

**Inked In:  
The Feminist Politics of Tattooing  
in Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo***

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**Abstract:**

*The Electric Michelangelo* (2004) by Sarah Hall both rehearses and challenges neo-Victorian fiction's propensity toward sensational and voyeuristic portrayals of female sexuality. Subjected to the sexualising gaze, circus performer Grace faces pressure to conform to patriarchal norms of female beauty. However, her resistance and, by extension, the novel's challenge to voyeuristic desire both inside and outside the text, is also deployed at the level of the gaze: through a series of eye tattoos which disturb the boundaries between performer and spectator, fictional character and neo-Victorian reader. As in the Victorian period, the limits of women's freedom of choice over their bodies remain contested today. As this article will demonstrate, Grace's struggle for bodily autonomy transcends the novel's temporal and spatial setting to comment upon contemporary gender ideology. Situating the novel within a framework of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, Victorian freakery and feminist scholarship on body modification, I argue that Grace's body modification demonstrates the social and political power imbued in the female body's performance of alternative modes of femininity. By re-inscribing tattoos as acts of bodily resistance against voyeurism and exploitation, subjects like Grace construct alternative forms of self-defined, inherently multiple, feminine identities.

**Keywords:** agency, body modification, carnival, *The Electric Michelangelo*, embodiment, freakery, gender, Sarah Hall, neo-Victorian, Victorian.

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Sarah Hall's novel, *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004), intervenes in the overt and sensationalised sexualisation typical of neo-Victorian fiction in order to explore modes of resistance to patriarchal constructions of femininity. The novel follows Grace, a heavily tattooed performer whose body is both revered – as a curio in the circus-like setting of Coney Island in the 1930s and 1940s – and feared for her off-stage subversion of feminine beauty. Situating the novel within a framework of Bakhtinian carnivalesque,

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Victorian freakery and feminist scholarship on body modification, I argue that Grace's tattoos act as an assertion of corporeal agency that write against the common trope of sexploitation in neo-Victorian fiction. While feminist analyses of contemporary body modification practices consistently invoke tattoos as a mode of resistance to patriarchal order through the reclamation of the female body, such theories have yet to be applied to the representation of body modification in neo-Victorian fiction. By re-inscribing tattoos as acts of resistance against sexual victimisation, rather than as examples of corporeal defilement, embodied subjects like Grace reject narrow definitions of femininity in favour of constructing meanings typified by their multiplicity, individuality, and freedom of expression. Rather than concede the loss of the body to patriarchal definition, Hall's novel suggests that, like Grace, contemporary feminists must continue to fight on this corporeal battleground, because the very equality such movements seek to achieve is dependent upon female-authored conceptions of the body that reflect the multiple and fluid identities of women themselves.

In the novel, Grace's heavily tattooed body is an object of perverse attraction in her guise as a circus performer. The amusement-park space of Coney Island affords Grace's 'deformity' a certain legitimacy that suspends – albeit temporarily – the societal censure she attracts for transgressing the patriarchal norms of feminine decorum. As this article will demonstrate, Grace's struggle for bodily autonomy transcends both the temporal and spatial setting of the novel, in order to comment upon contemporary gender ideology in the Western world. As in the Victorian period, which the novel consistently recalls despite its twentieth-century setting, the limits of women's freedom of choice over their bodies remain contested. Through Grace, Hall demonstrates that the right to freedom of expression is free only insofar as the mode of expression conforms to patriarchal constructions of femininity. In the novel, corporeal performances which fall outside this remit are punished through violent acts directed toward the female body. This tension is not dissimilar to recurring public debates concerning violence against women, where the preventative responsibility is all too frequently placed on victims rather than perpetrators. Although Grace's body bears witness to acts of patriarchal violence, her commitment to corporeal expression results in a rejection of her victimhood status in order to reclaim her bodily autonomy.

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Hall's novel begins in the opening decade of the twentieth century, in the small seaside town of Morecambe Bay, where Reeda Parks runs a hotel for consumptives and an underground abortion clinic. The novel follows the life of Reeda's son, Cy, who comes of age in Morecambe Bay and begins an apprenticeship as a tattoo artist with the eccentric and often grotesque Eliot Riley. Upon Riley's death, Cy relocates to the United States and finds employment in Coney Island, New York, surrounded by performers with various bodily deformities that attract crowds seeking leisure and entertainment, not unlike the visitors to Morecambe itself. It is here that Cy meets Grace, a performer who commissions him to tattoo her entire body with eye motifs. The design is based on an "almost-hieroglyphic, black-rimmed, black-lashed" image Grace tears from a book (Hall 2004: 247). The "old and parchment-like" quality of the paper (Hall 2004: 254), coupled with the well-documented Victorian cultural obsession with Egypt (see Richards 2009: 17), suggests the image's nineteenth century origins. The placement of Grace's tattoos under her clothing also reflects a common strategy among Victorian female tattooed performers, whose ability to conceal their tattoos allowed them "full (albeit feminine) freedom in public" (Braunberger 2000: 12).<sup>1</sup> Though Grace views her tattoos as a way to cement her autonomy, the transgressive nature of her body modification makes her vulnerable to attack. When this attack inevitably comes, at the hands of a man offended by the overt display of her body, Grace is forced to re-examine her relationship with her body and the power she has over its appearance. She convinces Cy to assist her in a revenge plot, before disappearing from the narrative, leaving Cy to return to England and muse over her fate.

Despite the novel's setting in the twentieth century, Hall constructs both Morecambe Bay and Coney Island as spaces that mirror the Victorian fascination – and unease – with the freak body. Indeed, in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freakshow* (2015), Helen Davies analyses several historical figures whose experiences transcend a narrow geographical and temporal definition of 'Victorian'. The extension of her case studies beyond the reach of Britain and Queen Victoria's reign demonstrates that the allusions to and reverberations of the period in contemporary culture risk being lost if such prescriptive parameters were arbitrarily enforced (Davies 2015: 4-5). Though Hall's novel has thus far attracted scant critical attention in the field of neo-Victorian studies, the

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novel's geographical spaces are 'trapped' in a Victorian past, as are their inhabitants, and it is this strategy – of recognising the Victorian era's persistence – that opens up the possibility of reading the novel as a genealogical critique of the cultural pressures placed on women's bodies in the present.

