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Skin Portraiture: Embodied Representations in Contemporary Art

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Visual Arts

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Abstract

In recent years, human skin has been explored as a medium, metaphor, and milieu. Images of and objects made from skin flesh out the critical role it plays in experiences of embodiment such as reflexivity, empathy, and relationality, expanding conceptions of difference. This project problematizes the correlation between the appearance of the epidermis and a person's identity. By depicting the subject as magnified, fragmented, anatomized patches of skin, "skin portraiture"—a sub-genre of portraiture I have coined—questions what a portrait is and what it can achieve in contemporary art. By circumnavigating and obfuscating the subject's face, skin portraiture perforates the boundaries and collapses the distance between bodies. Feminist, this project pays attention to skin portraits made by women.

To better understand skin, each chapter is focused on a particular skin metaphor. In the preface, a consideration of skin and its representation leads into an investigation of the skin-as-self metaphor in the introduction (chapter one). Framing the skin as an organ we dwell in, the skin-as-home metaphor (chapter two) explores touch and its role in experiences of empathy. Turning to the idea that skin is a garment, the skin-as-clothing metaphor (chapter three) fleshes out relationality and a queering of skin. Tackling race and skin colour, the skin-as-screen metaphor (chapter four) investigates the embodied experiences of mixed-raced, multicultural women. Addressing a loss of difference at the level of skin within bioengineering, the skin-as-technology metaphor (chapter five) considers the collapse of differences between bodies and species within bio-art.

Keywords

Skin, Portraiture, Embodiment, Reflexivity, Empathy, Relationality, Difference, Identity, Feminism, Touch

Acknowledgments

Over the last four years, what I have reflected on most is my grandfather, Gerald Statham. My fascination with all things skin is a result of his tattoos, which he earned overseas during the Korean War. Ranging from a large eagle inked across the breadth of his chest, to a snake on his leg, to a pin-up girl on his arm, amongst others, Gerald's tattoos marked him as a rebel. By the time I encountered these tattoos as a little girl, they had oxidized and "bled out" across his skin, which gave them the illusion of being "soft" and "fuzzy." In turn, tattoos make me nostalgic and sentimental, which is why I do not do them justice within the pages contained herein.

I am grateful to the Department of Visual Arts at Western University for supporting my intellectual growth. For making the administrative aspects of the doctoral degree a pleasure, I thank Paula Dias. For providing me funding to complete my research, I am indebted to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at Western, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for a generous Doctoral Fellowship. I also thank the Faculty of the Humanities at Western for the extensive travel funding awarded through the Graduate Research Fund, which enriched my professional development.

My progress in the doctoral program is owed to my committee. To Professor Kirsty Robertson, your mentorship and guidance has been greatly appreciated. Thank you for looking out for me. To Professor Joel Faflak, your sense of humor, generous support, and editorial elegance played an uplifting role in the completion of this project. For all the critical feedback, I am forever in your debt. To my primary supervisor, Professor Joy James, I can never express my gratitude to you for being one of the most thoughtful, critical, and supportive supervisors. You have acted as a constant source of energy, pushing my obsession with skin to a place of fullness. If it were not for your words of encouragement and understanding, I would not have finished this project. It has been a privilege to work with you.

I would not have been able to complete this doctoral research project without the support of the women in my life. My grandmother, Juanita Kellett, has been a feminist role

model, friend, and confidant for as long as I can remember. You are always in my back pocket when faced with difficult decisions. My mother, Heather Kellett, has supported my passions without falter. Your perseverance, resourcefulness, and sarcasm have made me the person I am today. My aunt, Connie Zolotar, is the most selfless, kind, and giving person I have ever met. Thank you for all the lunch dates.

Lastly, to those closest to me, I am forever in your debt. My “squirrel friends,” Stephanie Anderson, Jean-Marc Bourque, Ljiljana Brusic, Dave Kemp, Avril McMeekin, Stephanie Radu, and Kathryn Simpson, you inspire me daily with your generosity of spirit and many acts of kindness. To my editor, Avril McMeekin, if it were not for your insightful suggestions, I surely would not have pushed through—you are a wizard of words and prose. To my feline darlings, Siris, Neptune, and Yasha, your heightened sensuality and companionship has influenced these pages. Lastly, if it were not for the love, patience, and kindness of my partner-in-crime, Paul Coxson, I would be utterly lost. Thank you for our family. To everyone else I have not mentioned, thank you for being there over the years.

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Preface

In nineteenth-century Western culture, a paradigm shift took place in dermatology—the medical study of skin—that caused the representation of the body’s boundary to change, which, in turn, radically called into question what constitutes a portrait. Instead of relying on traditional portrait images of patients, those that visually focused on facial likeness and the accoutrements of identity, such as clothing, English doctors Robert Willan (1757–1812) and Thomas Bateman (1778–1821) rebelled against representational norms and began to visually fragment the body, producing what is called “macromorphological” images of skin.² By doing so, Willan, and later Bateman who continued Willan’s work, created a radically new visual language of skin that rendered patients anonymous in order to protect their identities and to place greater visual focus on the skin and its anatomy. By doing so, they came to know disease and skin disorders objectively. These macromorphological images became the standard image format in which all dermatological images of skin would henceforth be made.

Flip through any medical text with a section on dermatology, and you will see firsthand the lasting power of this visual language of skin, born of modern medicine. Even more timely are the “pimple popping” videos by American dermatologist Dr. Sandra Lee (a.k.a. “Dr. Pimple Popper”), available to view free online on video platforms and social media sites like YouTube and Instagram, which illuminate the hypervisibility of the body’s border in visual culture and its importance to contemporary conceptions of portraiture. While pushing portraiture into the expanded field, Dr. Pimple Popper videos have become a form of entertainment that engenders both enjoyment and disgust, underscoring a cultural fear of and obsession with skin in the twenty-first century.³

² Mieneke te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin: Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Medicine” (PhD diss., Maastricht University, 2006), 28, 38. “Macromorphology” (noun) is the gross structures (or morphology) of an organism, mineral, or soil component visible to the naked eye or with low levels of magnification. Within the context of dermatology, “macromorphological” images of skin capture the organ’s structures, anatomy, and function over time through close observation and careful representation.

³ To view “pimple popping” media, please see Dr. Sandra Lee’s YouTube channel (accessed August 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/user/DrSandraLee>) and Instagram (accessed August 10, 2015, <https://instagram.com/drpimplepopper/?hl=en>) profiles. I note that these videos engender simultaneous enjoyment and disgust because of the number of videos circulating on the Internet, which document the reactions of people unfamiliar with pimple popping media. Underscoring the popularity of this type of representation is the fact the Dr. Lee has over one million followers on both YouTube and Instagram. VICE

Like the name suggests, macromorphological images are produced through the formal magnification, fragmentation, and anatomization of the skin. By representing the skin as a stand-alone organ, subtle changes in the organ's appearance over time caused by illness and disease can be detected. The shift away from the patient's face, the part of the body understood to communicate a subject's identity in Western culture and across the canon of portraiture, to the magnified patches of skin signaled one of the earliest appearances of what art historian Ernst van Alphen calls "anti-portraiture" in visual culture.⁴ Anti-portraits are those that show "a loss of self instead of its consolidation," an operation that is often linked to the circumnavigation, masking, and blurring of the subject's face.⁵ What occurred in this particular moment of medical history was the problematization and disruption of the skin-as-self metaphor, which characterized and continues to shape the Western view of skin as a stand-in for who and what each of us is.

Concerned with the twenty-first-century impulse to use skin as medium for the production of art and to privilege it as a new, even radical, subject and material of portraiture, this project introduces "skin portraiture," a term I have coined to account for the increasing ubiquity of skin in contemporary visual culture. Influenced by nineteenth-century-macromorphological images, skin portraits fragment, magnify, and anatomize the skin so as to render the subject (quasi-)anonymous. The circumnavigation of the subject's face, particularly its features and likeness, permits skin portraiture to function as a kind of anti-portraiture that works to question what a portrait is and what it can achieve today. Importantly, this visual turn to skin in contemporary portraiture signals a desire to better understand the role skin plays in our physical, psychic, social, and cultural lives.

News recently reported on the growing popularity of these types of videos, referring to them as a new pornography for contemporary culture (Sophie Wilkinson, "Are Zit-Squeezing Videos the New Porn?," *VICE News* (October 17, 2014), accessed October 5, 2015, http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/are-spot-extraction-videos-the-new-porn-103).

⁴ Ernst van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 242-243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

By circumnavigating or blurring the subject's face, skin portraiture achieves a temporary, partial collapse of distance between bodies while privileging each body's uniqueness and autonomy. As a result of this perforation and stretching of epidermal boundaries between bodies, experiences of embodiment such as self-reflexivity, empathy, and relationality are brought to the surface, made perceptible through skin. The embodied experiences engendered by this type of anonymous representation contradict the definition of a portrait as a representational object that communicates the subject's identity and sense of self outwardly, reinforcing the distance between "I" and "not I." The result of skin portraiture's unwillingness to play by the rules of Western portraiture is an attempt to bring bodies together physically, affectively, socially, and culturally. Skin portraiture approaches bodily difference in new ways through an analysis of the sensual, nuanced, and indexical nature of skin. Because women have often, and problematically, been gendered in terms of feeling and bodily experience alone, this project takes as its primary focus the skins of women and skin portraits made by women.

"Skin Portraiture: Embodied Representations in Contemporary Art" is the result of a skin-themed visual database designed to catalogue and analyze the increasing presence of skin in visual culture, which includes contemporary art, design, popular culture, film, fashion, and advertising. International in scope and interdisciplinary in nature, this project looks at a host of skin portraits across a number of media, such as photography, performance, installation art, fashion, craft, and bio-art.⁶ Based on the evidence in visual culture, it would seem that while skin portraiture has been around for hundreds of years within medical and scientific contexts, it has only been with the turn to the new millennium that it has reached a level of ubiquity across visual culture. In order to better understand what is at stake when we represent skin today, this project works from an expanded definition of "portraiture" and looks primarily at skin portraits made over the last fifteen years.

While skin portraiture has been art historically analyzed as the product of early-modern science and medicine, it is only now that it is being theorized as a distinct sub-genre of

⁶ Bio-art is a genre of contemporary art that uses human and animal "bio-matter" (i.e., genetic material such as cells, organs, and tissue) as the medium for the creation of aesthetic and conceptual objects. Bio-art is a mixture of science and art, often executed by artist-researchers in laboratories.

contemporary portraiture and distinct subject of popular visual culture. Illuminating the increasing presence of skin in contemporary art are a number of contemporary art and design exhibitions such as, *Skin Deep* (2003) at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto, Milan; *Skin Tight: The Sensibility of the Flesh* (2004) at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art; *Skin* (2005) at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; *Skin Is Language* (2006) at the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; *Sk-interfaces* (2008) at the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool, UK; *Skin* (2010) at The Wellcome Collection, London, UK; and, *Skin: The Seduction of Surface* (2012) at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax. While these exhibitions vary in terms of foci, as well as artists and artworks included, they all look to skin as a contemporary medium, metaphor, milieu, subject, and object of culture. What is clear from an assessment and cataloguing of contemporary skin portraits and the skin-themed exhibitions that have taken place internationally is a concern for new ways of understanding what it means to be human by analyzing the body's boundary organ.

By encouraging relations across and between bodies, skin portraiture works through and speaks back to the study of embodiment within affect studies, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and phenomenology. Engaging all of these discourses, this project expands the study of difference in portraiture, specifically, and visual culture, generally. Fostering an interdisciplinary study of skin within an art historical context, skin portraiture is a provocative and timely sub-genre of portraiture that not only brings bodies together in radical ways, but also gives us the latitude to think through and about the skin metaphors that shape our cultural understanding and representations of skin. These varied metaphors, which flesh out our experiences in and as skins, shape the focus of each individual chapter of this study. With this focus on skin metaphors, I purposefully employ them in my writing to illuminate the fact that we constantly and consistently use them in our daily lives, often without realizing it.

This project contributes to contemporary art historical analyses of portraiture by taking a distinctly feminist approach. By focusing on the skins of and the skin portraits made by women in a number of diverse cultural contexts and geographic locations, this project seeks out new ways of engaging difference. This is not to suggest that male artists do not make skin portraits, or that they do not contribute to a critical investigation of how difference

plays out in, through, and across skins; on the contrary, more than half of the artists contained in the skin database that led to the birth of a theory of skin portraiture are male and offer important explorations of skin, difference, experiences of embodiment, and portraiture. In turn, a study of male skins, their representation, and use as a medium of art could comprise an entirely new research project linked to skin portraiture that would further contribute to cultural and visual analyses of skin.⁷ In Julia Kristeva's feminist critique of the Freudian psychoanalytic understanding of the subject as an "I" that traverses the Western socio-cultural realm, she argues that because Western culture "designates sexuality as the nexus between language and society," permitting sex to act as a marker of identity, the female body is a baseline through which difference, including race and class, can be interrogated, celebrated, and accessed.⁸ In addition to traditional psychoanalytic theories that position sex as the first form of difference between bodies, the patriarchal context of Western culture evaluates women and the female sex as less than rather than equal to men and the male sex, which has permitted women to find and utilize alternative, even radical, modes of (counter-) representation to explore their own experiences of embodiment and difference. In order to understand difference at the level of skin more profoundly, this project attends to sex and race in that they are both markers of difference visible at the body's edge.

Another goal of this project is to expand and contribute to the field of "skin studies." First by focusing on the representation of skin in contemporary visual culture and art and second by analyzing the skin metaphors that shape our representations and conceptions of skin, this project sheds new light on why our relationships with our integuments are fraught. While there is an abundance of literature on human and non-human skins in the arts, little attention has been given to the distinct presence of our largest organ in contemporary portraiture. The impulse to use skin as a medium and subject opens up a whole new category of visual representation that permits us to know bodies, their differences, and their

⁷ For a diverse analysis of men's skin, including the embodied experience and representation of masculine skin in visual culture, please see: Santiago Fouz-Hernández, ed., *Mysterious Skin: Male Bodies in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 84.

experiences in unexpected ways. In turn, a new branch of scholarly research devoted specifically to the skin has emerged in culture—skin studies.

While no universal definition of skin studies exists due to the fact that it is an emergent discourse coming into its own over the last few years, it is broadly understood as the interdisciplinary study of the body's largest organ.⁹ Skin studies outlines, investigates, probes, and imagines the nuanced and complicated ways our integuments shape and influence bodies and formations of identity, culture and its objects, and concepts of space and time. Though skin has long been an important object of study in medical and scientific fields, particularly dermatology and bioengineering, the study of skin within the arts and humanities has increased dramatically over the last few decades. It is important to note that while skin studies is an emerging branch of scholarly inquiry distinct from, but related to, body studies, "surface studies" has recently become associated with, but distinct from, skin studies precisely because skin has become one of its central foci.¹⁰ In this arena of scholarship, skin studies departs from the existing field of body studies and surface studies by focusing solely on the skin (rather than its role within the larger functioning of the body or its surface nature), taking it up as its own subject in order to expand on what we currently know about experiences of embodiment. A precursor to skin studies, body studies is important for its concern for difference and the ways in which difference influences the experience of bodies and subjects within the larger structures of culture.

Body studies emerged as a discourse during the 1990s, when a host of feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens, and Gail Weiss, amongst many others, set out to interrogate and examine the ways difference plays out, in,

⁹ Illuminating skin studies increasing importance within the arts and humanities, and beyond, is the skin-themed Postdoctoral Fellowship at Cornell University (2016-2017), accessed December 5, 2015, http://sochum.as.cornell.edu/ft_16_17.html.

¹⁰ The study of and concern for different kinds of surfaces including, but not limited to, skin, fabrics, screens, and interfaces. Please visit the international Surface Studies Directory (run by scholars in the United Kingdom) to review their short resource list, which includes a number of important skin studies texts: accessed September 21, 2015, <http://www.surfacestudies.org/resources.html>.

and across bodies in Western culture.¹¹ By doing so, they were able to better understand the ways culture shapes experiences and images of bodies, paving the way for skin studies and its focus on bodily difference and experiences of embodiment shaped by that very difference. Moreover, the anti-patriarchal, poststructuralist approach each of these scholars took to the study of the body permitted them to work through and critically reflect on the ways corporeality has been largely ignored by Western philosophy, theory, and politics. In turn, these feminist scholars re-considered how bodies are lived in, represented, and related to in order to enrich our theoretical and practical knowledge of corporeality.

Critical of the supposed static nature and representation of the body that we commonly associate with Enlightenment, Western philosophy, Gatens, for instance, argues that *the* body is male, heterosexual, and middle class, which has led to a narrowing of lived experience that evacuates the potential for critical engagement with an array of bodies and difference.¹² Margrit Shildrick argues that the concept of one singular, universal body is a fallacy, pointing out that our postmodern era and advanced technological age disperses and fragments bodies, making room for an infinite array of in-between bodies.¹³ The basic tenet of feminist body studies is simple: one body cannot stand in for all bodies. In the same way, one skin cannot stand in for all skins. Despite the fact that skin is an organ of commonality across us, we each experience it differently precisely because it marks a boundary.

For Margo DeMello, “body studies” is a field of research that encompasses the measurement and classification of bodies, illness and healing, racialized and gendered bodies, cultural perceptions of beauty, and new bodily technologies, all of which influence

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and “Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. K. Conboy et. al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹² Gatens, “Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic,” 84.

¹³ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio-)Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 9-10.

how bodies appear, move, interact, and live in the world as a result of formations of power.¹⁴ But what body studies have consistently failed to accomplish is an in-depth analysis of skin and its contribution to and mediation of experiences of embodiment. Skin studies, therefore, takes stock of how and why bodies are shaped by power structures and competing formations of culture in order to understand how culture works on and is a product of skin, and vice versa. By focusing specifically on the body's edge and surface, skin studies treats our integument as a distinct subject that cannot be lumped into the whole or remainder of the body precisely because it has a life of its own, which influences and shapes that very body.

