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The first case of amputation recorded by the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission occurred in 1991 and was perpetrated against a soldier in the Sierra Leone Army by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). “Since then,” the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report concludes, “amputation became a popular tool used by all the armed factions against perceived opponents irrespective of the laws of the war” (p. xvi). During the 1996 elections, punitive amputation became rife in the country as a military strategy. Reacting to the wording of one of the campaign posters—“Let’s put hands together to create a new future”—the RUF launched Operation Stop Elections, chopping off the hands and sometimes feet of prospective voters as a deterrent to voting. If hands were to be instruments of change then their absence was used to express the denial of that change. After ten years of conflict, an estimated 50,000 had been killed, and over 5,000 people had either been mutilated or undergone amputation by forces belonging to the RUF, the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and various vigilante groups.

This book seeks to explore the meaning of these amputations and the brandings, scarring, rape, torture, and killings that went with them. Cole asks: “What does it mean to be wounded, scarred, branded, or amputated?” “What message is inscribed on the body when it is subjected to these atrocities?” “What story does the branded, mutilated, or amputated body tell?” “How does the victim perceive and relate to his [sic] body after it has been amputated or deformed?” (The gendering of the amputee as masculine is a curious decision.) “How does society view the mutilated or deformed body?” “What is the relation between body and language?” and “Are the scars texts of memory or of amnesia?” (p. xvii). Cole explores not only the process of victimization, but also the processes of healing and renewal generated when the survivor of amputation rejects the discourse of dependency, and redefines and reclaims his or her identity. He reads the disfigured body as a “text of possibilities rather than limitations” and argues for the creation of a “disability culture” in post-conflict Sierra Leone where the negotiation of a new sense of self and function of amputees is crucial to healing, forgiveness and reconciliation (p. xxv).

Chapter 1 explores the mutilated body as a signifier of possession, control, and domination. The body is read as a text upon which, through processes of branding and mutilation, it is literally inscribed by the perpetrator with the signifiers of possession. Carving RUF onto the forehead of abductees and cutting of lips, noses, and ears are read as attempts by the perpetrator to own the body of the victim as well as to control it. Chapter 2 looks in more depth at punitive amputation as a military strategy during the civil war, drawing on postwar Sierra Leonean literature as well as on personal narratives. Among other things, it demonstrates the complex conceptualization of the amputated body by victim, perpetrator, and society. Chapter 3 examines the concept of disability in the context of punitive amputation. This chapter might be the most familiar to scholars of disability, looking as it does at the social exclusions that follow from amputation and at the distinctions between impairment and disability. Chapter 4 explores the visual representation of amputation in photography, providing examples of both the problematic way in which amputees are represented as forever trapped in victimhood and the potential for more positive representation. Chapter 5 argues that the ampu-
tated body is a site of resistance rather than domination and explores the possibilities of reclaiming the body after impairment. Drawing on the theory of “complex embodiment,” Cole examines the disfigured body as a mimesis, holding in it the potential to overcome as well as being the inscription of violence (p. 60).

Although there has been some interesting recent work on the relationship between postcolonialism and disability studies, all in all, far too few studies of disability stretch beyond the Euro-American sphere. That they do so is important for helping us to understand the construction of disability more generally. Firmly situated in Sierra Leone, this book is a start in that direction and, as such, poses some challenges for disability studies more generally. For example, disability scholarship, formulated in the global North, seldom confronts the cruelty of punitive impairment. As Cole points out, punitive amputation is not a new phenomenon—in the Belgian Congo hands were amputated by the colonial regime in punishment for not harvesting enough rubber, and the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda has been infamous for cutting off the ears and noses of civilians. Thinking about impairment in this context begs questions about the impact of the means of impairment (hacking off someone’s hand with a blunt machete as opposed to surgical removal), and about the extent to which we are able to reclaim disablement as a positive bodily way of being. Some elements about the intersection of disability and postcolonial studies could be developed further. Cole states that there is very little of what he calls a disability culture in Sierra Leone, but it would have been useful to learn a bit more about how impairment is constructed both in pre- and post-conflict Sierra Leone beyond the immediate context of punitive amputations.

The detailed and graphic representation of violence in this book will be off-putting for many and difficult to read for most. Using the personal testimonies of victims, including those documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Amnesty International, as well as those collected by the author in amputation camps, there are many chilling accounts of the processes of amputation, rape, and torture that occurred. Cole is of course aware of the difficulties in writing about violence, not least the slippage between violence and its representation and the potential for reinscribing violence in its narrations. But surely it would be wrong to represent this conflict without close attention to the violence that was intended to terrorize and mark itself on both the bodies of the victims of the atrocities and on the body politic of Sierra Leone itself?

The implications of this study stretch much further than Sierra Leone. It helps us to theorize disfigurement more generally and to think about the complex embodiment of amputation and related mutilations. It will be of benefit to historians and scholars of disability as well as those of Africa and postcolonialism more broadly. Despite the intense violence and disturbing material, this is in many ways a surprisingly optimistic book that looks at the body as a site of resistance and strength as well as horror and possession.

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