Scholarship on neo-Victorian fiction often focuses on the ethical quandary of representing Victorian sexuality. The central tenet of such arguments lies in the notion that neo-Victorian fiction itself is complicit in the process of exploitation, as its use of explicit sexual material is calculated to appeal to a modern readership, rather than effect political or ideological change (see Gutleben 2001: 170; Kohlke 2008: 55). For Marie-Luise Kohlke "the 'fine' and novel aim of historical inquiry and exposé is the pretence [...] that potentially masks a self-indulgent prurient voyeurism" (Kohlke 2008: 54). In contrast, I argue that Hall's novel engages in a deliberate inversion of such exploitative practices by demonstrating the social and political power imbued in the female body's enactment of alternative modes of embodiment. While this article does not seek to claim the progressive nature of the genre as a whole, it does aim to demonstrate that analyses of neo-Victorian characters' corporeality belie the notion of "political correctness in retro-Victorian fiction" as a "fashionable attitude, not an ideological battle" (Gutleben 2001: 170). Grace positions her body outside the realm of 'acceptable' female appearance, thereby intervening in the commodification of women's bodies according to male-authored constructions of sexual desirability (Şerban 2009: 190). Hall's novel goes beyond capitulation to such voyeuristic desires, by forcing the viewer/reader to reflect on the ethics of his/her gaze. In this way, the novel troubles the notion of reassurance through historical displacement by refusing to confine sexual exploitation to the past in order to "reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance toward sexual liberation and social progress" (Kohlke 2008: 56). The corporeal struggles of Hall's characters erupt in time and space, drawing parallels between Victorian freakery and the contemporary policing of women's bodies. Grace's project of body modification challenges the dominant constructions of female beauty – as pure and unmarked – which seek to confine women's corporeal expressions in ways that affirm the body's status as the object of male desire.

Despite gains made by the various invocations of the women's movement since the first wave feminists of the late nineteenth century, true

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equality remains elusive. In the cultural milieu of the West, women's bodies continue to be subject to surveillance, objectification, and exploitation by both individuals and institutions. Natasha Walter asserts that "we are now seeing a resurgence of old sexism in new guises. Far from giving new scope to women's freedom and potential, the new hypersexual culture redefines female success through a narrow framework of sexual allure" (Walter 2010: 10). This resurgence is not dissimilar to the Victorian dichotomy which constructed women in one of two ways: the ideal, asexual 'Angel in the House' figure, or the hypersexual, corrupting influence on men that was often associated with female prostitutes. Rather than being confined to particular occupations, classes, or categories of 'fallen women', hypersexual culture in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries involves a pervasive narrowing of choice for women regardless of their individual characteristics. Indeed, in her discussion of Emma Donoghue's neo-Victorian novel, *The Sealed Letter* (2008), Clare O'Callaghan uses a postfeminist framework to argue that the novel "reflects contemporary postfeminist debates that affirm the persistence of 'Victorian' attitudes towards female gender and sexuality" (O'Callaghan 2013: 65). These pervasive cultural attitudes toward female sexuality play a crucial role in creating an environment that at best condones and, at worst, encourages, violence against women.

Literary forms have a key role to play in contesting the normalisation of gender-based violence in the twenty-first century. A recent World Health Organization Report found that 1 in 3 women worldwide have been subjected to physical and/or sexual domestic violence or non-partner sexual violence (García-Moreno et al. 2013: 2), while more than a quarter of respondents to a Sexual Assault Research poll in 2005 believed that female victims of sexual assault were partially or completely to blame if they were "wearing sexy or revealing clothing" (Amnesty International UK 2005: n.p.). However, the difficulty of combatting such attitudes is compounded by the fact that, in the twenty-first century, "sexism persists in subtle ways that evade structural censure or control" (Fixmer and Wood 2005: 243). Rather than targeting the 'patriarchy' as a discrete or knowable entity, third wave feminism, of which postfeminism forms a part, "advocate[s] enacting personal resistance in concrete, local sites" (Fixmer and Wood 2005: 243). Such personal action brings to mind the recent proliferation of 'SlutWalks' and 'Reclaim the Night' events, where women campaign for their right to safety in public spaces. These displays of personal resistance can be

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extended to the literary form, which, I argue, is also capable of intervening in public debate. With specific reference to neo-Victorian fiction, for instance, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue that “in exploring the resistance of their fictional protagonists to actual abuses in the past, neo-Victorian fiction by women seeks to overwrite the pornographic ‘edutainment’ of our contemporary present” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 140). I take up this notion of ‘overwriting’ in my analysis of *The Electric Michelangelo*, arguing that Hall’s re-inscription of the female body as autonomous subject creates a space for readers to reflect upon the status of women in contemporary culture and – through Grace – presents a historical model of bodily resistance which can be emulated in the present.

### **1. Victorian Freakery**

Despite the enduring interest in the freak body in popular culture, freakery was largely ignored in academic circles until the late twentieth century. The evolution of what has been loosely termed ‘freak studies’ dates from the mid-1970s, complete with its own history of trends, from the social constructivist perspective of Robert Bogdan in the 1980s, which held that freaks were actively engaged in their commodification, to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s invocation of literary analysis and historiography a decade later, which focused on the cultural and temporal specificity of defining ‘normality’ and the role of the ‘abnormal’ body as a receptacle for societal anxieties (see Tromp 2008: ix-x). These two approaches converge in Marlene Tromp’s edited collection, *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (2008), where Christopher Smit argues that the Victorian freak ought to be viewed as “an entrepreneurial figure”, as an active subject rather than perennially disempowered object (Smit 2008: 291-292). Rebecca Stern, writing in the same collection, argues for a similarly progressive view of the transformative potential of freak discourse: “alongside viewers’ capacities to feel horror, superiority, or pity, that is, there is the potential for them also to experience feelings of association or alliance that are engaged and ethically conscious” (Stern 2008: 224-225). My analysis of *The Electric Michelangelo* is informed by this recent approach, in that I read Grace’s performance of the freak body as an informed and deliberate campaign for female bodily autonomy. Her project resonates with contemporary readers, who continue to grapple with the

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historical inequalities embedded in patriarchal gender ideologies that inform current cultural attitudes toward women.