In turn, skin studies focuses on the fleshy aspects and lived experiences of bodies that are mediated, brought together, and dispersed by and through the skin.¹⁵ Working to better understand the ways culture shapes skin and skin shapes culture, cultural theorists Claudia Benthien and Steven Conner offer expansive overviews regarding the ways skin has been understood, defined, represented, experienced, and interacted with in Western culture from antiquity to modernity through analyses of metaphors, literature, and art.¹⁶

While skin studies spans many disciplines within the arts and humanities, and beyond, it was crystallized as a distinct area of contemporary academic and theoretical inquiry with French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's *The Skin Ego*, written in 1974 and translated into English in 1989. Whilst skin has been studied within medicine and pathology for hundreds of years, enabling culture to privilege it as a boundary and a site where marks of difference are visualized, Anzieu offers a theory of the skin that privileges our integument as a paradoxical organ and morphological ground through which the psychic and somatic aspects of the body intertwine and ostensibly form who and what the subject is.¹⁷ What is critical about this theorization of skin is the way it emphasizes the importance of touch in

¹⁴ Margo DeMello, *Body Studies: An Introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 5.

¹⁵ For analyses of skin and the ways we live in, across, through, and between them, please see Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacie, eds., *Thinking Through the Skin* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Sheila Cavanagh, et. al., eds., *Skin, Culture, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁶ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Steven Connor, *Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

¹⁷ Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16–17.

facilitating and mediating experiences of embodiment. The crux of Anzieu's theory is that an overabundance of touch, or a lack of it, experienced in the subject's formative years (infancy and childhood) by their caregiver(s) shapes the subject's sense of self. A traumatic experience of touch in childhood can lead to neuroses and pathologies later in life. For example, too much touch can lead to the narcissistic compulsion to protect and cover the skin, which ostensibly transforms the skin into a shield that reflects or refracts what touches it.¹⁸ In an alternative scenario, too little touch can lead to a compulsion to masochistically rip, cut, or tear down the skin, allowing the subject to feel through gaps or sutures that, in many ways, makes the subject numb from touch.¹⁹ Anzieu positions skin, a boundary and the thing that binds each of us, as a relational organ that ironically brings bodies together. This coming together through difference at the level of skin illuminates how skin can enhance and alter our knowledge of our selves and others. While Anzieu's focus is on the ways tactile experiences shape who and what we are, which requires an understanding of skin as both a somatic and a psychic organ, the skin-as-self metaphor is the undercurrent of this and other psychoanalytic investigations of skin.

What is problematic about Anzieu's theory is that he treats skin, a plural and nuanced organ, as one that is primarily universal in that he does not work through the ways sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ability shape a person's experience of their skin, and thus, themselves and others. Whilst Anzieu seems to be at pains to treat the subject of his theory as gender-neutrally as possible, contrasting his predecessors such as Sigmund Freud, he does not work through the ways bodies experience skin differently as a result of their specific differences within the larger constructs of Western culture and ideology. That does not mean, however, that Anzieu ignores the differences of his patients within the case studies he includes in the text; it means he is unable to fully flesh out the idea that skin is the basis of difference because he is focused on touch, which is experienced by all bodies, regardless of their differences. As such, what is needed to expand scholarship on skin is a specific focus on the ways sexual and racial difference shapes and is shaped by skin, which would engender a

¹⁸ Ibid., 41–45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

more nuanced understanding of bodies, their experiences of embodiment, and a cultural preoccupation with skin.

A gendered investigation of touch within psychoanalytic parameters illuminates that experiences of skin are not universal, whilst, at the same time, underscores the ways skin is a marker of difference that makes sex and race visible within culture. Approaching skin through the frame of critical gender studies, cultural theorist and Anzieu historian Naomi Segal contributes to skin studies by thinking about the ways gender and sexual difference shape how we live in and across our skins. Focused on touch, in addition to an analysis of a history of Anzieu's life and his formation of his theory of the skin ego, Segal thinks through sexual and gender difference and how it impacts the ways we theorize and experience bodies at the level of skin.²⁰ Segal argues that what is required is an ethics of touch to work through the ways some skins are privileged over others and the ways they relate as a result of the cultural constructs of gender. Within patriarchal contexts, the touch of men is privileged over the touch of women, insofar as women are, in social spaces, more often than not touched whether they want to be or not, and are not afforded the same agency of touch as men, despite the fact that culture positions them as sensual. In turn, Segal gestures towards an ethics of touch that is consensual, one that would afford greater agency to female bodies, a clearer demarcation of tactile boundaries, and a greater coming into relation of those bodies.

Returning to the topic of bodies marked and re-contoured through a manipulation of the skin, practicing psychoanalyst Alessandra Lemma argues that engaging in "extreme" body modification practices is the result of desire to be loved that is amplified in adulthood by traumatic tactile experiences in childhood. For Lemma, these modification practices are extreme not because she deems them culturally unacceptable, but because the skin is so overwritten, Through tattooing, piercing, sub-dermal implantation, scarification, and/or branding, amongst other forms of modification the subject is read as something other than human, something de-idealized. Lemma asserts that the "(e)xperience of the body is shaped by the quality of our relationships with others and whether through our earliest exchanges

²⁰ Naomi Segal, *Consensuality: Didier Anzieu, Gender and the Sense of Touch* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 6.

with others we internalize an image of ourselves as loveable and desirable.”²¹ In other words, when the physical bodies we have and the psychic body schemas or phantasms we construct are in discord as a result of traumatic experiences of touch, skin becomes the ground through which this painful process of reification takes place. Lemma is clear to make the distinction between the construction of the idealized body (through cosmetic surgery) and the creation of a de-idealized body (through body modification practices like extreme tattooing). In Lemma’s theorization, by becoming “other” through an exertion of control over the skin, the subject gives birth to itself anew (autogenesis).²²

What is clear from a brief analysis of Anzieu and Lemma’s work is, firstly, that skin is the organ of embodiment, and treating it as such changes the ways we understand bodies, and, secondly, that a critical language and understanding of skin within skin studies are rooted within psychoanalysis, which is, at its core, a discipline traditionally concerned with sexual difference. These theories of skin reinforce sociologist Marc Lafrance’s notion that a “psychoanalysis of skin” does exist as a distinct branch of research and practice that can open up new ways of engaging bodies and their differences, particularly within the arts and humanities.²³

Emerging as a skin scholar well before Anzieu in the context of early post-colonial studies, Frantz Fanon offers a psychological and phenomenological analysis of what it is like to have black skin within the racist, anti-black paradigm of the African colony. He thus illustrates how skin colour and racial difference come to shape a person’s sense of self.²⁴ While Fanon uses psychoanalysis as a way to theorize the experience of epidermal difference, he interchanges sexual and racial difference without materializing the distinctions

²¹ Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Marc Lafrance, “From Skin Ego to the Psychic Envelope: An Introduction to the Work of Didier Anzieu,” in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. S. Cavanagh, A. Failler, and R. Johnston Hurst (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 25. In addition to the work of Anzieu, Lemma, Lafrance, and Segal, which contributes to the “psychoanalysis of skin,” Spanish psychoanalyst Jorge Ulnick’s *Skin in Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2008) offers readers an overview of the ways skin has been theorized in the field.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008).

between them and thus working through their differences. Psychoanalytic in its origins, postcolonial theory, as expanded by Fanon, saw a dangerous overlay of racial and ethnic difference onto sexual and gender difference. That is to say, male postcolonial theorists such as Fanon have, at times, failed to account for the fact that sexual difference is always already present in and across the skin concurrently with racial difference, and that sexual and racial difference are not subject to the same terms and conditions of power despite the fact that both mark the subject as “different” within patriarchal, colonialist culture. It is for this reason that a number of feminist postcolonial theorists work through sex and race, which I will specifically do in an analysis of the skin-as-screen metaphor (chapter 4), which necessitates a consideration of racialization.

What is clear throughout the burgeoning field of skin studies is a need to address the role difference plays in our relationships with, our conceptions of, and our experiences in skin beyond feminist theories and postcolonial studies. We also need to better understand skin as a relational organ beyond the scope of psychoanalysis. In order to fill these gaps, skin studies is at last beginning more directly to engage with what Patricia Clough calls the “affective turn” and experiences of relational embodiment.²⁵ For Clough, the affective turn is not only transdisciplinary, but also permits new experimental methods in contemporary scholarship about bodies and the world we live in that can capture and even explain the ways politics, economics, and cultural spheres make possible the expression of “a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter” in the twenty-first century.²⁶

To date, affect theory scholars have not addressed skin in the same ways skin scholars, such as Anzieu, have taken up affect, which is ironic precisely because skin is so involved in human experiences of embodiment and sensation. However, philosopher Erin Manning’s work on touch and her theorization of skin as a relational organ that cannot be contained, nor does it merely contain, shows promise for the fruitful intertwining of skin

²⁵ Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Introduction,” in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, eds. Patricia Clough with Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

²⁶ Clough, “Introduction,” 3, 2.

studies and affect theory.²⁷ Interestingly, queer studies has taken up both affect theory and skin, as demonstrated by Elspeth Probyn's investigation of shame as it is registered and read across the face through changes in the organ's colouration (i.e., blushing).²⁸ Yet despite Manning or Probyn's work, there has been a clear trend in affect theory to lump the skin into the body, which limits its potential for an analysis of difference and ironically fails to account for the individual components of bodies and experiences of embodiment.

What is so surprising about the lack of direct engagement with skin across much of affect theory is the fact that the skin is physiologically understood as the body's affective organ within science and medicine. It would seem that scientists and doctors are more interested in the affective nature of skin than are affect scholars, which is both surprising and worrisome. The Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) test, which was developed in the mid-twentieth century, registers quantifiable changes in the skin's electrical properties through a measurement of sweat. Using this test, scientists have proven that the skin not only mediates physiological and psychological aspects of the body, it also responds to changes in the body's environment, making it by definition an affective organ,²⁹ a fact exemplified by philosopher Brian Massumi's theory that affect is autonomous, particularly at the level of skin.³⁰ The hard data from GSR testing illuminates the ways skin can re-shape how technology operates so as to open up the potential for skin to make technology and communication processes more affective.³¹ What is clear is that not only does the skin bear the direct traces of experience, sensation, and feeling, but it also adjusts itself in relation to

²⁷ Erin Manning, "What if it Didn't All Begin and End with Containment? Toward a Leaky Sense of Self," *Body & Society* 15, no. 3 (2009): 33-45, and *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement and Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005).

²⁹ J. D. Montagu and E. M. Coles, "Mechanism and Measurement in the Galvanic Skin Response" *Psychological Bulletin* 65, no. 5 (1966): 261-79.

³⁰ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 24.

³¹ P.A. Vijaya and G. Shivakumar, "Galvanic Skin Response: A Physiological Sensor System for Affective Computing" *International Journal of Machine Learning and Computing* 3, no. 1 (February 2013): 31-34.

social spaces,³² particularly those that impact experiences of race, ethnicity, and gender.³³ As such, any scientific consideration of the ways spaces alter the body's responses needs to think through difference.

Affect theory is important to skin studies because it takes as its underlying intellectual position the idea that all bodies are different, regardless of how similar they might appear within particular socio-cultural and historical contexts. For Michael Hardt, the emergence of affect theory as a theory of experience and difference is a result of feminist considerations of the body and queer theory's concern for emotions and experiences of being-in-the-world differently, which intersect with cultural formations of power that shape the ways bodies are understood and represented.³⁴ As a result of its focus on experiences of embodiment, this project is committed to a conceptualization of skin as a fluid, elastic entity influenced by the work of feminist scholar Margrit Shildrick and geographer Robyn Longhurst.³⁵ By thinking through the infinite differences between skins and the ways experiences of embodiment are registered in them, this project challenges the idea that there is such a thing as a universal experience of skin and embodiment.

Taking up experiences of embodiment currently studied and theorized in affect theory, such as empathy and relationality,³⁶ I think through not only the affective nature of skin, but also how skin portraiture contributes to a distinct branch of art historical inquiry that focuses on "affective art" (art produced as a response to cultural trauma in our contemporary

³² G. McBride et. al, "Social Proximity Effects on Galvanic Skin Responses in Adult Humans," *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied* 61, no. 1 (1965): 153–57.

³³ Robert E. Rankin and Donald T. Campbell, "Galvanic Skin Response to Negro and White Experimenters," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 51, no. 1 (July 1955): 30–33 and Scott. R. Vrana and David Rollock, "Physiological Response to Minimal Social Encounter: Effects of Gender, Ethnicity and Social Context," *Psychophysiology* 35, no. 4 (1998): 462–69.

³⁴ Michael Hardt, "Forward: What Affects Are Good For," in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough with Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

³⁵ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*; Robyn Lonhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2001).

³⁶ While there are numerous texts that work through empathy and relationality, respectively, there is a growing concern for their coming together in order to further flesh out experiences of embodiment and culture within affect theory, as is exemplified by Carolyn Pedwell's *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

milieu) through what Jill Bennett refers to as “empathic vision.”³⁷ Empathic vision is a kind of feeling with others triggered by images of trauma.³⁸ Because trauma is traditionally an experience defined as being beyond both language and representation, traumatic images cultivate sensations and relations across bodies. For example, skin portraits made with flayed skin, both real and imaginary, can show us inside the human body and a body without borders, which gives us a sense of total knowledge of the body, and, therefore, a sense of horror and experience of trauma. The total sense of knowledge can, in turn, engender new ways of knowing and seeing. It is the traumatic nature of skin portraits that engender new connections across bodies and a deeper understanding of difference. Whilst I do not engage Bennett’s ideas at length here, they overlap and fold into my own through my analysis of the ways skin portraiture makes possible experiences of reflexivity, empathy, and relationality, which is connected to the traumatic nature of images that allude to the flaying of the body.

While scholarship concerning the skin in the arts is vast, none of it has explored recent iterations of portraiture that focus on the indexical representation of our largest organ, or contemporary art objects made from flayed skin or skin tissues beyond the scope of bio-art. It is for this reason that this project is both necessary and timely. I do not mean, however, to suggest that the representation of flesh in portraiture is absent from art history, because it is not. The art historical explorations of skin tone in modern painting by Susan Sidlauskas, Mechthild Fend, and Daniela Bohde, for example, act as a precursor to my analysis of skin portraiture because they probe how the medium of painting informs our readings of the subject’s identity and sense of self in history and culture.³⁹ Fend, who investigates skin and its representation in portraiture, extends her work into the realm of contemporary art and

³⁷ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 21.

³⁹ Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s ‘Madame X,’” *American Art* 15(3) (2001): 8–33; Mechthild Fend, “Bodily and Pictorial Surfaces,” “Portraying Skin Disease: Robert Carswell’s Dermatological Watercolors,” in *A Medical History of Skin*, eds. Jonathan Reinartz and Kevin Sienna (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), and “Marie-Guillemine Benoist’s ‘Portrait d’un négresse’ and the Visibility of Skin Colour,” in *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone*, eds. Caroline Rosenthal and Dirk Vanderbeke (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015); Mechthild Fend and Daniela Bohde, eds. *Weder Haut noch Fleisch. Das Inkarnat in der Kunstgeschichte [Neither skin nor flesh. The flesh tones in the history of art]* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2007).

printmaking, the latter often concerned with deconstructing the ways patients were represented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European medical history.⁴⁰ While important to the development of skin studies in art history, these analyses do not disrupt traditional portrait scholarship because they always focus on the subject's face and, as a result, their identity; thus, they do not expand art historical conceptualizations of portraiture or consider how skin is now a medium and subject in contemporary art.

The examination and theorization of skin in the arts has not surprisingly engendered a focus on man-made skins and non-human skins, both of which elide a discussion of human experiences of embodiment, on which this project is focused. In the realm of design, for example, man-made skins allow functional objects and buildings to take on a semi-living presence understood to mediate and interact with the environment.⁴¹ In contrast, the growing field of taxidermy studies focuses on the dead skins of animals, transformed by humankind into objects that shape culture and cultural identity.⁴² Art historically, taxidermy scholars such as Rikke Hansen and Steve Baker, amongst others, have assessed the ways animal skins have been manipulated into a legitimized medium for the production of contemporary art, particularly sculpture and installation.⁴³

Moving away from the skins of animals towards the skins produced by technology, art historian and affect scholar Laura U. Marks takes up skin as an interactive, mediating border zone that allows people to connect and relate through touch, both real and virtual,

⁴⁰ Mechthild Fend, "Emblems of Durability: Tattoos, Preserves, and Photographs," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 14, no. 4 (2009): 45–52; Mechthild Fend, "Flesh-tone, Skin-colour, and the Eighteenth-Century Colour Print," in *The Aesthetics of the Flesh*, eds. Felix Ensslin and Charlotte Klink, 203–32 (Berlin: Sternberg, 2014).

⁴¹ Ellen Lupton, *Skin, Surface, Substance, and Design* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002); Christian Schittich, *Building Skins: Concepts, Layers, and Materials* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Korydon Smith, "Breaking the Skin: Modifications of Body, Home, and Identity," *Multi* 2, no. 2 (2009): 33–43; Michael Wigginton and Jude Harris, *Intelligent Skins* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2002).

⁴² Pauline Wakeham, *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁴³ Rikke Hansen, "Animal Skins in Contemporary Art," *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 9, no. 1 (2010): 9–16; Steve Baker, "'You Kill Things to Look at Them': Animal Death in Contemporary Art," in *Killing Animals*, eds. The Animal Studies Group (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2006).

within the context of film and multisensory media.⁴⁴ Similarly, Alicia Imperiale and Melinda Rackham, both of whom often refer to the surfaces of objects, environments, and beings within computer and gaming technologies as “skins,” shift our attention away from living bodies to the avatars that stand in for us within the virtual worlds we increasingly occupy.⁴⁵ These avatars are virtual skins, which manifest in the form of a “fantasy self”; clothing and fashion work similarly insofar as they permit people to craft an image of who they want to be by layering garments over their bodies. Functioning as a second skin that both protects us and concretizes our identity and outward sense of self, clothing allows skin scholars to work through the ways we are always already in a state of tactile sensation.⁴⁶ Expanding the notion that clothing is a second skin that shapes who we are is the field of “soft sculpture,” a new genre of art that perforates the boundaries between sculpture and fashion by creating wearable, bio-technological, interactive garments designed to work with and through the living body at the level of skin.⁴⁷

The above overview of skin studies does not exhaust research dedicated to skin and our experiences with and in our bodily surface. While not exhaustive, my engagement with key work on skin in and beyond visual culture demonstrates how skin studies is increasingly becoming a branch of inquiry devoted to the ways we live in and across skins. In turn, this project fleshes out precisely how the ways we represent and use skin as a medium for art and portraiture influence and are influenced by culture. Scholarship on skin within affect studies, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and postcolonialism have increasingly explored the ways skin facilitates experiences of embodiment, experiences we take for granted precisely because they are elusive, hard to put into words, and, therefore, difficult to share with others.

