited in Didi-Huberman 1984: 69). Dermagraphism then, as this quote suggests, is both the name given to the process of reading the textual body of the other, and the term given to the textual mark that is written upon the patient's body and which in turn is read by the clinician. What I want to suggest is that rather than dis-covering the truth or essence of the other, this form of reading writes the body of the other as the expression of the story of the other that it desires to read, that it authors or authorises. As the examples discussed show, dermagraphism does this literally by inscribing the name of the clinician, or his hand-print, upon the textual body of the patient. It is possible to conclude from this, I would argue, that the subject does not precede writing, but rather is constituted in and through processes of reading and writing, the distinction between which is far from clear. Thus neither addressee nor addressor (assuming that we can any longer posit such a distinction) is independent of the 'message' which passes 'between' them. Thus we can conclude that dermal diagnosis is as much a (re)writing of the self as it is a reading/writing of the body of the other. But it seems to me that this is precisely what is forgotten in psychological attempts to represent the subject of self-mutilation.

It is my contention that such forms of analysis dis-figure the body of the other, not because they distort the 'reality' of that body, but because they apprehend – that is, read and write – the body, solely in terms of meanings that discourse can speak; they disavow materiality, the carnal, intertextuality and/or the figural, and thus in supposedly rendering audible the voice of the other, they in fact silence or forget radical difference rather than testifying to the differend. This is perhaps what Didi-Huberman means when he concludes that [d]ermagraphism produces ... a kind of thanatography, a sentence which controls [or attempts to control] the destiny of the patient [the other], and which incarnates the corporeal to corpse' (1984: 70). Given this, we might perhaps describe the work of Grumet, Favazza and McLane as exemplifying what Nietzsche has described as 'the hand that in a considerate fashion – kills' (1984: 73).

Whilst dermagraphism may no longer be a popular or acceptable clinical procedure, the assumptions on which it was founded are still apparent (as I have suggested) in psychological and/or dermal diagnostic attempts to extract abstract truths from the depths of the so-called disfigured body. Rather than either validate this approach, or simply dismiss it as erroneous, my aim has been to demonstrate that fleshly (dis)figuration can be seen as performing the role of the figural in the understanding of understanding. Like McLane, I too believe that 'we must listen' to the voice on the skin, to fleshly (dis)figuration. But unlike McLane, for whom the imperative to listen is in order to hear, to make audible the truth that has been silenced, to know, to cure, to produce closure, I want to listen to the unspeakable voice of the other at work within and against the psychological representation of the disfigured body. This 'we must', then, is not so much a command to undertake a Heraclesian journey into the underworld in order to return with the head of that which was once too monstrous to face directly, but rather, an ethical invocation in the Levinasian sense. For Levinas this 'we must' – at least if it is understood as an ethical response-ability which is affected in and through exposure to the other – is something which engenders being(s) rather than something which can be reflected upon by a subject(ivity) that pre-exists it, and/or is external to it. Such an encounter with carnality, with the flesh, 'is not only indica-
tive, [and] informative but simultaneously, vocative and imperative' (Lingis 1986: 227). Lingis describes the ethical event or relation, which exceeds the sphere of cognition, and in and through which self and other are mutually constituted, in the following way:

In his flesh I see ... the demanding insistence of his being. Skin is not hide nor covering, camouflage, uniform, adornment. It is a surface of exposure, zone of susceptibility, of vulnerability, of pain and abuse. In the skin inscribed with its own wrinkles, one ... read[s] ... the vulnerability of what is other. One’s eyes touch it lightly, affected by the susceptibility of [the other] ... In this exposure the other does not affect me as another substance that solidifies under my hold, that sustains and supports. His face is not the surface of another being. It is flesh of no identifiable colour that does not hold its shape. There is want of being in all flesh; what faces is not something whose identity I can grasp. The anonymity of fingers, legs, genitals is not that of implements utilizable by anyone but the unrepresentable importunity of a want, the inapprehendable movement of a contestation, the unmeasurable force of a question that badgers and disrupts (1989: 138).

Or to put it more simply, the carnal materiality of the other ‘weighs on me’ (Lingis 1989: 137), questions me, contests me, disturbs my perspectives, and the law that governs or gives life to them.