While this article focuses on Grace's capacity for agency in her performance of freakery, this does not deny the uses and abuses to which the freak body was frequently put in the Victorian era, nor does it seek to claim that all neo-Victorian novels are free from such exploitation. As Davies notes, texts which reproduce, rather than self-consciously engage with, the Victorian (and modern) desire for spectacle fall short of an ethical engagement with the historical figure of the freak (Davies 2015: 13). However, like Davies, I argue that it is crucial to challenge the idea that freakery is synonymous with oppression (see Davies 2015: 6), in order to expand the possibilities of enfreaked embodiment to include empowered subjects. Davies thus contrasts Victorian representations of the nineteenth-century giantess Anna Swan as a "passive" figure (Davies 2015: 101) with Susan Swan's fictional re-imagining of her in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983), in which Anna "takes ownership of her performance and self-presentation, and this is framed as a feminist strategy" (Davies 2015: 104). I argue that Grace's performance of self as spectacle engages in a similarly deliberate assertion of feminist agency. Unlike many of her real-life counterparts, who were coerced or coaxed into a life of performing by profit-hungry managers, Grace's self-made enfreakment is freely chosen and calculated to play on the public desire for entertainment: "They will pay to see me looking back at them [...]. It will be funny, like being the invisible woman" (Hall 2004: 272). While Nadja Durbach argues that "[t]he very act of displaying one's body publicly rendered the female performer, regardless of the content and nature of the performance, a sexual object" (Durbach 2014: 147), reading Grace as complicit in her objectification ignores the fact that, simply by virtue of being a woman, she is always already looked at. Fittingly, Cy describes a sailor's whistle directed at Grace as "a last flush arrow aimed at her composure with a message tied to its shaft saying she was still a woman after all, and this fact alone had drawn the man's bow" (Hall 2004: 243). Given that the "unmarked female body" is arguably "a myth" (Pitts 2003: 75-76), Grace's ability to inscribe and perform a self-determined version of her body represents an empowering, rather than exploitative, engagement with historical freakery and its modern-day equivalents.

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The distinction made by freak studies between viewer and performer and their respective associations with the educated and the educator, seems at odds with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, in which the identities of performer and audience are simultaneously enacted by all participants (see Bakhtin 1984: 7). However, I argue that Grace, in returning the gaze of her 'audience', is both viewer and viewed and, as such, these categories are once again collapsed as the inhabitants of Coney Island engage in the collective project of looking and being looked at. In this way, carnival participants gain an awareness of the permeable boundaries between bodies that, in other spaces, are unquestionably considered to be discrete entities. However, the confinement of such subversive expressions to the carnival space casts doubt upon whether such progressive modes of embodiment are possible in the outside world. For Tromp and Karyn Valerius, freakery is inherently context-dependent – the status of the freak body changes across temporal, geographical, and historical space (Tromp and Valerius 2008: 4). This paper thus engages not only with the historical specificities of Victorian freakery as represented in Hall's novel, but also, the continuing relevance of such attitudes in twenty-first century culture. This raises questions about how the neo-Victorian invocation of freak discourse intersects with contemporary body politics. How might the literary representation of the Victorian freak, and its descendants, speak to ongoing debates about the normalisation of sexual exploitation of the female body, and the importance of deliberate acts of resistance?

Although Hall's novel is set during the opening decades of the twentieth century, she consistently invokes Victorian-era freak show imagery in her depiction of the novel's twinned amusement spaces. Morecambe Bay – Cy's English hometown – and its US double, Coney Island, are constructed as crumbling legacies of the Victorian fascination with freaks, where non-normative bodies were celebrated as objects of pseudo-scientific study and commoditised for the pleasure of a viewing public. As Durbach argues,

despite claims to be exhibiting an 'authentic' body, what was on display was in fact staged, posed, and narrated in ways that belie any attempt to suggest that [...] these were unmediated human specimens whose bodies were transparently legible. (Durbach 2014: 47)

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Far from freakery being a self-evident condition, performers within carnival spaces like Coney Island were engaged in a process of constant mediation, whereby their embodied presentations were continually re-worked to appeal to the spectators of the day. Indeed, as tattooed freaks became more common in the late Victorian era, performers went to ever greater extremes to maintain their sensational status by inking larger surfaces of skin with increasingly unusual images (Fisher 2002: 96). The artificiality of freak bodies is also evident – and capitalised upon – in the seaside location of Cy’s childhood:

Children annually sold tickets for tours to see the local boggarts, monsters, spirits and wee folk of the area [...]. The boggarts themselves ranged from convenient stray dogs, vagrant tramps and drunks, to friends and younger siblings dressed in raggedy clothing with twigs entwined in their hair and mud on their faces. (Hall 2004: 36)

Cy and other opportunistic youths played to the public fascination with the abnormal in the early twentieth century, in itself a legacy from the Victorian age. In this way, the supposedly ‘normal’ space of Morecambe becomes enfreaked through the entrepreneurial tactics of its youth and comes to act as a forerunner – a kind of travelling carnival – for the purpose-built Coney Island.

The amusement park space of Coney Island engages in a meta-performance of both the Victorian freak show and its more immediate antecedent, Morecambe Bay. When Cy arrives in Coney Island, the allusions to Morecambe are immediately apparent:

it was Morecambe gone putrid and suffering without any of its former inhibitions [...]. As if this truly was the nation’s purgatory, where any prurient display was advocated, any misdemeanour was acquitted, any sin suspended before a hopelessly hung celestial jury. (Hall 2004: 186-187)

Morecambe and Coney are constructed as holding pens for societal excess: spaces in which the viewing public can excise their forbidden desires before returning, cleansed, to ‘normal’ life. The nineteenth-century freak show

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served a similar purpose: it provided an outlet for the Victorian obsession with the abnormal – a clandestine fascination with the body’s capacity to leak from its social confines – and re-affirmed the spectator’s own performance of normalcy and propriety. For Smit, the Victorian freaks’ “employment of their own bodies, as objects, was made a lucrative process by a cultural and economic milieu of spectacle and fascination” (Smit 2008: 291-2). However, this is not to suggest that the freak is a pre-existing or natural identity that simply benefitted from a period of fashionable exposure. Much like the gendered body, the freak body is equally constructed and performed for particular purposes in particular spaces.