⁴⁴ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University, 2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002).

⁴⁵ Alicia Imperiale, “Seminal Spaces: Getting Under the Digital Skin,” in *Re:Skin*, eds. Mary Flanagan and Alan Booth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Melinda Rackham, “Safety of Skin,” in *Re:Skin*, eds. Mary Flanagan and Alan Booth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 68.

⁴⁷ Lucy Gundry, “Dialog: Fabricated Skins” *Textile* 6, no. 3 (2008): 286–91.

The elusivity of skin and experiences of embodiment are made knowable and sayable through metaphors, such as *skin-as-home*, *skin-as-clothing*, *skin-as-screen*, and *skin-as-technology*, which I take up within this project specifically.

Skin metaphors are limitless, which could open up skin portraiture to a more extensive program of research in the future. In order to work through the complexity of these metaphors, each chapter's analysis of a number of metaphor-specific skin portraits also includes discussion of a recent "skin flick." Contemporary fictional films about skin, particularly those that tackle the metaphors that shape our experiences in and across our integuments, are important to any visual study of our largest organ because they make accessible the fears and desires that circulate around bodily difference in our cultural imaginary.

In the first chapter, which serves as a more extensive introduction to skin portraiture, I think through what skin means to Western culture, and how the skin-as-self metaphor has shaped our experiences in and of skin. Deconstructing the pervasive understanding of the skin as a substitute/container for the whole of an individual permits this project the breadth of scope to think through what is at stake in our present cultural and political milieu when we break bodies down to patches of skin. This introductory chapter serves as a starting point for thinking through skin portraiture as a mode of embodied representation that runs counter to traditions in the canon of portraiture. This chapter looks back to the history of medicine and early feminist video art of the 1970s in order to offer a historical overview of the evolution of skin portraiture in Western visual culture.

Skin-as-home: Focusing on touch amongst women, chapter two analyzes crafted skin portraits because they encourage a meeting of many skins through domestic labour and feminine touch. This chapter considers the skin-as-home metaphor in order to reinforce the idea that skin is a place in and through which we dwell. In order to think through the skin as a home, this chapter analyzes what I call *Haut craftwork*, a distinct branch of skin portraiture that uses flayed skin, illusionary and otherwise, as a medium for the "crafting" of objects. Focusing on the skin portraits that make up Scottish artist Jessica Harrison's ceramic self-portrait series *Handheld* (2009), this chapter examines haptics, feminine touch, women's

work, and touch in and of the home, thinking through the ways skin cultivates reflexive encounters and empathic feelings across disparate bodies.

Skin-as-clothing: In order to probe fantasies and fears of getting under the skin of another and wearing their skin like a garment, chapter three considers the encounter with the wearable skins of others and the potential for radical relationality across bodies inherent in skin portraiture. By transforming skin into clothing, contemporary artists become *Haut couturiers* who permit new relations between bodies not only by making garments from real and illusionary flayed skin, but also by privileging the inter-corporeal, communicative, and transformative nature of skin, which is underscored by the fact that queer skins are the result of this type of skin portraiture. In order to achieve radical relations between bodies through touch, both virtual and real, Argentinean artist Ana Álvarez-Errecalde's interactive performance installation, *More Store* (2009–ongoing), permits viewers to wear the skin of the subject(s), thus becoming participants in the work. Acting as “the frontier between self and non-self,” *Haut couture* opens up the space to consider skin portraiture as a radical and relational mode of representation that can alter our perceptions of and relationships in/through/across our skins.⁴⁸

Skin-as-screen: Shifting the focus more specifically to the ways sex and race influence experience of embodiment, the fourth chapter investigates the ways skins are marked by outside cultural, social, economic and political forces, often the result of skin colour, which, in turn, positions white skin as the de facto or “primary” skin colour. Highlighting experiences of cultural belonging, or lack thereof, this chapter considers the performance of “passing” by mixed race persons in order to probe the ways racialization can open up new experiences of embodiment that push culture towards a deeper understanding of racism and skin. Through passing, which is a highly complex and loaded performance of marking one's self in order to survive the racist, white, violent space of the colony, the subject may take up body images, posture, dress, and modes of speech belonging to another, presumably more powerful, racial group. In contrast, that same subject could reject the performance of passing and refuse to pass by marking one's skin from without in order to underscore, whilst, at the

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1985), 2–3.

same time render ambiguous, sexual and racial difference. However, the problem with the latter is a collapse of difference, a theme I discuss in the following chapter. In both scenarios, marking the skin explores racialized embodiment. Applying a feminist lens to Homi Bhabha's theory that culture is located at the margins, in the gaps and interstitial zones of the postcolony, this chapter argues that multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic women are a potential postcolony figure, whilst always already problematic insofar as their skins are the result of a collapse of racial difference at the surface of the body, capable of disrupting the colonialist-racist paradigm. By being read as white and black within apartheid-era South Africa, this chapter aims to better understand the benefits and dangers of locating and defining raced skin, as exemplified by a discussion of the infamous Sandra Laing, whose story is told in the film *Skin*, directed by Anthony Fabian (2008), and feminist artist Berni Searle's photographic self-portrait series *Profile* (2002).

Skin-as-technology: The concluding chapter ends this project by working through ways skin has been increasingly manipulated at the genetic and cellular levels within biomedicine, bioengineering, and bio-art over the last fifteen years. Focusing on bio-art's production of new, chimeric skins made from the living biomatter (i.e., hair, blood, bone, tissue) of many human and animal bodies, the last chapter acts as a contrast to chapter four in that it is concerned with the potential collapse of sexual and racial difference at the visible surfaces of skin. Bio-skin portraits created through tissue culturing processes, such as Julia Reodica's *HymNext* Project (2004-2008), take portraiture beyond representation, offering humanity not only radical experiences of relationality, but also the extension of bodies across time and space through biomedical intervention. Framing skin as an organ that is both a technology of embodiment and one worked on and altered by technological means, this chapter thinks through a loss of visible differences between skins, examining conceptions of difference at the cellular level is preserved. In turn, bio-art skin portraits throw difference into flux, offering readers a chance to think through the ways these new chimeric skins both preserve species-specific differences and collapse the epidermal boundaries between bodies, species, sexes, and races.

Chapter 1

1 « Skin Portraiture: An Introduction »

In 1952, fifty years before skin would emerge as its own medium and discourse in the arts and humanities, Roald Dahl wrote a short story that called the understanding of skin into question. “Skin” transforms the protagonist, a Russian vagabond and retired tattooist named Drioli, into a skin portrait.⁴⁹ The story begins one night when the expressionist artist Chaïm Soutine paints a portrait of Drioli’s wife, Josie, across the tattooist’s back. Wanting to immortalize the portrait, Drioli teaches Soutine how to tattoo so that the young artist can ink over the paint and make the portrait permanent. Some years later, Drioli’s memories of the night resurface when he encounters an exhibit of the late Soutine’s paintings at a Parisian gallery. Compelled to enter the unfamiliar space, Drioli disrobes, unveiling his own original Soutine—his skin. Bemused and confused, the art elite examine Drioli’s back, coming to the conclusion that the inked portrait is in fact an authentic Soutine despite its unusual medium, a medium not recognized or legitimized at the time in Western art history.

What becomes clear to the reader is that for the tattooed portrait to be recognized and valued, it must be removed from Drioli’s back, so that it can be transformed into a painting on canvas. Discussions regarding the surgical removal of the portrait ensue, but Drioli objects. He understands what the others do not—he cannot live without his skin. A mysterious man offers a solution: if Drioli comes with him to Hotel Bristol in Cannes, and displays his skin to guests as a living work of art, the vagabond will live comfortably for the rest of his life. In the last sentences of the story, the reader learns that Drioli is never heard from or seen again, and that Hotel Bristol does not exist. Worse, a mysterious “painting,” identical to the image inked across Drioli’s back, is spotted for sale at an auction in Buenos Aires a week later.

⁴⁹ Roald Dahl, “Skin” (1952), in *Skin and Other Stories* (London: Puffin, 2000), 1–21.

What makes the locale of the sale important is twofold. Firstly, Argentina was a safe haven for many Nazi officials who fled Germany post–World War II to avoid being tried as war criminals at the Nuremberg Trials (1945–48).⁵⁰ Argentina acted as a safe haven for war criminals as a result of the Juan Domingo Perón regime, which aligned itself with Axis ideology due to close cultural ties to Germany, Italy, and Spain, and financial incentive insofar as European war criminals would bring with them an influx of money and valuables to South America. Government officials provided travel documents and safe passage for many German (and Croatian) officials, despite the fact that Argentina would later oppose the Axis powers at the end of the war. Of the prominent Nazi officials who fled to Argentina pre- and post-war were Dr. Joseph Mengele (who died in Brazil in 1979 of a stroke) and Adolf Eichmann (who was caught on the streets of Buenos Aires by Israeli officials in 1960).

Secondly, the news coverage surrounding these trials illuminated the idea that human skin could be used for the production of domestic objects, as recounted by witness testimony. While no proof exists, outside of one lampshade that has been confirmed to be made from human skin,⁵¹ testimony affirms that the skins of concentration camp victims, such as those of Büchenwald camp, were used to make a variety of what seems now to be (quasi-)mythological domestic objects ranging from saddles to purses, shoes to lampshades, and other small “collectible” items (e.g., trophies) for SS officers, which I return to in chapter three.⁵²

Loaded with this knowledge, Dahl’s story leaves the reader to ponder the details of Drioli’s untimely death, particularly whether he was flayed pre- or post-mortem, who purchased the portrait, and whether or not its collector knew the portrait was made of human skin. “Skin” is an unsettling tale that provokes a self-reflexive thinking about and

⁵⁰ Uki Goñi, *The Real Odessa: How Perón Brought War Criminals to Argentina* (London: Granta, 2002).

⁵¹ Mark Jacobson, *The Lampshade: A Holocaust Detective Story from Buchenwald to New Orleans* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

⁵² David A. Hackett (Ed. & trans.), *The Buchenwald Report* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

through the body's boundary, particularly how important it is to us. In turn, "Skin" is a literary starting point for working through the curiousness of our integuments insofar as it renders them simultaneously visible and invisible. By doing so, the story illuminates how skin is both experienced and represented: as fragments. Moreover, it asks us to consider how skin has been largely neglected by scholarship pertaining to bodies and their experiences within the arts and humanities...until recently. As such, the story prompts further questions: Has the representation of skin changed over time? If so, how and why?

Although the veracity of accounts of objects made from flayed skin remains in question, I draw this connection to underscore the fact that "Skin" is an imaginative and fictional response to a particular moment in twentieth-century culture in which epidermal appearances increasingly became a life-or-death matter. This post-war moment was influenced by and responsible for the resurgence of the skin-as-self metaphor in Western culture. This metaphor is important to analyses of portraiture because it positions the body's most superficial organ as a stand-in for the entire person. "Skin" highlights Western culture's preoccupation with skin as it simultaneously addresses our cultural fear of a loss of skin and our fantasy or desire to remake or enhance our bodies by wearing the skins of others (and, as a result, possessing them and their power), both of which are made possible through flaying. Throughout the remaining pages of this project it will become clear that flaying is not only what makes skin portraiture possible, it is also a galvanizing issue across this project.⁵³

Art historically speaking, Dahl imagines portraiture in the expanded field when he transforms the body's boundary organ into a medium of portraiture. More importantly, "Skin" becomes the conceptual conduit through which we can easily imagine "skin portraiture," a term I have coined to describe a contemporary sub-genre of portraiture and theory of representation that offers us new ways of imagining and imaging subjects by representing them as patches of fragmented, magnified, and anatomized skin, rather than as intact bodies whose identities are communicated by their faces. Skin portraits

⁵³ Warwick and Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame*, 31.

circumnavigate or obfuscate the representation of the subject's face, permitting them to appear to viewers as (quasi-)anonymous. Treating skin as a subject, skin portraiture reveals aspects of the lived body not easily communicated, read, or experienced in traditional iterations of portraiture, such as reflexivity (feeling one's skin by looking at another's) and empathy (feeling with, rather than for, another through experiences of touch, both real and haptic). A form of anti-portraiture, skin portraiture communicates identity differently precisely because it focuses on the appearance of skin rather than the subject's face, fostering relational experiences of embodiment across disparate bodies. Compared to traditional portraiture, skin portraiture achieves a greater appreciation and concern for, as well as celebration of, bodily difference, particularly sexual and racial difference.

In order to think through the skin and know our integuments differently, this study of skin conceives of our largest organ as morphological, topological, and technological. The skin is morphological because it is always in a state of flux, perpetually changing its appearance as a result of time. Marks, changes in colouration, and a diminishment of elasticity, for example, imbue the skin with a sense of rogue movement, which makes it an unpredictable and uncontrollable organ. The skin is topological because it is a continuous envelope that is always folding over on itself, coming into sensual contact with itself, others, objects, and environments. Activated by touch, skin is a sensing organ that facilitates our relations in and with the world, which makes life possible. Skin is technological; it is a kind of technological apparatus that mediates a number of vital physiological functions, such as respiration and reproduction, amongst others, and facilitates the psychic development of a body image and the ego, which are critical to the formation of the subject's identity and sense of self. Moreover, skin is increasingly worked on by technology in science and medicine, which has allowed for the transformation and dispersal of skin in and across culture in ways that have not been possible in other moments in cultural history.

At its core, this project conceives of skin as more than the sum of its parts and certainly more than a mere stand-in for the subject. Specifically, I argue that skin is a paradoxical, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional organ that has a subjectivity of its

own, which accounts for the complicated and nuanced relationships we have with, in, across, and through our skins and those of others. Moreover, I ask: What does the emergence of skin as a medium and a distinct subject in contemporary art say about the state of culture and bodies in the West? What is at stake when skin becomes a discourse and visual language in its own right? What is certain is the fact that skin's paradoxical, "both/and" nature, which I will unpack below, has the potential to open up new ways of perceiving, knowing, and relating to bodies, their differences, and their experiences, making it the most important part of the body in our current cultural milieu. Through this act of deconstruction, we can open up our thinking about the skin-as-self metaphor and how it is commonly used to characterize skins and our experiences in/with them. By working through this metaphor, this project can better understand what is at stake when our skins are employed as both a visual language in visual culture and a medium in contemporary art. Laying the scholarly terrain for this research on skin, I have provided a short introduction to and overview of skin studies in the preface in order to contextualize an interest on skin within the visual arts in this introductory chapter. Specifically, in this chapter I consider developments in portraiture now within art history and visual culture, as well as skin portraiture's origins in nineteenth-century dermatology and late-twentieth-century performance art in order to underscore the importance of skin portraiture to Western culture. Lastly, this introduction will further unpack the skin metaphors mentioned above, which shape the critical trajectory of and layout of this project.

1.1 « Portraiture Now »

For many, the definition of a portrait is simple: a portrait is "a painting, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting the face or head and shoulders."⁵⁴ Shearer West argues that portraits, while "aesthetic objects," are also "a substitute for the individual they represent," an effect often achieved through mimesis. While these

⁵⁴ Oxford Dictionaries, "Portraiture," *Oxford Dictionaries*, Accessed January 5, 2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/portraiture>.

definitions lack nuance in light of the vast study of the genre in contemporary art history, they reinforce the connection between the representation of the face and the communication of identity.⁵⁵ “Likeness” is traditionally associated with the face, generally understood as the most distinct part of the human body that can communicate outwardly who and what a person is, which is always already based on cultural conceptions of beauty and class.⁵⁶

In the history of portraiture, likeness is critical for the success of a given portrait because it reinforces boundaries between subject and object, represented subject and viewer. For Ernst van Alphen, portraits serve as a vehicle through which the subject “secures [her or his] own being.”⁵⁷ Being is achieved through a rhetorical play of mimesis that re-presents the subject to others through a focus on their face and its particularities, thereby creating a boundary between subject and viewer. Through re-presentation, the portrait is thought of as absorbing the qualities and features of its subject *in situ*. As a result, mimesis is often achieved by mediums that lend themselves to a heightened sense of realism, such as photography, film, and sculpture. Through the deployment of likeness, viewers are immediately able to refer to the represented subject as “not I.” This experience of “not I” underpins the distance between the subject and the viewer so as to assert one being (the subject’s) over another (the viewer’s). A lack or problematization of facial likeness, therefore, can short-circuit the traditional portrait’s asymmetry, allowing viewers to self-reflexively encounter their own skins through the representation of another’s. Contemporary artists have started to question likeness in the expanded field of portraiture through the circumnavigation of the face and a focus on fragmented and anatomized patches of skin.

In recent years a question has emerged: What is a portrait now? Working through

⁵⁵ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43.

⁵⁶ For an interesting discussion of the representation of the face in photography and the role the artist plays in rendering facial expressions blank in contemporary art, please see: Julian Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face?: Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art,” *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 71–90.

⁵⁷ Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 239.

this question, the exhibition *The Portrait Now* (1993–94), curated by Robin Gibson at the National Portrait Gallery of London (UK), theorized that a “return to figuration” in art had taken place during the 1980s and 90s, primarily in painting and sculpture.⁵⁸ The return to the figure and its sensuousness constituted an attack on the abstraction popular in twentieth-century modernist art and the popularity of photography as a means to capture likeness in the nineteenth century and beyond. More importantly, the portraits included in the show, such as those of Lucien Freud and Chuck Close, were understood as putting the figure back together through a focus on the sensual aspects of the body which had been, until then, omitted from portraiture as a result of the genre’s focus on the face and its representational likeness.