On the one hand, then, it may be and in fact is possible to read the body of the other as a canvas upon which psychologically relevant themes are portrayed, as Gruet has suggested, but at the same time what such practices presuppose, and what disallows closure, is the vocative and imperative force of the fleshly encounter, in and through which both self and other are continuously (re)constituted, (re)read and (re)written: mark and are marked.12

My conclusion then is that fleshly (dis)figuration remains duplicitous, because, like ‘my’ bodily being, the bodily being of the other both affects, and is affected by, a trace of what Levinas calls the Other-in-me.13 ‘The body’ (as text) is not an object that can be apprehended, but rather, is a ‘gaping wound’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 394); an openness onto the world which figures the unassimilable. It is the site of an excess that is at the heart of representation and yet is forgotten in and through representation; that generates the possibility of reading, writing, knowledge, and simultaneously interrupts it.

The question which remains unaddressed in my analysis is what the implications of this critique might be for clinical practice – a question that is difficult to answer and yet unavoidable given the context in which the essay finds itself. I concede that I do not have an answer, which is not to suggest that a response is not possible. Whilst on the one hand, I am wary of what I see as normalising attempts to read, represent, and/or judge fleshly (dis)figuration, I do not on the other, presume myself to be ‘safe and sound’ (Lyotard 1990: 26), to somehow be beyond representational logic and its inherent limitations. Thus it seems to me that the question is not so much whether or not to write/read the inscribed body, but rather, how to read fleshly (dis)figuration so as not to forget the figural; how to make possible a response rather than an answer.14 What I hope this essay has managed to do is to provide a response, to testify to the figural, and thus to show that writing can bear witness to ethical response-ability. ‘Instead of being the description of an experience, conducted by an “I” in quest of self-knowledge ... writing is the testimony of a fracture, of the opening onto the other ... its aptitude for hearing a call’ (Lyotard 1988: 113).

An ethics of reading/writing then, is not a hermeneutic method, but rather, is the affective insistence of ‘reading as a crisis of judgement’ (Readings 1991: 128). And insofar as an ethics of reading/writing could be said to engender the performative effect of ‘provoking further discussion’ (Readings 1991: 37), then it is neither an absolutist approach to textuality, a form of relativism which promotes a refusal to judge, nor a pluralist claim that all judgements are of equal value. Rather, an ethics of reading fleshly (dis)figuration allows for a critical exploration of the ways in which reading and writing might be complicit in the production of knowledges, identities, and social relations.

Notes
1. For a similar analysis of the marked body that focuses in more detail on tattooing, see Sullivan (1995).
4. This position is shared by Sheila Jeffreys who, in an article entitled ‘Sadomasochism, Art & The Lesbian Sexual Revolution’, argues that tattoos, piercings, scars and so on, are forms of self-mutilation which abuse
non-survivors often employ. For a critical response to Jeffreys’ claims see Sullivan (1997).
5. Sections of McLane’s article, such as the one quoted here, are written in italics, although the reason for this is never given.
6. For a well-developed critique of this understanding of subjectivity which he sees as exemplifying classical philosophy and its theoretical limitations, see Lingis (1983: 19-46).
7. For Lyotard the term le différend refers to, but does not represent, the unassimilable or unnameable that is at the heart of representation, and yet which every representation necessarily forgets.
8. See Libidinal Economy, (30-1).
10. At the same time, Lyotard claims that textuality appears as a figure in the phenomenological understanding of perception, thus he avoids reaffirming a dualistic tendency to posit one theoretical perspective as good, right or true, and the other as its opposite.
11. In The Differend, Lyotard states that ‘[t]he différend is signalled by [the] inability to prove. The one who lodges the complaint is heard, but the one who is a victim, and who is perhaps the same one, is reduced to silence’ (1988: 10).
12. For a similar critique of the tendency to overlook the vocative and imperative characteristics of intersubjectivity in the focus on meaning and intentionalness, see Sullivan (1997; 1999).
13. For Levinas, the ethical encounter, the trace and the response-ability it evokes, occurs as a past that cannot be re-presented; a past ‘more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical passed’; ... ‘a past which was never present’ (1978: 9, 24).

References