In fact, the allure of the freak body is, in part, drawn from a self-conscious fascination with one’s own body. In viewing the freak, the spectator is able to displace his/her own bodily anxieties onto the ‘Other’ and, in this way, “Coney could hypnotize the crowds with their own fantasies and squeamishness made external” (Hall 2004: 189). As Joyce Huff demonstrates,

[f]reak bodies are represented as existing in a binary relationship to the norm [...]. What this opposition offers to subjects whose bodies are thus defined as normal is the illusion of freedom from the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of bodily existence. This fiction can only be maintained, however, by the continued and systematic devaluation of the freakified body, for it is only by comparison with stigmatized subjects that ‘normal’ ones appear free. (Huff 2008: 44-45)

Thus, the denigration of the freak is essential to maintaining the reassuring distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and this, in part, is the attraction of Coney Island: “voyeurism was key [...] that pivotal ocular quality to anything on offer. The devouring eye” (Hall 2004: 185). The freak embodies the somewhat contradictory tension between staging the grotesque for public consumption and, at the same time, concealing the performative nature of constructing the self as freak from that same public, so as not to disrupt the very illusion of watching the ‘Other’. The audience, for their part, are equally implicated in this contractual exchange: they perform both their fascination and repulsion at the freak’s ‘Otherness’, while denying the

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similarities that would threaten to collapse the freak/normal divide. The subversive potential of Grace's bodily modification lies in her deliberate disruption of the ease of distinction between audience and freak. As her body recovers from the tattoo needle, it begins to turn its gaze outward:

There was a large scabby, healing tattoo exactly centre on the flesh of her stomach, already observing the world through its conjunctive, crusted eye. It looked like something deformed from one of the freak shows. (Hall 2004: 271)

Far from offering her body up for consumption, Grace's visual 'deformity' is the very quality that allows her to resist such devouring gazes, because it forces her audience to examine their own bodily permutations. If the audience cannot enforce the boundaries between their bodies and Grace's, then they, too, become 'freakified' as objects of her voyeuristic gaze.

## **2. The Grotesque Gaze**

Mikhail Bakhtin's foundational work on the grotesque examines carnival culture in Europe during the Middle Ages. His reading of carnival provides a useful lens for understanding Grace's embodied subjectivity as an assertion of autonomy.

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (Bakhtin 1964: 7)

In Hall's novel, Coney Island is one such carnival space. It provides its performers, Grace among them, with a venue for self-expression outside the confines of New York society. As a liminal space, Coney Island suggests the possibility for boundary transgression and the potential for modification of existing social orders. It exists as "[h]orrific proof that the Victorian era could not invoke and conjure the black soul of the Gothic and eternally suppress its darker energy with mere cages of ornament and primness and order" (Hall 2004: 190-191). Coney Island's boundedness is thus not only geographic, but temporal, as it becomes a kind of Victorian time capsule

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which allows visitors to disregard its relevance to the ‘outside’ world of the present. However, it is also imbued with subversive potential – the possibility that the underbelly of Victorian society will ultimately leak from Coney’s attempt to contain it. In this way, it contests Bakhtin’s assertion that such a conception of the carnival is lost in the modern canon. Bakhtin identifies a trend, beginning with the Romantics and persisting in contemporary literature, which has seen grotesque imagery stripped of its positive, universalist pole (Bakhtin 1964: 26). The grotesque body itself is a key site of this transformation: no longer “a body in the act of becoming”, it is instead “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body” (Bakhtin 1964: 317, 320). However, Hall’s depiction of bodies, and, chiefly, freak or non-normative bodies, is far more reflective of the fluid, unbounded body of the Middle Ages than the restricted body of modernity. In disrupting the status quo to return to this model of the body, Hall suggests that the potential for female autonomy lies in the reclamation of the body’s boundlessness that modernity has sought to quash in favour of a more docile, less threatening body. However, she does so by staging this reclamation in the bounded neo-Victorian space of Coney Island, which suggests that such fluid modes of embodiment may still be subject to censure outside the carnival world.

In order to account for the specificity of Grace’s embodied resistance to exploitation in the novel, I triangulate the Bakhtinian grotesque and its feminist responses, Victorian freak discourse, and the contemporary politics of female tattooing. Mary Russo’s feminist intervention in Bakhtin’s theorisation of the grotesque is important here, as she addresses his failure “to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped” (Russo 1995: 63). To redress Bakhtin’s gender blindness, Russo analyses various performances of non-normative female bodies to argue that such displays form part of the strategy to reclaim traditionally male-occupied spaces within the carnival sphere and, by extension, intervene in political and ideological debates concerning female bodily autonomy (Russo 1995: 26). The search for autonomy is also a key feature of debates surrounding female body modification. For instance, several scholars theorise female tattooing as an active and empowering practice that has the potential to contest dominant power relations (see Braunberger 2000: 3; MacCormack 2006: 64, 79;

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Mifflin 1997: ii). Approaching the novel in this way enables us to understand Grace's tattoos as an act of resistance that seeks to overwrite the cultural and critical silence toward women's assertions of bodily autonomy.

Hall's focus on Grace's aesthetic choices – and their repercussions – highlights the ways in which women's bodies have been policed by the male gaze. In patriarchal discourse, female bodily expression is limited to two discrete categories:

Women's bodies have been controlled by the male as either virgin mothers or whores: the male wants to protect/confine to the home the sexless wife/mother/daughter while he wants to gaze at/objectify/commodify the sexual woman. (Hardin 1999: 84)

Far from being natural categories, the sexual/pure distinction is constructed through normative prescriptions of female appearance and behaviour, and is used to justify either confinement or exploitation based on the category to which a woman is (externally) judged to belong. For Natasha Walter, "the rise of a hypersexual culture [...] has reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances of power in our society" (Walter 2010: 8-9). Within such a culture, patriarchy persists less as an overt structural determinant of female bodily expression, and more as one among a number of discourses that insidiously encourage women to internalise normative constructions of female beauty under the guise of empowerment. *The Electric Michelangelo's* protagonist, the tattoo artist Cy, makes this connection between the male gaze and the maintenance of patriarchal power explicit:

Some days it was abundantly clear to him that men were truly still mesmerized by women, obsessed with their definition and their difference, and that all he was doing with his ink and his needle was recording the history of the female sex through the symbolic vision of another species. (Hall 2004: 165)

This obsession with defining 'woman', as though she, as a separate 'species', is possessed of some universality which exists in direct opposition to man's individualism, reinforces women's perceived inferiority by

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creating a space where their exploitation is not only justified, but necessary in order to preserve dominant power relations. Though Hall's novel offers an alternative narrative to the dominant construction of woman as (deserving) victim, Grace is not exempt from the experience of such violence. This suggests that the novel remains sceptical about the extent to which body modification can achieve full liberation for the women who practice it.