A decade later, Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate’s survey text *The Portrait Now* (2006) argued that new forms of figurative portraiture had sprung up in the early twenty-first century as a result of the increasing emergence of female artists and the late-twentieth-century turn to neo-conceptualism.⁵⁹ Nairne and Howgate argued that notions of identity, representation, power, and nationality connected to a shifting perception of the “changing world” were produced not only through capitalism and globalization, but also natural disaster, war, terrorism and celebrity culture.⁶⁰ Problematizing the definition and function of the portrait, *The Portrait Now* considered various new strategies that disrupted and highlighted the transmission of likeness, such as the blurred yet knowable faces in the archival Holocaust portraits of Christian Boltanski and the masking and doubling of the face in the work of Gillian Wearing. Consistent across conceptions of portraiture “now” is the general attempt to disrupt facial likeness and the resulting exploration of identity in

⁵⁸ Robin Gibson, *The Portrait Now* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1993), 8.

⁵⁹ Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, *The Portrait Now* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 11. Neo-conceptualism is a genre of contemporary art made during the 1980s and 1990s, which extended the focus of conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s to consider not only the value of art and the role of the institution, but also the ways art is commodified within capitalist culture, and the ways art intersects with and explores experience of gender, race, and class. There is no overriding aesthetic of neo-conceptualism; however, there is a preference for photography, video, and new media over more traditional mediums like painting and sculpture.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

non-traditional ways.⁶¹

The general understanding of a portrait, no matter how private, is that it is always made with a viewer in mind. Richard Brilliant argues that there exists “the limits of likeness” because the artist is always synthesizing, modifying, and conveying the subject’s likeness through her or his own stylistic likeness.⁶² This act of observation, translation, and synthesis means that the limit to likeness is always already present, which impacts the way a viewer will come to know and experience the subject. It would seem, then, that portraiture produced in the last few decades purposefully interrogates this limit. In this vein, van Alphen positions the portrait as an image-making practice that has the potential to disrupt likeness, producing an “anti-portrait.”⁶³ Anti-portraits are portraits “that have returned, but with a difference,” ones that show “a loss of self instead of its consolidation.”⁶⁴ Anti-portraits engage the represented subject *and* the viewer through the disruption of facial likeness, allowing the portrait to dissolve the boundaries between the subject represented and the viewer. Van Alphen’s theory of anti-portraiture contextualizes the emergence of skin portraiture as a distinct, antagonistic sub-genre of portraiture. While certainly antagonistic, skin portraiture, unlike anti-portraiture, achieves an experience of many selves, selves that represent both a consolidation *and* a loss of the self made possible by the sub-genre’s formal qualities, which work to obscure likeness and, as such, the boundaries between subject and viewers, and its resulting ability to encourage experiences of embodiment, such as reflexivity, empathy, and relationality.

⁶¹ In addition to the formal erasure of likeness by skin portraiture, other iterations of portraiture challenge the canon by focusing on the facial likeness of marginalized subjects from sexed and raced communities. For example, please see: Jonathan D. Katz, *Hide and Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian, 2010), Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 1992). These three monographs focus on making difference visible through contemporary portraiture so as to challenge categories, perceptions, and representations of sexual orientation and race.

⁶² Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 40.

⁶³ Van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 242.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

1.2 « Skin Portraiture: A Definition »

Skin portraiture is a sub-genre of portraiture that disrupts the definition and function of traditional portraits through the circumnavigation and/or blurring of facial likeness, illuminating its connection to van Alphen's anti-portraiture. Through magnification and anatomization of the epidermis, skin portraiture abstracts the body's skinscape so as to render the subject seemingly anonymous through the visual (and sometimes real) fragmentation of their skin. While there is a sense of anonymity at play across skin portraiture because the face is absent or obfuscated, the skin's appearance conveys experiences of embodiment that, while nuanced and subtle, also contribute to a person's likeness. In other words, skin portraiture focuses on an alternative notion of likeness via the skin, exploring epidermal likeness as a means to gain access to felt experiences of embodiment. Skin portraiture is literally located at the "limit" of likeness.

Some skin portraits, such as those of South African artist Berni Searle [Figs. 40–47], who I discuss at length in chapter four, explore the accepted correlation between facial likeness and identity within the canon of portraiture despite functioning as skin portraits. However, even when the face is present in Searle's skin portraits, she disrupts the transmission of facial likeness by turning her head to profile position, which not only obscures the parts of her face that make her "her," but also renders her androgynous, so as to gesture towards the idea that the subject and their difference can never be taken in at one go, and the fact that we cannot see or feel our skins in their entirety.⁶⁵

By representing what is normally whole, such as the body and face of the subject, as fragments or patches, skin portraiture complicates the autonomy of the represented subject. By doing so, it cultivates the potential for portraits to refer beyond themselves. When the face is absent or problematized, the typical boundary between "I" and "not I" breaks down. When these boundaries collapse, skin portraiture encourages a host of bodies to reflect on their own skins by looking at those of strangers. When the portrait

⁶⁵ For a look at Berni Searle's skin portrait series *Profile* (2002), please visit: accessed July 16, 2014, <http://bernisearle.com/portfolio-items/installation-of-view-of-profile-2009/>. For an in-depth analysis of this particular skin portrait, please refer to chapter four.

simultaneously refers to the represented subject *and* the viewer, the portrait becomes something more, something other, that brings bodies together. By showing us our skins as we normally see them—as fragments—skin portraiture encourages viewers to reflect on the correlation between their own experiences of embodiment and their skin’s appearance.

As suggested by its name, skin portraiture is a visual language that makes the representation of the skin its priority. In some cases, however, human skin *is* the medium, signifying the overwhelming desire to move beyond representation. In Andrew Krasnow’s *Palette* (1992/1999) [Fig. 1], for example, the artist creates a map of the United States from skin donated to medical science in the 1980s by donors who gave what is called “living consent” (i.e., consent given exclusively to the artist before the time of their death).⁶⁶ In order to represent the skin as a fragment, more often than not skin portraiture flays (both literally and figuratively) the cutaneous surfaces of bodies so as to transform them into a radical new material for the creation of portraiture. Despite the underlying horror and anxiety achieved by flaying, skin portraiture focuses on the epidermis in all of its nuanced likeness through mediums that achieve a heightened sense of realism, such as photography, film, and video. While realism is critical to the skin’s representation, there is also a focus on the viewer’s ability to imagine them selves in the skin of another. The imaginative burden placed on viewers permits the tactile and indexical mediums, such as performance, installation art, and various craft- and fashion-oriented practices, to amplify the experiences of reflexivity, empathy, and relationality experienced by viewers.

⁶⁶ Simon Ings, “Walrus Made from Human Skin Makes Its First Public Appearance,” *The New Scientist* August 20, 2015, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn28073-walrus-made-from-human-skin-appears-in-its-first-public-photo/>. In a similar vein to Krasnow, Canadian artist John Scott’s *Selbst* (1989) surgically flays the skin and presents it as a portrait in an attempt to move beyond representation.



Figure 1: Andrew Krasnow. *Palette*. Human skin and thread. 63.5cm x 53cm. 1992/1999. © Andrew Krasnow.

The formal qualities of skin portraiture (realism, indexicality, fragmentation, magnification, anatomization, and facial anonymity) disrupt the boundaries between bodies so as to engender a cross-identification of skins. When skins meet through portraiture, bodies can appreciate and even attempt to traverse categories of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and class that are expressed by the state, texture, and appearance of skin. Despite the fact that we cannot presume to know the experiences of a body just by looking at its skin, skin portraiture connects all bodies insofar as they all exist in and as skin, yet, at the same time illuminates the impossibility of fully seeing, knowing or touching ourselves and others, which is precisely what breeds a respect for difference. However, if I were to paint a “darker” picture of skin, I would highlight the fact that while we are bonded by and through our skins insofar as skin is a boundary that separates us and at the same time joins us, we are always already both together, but never one *or* the other. In turn, skin represents an impossibility of knowing others, whilst, at the same time, functions as a limit that binds us. While total anonymity is not possible given that each

skin bears the traces of a particular person's experiences of embodiment, skin portraiture engenders the meeting and sensual communication of many skins. Skin portraiture is significant to studies of embodiment because it connects bodies by complicating the boundaries between them. In order to achieve this meeting of bodies, skin portraiture engenders an uncanny sensual experience of feeling one's own skin by looking at the epidermis of another, cultivating feelings of empathy and radical experiences of relationality through an emphasis on touch, both real and virtual.

Acknowledging and utilizing the traditional art historical definitions of portraiture, skin portraiture critiques the representation of bodies in the West. Unlike traditional portraiture, skin portraiture places emphasis on the likeness of skin rather than that of the face so as to redefine what a portrait is and reorient what it can achieve. Portraiture is an important area of inquiry within the growing field of skin studies because it is a genre of representation *par excellence*, at pains to capture the differences across bodies. By obscuring, blurring, and circumnavigating the face, skin portraits attempt to make the subject anonymous; however, like the face, skin is unique to each individual, which means that it functions as an alternate marker of identity, as has been reinforced by a history of fingerprinting practices.⁶⁷

1.3 « Early Iterations of Skin Portraiture: Nineteenth-century Dermatology and Contemporary Art

While skin portraiture is a new concept or strategy in contemporary art, focused on sensual and social relations among bodies, the formal practice of fragmenting, magnifying, and anatomizing the skin so as to make the subject anonymous is not new to Western visual culture. Skin portraiture has its origins in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century dermatology, particularly what Mienke te Hennepe calls the “macromorphological” images of skin that emerged out of the British school of

⁶⁷ Simon A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

dermatology.⁶⁸ Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, macromorphological images have “returned, but with a difference” in the form of skin portraiture.⁶⁹

Early dermatology was tasked with understanding the skin’s structures and functions as well as the internal and external conditions that prompted illness and disease at a time when technology was limited. In “Depicting Skin: Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Medicine” (2006), te Hennepe argues that images of skin were absent from medical records during the eighteenth century because skin was not officially a branch of medical inquiry at this time.⁷⁰

Built in the early seventeenth century, l’Hôpital Saint-Louis was originally intended to treat the plague and other epidemics, such as cholera, typhus, and smallpox. Later, as a result of the political and intellectual reform born of the French Revolution (1789–1799), Parisian hospitals were revolutionized and divided according to specialized services. Under the supervision of Dr. Jean-Louis Alibert (1768–1837), the Hôpital Saint-Louis turned its attention to skin, in recognition of the role our integuments play in the identification and treatment of many illnesses and diseases. It was thus with Alibert that the French school of dermatology was born. While Alibert is famed for overseeing the first dermatology hospital and advancing the field with his early research, the historical record suggests that in England Dr. Robert Willan (1757-1812) was the first to classify skin disease from an anatomical perspective with his four-part series *On Cutaneous Diseases*, issued between 1798 and 1808. As we shall see, the feud between the French

⁶⁸ te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 37. While I credit Te Hennepe for the use of the term “macromorphological” to refer to magnified and fragmented images of skin within the context of the early history of dermatology, she is not the originator of the use of the designation “morphological”; British dermatologist Robert Willan is. For further reading on the representation and study of skin in the history of Western medicine, please see Jonathan Reinartz and Kevin Siena (eds.), *A Medical History of Skin*. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013) and Manfred Horstmanshoff et. al. (eds.) *Blood, Sweat and Tears: The Changing Concepts of Physiology from Antiquity into Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁶⁹ van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal,” 242.

⁷⁰ te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 21. For further reading regarding the emergent years of dermatology, please see: William Allen Pusey, *The History of Dermatology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979).

and English schools of dermatology of the nineteenth century precipitates the radical departure from traditional portraiture that skin portraiture makes possible in contemporary visual culture.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, doctors saw the skin as an important boundary organ that acted as a screen to communicate what was happening beneath the body's surface, which required specialized medical inquiry. This shift toward a study of skin disease engendered the idea that in order for the skin to be known, it had to be closely observed. This act of visual observation was translated into images such as drawings, engravings, and paintings.⁷¹ These early images were handmade; it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that technologies such as microscopy and photography would revolutionize the ways the skin was known and represented (despite the fact that microscopy had been used before falling out of favour during the eighteenth century).⁷²

Acclaimed historian of medicine Sander Gilman argues that medical historians have treated medical images as either mere illustrations or “high art.”⁷³ Within contemporary visual culture, te Hennepe points out, there have been two contradictory ways of conceptualizing images of skin: on the one hand, historians of dermatology treat images of skins as “afterimages of verbal ideas,” positioning them as “subordinate to the text.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, art historians and cultural studies scholars have considered dermatological images “self-sufficient works of art,” allowing them to become dislodged from a “context of (knowledge) production, use and function.”⁷⁵ Given the limited nature of technology and communication during the early nineteenth century, dermatologists were faced with

⁷¹ The sense of artistry attached to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century dermatological images is further explored in art historical analyses of the representation of skin in French art and medicine, see: Mechthild Fend, “Bodily and Pictorial Surfaces: Skin in French Art, 1790–1860,” *Art History* 28, no. 3 (2005): 311–39.

⁷² te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 13.

⁷³ Sander Gilman, *Health and Illness: Images of Difference* (London: Reaktion, 1995), 12–15.

⁷⁴ te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 16.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

creating a visual language of skin that could be easily transmitted across geographic locations, cultures, and medical institutions in an attempt to standardize the field. The easiest way to accomplish this was through pedagogical images, such as paintings contained within image folios and engraved prints within books.⁷⁶ It is not until approximately 1860 that these photographic phenomena were appropriated by dermatology as the primary means of recording skin and its diseases.

Influenced by representational norms circulating within visual culture, the early years of dermatology in France under Alibert made use of the formal qualities of popular portraiture as the model for clinical images of patients with skin disease.⁷⁷ For Alibert, the study of skin disease, as presented in *Description des maladies de la peau observées à l'Hôpital Saint-Louis* (1814), was not limited to the epidermal site, but included a consideration of the patient's identity and context as communicated by visual clues such as clothing.⁷⁸ For Fend, the precise or lifelike representation of clothing was intended to illustrate to the viewer that the appearance of the skin and its associated illness or disease was faithfully and realistically recorded. This attention to the patient's clothing is what Fend calls the "reality effect"—"a way of suggesting that we are looking at an actual sick person."⁷⁹ Moreover, this attention to each patient's clothing visually reinforces the intimate relationship between how we experience skin and how we experience clothing—both communicate outwardly who and what we are, particularly in the context of the skin-as-self metaphor. As such, many of Alibert's clinical images focus on the dressed

⁷⁶ It is worth noting that handmade images (i.e., drawings and prints) were eclipsed by photography around 1860 when dermatologists appropriated the technology from popular visual culture. The use of photography is critical to the study of skin insofar as it permitted dermatologists to make indexical images rather than subjective representations.

⁷⁷ For an overview of portraiture during early modernity and the ways artistic and cultural conventions changed our perception of the subject, please refer to Catherine M. Soussloff's *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁷⁸ To view a selection of Alibert's dermatological portraits, please see: *Hagerströmer Biblioteket*, "Alibert, Jean Louis (1768-1837), accessed June 23, 2014, <https://hagstromerlibrary.ki.se/books/1546>.

⁷⁹ Mechthild Fend, "Portraying Skin Disease," 147.



Figure 2: Baron Jean-Louis Alibert. “Scarlatine Normale (Woman with Scarlet Fever)” in *Clinique de l’Hôpital Saint Louis*. Coloured engraving. 1833.

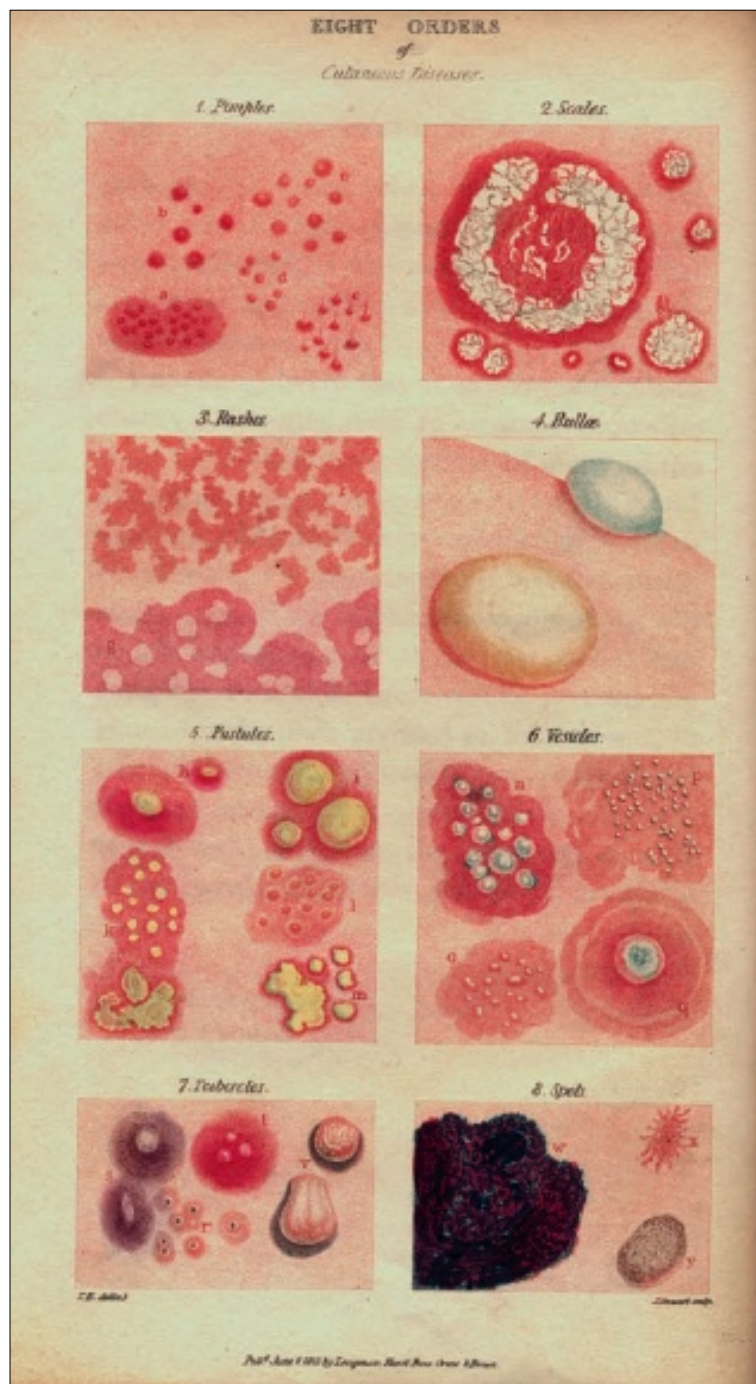


Figure 3: Robert Willan. "Eight Orders of Cutaneous Diseases." In *A Practical Synopsis of Cutaneous Diseases*. Coloured engraving. 1817.

patient in poses that are common to the canon of portraiture, such as the three-quarter or profile position, making each patient appear human and knowable [Fig. 2].⁸⁰ Invariably, Alibert's images represent the patient's face, reinforcing the idea that the skin is a stand-in for the person.

In contrast to Alibert's clinical observations, Robert Willan eventually saw the traditional portrait format in dermatology as akin to works of art in the sense that it made the diseased site of skin secondary to the overall representation of the patient.⁸¹ Thus attempting to design a new visual language of dermatology, Willan, and later his pupil and colleague Thomas Bateman (1778–1821), produced a method of representing skin that was radically new. Referred to as the “macromorphological” style or approach, Willan and Bateman's method employed the formal strategies of magnification, fragmentation, and anonymization to abstract and fragment the body, his goal being to see the skin clearly over time [Fig. 3].⁸² By zooming in on the skin, the British school headed by Willan was able to distance the viewer from the patient, thus foreclosing the possibility of the viewer's attempt to associate disease with class, sex, gender, ethnicity, or race. In effect, the Willan–Bateman method revolutionized image-making practices in dermatology, overturning the popularity of Alibert's images.⁸³ First experimented with in Willan's *On Cutaneous Diseases Vol. 1* (1808) and later in Bateman's *Delineations of Cutaneous Diseases: Exhibiting the Characteristic Appearances of the Principal Genera and Species Comprised in the Classification of the Late Dr. Willan* (1817, 1828), the

⁸⁰ In Alibert's style of image production, men are typically depicted facing forward, confronting the viewer with their gaze, and women are typically depicted in profile position, averting their gaze. The specific representation of male and female bodies in this way underscores the visual language of gender in visual culture at the time.

⁸¹ te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 46.

⁸² While Robert Willan's earliest images are based on the format of popular portraiture, there is a turn to the skin as a fragment later in his career, particularly at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For examples of Willan's differing representations of skin disease and the patient, please see: Emily Dymock, “Smallpox and Measles,” *Early Modern Illness and Treatments*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta, n/ d), accessed March 4, 2014, http://www.ualberta.ca/~illness/diseases/new_smallpox.html.

⁸³ te Hennepe, “Depicting Skin,” 37.

macromorphological style became the visual standard in dermatological imaging practices thereafter.

Skin portraiture, therefore, draws from and rubs up against the origins of dermatological images in the history of medicine by re-conceptualizing the macromorphological images of Willan and Bateman. By using this historical visual language, skin portraiture reinforces the idea that the skin has a vitality of its own. While other organs and body parts have been represented as magnified fragments in the history of medical visual culture, particularly anatomy, “skeletal portraiture” or “organ portraiture,” for example, would not yield the same meaning or carry the same weight as skin portraiture precisely because we do not continually perceive or feel our bodily interiors—unless, of course, they are injured and in pain—in the same way we do our skins. In this way, we do not associate the body’s interior with our sense of self or identity in the same way we do its exterior.⁸⁴ Moreover, we see, feel, and interact with our epidermal surfaces precisely because the skin *is* our bodily surface, suggesting that the skin plays a critical role in formations of identity and experiences of embodiment.

One of the earliest iterations of skin portraiture in contemporary art is Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* [Fig. 4].⁸⁵ In this black-and-white video, the Canadian new media artist documents the scars, marks, and imperfections acquired by her skin throughout the course of her life on the occasion of her twenty-seventh birthday.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ However, when the body is in pain, we are acutely aware of the corresponding bodily site (Leder, *The Absent Body*), which can, in the case of chronic pain, deeply impact, both permanently and temporarily, a person’s outward likeness. When a person who has kidney disorder experiences traumatic chronic pain in their lower lumbar region of the back, for example, their bodily posture, attitude, behavior, and movement can alter their sense of self and likeness.

⁸⁵ The earliest contemporary skin portrait I have found that complies with most of the sub-genre’s formal attributes is Ulay’s 1972 performance, in which he tattooed the letters *GEN E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO* on his skin, had the tattooed skin surgically removed, and mounted the skin with DNA-laden string in a glass vitrine. For a discussion of this skin portrait, please see: Mechthild Fend, “Emblems of Durability.” While I acknowledge this particular skin portrait as the first historically, I focus on Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit* video performance in the above text because it represents the first skin portrait made by a feminist female artist and because it is concerned with lived experiences of embodiment.

⁸⁶ To view a short segment of Steele’s *Birthday Suit*, please visit: *Video Data Bank*, accessed July 17, 2013, <http://www.vdb.org/titles/birthday-suit-scars-and-defects>.

With a camera set up on a tripod, Steele enters the screen from a distance, fully nude, and proceeds to narrate each event that has marked her skin. Connecting her dermal appearance to real, embodied events, Steele repeatedly caresses and touches each mark, scar, and imperfection. The grain of the video combined with the artist's undulating distance and closeness to the screen makes her face hazy, blurred, and intermittently absent. Steele zooms in on the tactile nature of her skin so as to disorient viewers and permit them to think about their own epidermal marks and, if relevant, their own experiences of bodily trauma.

Reflecting on the performance years later, Steele says that the video is the result of her desire “to chronicl[e] [her] passage through time,”⁸⁷ echoing Connor's sentiment that the “skin is a soft clock,”⁸⁸ one that marks the body temporally. Steele reinforces the connection between the appearance and experience of her skin in this performance, commenting that “this tape accepts the extent of those consequences.” What is not conveyed by Steele's narration is the fact that while these marks show the “consequences” of her experiences of embodiment, other marks, those that have not had the same type of permanent effect, such as bruises and swelling, have also contributed to her sense of self but cannot be shown to us or remembered in the same manner because they are temporal (second-order marks) rather than permanent (first-order marks). Whilst different types of epidermal marks are abundant in all of our epidermal lives, Steele's inability to address the ways her skin is marked continually on an almost imperceptible level illuminates the fact that collectively we are more concerned with the skin's ability to regenerate, to heal itself from unsightly marks, rather than its ability to generate marks like bruises, for example, that are impermanent and temporal. The implication of second-

⁸⁷ “Lisa Steele,” *The CCCA Canadian Art Database Project*, accessed January 9, 2013. http://cca.concordia.ca/artists/media_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=53709&link_id=264.

⁸⁸ Steven Connor, “Mortification,” *Thinking Through the Skin*, eds. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (New York: Routledge, 2001), 46.

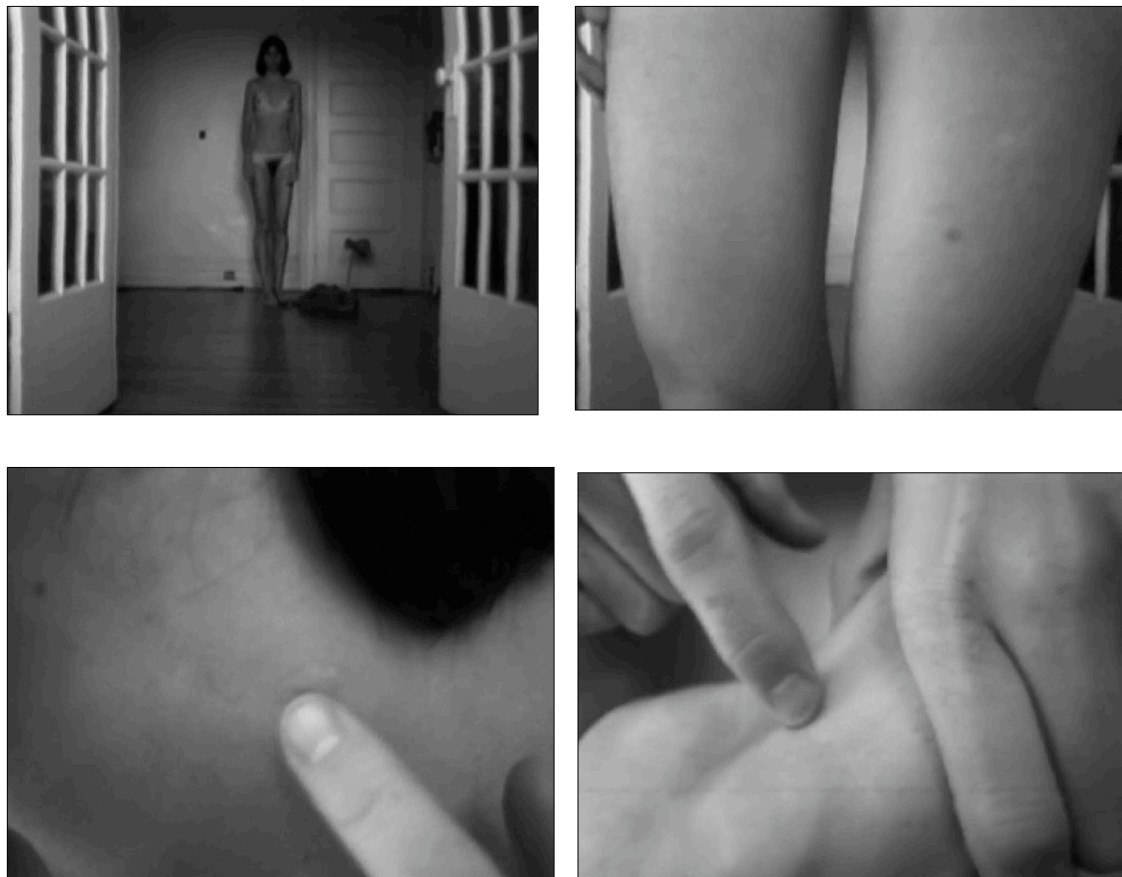


Figure 4: Four stills from Lisa Steele's *Birthday Suit: With Scars and Defects*. 11-minutes video. 1974. © CARCC-Copyright Visual Arts 2016. Images reproduced courtesy of CARCC.

order skin marks, as I am loosely calling them here, is that skin has a life and realm of experience of its own that is elusive to us (the subjects). More importantly, who and what we are as subjects is the product of *both* temporal *and* permanent epidermal marks.

Conceptually, this video is titled after the popular idiom “birthday suit,” referring to the state of nakedness in which one enters the world. Moreover, while the term is applicable to all of us in states of undress, the title highlights the fact that the skin represented is not our own insofar as our own scars, marks, and imperfections do not match Steele’s. Steele’s early skin portrait, in some ways, mimics traditional portraiture insofar as it distances her body from the viewer’s, only intermittently allowing her skinscape to come into proximity to the viewer’s. However, because many, if not all, of us have experienced bodily trauma at the level of our skins in our mundane lives, we can connect with Steele and experience the skin as a commonality between us.

In my own encounters with this video performance, I have consciously reflected on my own scars and associated experiences of embodiment. Of note is the large scar that runs horizontally across the right side of my torso, which is the result of surgery nine years ago. Watching Steele touch her scars, particularly the ones on her knee and fingertip, both of which run very deep and thus easily communicate a sense of pain and trauma, made my own large scar tickle. It was as if all of a sudden my perception of the scar was acute, which brought up the memory of debilitating pain, the relief of surgical trauma, and a very itchy period of epidermal healing. The itching is of note insofar as it acts as a kind of traumatic sense memory—as my incision healed, my scar itched uncontrollably. While we have different embodied experiences, my ability to feel with Steele is, in part, influenced by the fact that we are both Caucasian Canadian women who have scars. However, the way she fragments and magnifies her skin on screen is what permits me to be an active participant in the work, and, thus, become self-reflexive so as to feel with her through the tickling of my own scar. The tickling sensation I experience is of further importance because it brings me in relation to Steele while at the same time preserving my own unique perspective and sensual autonomy. However, like skin and our experiences of affect with, in, and across skins of others, this kind of neurological and psychological

empathy has a limit and cannot be experienced the same across diverse bodies, identities, and experiences.

Within English-speaking contexts, the use of the word “suit” reinforces the idea that skin, like clothing, protects and mediates the body and its experiences in the world. For cultural theorist Claudia Benthien, this designation underscores our understanding of the epidermis as a stand-in for “the whole human being.”⁸⁹ However, when we refer to the skin as a suit—that is, as an inanimate object—we also suggest that we can manipulate, tailor, and alter our skins at will in support of our increasing desire for complete control over our bodies. The irony of *Birthday Suit*, however, is that the marks and imperfections that have contributed to Steele’s sense of self (as they are narrated) were not purposefully or consciously produced by the subject herself, thereby problematizing the association of omnipotence with the skin-as-clothing metaphor. Rather, each imperfection is a “consequence,” a result of her experiences of embodiment *and* the product of the skin’s own vitality that creates the marks and scars that seal Steele’s bodily boundaries. This sense of irony provides critical tension to the performance, suggesting that we grow into and achieve our birthday suits rather than inherit and develop them.

Birthday Suit, therefore, is a critical early example of skin portraiture because it adds force to the fact that our skins and our experiences of/in/with them are paradoxical. Firstly, skin *both* protects our bodily boundaries *and* mediates our bodily experiences in the world, and, secondly, the very containment skin offers is at once to create a body *and* make the inside vulnerable to the outside. While the performance reinforces Steele’s individuality and identity through her deployment of narration and intimate self-touch, the boundaries typically installed between the artist and viewer in traditional portraiture, by way of facial likeness, are weakened by her bodily movement because her facial likeness is elusive. Steele’s complication of likeness through the filmic magnification and fragmentation of her skinscape encourages each viewer to move beyond her skin toward a consideration of their own insofar as we all have experienced the epidermal marks of time.

⁸⁹ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 17.

Because we all exist in and as skin, Steele's performance highlights that we are connected by and relate through skin. I have repeatedly referred to empathy and relationality thus far as points of entry into what skin portraiture achieves, and I will further explore these experiences in the following two chapters, respectively. In the meantime, I turn to a discussion of the metaphors that frame our relationships with, in, across, and through our skins precisely because skins are a boundary, a gap that is unknown (i.e., the "felt" versus "imagined"), which triggers a "crossing over," a carrying across from one thing (e.g., reality) to another (e.g., representation), as if to elude the suture between them.⁹⁰

1.4 « Skin Metaphors »

While skin portraiture engenders feelings of empathy and experiences of relationality, it also encourages us to think about the common metaphors we employ and deploy to talk about or frame the skin. It would seem that the skin requires metaphORIZING because it has a vitality of its own, which makes it hard to grasp despite the fact that it is a tactile organ. Exploring the many ways skin portraiture brings bodies together by way of their boundary organs, I use skin metaphors as devices that help work through the nuanced ways experiences of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and cultural belonging play out across and through the skin. Taking its cues from the work of Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, this project's use of metaphors attempts to "think through the skin."⁹¹ Because our relationships with skin(s) are complicated, nuanced, and even fraught, arguably due to the paradoxical character of our integuments, skin metaphors give us the conceptual tools to

⁹⁰ The English *metaphor* derived from the 16th-century Old French word *métaphore*, which comes from the Latin *metaphora*, "carrying over", in turn from the Greek μεταφορά (*metaphorá*), "transfer," from μεταφέρω (*metapherō*), "to carry over", "to transfer" and that from μετά (*meta*), "after, with, across" + φέρω (*pherō*), "to bear", "to carry" ("Metaphor," *Wikipedia*, accessed July 17, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>).

⁹¹ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Thinking Through the Skin*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

better understand our experiences of simultaneously being a skin and living in skin in the world.

Both an organ with an individual, vital life of its own *and* an object we attempt to control in service of our own vitality, the skin is a precarious organ. The precariousness of skin is illuminated by the contradictory ways we talk about and represent it in Western culture, simultaneously framing our outermost edge as both everything and nothing to us. Through metaphors, such as skin-as-interface, skin-as-screen, skin-as-landscape, skin-as-clothing, skin-as-technology, and skin-as-home—all of which are taken up within the larger scope of this project—we work through our skins in order to achieve a sense of comfort in and with them. This present study of the appearance, representation, and signification of skin in contemporary art and visual culture, particularly portraiture, addresses and works through what Lafrance calls our “fraught relationships with our skins.”⁹²

While metaphors are often employed in literature as figures of speech that connect two objects, persons, or scenarios, they are used as devices, whether consciously or not, by a host of contemporary artists in order to think through precisely how and why our relationships with our skins are fraught. Metaphors highlight the fact that the way we talk about skins reflects our relationships with them. Benthien points out that our understanding of and relationship with the epidermis are informed historically and contemporaneously by idioms, sayings, and metaphors.⁹³ What these devices have in common is that they make complex concepts, objects, events, and experiences communicable. For Marc Lappé, we “unconsciously incorporate skin metaphors in our lives,” in order to form or reinforce our constantly shifting body image(s).⁹⁴

⁹² Marc Lafrance, “Skin and the Self: Cultural Theory and Anglo-American Psychoanalysis,” *Body & Society* 15, no. 3 (2009): 4–24, 20. My argument that our relationship with skin is complicated, if not problematic, is a result of the skin’s paradoxicality. Echoing Lafrance’s assertion that our relationships with skin are fraught, my skin-oriented research differs from his insofar as he unpacks the significance of this relationship through a psychoanalytical rather than an art historical and interdisciplinary frame.

⁹³ Benthien, *On the Cultural Border*, see chapter 2, “Boundary Metaphors: Skin in Language.”

⁹⁴ Marc Lappé, *The Body’s Edge: Our Cultural Obsession with Skin* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 1.