The eye tattoos – 109 in number – are spread across the canvas of Grace's skin. This is a direct contravention of the ideal female body as pure, unmarked, and available for the imprint and inscription of the male gaze (Şerban 2009: 194). As punishment for such a deviation, she suffers an acid attack at the hands of Malcolm Sedak, a man offended by the "desecration" of her gendered body (Hall 2004: 286). MacCormack argues that "tattooed women are frequently described as disrespecting the sanctity of their female bodies" and goes on to muse, "if tattooing mutilates the female body, we should ask whose version of the female body is this body?" (MacCormack 2006: 67, 70). In Hall's novel, Sedak's attack is motivated by his desire to fix Grace in his own – and, arguably, wider society's – image of ideal femininity:

He had wanted her body altered, put back to how she belonged, restored to grace and femininity, restored to God's blueprint for her kind. As if the acid might have licked off the tattoos like the tongue of a mother cat, leaving behind a blank white skin to be preserved by the salve. (Hall 2004: 286)

Sedak's attack is represented as a perverse form of would-be salvation. Stripping Grace of the visible record of her subversion is intended to produce a commensurate effect on her subjectivity: to reinstate her compliance to patriarchal control (Şerban 2009: 191). However, far from returning her body to an unmarked state redolent of Victorian conceptions of female purity, Sedak's act of reclamation creates new marks upon Grace's body and, by extension, her mind: her zealous assertion of bodily agency is amplified rather than quashed. As Victoria Pitts argues, "reclaiming projects do not return the body-self to any pre-victimized state of body or selfhood" (Pitts 2003: 85). Indeed, the very idea of the pure or

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natural female body is in itself a falsehood. Even without visible ‘scars’ – either those willingly inflicted in the process of becoming tattooed, or violently imposed by the acid – Grace’s body is always already marked. Her body carries the history of her gender, as it holds within it a record of the patriarchal exploitation of the female flesh.

However, Grace’s embodiment of such histories is crucial, rather than detrimental, to her ability to author her body in the present. Far from being synonymous with subjugation, “the past, a past no longer understood as inert or simply given, may help engender a productive future, a future beyond patriarchy” (Grosz 2003: 16). Even while patriarchy persists, the past informs Grace’s active opposition to and refutation of the oppression it has inflicted – and continues to inflict – upon women’s bodies:

Grace had been outnumbered by the men of history [...] but she had found a way to win her freedom, and for a time she had celebrated the identity of her body as her own sovereign state. And now the land had been razed again [...]. But her eyes, those dark, solemn, prolific eyes still glimmered and said her mind had not lost that spirit of rebellion and never would. (Hall 2004: 308)

In collapsing the distinction between Grace’s real eyes and their tattooed counterparts, this passage indicates Grace’s determination to recreate the acid-ravaged ink in her own image. By eyeing her “razed” tattoos as a marker of survival and continued rebellion, she demands to be seen as an autonomous and self-defined subject. As Elizabeth Grosz argues,

if bodies are inscribed in particular ways [...] then these kinds of inscription are capable of reinscription [...] of being lived and represented in [...] terms that may grant women the capacity for independence and autonomy. (Grosz 1994: xiii)

Grace’s body is, in this sense, doubly double. On one hand, it records not only the victimisation of her gender, but her capacity to rewrite this narrative of social injustice. On the other hand, the modern woman’s scarred flesh re-enacts the embodied history of abused female Victorian freaks and, more generally, women of the period. Her body thus ‘speaks’ as well as

‘looks’ back, testifying to both her own and her historical counterparts’ suffering.

Both Grace’s commitment to her tattoos and her response to Sedak’s attack, seeks, and arguably succeeds, in disrupting the monopoly of the male gaze. Embedded in the very design of Grace’s tattoo – the imagery of eyes repeated – is a challenge to such objectification of women’s bodies (Şerban 2009: 194). For Bakhtin, “the grotesque is interested only in protruding eyes [...]. It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines” (Bakhtin 1964: 316). The design – and execution – of Grace’s tattoos has this very effect. The ink extends beyond her body to demonstrate the permeable boundary between her flesh and another’s:

The eye out-manoeuvred his [Cy’s] gaze, it failed to be inanimate and resisted being used or judged as an object [...]. Truly, he did not know who was primarily looking at whom, Cyril Parks or the eye, because his gaze was mirrored, deflected, equalled. It was as if the image was playing a game with him. (Hall 2004: 258)

The game being played by Grace is that of transforming the notion of female body-as-spectacle to viewer-as-spectacle. As a player in this game, Cy becomes a stand-in for the postmodern reader, who also seeks to consume Grace as neo-Victorian spectacle. Her protruding eyes gaze upon her audience – both within and without the text – in a mirroring of Bakhtin’s carnival:

audiences and performers were interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness [...]. Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred or brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation. (Russo 1995: 78)

Neo-Victorianism shares in the carnival’s liminality, with the boundaries between past and present collapsing as the former intrudes into the latter, demonstrating the resonances of Victorian gender ideologies in the

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twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the novel, Grace enlists her body in the blurring of such historical boundaries through the assertion of her right to gaze actively at those who would seek to consume her, becoming, in a sense, a consumer herself.

However, the return of the gaze is not an end in itself. It is, rather, a step in the process of reclamation – obtaining bodily autonomy is dependent upon rejecting the male gaze and constructing a new mode of seeing that transcends pre-existing notions of feminine beauty (Şerban 2009: 191). Far from simply reversing the existing power divide, “the body becomes the appropriate space of reaction because for so long it has been the site of appropriation” (Hardin 1999: 85). Thus, when Cy points out the apparent contradiction between Grace’s wish for the tattoos to be concealed by clothing and her plan to exhibit her tattooed body, she frames her response in terms of the freedom to decide when, where, and by whom she is looked at: “Otherwise my body already belongs to them [...]. They can think what they like, but what they cannot do is use me with their damn eyes. Not ever again” (Hall 2004: 272). Appropriately, for MacCormack, “the amount of resistance with which conservative culture meets them [tattoos] evinces their continuing potential to alter power relations” (MacCormack 2006: 79). As such, when Sedak, as a representative of society’s conservative values, seeks to erase her bodily acts of resistance, she avenges herself upon him. With Cy as her accomplice, she breaks into the asylum – another familiar neo-Victorian space – where Sedak is serving his sentence, and blinds him with a metal fire iron (Hall 2004: 318). Sedak is, in effect, robbed of his ability to gaze upon women and, as a result, is stripped of his ability to punish those women who contravene normative assumptions of female beauty.

Grace’s use of violence in her attack on Sedak is both a reclamation of her embodied agency and a problematic feminist strategy. Her retaliatory act is indicative of her refusal to embody the role of victim traditionally assigned to women. According to Claire Renzetti, “it is women’s ‘nature’ to be passive; the respectable woman, the feminine woman, is socially constructed as a natural victim. Thus, the woman who uses violence is inherently a ‘bad’ woman” (Renzetti 1999: 49). In this way, Grace’s act is troubling: while it continues the pattern of subversion against feminine norms that her tattoos began, it simultaneously seems to confirm the very norms she resists. Indeed, Grace attracts Sedak’s ire because “her monstrous

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body, with its living orbs that watched him back [...] struck him impotent” (Hall 2004: 287). In looking back at her audience – both during her performance and, more broadly, as she moves through public space – Grace resists the objectifying male gaze. However, her return of the gaze is no match for Sedak’s acid. While Grace’s tattoos are deliberately designed to allow “her clothing” to “seal off the images” (Hall 2004: 264), the acid attack disrupts her ability to delimit the visible borders of her bodily subversion. In order to regain a sense of autonomy, Grace turns to violence, blinding Sedak in a “vague quid pro quo affair” (Hall 2004: 317). That this act goes unpunished by the authorities suggests that Hall resists an unequivocal condemnation of Grace’s methods. Thus, while “[m]any feminists insist that we can and should do better than patriarchs”, Martha McCaughey and Neal King assert that “[r]ebellion never runs free of oppression” (McCaughey and King 2001:2). Yet criticising Grace’s use of violence as a mere appropriation of a patriarchal strategy, here designed to reverse the victim/perpetrator dynamic, fails to take into account the fact that she exists within a culture that legitimises violence as a means to gain control. While I do not suggest that Grace’s particular mode of rebellion ought to be lauded as a feminist victory in and of itself, robbing Sedak, the embodiment of quasi ‘Victorian values’, of his violating (and violent) gaze nonetheless reasserts her identity as an embodied subject.

### **3. Body Modification as Resistance**

While tattooed bodies – particularly female bodies – were common in freak shows of the Victorian era, Grace’s understanding of her tattoos and their significance has far more in common with contemporary tattoo practices than their status in the historical setting of the novel. While the recent material turn in feminist criticism is beginning to restore the “physicality of the human body” (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 15) after its relative absence in poststructuralist discourse, it has also been criticised for its tendency to underestimate the influence of earlier feminist theorising on the body (Hinton and Liu 2015: 131). In contrast, feminist work on body modification recognises the ongoing relevance of Grosz’s corporeal feminism in understanding the potential for bodily actions to alter existing power relations (see Craighead 2011; Botz-Bornstein 2013; Fenske 2007; Pitts 2003). In an echo of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque body, Pitts argues that “in late modernity, the body is presented as a plastic, malleable space for the

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creation and establishment of identity” (Pitts 2003: 50). This postmodern approach to the body, like neo-Victorianism itself, is an act of recovery: it rejects the closed, complete notions of the Romantic, Victorian and Modernist body in favour of a reversion to earlier invocations of the body as a fluid and shifting entity. However, the Victorian freak body – and its neo-Victorian re-imaginings – demonstrate that far from dying out, the carnivalesque body of the Middle Ages continued to exist at the margins of a society which favoured more rigid and essentialising bodily conceptions, formulated on the basis of disciplinary religious, moral, or ‘scientific’ categories.

Hall’s novel recovers this marginal history through Grace’s emulation of Victorian performers’ tattooing practices, thereby suggesting that “a tattooed body can challenge representations of the traditional female body and the body itself as an intelligible and fixed phenomenon” (MacCormack 2006: 57). Michael Hardin’s analysis of female tattooing takes up this notion of disrupting taken-for-granted appearances:

The tattoo becomes the sign of the woman’s recognition of the historic and violent imposition of the male cultural narrative upon the female, the denial of woman’s place as his object in that narrative, the removal of herself from the patriarchal exchange, and the presentation of a new and individual, female narrative, which by being inscribed upon the body, cannot be appropriated. (Hardin 1999: 82)

While such a view emphasises women’s agency in determining the appearance of their bodies, these practices have been shunned by radical feminists, who subscribe to the view that body modification is yet another form of self-mutilation on behalf of women who have internalised patriarchal models of control (Jeffreys 2000: 410). However, such a conflation does little but reinforce the idea – vehemently contested by Grosz – that any engagement with the female body in the contemporary sphere is necessarily an example of female submission (Grosz 1994: xiv). Instead, she argues that we must move “beyond the model of woman as passive victim of male power who is robbed of agency and efficacy” (Grosz 2003: 21). Aware as she is of such criticism from radical circles, Pitts argues that “women are not choosing whether or not to be modified and marked, but are

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negotiating how and in what way and by whom and to what effect” (Pitts 2003: 76). Body marking, in this sense, is neither inherently submissive nor subversive. It is the woman’s degree of control over her tattooing, coupled with the performance of her tattooed body in social space, that determines the extent to which such bodily modification practices are mobilised in support of female agency.<sup>2</sup>