In thinking through “the poetics of space,” Gaston Bachelard argues that metaphors “giv[e] concrete substance to an impression that is difficult to express.”⁹⁵ He warns, however, that metaphors can harden over time, forcing images to lose their spontaneity because they are “*fabricated images*, without deep, true genuine roots.”⁹⁶ When we utilize skin metaphors to understand, to think through and with, the epidermis and its associated functions, we emphasize how “various modes of perception determine various modes of inhabitation.”⁹⁷ As such, metaphors help us organize and categorize the myriad ways skin portraiture helps us better understand the role skin plays in our lives.

Played out through and across the skin, experiences of embodiment are impacted by culturally instituted notions of difference, such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and cultural belonging. An increasing awareness of how difference plays out has led to a re-conceptualization of skins and our experiences in and of them. In contrast to the numerous branches of skin research that currently exist in the arts, skin portraiture is specific insofar as it critiques the canon of portraiture in art history in order to effect a paradigm shift in how we represent the subject and conceive or respond to experiences of embodiment in the twenty-first century. The metaphors we employ are visual devices that help us work through the various ways skin portraiture engages and addresses sensual, sexual, physical, and psychic aspects of social, political, and cultural life.

By deconstructing some of popular skin metaphors that we use, this project highlights the impacts skin has on our experiences of embodiment. It is worth noting that as far as skin metaphors are concerned, they are infinite in number and would take a lifetime of work to unpack and theorize. In the meantime, I turn my attention to a general consideration of skin and the skin-as-self metaphor below so as to flesh out the skin’s nuances, abilities, and functions in our psychic, somatic, and social lives, which will be important to the flow of the chapters that follow.

⁹⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 74.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 70.

1.5 « Skin »

A boundary surface, skin holds together the parts of our bodies—bones, organs, muscles, ligaments, circulatory and nervous systems, as well as a host of other systems—that are elusive to us precisely because they reside beneath the surface. A first line of defense against the microscopic dangers of our environments, skin is a sentinel and an immune system. Wrapped up in and around nearly every aspect of bodily life, skin is arguably the body's most important organ. During the earliest stages of human physical development (e.g., the “gastrula stage”), the embryo forms into a sac through a process of invagination of one of its sides, and forms two layers, the “ectoderm” (outer skin) and the “endoderm” (inner skin). Anzieu argues that this splitting of skin into two parts is a quasi-universal biological phenomenon insofar as every plant skin and every animal membrane, with few exceptions, consists of two layers, one internal and one external.⁹⁸ This splitting permits the skin of the mind (i.e., the cerebral cortex; “cortex” is the Latin word for bark or shell) and the body's skin to become anaclickally intertwined, permitting the body's fleshy edge to communicate and experience the psychic and somatic aspects of the body and subject. What this splitting underscores is the fact that the skin is paradoxical—“the center is located at the periphery.”⁹⁹

Illuminating the significance of skin is the fact that before an organism can form, let alone grow, a skin is needed to seal, envelop, contain, and protect its body from dissolution and dispersal into its environment. Yet without a capillary system to supply blood and oxygen, the skin cannot grow so as to ensure the growth of the organism.¹⁰⁰ So, while skin is arguably any organism's most important organ, it would seem that it is not

⁹⁸ Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 9.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Oron Catts, “Fragments of Designed Life: The Wet Palette of Tissue Engineering,” in *Biomediale: Contemporary Genomic Culture*, ed. Dmitry Bulatov. (Kaliningrad: National Center for Contemporary Art; The National Publishing House “Yatarny Skaz,” 2004), accessed August 15, 2014, <http://biomediale.ncca-kaliningrad.ru/?blang=eng&author=catts>.

stand-alone; rather, it is connected to other metabolic functions and physiological processes of the body. What is clear, however, is that without skin, life would cease to exist.

The average adult has twenty-one square feet of skin comprised of thirty million cells and accounting for 12 to 15 percent of their body weight. Our most sensitive organ, the skin is home to forty-five miles of nerves that allow the body to form tactile and vibratory impressions of the world. These impressions come to influence a body's relations with and in the world, which in turn shapes the subject's sense of self. More importantly, the skin is, as philosopher Michel Serres argues, a "meta-organ" through which our senses of touch, sight, taste, smell, and hearing function.¹⁰¹ Cultural theorist Steven Connor, amongst others, poignantly argues the skin is our "common sense," an environment through which we all exist, albeit differently.¹⁰²

At the very core of skin's nature is a paradox—it is *both* a boundary that seals off the interior parts of the body from the exterior world *and* a porous interface that brings bodies and objects in the world into relation. On the one hand, skin is everything to us: it is a vitally protective envelope that makes us visible, and it mediates, stores, filters, and supports our experiences of being a body in the world. On the other hand, skin is nothing to us: it is a fleshy sheath so constant and permanent that we are often blind to it, allowing us to take it for granted through the increasing use of cosmetic surgery and other forms of epidermal modification (e.g., tattoo, piercing, scarring, sub-dermal implantations) and render it seemingly invisible when it is not out of bounds or causing pain. As a result of its situatedness at the surface of the body, skin is commonly characterized as a superficial organ. Ironically, the skin is an organ of depth that we render superficial in an attempt to

¹⁰¹ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (1985), trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 26. In *The Skin Ego*, Anzieu argues that our outermost edge is critical to the maintenance of our physical, psychic, sensual, and social lives. In addition, he asserts that skin is our primary zone of contact with the world through its interplay with our five senses. Devoting the last chapters of *The Skin Ego* to the role of our senses, Anzieu investigates alternative types of skins that impact experiences of embodiment: the sound envelope (chapter 11), the thermal envelope (chapter 12), the olfactory envelope (chapter 13) and what might be called the "taste envelope" (chapter 14).

¹⁰² Connor, *The Book of Skin*, 28.

control it precisely because it functions as a stand-in for who and what we are in Western culture. This perceived sense of superficiality is not only the result of ideas about bodies, ideas that render the physical and fleshy aspects of bodies less important than the psychic or intellectual ones, it also accounts for why skin has been largely overlooked within body studies.

Vital to human life, skin has a vitality of its own, shedding and re-growing itself every fifty-two to seventy-seven days.¹⁰³ A woman who lives to the age of eighty-three will have experienced the skin's renewal approximately five hundred times without even realizing it.¹⁰⁴ This fact underscores not only the skin's morphological nature, but also that we are not conscious of its movements—unless they cause us distress or pain, as Drew Leder argues in his phenomenological analysis of being in a body, a condition that he argues is typically absent from our perception.¹⁰⁵ Yet this sense of movement and growth shows us that we do not have control over our skins; rather, in many cases our skins have control over us. Highlighting its morphological nature, skin engenders the appearance and disappearance of marks such as scars, moles, pimples, dimples, pits, pocks, freckles, stretch marks, and lesions, which manifest often in contradiction to the wants and desires of the subject, across the surfaces of bodies. These marks are the result of the embodied experiences of the subject, who brushes up against bodies and objects in the world, *and* the skin's inherent sense of renegade agency, which imbues it with a subjectivity of its own. Marks that alter the skin's appearance shape and impact our sense of self, our relationships with others, and our movements in and through the world.

Perceived in relation to specific notions of value, skin is shaped by time. In turn, time dictates how culture will define, represent, and experience skin. As such, skin and culture are always intertwined, allowing them to mutually co-constitute one another. Any

¹⁰³ For an introduction to a natural history of skin that addresses its metabolic functions, please see: Nina Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ "Life Expectancy at Birth by Sex, by Province," *Statistics Canada*, accessed January 15, 2015. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/health26-eng.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

analysis of skin requires an analysis of culture. I now turn my attention to what is arguably the most significant metaphor: skin-as-self.

1.6 « Skin-as-Self »

While skin is the human body's largest organ, it is also the body's "face."¹⁰⁶ As a result, we have a cultural tendency to position skin as a metonymic stand-in for the entire person. According to Benthien, this tendency was at its apex of popularity during the height of modernity in the nineteenth century,¹⁰⁷ the result of shifting conceptions of the subject during the Age of Enlightenment (1650s–1780s). During this period of cultural revolution and scientific breakthrough, the human subject was defined and understood as a rational being capable of controlling the world through the ordering and classifying of all things, particularly bodies. Importantly, advancements in the practice and theory of science and medicine, as well as the study of philosophy, engendered cultural paradigm shifts that led to the creation of an ideal body that is often white, European, Christian, heterosexual, and male.

An ordering and classifying of bodies and things requires a positioning of one cultural perspective over all others, which leads to an intolerance of difference. Skin became the primary target of modern impulse to order, classify, and know bodies, underscored within the Victorian period (1837-1901) through its attention to an interest in knowing difference through dermatology (discussed in the introduction) and physiognomy (discussed in chapter four), the "art" of judging a person based on their facial appearance, which was founded in ancient Greek culture and re-popularized by Johann Kaspar Lavater in the eighteenth century. A desire to deconstruct, command, and even re-order the human body, combined with increasing specialization in the fields of science and medicine during

¹⁰⁶ Connor, *Book of Skin*, 29.

¹⁰⁷ Benthien, *On the Cultural Border*, 24-25.

the nineteenth century, led to the concretization of the skin-as-self metaphor through the emerging fields of dermatology and physiognomy.

As we have seen, in dermatology, skin was dissected anatomically and observed clinically so as to work through the myriad ways it functioned and contributed to the bodily life of the patient. Early schools of dermatology positioned skin as a screen-like organ that could communicate aspects of the patient's health and character because of its interconnectedness to many other facets of the body inside the body. In the pseudo-science of physiognomy, by contrast, skin was not clinically observed; rather, it was subjectively viewed, judged, and positioned as a mere object of culture that could offer quick (de)valuations of bodies based on the appearance (e.g., lines, curves, and symmetry) of the face based on cultural norms and ideals. In turn, the attempt to classify and know personality "types" from the appearance of a person's face, as evidenced by Lavater's work, cultivated Western xenophobia and racism insofar as its theories and representations aligned a person's unideal facial features, often influenced by race and ethnicity, with their supposed potential for crime, mental illness, and even greatness. Through the classification, measurement, and ordering of human facial features physiognomists were able to create personality "types" based on appearances, which, in turn, crystalized a fear of bodily difference.

In social settings, epidermal marks, such as moles, scars, and blemishes, as well as the skin's colour, texture, and elasticity, serve as indicators of character, context, and value within culture due to the popularization of the skin-as-self metaphor two centuries ago. While the correlation between the skin's appearance and a person's identity or value is not a concept or phenomenon born of our own cultural milieu, it is one that increasingly preoccupies us despite the efforts that have been made in civil rights over the last fifty years, for example. As evidenced by the recent waves of protests and riots in the United States due to the deaths of a number of unarmed people of colour (Michael Brown, Tamir

Rice, and Freddie Gray, amongst many others) at the hands of police, the skin's appearance, namely its colour, is still a life-or-death matter.¹⁰⁸

Although this metaphor persists, the tide has started to turn; the skin-as-self metaphor has been contemporaneously problematized and disrupted, politically and academically. In visual culture, artists are increasingly exploring their epidermal experiences of difference as a way to refuse and trouble antiquated, biased, idealized, and binarized conceptions of bodies. Importantly, the cultural context in which epidermal appearances might be read and judged is constantly shifting, which means our conceptions of skin are always already in a state of flux and should, therefore, be rendered immediately suspect.

A reading of the skin privileged in and by the skin-as-self metaphor engenders contradictory cues about a person and their value as a result of their situatedness within or without dominant culture, which is why such a reading must be deconstructed and re-envisioned. For example, weathered, tanned, and wrinkled skin can, on the one hand, be read as the marks of a labourer who works out of doors and, therefore, productively contributes to society through their rigorous work ethic. While considered “blue collar,” and therefore “lower” class, the body of the labourer is valuable and, therefore, viewed positively.

On the other hand, the same epidermal marks can be read as the signs of someone who has spent considerable time drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and even sun tanning, for example, which may be considered lower-class activities associated with laziness or, conversely, upper-class activities of leisure associated with expendable time and income. In this example, the subject is perceived negatively because of an assumption that they do not contribute to society and culture due to their lack of labour, regardless of

¹⁰⁸ It is important to note that while I only briefly mention the recent deaths of these three men, there have been a number of race-related deaths that further illuminate how the skin-as-self metaphor negatively impacts bodies of difference. For a very brief overview of some of these race-related deaths caused by police in the United States, please see: Rich Juzwiak and Aleksander Chan, “Unarmed People of Color Killed By Police, 1999–2014,” *Gawker*, August 12, 2015, accessed November 3, 2015, <http://gawker.com/unarmed-people-of-color-killed-by-police-1999-2014-1666672349>.

their class status. Moreover, it is presumed that those who partake in these activities do so willingly and ignorantly, which suggests a lack of knowledge and self-care that could be understood as a drain on social systems, such as health care.

While I am generalizing about how we might read weathered, wrinkled, and tanned skin in Western culture, I do so to illuminate the contradictions inherent in such epidermal readings. The problem with reading another's skin as I have just described is that it involves the exercise of judgment, which is informed by cultural ideals and biases. Moreover, reading skin engenders and normalizes a limited, superficial engagement with the subject and a simplified understanding of skin.

More than a classed, raced, or sexed face, or a mere sheath covering the body, skin is an active, sensing organ that has the ability to alter its appearance so as to confuse our readings of the subject. While it is a sensuously pleasurable organ, skin is also a source of pain and a site of trauma. The skin's rogue sense of subjectivity and agency suggests that its appearance is not merely the result of the subject's choices and movements or relations in the world. As such, many of us desire control over our skins due to the fact that their appearance communicates information about ourselves to others. Because our skins can move and morph of their own accord without direction or permission from the subject, they are possessive of us. When skin takes control over the body, as it does in cases of disease and autoimmune disorder, for example, it can make us feel trapped, immobile, and alone, as is so clearly illustrated by the painful experiences of "butterfly children." While I argue against the skin-as-self metaphor, generally, I find it useful for better understanding the lived experiences of bodies plagued by skin disease insofar as it opens up ways of empathizing with and relating to those bodies.

Epidermolysis bullosa ("EB") is a genetic disease that affects the skin of one in fifty thousand people. Those who suffer from EB are called "butterfly children" because their skins are as fragile as butterfly wings. As a result of complications such as skin cancer that arise from the continuous peeling of the skin and its falling away from the

body, butterfly children do not often live past their teen years.¹⁰⁹ EB ranges from “mild” to “severe.” In dystrophic EB (“DEB”), the most intense form of the disease, a genetic defect eradicates and weakens the “mortar” that keeps skin cells together and anchors the epidermis (top strata of skin) to the dermis (the underlying strata of skin). DEB sufferers feel as if they are constantly on fire, likening their large wounds to third-degree burns. They lead a life of tactile isolation, limited mobility due to a loss or erosion of limbs, and excruciating pain as a result of the skin’s genetic directive to flay itself. Medically speaking, EB is considered one of the most elusive genetic disorders known to the global medical community. It is also one of the most painful experiences of embodiment caused by disease recorded and studied in history.

EB and a host of other skin diseases, such as autoimmune disorders like psoriasis (meaning “itchy skin”) and scleroderma (meaning “hard skin”), cause the skin to turn on the subject and against the body. In turn, skin becomes a traumatic organ, sparking in the afflicted subject a fantasy of taking it off, a desire to transcend one’s outermost layer. Relatedly, a desire to get under someone’s skin by flaying, marking, altering, and cutting the skin appears often in our cultural imaginary. While it is not actually possible to take the skin off like a garment, many bodies are increasingly turning to body modification practices, which span tattooing to cosmetic surgery, in order to drastically re-shape their bodily contours and alter their appearances. It is because skin is somatic and psychic, sensual and social, that its alteration and even removal is often read as an act that can unveil the subject and their “true self” to others.

Popular in contemporary life, but dating back to the dawn of mankind, body modification practices suggest that the skin is and has always been the vestment through

¹⁰⁹ Epidermolysis bullosa was brought to the attention of the public as a result of the American and British documentaries *My Flesh and Blood* (2003; HBO) and *The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off* (2004; Channel 4). Recent trials in stem-cell transplantation by Dr. John Wagner et al. at the University of Minnesota in 2008 have shown favorable results in steps towards finding a treatment and cure (Josephine Marcotty, “Long-shot stem-cell treatment gives two brothers a future,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), June 8, 2008, <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/19471139.html>). While generally called “butterfly children” in the West, sufferers of EB are also referred to as “cotton wool babies” in Australian vernacular and “crystal skin children” in South America. In Canada, there are approximately 2,000 EB sufferers.

which we form and work on ourselves over time in order to suit or contrast various cultural paradigms.¹¹⁰ Reinforcing this widespread belief that skin stands in for the person, Sigmund Freud argues that the ego is, first and foremost, a “bodily ego” that is “ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body.”¹¹¹ Taking into account the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Serres contends that the skin is “the place where the ego is decided,” which reveals why analyses and explorations of body modification practices, particularly within psychoanalysis, are often concerned with the correlation between skin and self.¹¹²

In order to better understand the skin-as-self metaphor, I turn briefly to two contemporary films that explore the link between skin and identity. *He Took His Skin Off For Me* (2014; Dir. Ben Aston) and *American Mary* (2012; Dir. Jen and Sylvia Soska) are just two amongst a host of skin flicks that probe the metaphors that shape our experiences in and perceptions of skin. I have chosen them because they both reinforce and disrupt the skin-as-self metaphor. At the heart of many horror and science fiction films that make skin their primary focus is the idea that skin is now a medium through which new bodies are being engineered and crafted. These films underscore Lafrance’s assertion that being comfortable in one’s skin is not a given; it is an achievement insofar as our skin has an agency of its own that often contradicts our own wants and needs.¹¹³

In the British independent film *He Took His Skin Off For Me*, the nameless protagonist (played by Sebastian Armesto) removes his skin for his girlfriend through

¹¹⁰ In 1991, Ötzi, a 5,300-year old mummy, was found in the Ötztal Alps, Italy. This mummy is of significance because the well-preserved body illustrates that modification practices, such as tattooing, have been a part of human culture for thousands of years. The age of these tattoos highlights a long-standing desire to modify the body, its health and image via the skin. For more information regarding Ötzi, please see: <http://www.iceman.it/en/node/226>.