Though Hall’s novel is temporally located between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the 1960s, her representation of the body throughout the novel reflects contemporary, rather than historical, models of corporeality. Like Bakhtin’s carnivalesque body and the fluid corporeality of the feminist body modifier, Grace’s body refuses to be bound by rigid, externally imposed definitions of feminine appearance. Many of these arguably constitute a nineteenth-century legacy, concerned as the Victorians were with gender and codification, thus rendering Grace’s tattooed corporeality both testimony to and contestation of this cultural inheritance. The body modification strategies pursued by the women in Pitts’ sociological study “imply that their body-stories are in flux, opened to the possibilities of re-inscription and renaming” (Pitts 2003: 73). The comparable fluidity of Grace’s body/body-story is evident after the attack, when she is described as, “an undecided compound, not quite solid, not quite liquid, but something in between” (Hall 2004: 297). This fluidity demonstrates her capacity to reassert her bodily autonomy, by constructing a new identity that both acknowledges the violation and yet refuses to be defined by it. As Pitts notes “modifications of the body that open the body’s envelope are, from the Western perceptive, abject and grotesque, but as the women describe, they also place the body in a physical and symbolic state of liminality and transformation” (Pitts 2003: 57). The acid attack, though plunging Grace’s body into a state of trauma by eating away at her tattoos and, by extension, her flesh, nonetheless delivers her into such a liminal space, where her subsequent choice to blind Sedak reflects her capacity to reclaim her narrative. However, the novel’s suggestion that Grace’s only route to reclamation lies in violence does little more than effect a role reversal between victim and perpetrator. As a result, the text’s overall message of the importance of moving beyond existing forms of exploitative power relations is undermined.

Though Sedak’s attack on Grace is an overt act of violence, it is not the first time her skin has been unwillingly marked. Far from being an

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aberration, the attack exists as an overt display of the violence routinely inflicted upon bodies which occupy a precarious place in the existing social order. For MacCormack, “skin is a marked surface inscribed with texts of race, gender, sexuality, class and age before it is marked by ink” (MacCormack 2006: 59). The skin’s status as a marker of difference in contemporary culture is not dissimilar to the way in which Darwinian classificatory practices based on physical characteristics were co-opted to justify the hierarchical nature of Victorian society. From this standpoint, the disempowerment of non-white, non-male bodies was an inevitable consequence of their evolutionary inferiority (see King 2005: 156, 157). Refusing to question the impact these varied forms of in/voluntary inscriptions – both past and present – have on the lived experiences of bodies can only contribute to the continued exploitation of female bodies. Grace herself is only too aware that, in order to resist the men who seek to consume her, she must redraw her bodily territory:

She had always said it would be about body, hadn’t she, that the battleground had been chosen by others and a war would be fought there, and won or lost? Hers had been the site of an almighty uprising, on a territory mapped out and claimed by an administration that had every intention of preserving empire and dictating the law of the land to its colony. (Hall 2004: 307)

Hall’s conflation of Grace’s body and colonisation in this passage reflects both the expansive reach of the Victorian Empire and the shared – though distinct – struggle for independence faced by women and colonised peoples. However, it is impossible to raze the battleground of the body – or, indeed, the colonial past of now independent nations. To attempt to do so would be to deny the power of the gaze that has been directed toward the female form and the colonised Other. Instead, what is needed is a “reordering of power and not its elimination” (Grosz 2003: 19). Body marking is not an unmediated practice, even when it acts as an assertion of agency there are cultural, historical, and social abuses of power which necessitate such an assertion and, as such, what Grace does – and what feminism must do as Grosz implores – is to continue to wrest the always already ‘colonised’ body back from patriarchal control, to win the battle.

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Cy, for his part, struggles to understand how any practice that champions the visual and the grotesque can be empowering. Cy – or ‘see’ – is unable to separate his profession from the history of male voyeurism and, as such, is limited to a perverse reading of Grace’s strategy of resistance. For MacCormack, “tattooed skin provokes response, it invites other bodies to fold into it. It demands engagement, whether the interlocutor is critical or celebratory of inked flesh” (MacCormack 2006: 77). Eliciting a response through body modification is far more important in contesting the historical silence toward female bodies than the specific nature of that response. Cy’s ability to understand this is, in part, restricted by his gendered complicity in the objectification of female bodies: “he had known what she was up against all along, hadn’t he, him with his booth walls drowning under images of sex and stylized female bodies?” (Hall 2004: 308). While Cy doesn’t possess Grace sexually, he recognises that he can no more remove the historical entitlement men hold towards the possession of women’s bodies than she can become invisible or live outside of such constructs. Instead, Grace demands engagement through her body modification practices; she refuses to be ignored:

I can’t say you can’t have my body, that’s already decided, it’s already obtained. If I had fired the first shot it would have been on a different field – in the mind. All I can do is interfere with what they think is theirs, how it is supposed to look, the rules. (Hall 2004: 274)

Body modification cannot undo history, nor restore the body to a pre-violated state. Indeed, “the language of reclaiming, even written on the body, does not imply material reclamation in an objective sense; past body oppression is not reversed, rape culture is not erased” (Pitts 2003: 79). However, the impossibility of erasure does not render Grace’s interruption futile: through her tattoos, as well as the skin grafts which reclaim her acid-ravaged body, she demonstrates that body modification need not be inherently supportive of patriarchal ideology. Instead, it can be directed by motivations and actions which assert bodily autonomy.

In the novel, tattooing is a crucial strategy for identity formation, re-formation, and reclamation. The tattoo artist, then, is responsible for rendering such expressions of individuality visible on the skin. For Cy,

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to tattoo was to understand that people in all their confusing mystery wanted only to claim their bodies as their own site [...]. It was to understand that in order for a body to be reborn and re-yoked, first it needed to be destroyed and freed. (Hall 2004: 260)

Though re-yoking has connotations with tattooing as self-mutilation (see Jeffreys 2000: 410), Hall challenges the notion that bodily destruction and transformation are inherently incompatible. Instead, she suggests that re-inscription is dependent upon the erasure of earlier markings. This malleability reflects “recent trends in the tattoo industry that promote bodies as living canvasses and tattooists as artists” (Craighead 2011: 43). From Cy’s perspective, Grace’s reclamation is undermined by her determination to display her tattooed body. However, it is crucial to recognise that Cy is not only an artist – the Electric Michelangelo of the novel’s title – but also a “conduit” through which Grace chooses to rewrite her body canvas (Hall 2004:262), much as a writer chooses a favourite pen. The eye tattoos allow Grace to assert her individuality and resist objectification by the male gaze, while simultaneously opening herself to the same. As a result, even the men she ostensibly trusts, like Cy, are unable to fashion her in their own image: “he began to realize that there was a hopelessness to any wistful portrayals he might make of her [...] her corporeal immediacy refuted his designs” (Hall 2004: 264). Grace contests the boundaries of ideal feminine appearance that society attempts to impose on her by creating an alternative mode of beauty that engages with male desire by refusing to be contained by it.