¹¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), trans. J. Riviere and Ed. J. Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960), 19.

¹¹² Serres, *Five Senses*, 17.

¹¹³ Marc Lafrance, “From Skin Ego to the Psychic Envelope,” 23.

flaying.¹¹⁴ He does so because he thinks she wants and needs to get under his skin for the success of their love story, which she does...in the beginning.¹¹⁵ By taking his skin off, he literally exposes himself to his girlfriend in a way that is not typically possible, which he understands as the only possible act that will save and enrich their relationship. Ironically, this gesture requires the removal of precisely the physical features and epidermal contours that make him “him” and foster the couple’s intimacy. Appearing both alien and universal, the protagonist eradicates the ground through which touch and intimacy take place, which means that the couple can no longer relate on a tactile and sensual level. The film’s tag line, “Love is sticky,” underscores the fact that without skin, the protagonist is a lumpen visceral form, a state of being that engenders both a physical and an emotional distance between the lovers. Exposed to the world, the protagonist’s skinless body leaves a messy trail of blood about the house, which strains the couple’s already problematic relationship and leads, ultimately, to its dissolution.

What the film explores is a cultural suspicion of the skin-as-self metaphor in contemporary life. When we say things like “I just want to get under her skin,” we are suggesting that the skin is not all a person is and that there are intangible aspects below the surface that make a person who and what they are. At the same time, when we employ this idiom in reference to another, we are suggesting that we want to, in part, possess them, which requires the removal of their most possessive and controlling organ: the skin. Ultimately, *He Took His Skin Off For Me* positions skin as the very thing that makes relations across bodies possible and explores how those relations become impossible without a sensing, mediating, and protecting fleshy boundary. Moreover, it makes visually accessible the ways the skin-as-self metaphor has concretized the link between a loss of

¹¹⁴ To watch the short film, please see: *He Took His Skin Off For Me*, dir. Ben Aston, accessed November 12, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/116498390>.

¹¹⁵ Produced entirely without the aid of computer graphics (“CG”) and with the financial aid of more than 200 Kickstarter backers, Ben Aston’s film is considered to be a visual feat. If interested in the laborious special effects that went into creating a skinless body, please see: *Behind the Scenes: He Took His Skin Off For Me*, accessed November 12, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/116467047>.

skin and a loss of self. The inverse of this is the increasing desire to control our skins in order to reify the connection between skin and self.

In the contemporary British horror film *American Mary*, Mary Mason (played by Katharine Isabelle) is a heavily-in-debt medical school dropout who takes her surgical knowledge and prowess to the underground world of extreme body modification. Her clients, most of whom identify as “freaks,” desire fantastical and illegal procedures, such as the amputation of one’s genitals in order to become doll-like, or the transplantation of limbs between twins so that they can be together forever. Because Mary is not a certified medical doctor, she operates outside the law of health care and societal norms and is able to capitalize on the desire many have to re-contour their body images through the manipulation of skin.

Addressing the ways we might feel trapped in our skins, *American Mary* treats skin as an object that can be controlled so as to shift power to the subject. Framing skin as an organ of transformation and power, the film reinforces the validity of the skin-as-self metaphor by privileging the skin’s renewable, elastic, morphological, and porous nature. By doing so, it makes visually accessible the way the skin’s possessiveness can be interrupted and forestalled by exerting control and possessiveness over it—through the overwriting, sculpting, and re-contouring of the body.

In contemporary visual culture, body modification practices are no longer limited to tattooing and piercing; the increasing engagement with scarification, sub-dermal implants, and tongue splitting, to name a few, is radically challenging what skin can do, what constitutes a body, and what determines a body’s cultural intelligibility. While here I have only touched on the important role body modification practices play in our contemporary negotiations of skin, I will return to the topic through my discussion of wearable skins in chapter three and engineered skins in the conclusion.

By engaging skin metaphors as devices that help us better understand our differences, as well as our fraught relationships with our integuments, this project thinks through the ways our thoughts of and perceptions about skin translate into representations across popular visual culture. In focusing on portraiture, a mode of representation invented

to convey the aspects of a person that are invisible or reside beneath the surface (i.e., their personality), this project illuminates Western cultural and social values, particularly those related to conceptions of difference. In turn, how we represent skin reflects the way we think about, perceive, and even experience bodily difference. While the skin-as-self metaphor is one of the most important because it is a foundational metaphor, functioning as one that other skin metaphors can enhance or contest, it is critical to our understanding of skin as an empathic organ. How we dwell in skin, and the ways we imagine it as a boundary, uncovers the value we put on it as a culture.

Chapter 2

2 « Skin-as-Home »

In recent years, contemporary cinema has explored the limits of the body. Anatomically speaking, those limits are skin. Art and film critic James Quandt writes about this filmic exploration of the body's boundary in French horror cinema, referring to it as the "New French Extremity Movement," or, simply "French Extremism."¹¹⁶ Quandt argues that the genre pushes the boundaries of acceptable subject matter in order to explore the socio-culturally instituted ideologies, including taboos, about bodies that frame our relationships with them. Describing the genre as one that "wade[s] in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm," Quandt asserts that the body is opened up to "fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and to subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation and defilement."¹¹⁷ What is clear from such a description is the emphasis on skin, touch, and sex, in addition to violent trauma.

A "cinema of the body," French Extremism intermittently visually magnifies, fragments, and anatomizes skin.¹¹⁸ By doing so, it captures the visceral and elusive nature of trauma and pain and, more importantly, focuses on skin as a boundary organ. It is through the visual stretching and perforation of epidermal boundaries between bodies on screen that French Extremist films reflect culture back to itself, visualizing collective yet unspoken fears, anxieties, and fantasies about bodies, such as the dispersal of the body and a loss of self through the skin. Films associated with the genre include, among others: *Dans ma peau* (2002; dir. Marina de Van), *Haute tension* (2003; dir. Alexandre Aja), *À l'intérieur* (2007; dir. Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo), and *Martyrs* (2008; dir. Pascal Laugier).

¹¹⁶ James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," *ArForum* (February 2004): 126–32.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹¹⁸ Tim Palmer, "Style and Sensation in Contemporary French Cinema of the Body," *Journal of Film and Video* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 22–32.

While Quandt makes the case that an opening up of bodies on screen permits French Extremism to engage and reflect culture precisely because it visualizes Western fears, desires, and anxieties about bodies, he does not account for the ways spectators are reciprocally opened up through experiences of reflexivity and feelings of empathy triggered by the representation of another's epidermal boundary. It is the intermittent visual magnification, fragmentation, and anatomization of the subject's skin on screen, particularly during scenes of torture, that permit spectators to feel their own skins crawl, an experience of reflexivity triggered by looking at another's skin that makes possible a transformation of affect and produces an anxious affective economy. While most spectators will not be able to speak to experiences of torture, they can "feel with" the subject rather than a "feel for" her insofar as we all exist in and as skins, albeit differently.¹¹⁹

The distinction between "feeling for" and "feeling with" is important because it fleshes out the duality of empathy. Empathy is "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another."¹²⁰ What this definition suggests is that, on the one hand, I suspend my own feelings and experiences in order to inhabit the body of another to "understand" them by standing in their shoes. For Dominick LaCapra, this side of empathy, this "feeling for," is "vicarious," which means these kinds of empathic experiences lead to a temporary loss of self.¹²¹ On the other hand, empathy also permits me to acknowledge my feelings and experiences while, at the same time, experiencing those of another by "feeling with" them. Feeling with is a kind of virtual sharing, an experience of mutuality. This emphasis on sharing and co-constitution underlines the self-reflexive nature of empathy.

¹¹⁹ I write "her" because the protagonists of most, if not all, French Extremist films are women. For analyses of the representation of women in horror cinema, generally, see: Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

¹²⁰ Oxford Dictionaries, "Empathy," *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/empathy>.

¹²¹ Dominick LaCapra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 135.

Vicarious empathy does not cultivate experiences of difference or its celebration across bodies because two experiences of being in/a body are consolidated. LaCapra asserts that we can get around the problem of vicariousness through what he calls “empathic unsettlement.” When it comes to witnessing trauma, empathic unsettlement “involves the virtual not vicarious experience—that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of—or speaking for—the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice of suffering.”¹²² A feeling for the protagonist, which is the default experience of spectatorship in the horror film genre (and why it is so popular), permits a collapse of experience and an eradication of difference. Feeling with the protagonist, however, suggests an engagement with one’s self, with one’s body and skin, prompted by the experience of another body and its skin. The visual magnification, fragmentation, and anatomization of the subject’s skin during scenes when the body is being beaten, torn, cut, and flayed make possible a sharing of epidermal perspectives and a common ground between subject and spectator, which is, albeit problematically, based on assumptions regarding spectatorial affect and pleasure. When I conjure the imagined spectator in order to better understand skin portraiture’s abilities and achievements as a radical form of portraiture, I place myself and my experiences as the de facto basis for its evaluation and definition, which, in turn, runs the risk of excluding the divergent experiences others might have with the same kind of skin-related images or objects. However, given that all humans live in, across, and through skin, I use my own experiences as the ground through which to both feel and imagine skins of others as an act of feeling others.

The representation of the subject/protagonist’s skin as fragmented, magnified, and sometimes anatomized makes them both familiar and foreign to spectators. When the skin of another is represented in this way, spectators see it in the same way they would see their own—in pieces. For example, when I look at my skin, even in a mirror (or in multiple mirrors), I do not see the organ in its entirety as it envelops my body in the round; rather, I see only the part of the skin that I look at, which always already implies that what

¹²² Ibid.

is behind, above, and below my line of sight is temporarily absent. As such, I rely on touch to make up for what is lost when swaths of my epidermis are invisible to me.

A kind of skin portraiture, French Extremism also contributes to the study of skin metaphors, particularly skin-as-home, a metaphor that the genre reinforces through its emphasis on home invasion and its tendency to stage the family home as the setting for extreme acts of violence. By dramatizing the invasion of both the home and the skin, these films illuminate our long-standing cultural preoccupation with boundaries, particularly those that demarcate outside from inside. The compounding of invaded boundaries highlights the skin's function as a home and the home's skin-like nature. French Extremism illuminates not only the presence and popularity of the home metaphor in our cultural milieu, but also the fact that skins, like homes, are spaces in which we dwell.

By considering the act and importance of dwelling, I flesh out the skin-as-home metaphor below, using it to think through a number of handcrafted examples of skin portraiture. The home metaphor illuminates the importance of touch, both real and virtual (haptic), to elusive experiences of embodiment like reflexivity and empathy, allowing us to better understand the complexities of skin. Moving from a brief cultural analysis of touch, I turn my attention to “women's work” in the space of the home to think through the gendering of the senses in Western culture. More importantly, the idea of women's work leads me to a discussion of *Haut craftwork*, a branch of skin portraiture that engages traditional crafting techniques, such as embroidery, sewing, knitting, and ceramic sculpting, but disrupts those very traditions by using human skin as a untraditional and highly macabre material in which to re-imagine our domestic spaces. The German noun for skin, *Haut*, plays off the French word *haute*, meaning “handmade,” often linked to the term *haute couture* (hand-sewn, one-of-a-kind clothes). In the last section of this chapter, I analyze *Handheld* (2009) [Figs. 13–21], a series of diminutive ceramic sculptures by Scottish artist Jessica Harrison. *Handheld* is an important case study because it clearly explores the acts of flaying and crafting, the space of the home, and tactile sensuality through Harrison's creation of miniature furnishings that appear to be made from skin that is both alive, attached to a body, and dead, flayed from it. This discussion of the house

metaphor and crafting leads into a discussion of the clothing metaphor and the potential for relationality between and across bodies in skin portraiture in the following chapter.

2.1 « Dwelling In Skin »

Both a verb (“to dwell,” i.e., to live in or inhabit) and a noun (“a dwelling,” i.e., a space we live in, such as an apartment or house), dwelling is, for philosopher Martin Heidegger, the thing that makes us human insofar as it prompts us to build and, as a result, relate to others, objects, and environments.¹²³ The nature of these relations is tactile. More importantly, these relations are identity-forming. For psychoanalyst Anzieu and anthropologist Ashley Montagu, who and what we are in adulthood is shaped by tactile experiences in the early, formative months of our lives (0–18 months).¹²⁴ In other words, our skins psychosomatically determine our experiences of embodiment and our movements in the worlds we (will come to) occupy. Too much touch, being touched in the wrong way, and even a lack of touch can engender what Anzieu sees as either a “strong” or a “weak” skin ego as I touched on in the introduction, which, in addition to forming a subject’s identity, also shapes and directs a person’s future relations with skin.¹²⁵

Acknowledging the skin ego as an “imaginary space” and “a metaphor of very broad scope,” Anzieu defines it as “a mental image” that is created from the child’s “experience of the surface of the body” that permits them to “represent [themselves] as an Ego containing psychological contents.”¹²⁶ A subject who has an unhealthy skin ego as a result

¹²³ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Thinking, Dwelling,” in *Heidegger: Basic Writings*, trans. Taylor Carmen (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹²⁴ While I reference Anzieu and Montagu together in order to reinforce the idea that touch-based relations in infancy and childhood shape our identity and relations with skin as adults, I must note that Montagu’s emphasis on touch is “centripedal” (outside-in) whereas Anzieu’s, by virtue of his being a psychoanalyst, is “centrifugal” (inside-out) (Montagu, *Touch*, 10). This point, while minor, does account for differences between Anzieu and Montagu in theorizing skin and the role it plays in human culture.

¹²⁵ Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 41–44.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 5, 40.

of problematic tactile relations with their caregiver(s), for example, might experience various “psychopathological” manifestations, such as a need to cover one’s skin or a fear that the skin is full of holes.¹²⁷ What is underlined here by Anzieu’s conception of the skin ego is, firstly, that we live in, across, through, and as skin, and, secondly, that our style of dwelling in skin is both the cause and effect of tactile relations across bodies.

While Anzieu thinks through the importance of tactile relations in human development, he does not consider the ways those relations are influenced by the space in which they often take place—the family home. Anzieu’s lack of consideration of the home environment within the context of his analysis on ego-formation, the skin, and touch within the caregiver-child dyad is surprising precisely because these experiences tend to take place in and through the family home. As such, an analysis of the family home is an area of inquiry that would enrich our understanding of the role skin plays in our lives. In Anzieu’s conception of the subject, as in French Extremism’s exploration of boundaries, skin and home are intertwined because they are dwelling spaces. It is no surprise, then, that a fear of losing one’s corporeal lodgings through violence and trauma is taken up in both psychoanalysis and contemporary horror cinema, particularly French Extremism.

When we lose our skins or are confronted with images of flayed bodies, we are reminded that without skin we do not have the ability to dwell, and, as a result, cannot relate to others, objects, and environments in the world. If we cannot dwell and relate, we become something other than, something simultaneously more than and less than human. When the skin is metaphorized as a home, there is both a fear and fantasy of losing our integuments, which is taken up, for example, not only in Anzieu’s reading of the narcissist and masochist skin egos that I touched on in the preface, but also in the representation of the flayed body in Pascal Laugier’s film *Martyrs*.¹²⁸

Set at the end of the twentieth century, *Martyrs* opens with a scene of a young, badly abused girl named Lucie (played by Mylène Jampanoï) who is locked away in a

¹²⁷ Ibid., 66–67.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 40–44, 108, 123–127.

room in an abandoned warehouse but escapes imprisonment. Making her way to an orphanage, Lucie meets Anna (played by Morjana Alaoui), a kindred spirit, who has also experienced childhood abuse and pain. Fifteen years later, Lucie finds her childhood abusers from an image linked to a story in a local newspaper and takes revenge by murdering them in their upper-middle-class, modernist, suburban family home. Arriving too late to stop Lucie, Anna attempts to clean up the dead bodies and viscera strewn about the house. Tormented by a vision of a disfigured woman, Lucie has a psychic break and commits suicide in her ex-captors' home after realizing she cannot escape the trauma that has shaped her.

Hearing a noise, Anna is led to a secret bunker in the sub-basement of the house where she comes upon a woman so badly abused, the woman no longer seems human. Anna attempts to remove the bolts that anchor metal plates into the woman's skull, but she is instead confronted with the horrific truth about Lucie's past when she is met by a secret philosophical society that takes her captive. Lucie was kidnapped and tortured so many years ago because the society engineers living "martyrs," those that have survived physical martyrdom, which entails a prolonged, incremental regime of physical and psychological torture that leads one to the precipice of death. The purpose of these martyrs is to glean the secrets of death and gain transcendental insight into afterlife. The society, it seems, has a long-standing preference for turning women into martyrs due to the fact that they believe women are biologically, psychologically, and spiritually stronger than men.¹²⁹ If taken as a metaphor, the female martyr points to the fact that women, their bodies, and their difference are responsible for awesome forces of political, social, and cultural transformation, which patriarchal culture fears. It is because they are awesome—because they and their sexuality instill fear—that women are the primary targets of such radical epidermal transformation in this film and across the bulk of French Extremist films. The skins of women bring us closer to knowing, seeing, and relating to bodies differently.

¹²⁹ This preference, albeit fictional, is associated with historical facts: many of the martyrs documented in history, particularly those recorded by Christian sources during the middle ages and those linked to the witch trials of the early modern period, for example, are women.