Though Grace’s skin is scarred and her tattoos are blurred by the effect of the acid, she refuses to cede control over her body. She undergoes experimental skin graft surgery, which, in repairing the damaged tissue, creates yet another version of her body. Upon her recovery, Grace returns for a final visit to Coney Island, where she undresses in front of Cy. Once again, he adopts the hybrid role of viewer/reader in trying to make sense of Grace’s new body-text:

If her eyes said love [...] his clamouring heart and the racket of his blood drowned the message out, so he would never know for sure.

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He could not fathom the bravery of that exposure [...]. Stronger than diamond or atomic propulsion or wrought iron. (Hall 2004: 305)

Grace's naked revelation foregrounds a peculiarly bodily form of resilience and resistance to definition, one that is unequalled by even the strongest naturally-occurring minerals and man-made structures. Cy's struggle to reconcile the multiplicity of meanings imbued in her gesture with his physical arousal is reflective of the neo-Victorian sexploitation more broadly. Grace's strip-tease both capitulates to the sensational expectations of readers and frustrates it, in that her body remains, to a certain extent, uncharted territory. Rather than accept the version of her body Sedak has created, or the one Cy wishes to impose, Grace transforms the skin grafts and scars from markers of her victimisation into markers of agency by re-asserting control over the conditions under which her body is viewed. In this sense, her scars perform a similar function to her tattoos, whereby the "tattooed body resists organization by presenting another layer which must be organized, the signification of which is volitional but neither clear nor stable" (MacCormack 2006: 64). Grace's wilful exposure of this – albeit involuntary – extra layer of signification demonstrates the body's limitless capacity to be rewritten.

#### **4. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian Tattooing and Bodily Autonomy**

Neo-Victorianism has been charged with perpetuating the present-day exploitation of women through its tendency to sensationalise, rather than critique, portrayals of female sexuality. Rather than accede to the desires of her contemporary readership to be titillated and entertained by the overt sexualisation of her female characters, Hall focuses on Grace's body modification as an assertion of autonomy, which challenges the patriarchal objectification of the female form. This cultural wariness toward displays of female autonomy is itself inherited from the Victorians, who co-opted scientific approaches to embodied difference in order to position women's inferior place in the social hierarchy as a biological inevitability.

The novel's mid-century setting in the liminal spaces of Coney Island and Morecambe Bay acts as a grounding point between past and present: it demonstrates the way in which Grace's identity is shaped by the nineteenth-century en-freakment of tattooed women, while suggesting that she herself has a fictional legacy to impart to her twenty-first century

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counterparts. Grace's body, as a hybrid of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the Victorian freak show performer, demonstrates the liberatory potential of body modification practices. Through her tattoos, Grace asserts the right to become 'author' of her own body, overwriting the cultural gender inscriptions that threaten to disempower her. This potential was recognised by some Victorian women, whose tattoos were calculated to maximise their economic benefit in the bounded setting of the freak show where deviance was the norm, whilst still according them freedom in public space, where difference gave rise to exploitation.

Grace performs the role of neo-Victorian tattooed freak ironically – her chief purpose is to return the spectators' gaze and, in so doing, trouble the boundaries they so depend upon to maintain their normalcy in the face of her difference. Her many eyes reflect the gaze of the freak show audience, troubling their – and, arguably, the readers' – ability to consume her. Here, body modification becomes a mode of rebellion against conformity to traditional notions of feminine beauty, codified during the Victorian age through disciplinary discourses of moral purity, medicine and evolutionary science. Tattooing allows Grace to engage in a process of reclamation, so that her body is no longer defined by the histories of female violation to which it simultaneously bears witness. While Grace's re-appropriation of violence in her revenge attack on Sedak signals Hall's pessimism toward current strategies of resistance, it nonetheless recognises the importance of contesting gender-based discrimination. The inking-in of Grace's self-defined identity demonstrates neo-Victorianism's potential to intervene in contemporary culture's hypsexualisation of women's bodies by providing a blueprint for securing discursive change in the present.

### **Notes**

1. In the early Victorian period, tattooing was associated with savagery and primitivism due to a history of colonial encounters with tattooed indigenous peoples, some of whom were returned to Europe and exhibited as a precursor to Western tattooed performers (DeMello 2000: 47, 49). Though Westerners increasingly began to take up the practice, tattooing remained largely invisible in Victorian Britain (Bradley 2000: 137), as prior to the 1880s, it was confined to the

working classes, sailors, and criminals (Fisher 2002: 94). However, with the invention of the electric tattoo machine in the late nineteenth century (estimations vary from the 1870s-1890s; see Fisher 2002: 95), tattoos became more accessible. This advancement coincided with both a fad among the upper classes for tattoos (Fisher 2002: 95) and the emergence of female tattooed performers in circuses and freak shows (DeMello 2000: 58; Mifflin 1997: v). However, by the mid-twentieth century, the popularity of tattooed freaks had waned as the public's appetite for sensation grew harder to satisfy (Fisher 2002: 96). Grace's ahistorical popularity as a performer in this period thus demonstrates the novel's collapsing of temporal boundaries between 1940s New York and nineteenth-century Britain, while her departure from Coney after Sedak's attack cements the status of tattooing as a crumbling legacy of the Victorian era – a trend reversed in the later twentieth century..

2. Grace's self-determined tattooing exists in direct contrast to that of the titular character in Belinda Starling's neo-Victorian novel, *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007). Whereas Grace selects both the design and artist of her tattoos, Dora is forcibly branded with the emblem of the *Sauvages Nobles*, a group of upper-class men involved in the pornography trade. In a sense, this is the Victorian freak show made real, as performers often invented narratives of forcible tattooing to draw crowds (see Mifflin 1997: 18). However, the violence inflicted upon Dora troubles Hardin's assertion that to be tattooed is to resist appropriation (Hardin 1992: 82), because, unlike Grace, Dora's branding is an act of appropriation by men who seek to trade in her tattooed skin.

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