Locked in the bunker below the house, Anna is systematically tortured over an unspecified period of time. Beginning with what might seem like “light” forms of violence, such as punching and kicking, the abuse escalates to the apex of torture: flaying. Reaching “the final stage” of her transformation, Anna is taken into a stainless steel surgical theatre, where she is strapped to a table and flayed alive. The unhomely appearance of the room foreshadows Anna’s loss of her fleshly lodgings. While the film attends to a blurring of visual boundaries between Anna, her surroundings, and her torturer in this scene, what is significant is the way the camera focuses on her face, which is the only part of her body that is not flayed. This visual focus is designed to communicate an epidermal experience of transformation that is not only impossible to verbalize, but also too difficult to watch.¹³⁰ Flayed alive, Anna miraculously survives, which, in medical terms, is impossible due to shock and exposure.¹³¹

Anna’s survival is what makes her a martyr—she has witnessed what lies beyond life in death and has lived to tell the tale. Confronting the spectator with an image of a skinless, alien body, *Martyrs* shows us a paradoxical figure that is both more and less than human [Fig. 5]. Removed from her shackles, Anna is placed in a sterile liquid bath to extend her life so she can communicate what she has experienced at the precipice of death to “Mademoiselle” (played by Catherine Bégin), the leader of the society. Upon learning what Anna has witnessed, Mademoiselle shoots herself in the head, painting a grim picture of contemporary life. Shrouded in soft, white light, Anna’s face communicates the pain, suffering, and ecstasy of the ordeal, illuminating the Western obsession with skin as a stand-in for who and what we are, and our understanding of it as a dwelling space.

¹³⁰ It is interesting to note that spectators are rarely, if ever, shown the gruesome act of a character being flayed alive in its entirety on screen. This is presumably because there are a host of special effects challenges (and costs) associated with this kind of representation, and, more importantly, because what is omitted from view is often more important than what is shown.

¹³¹ In most cases where a flayed body is represented in visual culture, the depiction is unrealistic. One example where flaying is represented in believable medical terms is the *Game of Thrones* episode “The Gift” (season 5, episode 7), wherein Ramsay Bolton flays an old woman, leaving her partially skinned. He remarks to his new wife that the woman’s heart gave out before they could flay the upper part of her body.



Figure 5: Film still—Anna chained up after being flayed alive. Pascal Laugier. *Martyrs*. Directed by Pascal Laugier. 2008. Berlin: Wild Bunch, 2008.

What makes Laugier’s visual representation of the beaten, skinless body noteworthy is the fact that he does not show spectators the actual act of flaying. Witnessing such a taboo act would be read within Western visual culture as a gratuitous display of torture designed to shock, as is often associated with “torture porn” films like James Wan’s *Saw* (2004) and Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005), for example.¹³² *Martyrs* strikes at the heart of the human condition through its emphasis on pain and suffering, both lived and symbolic, precisely because all humans have felt, in some way, pain and suffering. It is for this reason that feelings of empathy for the subject on screen manifest across

¹³² “Torture porn” is a term coined by film critic David Edelstein in 2006 (David Edelstein, “Now Playing at your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn,” *New York Magazine* 28 (January 2006), accessed June 12, 2015, <http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/>). A sub-genre of “splatter films,” torture porn focuses on explicit scenes of torture, which engenders visceral responses across spectators. The use of “porn” in the name is due to the visual emphasis on the naked body, flesh, and sex acts; the presentation of non-sexual violence in a way that is aesthetically akin to pornography; and the arguments that they are “consumed as a kind of violent fetish pornography by viewers who are sexually aroused by displays of torture” (Steve Jones, “The Lexicon of Offense: The Meanings of Torture, Porn, and ‘Torture Porn,’” in *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, eds. Feona Atwood, et al. (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), 187–88).

spectators.¹³³ For Elaine Scarry, pain—particularly experiences of pain achieved by torture—is the very thing that allows us to know bodies, including our own, differently, engendering new experiences of embodiment that result from a “making and unmaking of the world.”¹³⁴ Important to human life, pain shapes our sense of self, our perception of others, and our movements through socio-cultural, as well as architectural, spaces. Moreover, because all of us have experienced pain in some way, we are all ostensibly connected by it. A cornerstone of corporeality studies, the representation of pain and its connection to skin are important because both are elusive and hard to verbalize.

Underpinning Scarry’s analysis of pain is a meditation on the nature of torture. Torture is a taboo act that, by virtue of being a limit imposed by culture, illuminates and “reflects the overall value system that depends on its enforcement.”¹³⁵ For Freud, taboos are “a sensing of something unapproachable,” which underscores, firstly, why they are so often metaphorized as boundaries and, secondly, why skin and touch—the organ and sense, respectively, that delineate boundaries and allow us to physically approach torture—are consistently explored in French Extremism.¹³⁶ The emphasis on pain in *Martyrs* elicits responses of empathy because our attention is drawn to parts of the body that are normally either invisible or “absent” (i.e., those that we cannot see and feel consistently: internal organs and parts of our epidermal landscape).¹³⁷ While I have been arguing against the idea that skin is merely a boundary, despite the fact that it is a very necessary boundary that polices the border between the outside world and inside the body, it functions as an ultimate limit of knowledge, a limit designed to protect us. When the

¹³³ Rob Carnevale, “Martyrs—Pascal Laugier Interview,” *Indie London*, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/martyrs-pascal-laugier-interview>.

¹³⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹³⁵ Samuel Moyn, “Torture and Taboo: On Elaine Scarry,” *The Nation*, February 5, 2013, accessed June 5, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/torture-and-taboo-elaine-scarry/>.

¹³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points on Agreement Between the Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1950], trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 2009), 18.

¹³⁷ Leder, *Absent Body*.

skin is flayed, for example, it allows us absolute knowledge, knowledge about what we cannot see or otherwise know, which *is* horrifying. In turn, horror comes from getting what some viewers might want—absolute knowledge. Contrary to my general understanding that it is more productive to imagine skin is boundary-less, epidermal boundaries help us limit the knowledge and trauma we experience, which in the context of both French Extremism and skin portraiture plays out and across the family home. However, this begs the question: When should we not cross skin boundaries?

2.2 « Architecture Metaphors: House and Home »

Homes are architectural structures that not only protect and shelter our bodies from the environment, but also foster a range of important relations between them. This is not to suggest, however, that the home is universally understood or experienced in this way: it is a space often associated with family, but it can also be a battleground, a place of physical and emotional trauma. While a number of definitions and cultural understandings of home exist, I argue that it is ultimately, like the skin, a space that is “transactional.” In other words, the home and the subject are “mutually constituted.”¹³⁸

What I mean by “mutually constituted” is the phenomenon by which the subject—via their skin—and the home—via its surfaces—are brought into reciprocal relation as a result of touch. By dwelling in a home, we imprint on it and are shaped by its surfaces, spaces, textures, and experiences. In return, the home is imprinted on and shaped by our dwelling as is illustrated by the idiosyncratic ways we live in, arrange, curate, touch, and move through it. For feminist philosopher Shannon Sullivan, “mutual constitution” implies an ethical coming together of skins, whether they are the skins of bodies or of environments, in such a way that they are able to express equal force and influence on

¹³⁸ Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.

each other while, at the same time, retaining their individual character and attributes.¹³⁹

Sullivan poignantly asserts that,

The boundaries that delimit individual entities are permeable, not fixed, which means that organisms and their various environments—social, cultural, and political as well as physical—are constituted by their mutual influence and impact on each other. This co-constitutive process does not merely happen once to establish static entities that never change; because the relationship between organism and environment is dynamic and ongoing, both organism and environment are being remade by means of shifts and changes in the other.¹⁴⁰

The crux of Sullivan’s consideration of bodily relations is the transactional element; a transaction makes possible a coming together of skins in a reciprocal, “non-viciously circular way” that engenders the “mutual transformation” of skins, as well as “significant change” to the very make-up and experiences of those skins.¹⁴¹

While Sullivan flirts with the topic of skin, as the title of her book *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism* (2001) suggests, she does not study skin *per se*, nor does she tease out the empathic nature of skin, which is critical to my own analysis of skin portraiture. However, Sullivan’s theorization of mutual constitution through bodily relations can be applied to a study of the skin’s role in experiences of embodiment as they pertain to viewer experiences of skin portraiture, for example. Sullivan suggests, in contrast to Anzieu that “bodies do not stop at the edges of their skins and are not contained neatly and sharply within them,” which is non-reductive and avoids the characterization of bodies as bounded, lumpen forms of flesh made passive as a result of culture.¹⁴² The word “constitution” suggests that through this meeting in socio-cultural spaces, skins are subtly altered, opened up to accept one another through

¹³⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 2.

respect and dynamism, ensuring that “meaning no longer be thought of as a product of a single subject’s intentionality.”¹⁴³

A home is a space and a place that is transformed, made meaningful and intimate, through dwelling, which has its basis in touch. When we metaphorize the skin as a home, we work through our cultural understanding of skin as an empathic and relational organ. Moreover, the intimate and sensual nature of the home—the ways we imprint into, move across, and interact with it—permits us to forge embodied connections between and across skins that shape who we are and what we will become. It is no coincidence that many of us read a person’s home as a portrait of them, a reflection of who and what they are. Bachelard suggests that the home is a “cosmos,”¹⁴⁴ an intimate space comprised of “imaginative resonance[s],” one that is “created, illuminated and experienced through memories, dreams and emotions.”¹⁴⁵ Home and identity, like skin and our sense of self, are inextricably linked.

In many cultures, the word “home,” conjures up an image of a place. Dwelling is, as Heidegger suggests, the result of building and the impetus for it; however, not every place we live or spend a lot of time in is a place of dwelling.¹⁴⁶ It is important to note that there remains a linguistic and cultural distinction between “house” and “home.” While one can live in a house, one might not feel at home in it, which is why feminist philosophers like Elizabeth Grosz argue women need to rethink space and make spaces of dwelling their own.¹⁴⁷ If we were to refer to the skin as a “house,” for example, we would lose the underlying implication of intimacy, touch, and relationality insofar as houses are spaces that are yet to be lived in and imprinted on intimately over time by a person or group of

¹⁴³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁴⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 2–3.

¹⁴⁵ Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” 145.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Women, Chora, Dwelling” in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden, 210-222 (London: Routledge, 2000).

interconnected persons. “House” conjures an image of a walled and roofed structure that protects and shelters bodies, but it does not cultivate sensual relations across them. There is an emptiness associated with the word “house.”

While I argue in favor of the home metaphor, the house metaphor is also important to our cultural understanding and representation of skin because it has, as Benthien suggests, been present in our Western imagination since antiquity and early Christianity.¹⁴⁸ Benthien’s emphasis on architectural metaphors, particularly the house, is the result of the widespread, highly documented belief that the body is the place where the soul lives in Western cultural history.¹⁴⁹ In this arrangement, the skin becomes mere “walls” that protect and seal both the body and soul. When skin is understood as a wall or façade, its vital, sensing capabilities are diminished and the body is characterized as a “hollow, vessel-like space,” which, in turn, works to suppress its empathic nature.¹⁵⁰

In their cultural analysis of the home, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling define the home as a “complex and multi-layered geographical concept” that is “a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two.”¹⁵¹ What is important here is the reinforcement of home as a place through, in, and across which we touch. When people reflect on their childhood homes, for example, the memories they recall have more to do with their relations with others, events, and the senses, particularly touch and olfaction, than with the architectural structure or features of the homes in question. Furthermore, Blunt and Dowling argue, a “home is much more than house or household” insofar as it is the “personal relations” of the home “that constitute [it].” I extend Blunt

¹⁴⁸ Benthien, *On the Cultural Border*, chapter 2.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵¹ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, 2–3.

and Dowling's argument here insofar as it can help us to think through our largest organ's empathic nature.¹⁵²

2.3 « Empathic Skins: Touch and Haptics »

What is stressed by French scholarship on skin—referred to as a “metaorgan” by Serres and perceived by Anzieu as “consensual”—is how our integuments function as the home to the five senses.¹⁵³ A complex psychosomatic organ, skin is the interactive place where the senses are brought together and perceived. Most important to the study of skin within the arts and humanities is its ability to touch and feel.

Touch is a special sense. It is both sensual and sensitive, permitting bodies to come into meaningful contact with other bodies, objects, and environments, which causes a ripple effect of relations. Unlike the other four senses that punctuate the skin's matrix, touch is unique insofar as it is part of skin, embedded into it. Sight, hearing, smell, and taste are connected to skin but also distinct from it, which makes them anatomically less important than touch. Because touch cannot be dislodged from the skin, except in rare cases of congenital analgesia (a complete lack of feeling and sensation of touch in the skin), for example, it is the sense most critical to human and animal survival. People with congenital analgesia often experience numerous life-threatening injuries due to an inability to feel their own skin and the skins of the world. In other words, a lack of touch means a loss of bodily boundaries. The fact that touch is embedded in skin literalizes the concept that touch is “the deepest sense.”¹⁵⁴

Skins can sense even the lightest of touch due to millions of nerve endings called Meissner's corpuscles located in dermal papillae (small, nipple-like extensions of the

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Serres, *Five Senses*, 53, 59, 83; Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, 127. As noted by British Anzieu historian and cultural theorist Naomi Segal, Anzieu uses the term “consensual” to refer to the skin so as to reinforce the skin ego's fifth function: the bringing together of perception of all the senses (Segal, *Consensuality*, 4).

¹⁵⁴ Constance Classen, *Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

dermis, the middle layer of skin, into the epidermis, the top layer of skin), which are distributed across the entirety of our skinscapes. These nerve endings are concentrated in the pads of the fingers, as well as the lips. This concentration explains, firstly, why definitions and representations of touch are almost always associated with the hands, and, secondly, why kissing is culturally perceived as the most intimate act between lovers (see Garry Marshall's 1990 film *Pretty Woman* for a fictional exploration of the intimacy of kissing).

In the history of Western culture, however, touch has been downplayed, placed at the bottom of what is a clearly delineated hierarchy of senses.¹⁵⁵ Considered a lowly sense in comparison to vision because it does not permit a distanced mastery over the other, object, or world which positions the (male) subject at the center of the perceived socio-cultural universe that is, in turn, dominated, touch has been culturally associated with women and the space of the home.¹⁵⁶ With that said, if one looks to acts of sexual violence in culture, for example, it is clear that touch permits a mastery over others, objects, and environments. Despite this evaluation, touch is the first sense to develop, followed by hearing, olfaction, taste, and then, lastly, sight.¹⁵⁷ In biological terms, the sooner a body part or bodily function appears within a body (during gestation), the more critical and important it becomes to the overall functioning of that body. The fact that babies are born with blurred vision, are near-sighted, and experience each eye moving independently of the other while the other four senses are highly developed and attuned suggests that vision is not critical for survival or growth. However, once touch and hearing are mastered, which for Montagu is the “know-how of being human,” vision becomes the most important sense.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Robert Jütte, *History of the Senses* (London: Polity Press, 2005). Please see chapter 3, “Classifications: The Hierarchy of the Senses,” 52–71.

¹⁵⁶ Constance Classen, “Feminine Tactics: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Berg, 2005), 228.

¹⁵⁷ Montagu, *Touching*, 249.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Montagu suggests, like Anzieu, that a person's identity is the result of a feeling of contact with the body—"to know who one is, the person must be aware of what he feels."¹⁵⁹ Specifically, Montagu argues that when "I feel this objective something 'out there,' beyond the bounds of my body, I also at the same instantly experience my own self."¹⁶⁰ In these terms, humans require touch in order to form an identity.¹⁶¹

In recent years, Western culture has experienced a decline of physically felt tactile encounters between bodies due to the increasing popularity and consumption of communication technologies made possible by the Internet, such as social media, online gaming, and virtual reality that permit a kind of virtual touching.¹⁶² Observations of Western life today suggest that, firstly, we are putting more and more physical distance between bodies, which forecloses the potential for felt sensual encounters across skins, and that, secondly, we are losing the ability to gain knowledge through our real or physical skins, which means we are less in touch with the tangible world around us.

For anthropologist David Howes, who studies the Cashinahua tribal peoples of Eastern Peru, touch is important in the context of this non-Western tribal culture because it is a tool and a vital source of knowledge.¹⁶³ "Skin knowledge" (*Ichi una*) "is the knowledge of the world one acquires through one's skin."¹⁶⁴ The Cashinahua find their way through the dense jungle of Peru and locate animals to hunt for food without the aid of the contemporary technologies such as GPS or night vision, normalized and

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 206.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 102. To make this point clear, Montagu discusses Helen Keller (1880–1968), an American woman who became blind, deaf, and mute due to illness in infancy, and who famously learned to communicate and form impressions of the world solely through touch.

¹⁶² Edward Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2007), 52-55.

¹⁶³ David Howes, "Skinscapes: Embodiment, Culture and Environment," in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Berg, 2005).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 27.

popularized in the West. Skin knowledge can be understood as a form of “dermo-optical perception”: “seeing with one’s skin, seeing without sight in the mind’s eye.”¹⁶⁵ Howes stresses that Western culture’s lack of tactile perception is the result of not only our increasing technological integration, but also the rational design principles that make our architectural environments tactically uninteresting.¹⁶⁶ What underscores Howes’s analysis is that non-Western conceptions of skin knowledge can open up new experiences of embodiment in and for Western culture.

Placing emphasis on the empathic nature of skin, human geographer Mark Paterson underscores the metaphorical slippage between touching and feeling.¹⁶⁷ Feeling is both the physical sensation registered at the surface of the body caused by touch *and* an emotional state triggered by an affective coming together of bodies. I can literally touch your arm and, at the same time, touch you with my sentiment, both of which you feel. Touch is a *feeling-with* that always already involves relations between and across bodies in which “the tactile and the emotional arise within each other.”¹⁶⁸ What Paterson emphasizes is “proximity”—touch collapses distance between bodies, opening bodies up to “physical nearness of tactile contact as well as the metaphorical nearness of empathy.”¹⁶⁹ It is because of the nuanced nature of touch that philosopher Edith Wyschogrod argues that the tactile encounter is precisely what permits sympathy and empathy to function as a “bringing near” that “draws others into proximity.”¹⁷⁰ While touch is our most important sense, it would seem that it has only been seriously researched

¹⁶⁵ Montagu, *Touching*, 146.

¹⁶⁶ Howes, “Skinscapes,” 29, 27.

¹⁶⁷ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 13.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁷⁰ Edith Wyschogrod, “Empathy and Sympathy as Tactile Encounter,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1981): 25.

in the twenty-first century, a milieu wherein what it means to touch and be touched has been altered as a result of technology.¹⁷¹

While we are a species who needs to touch in order to survive, we also have socio-cultural prohibitions on touch that work to separate skins precisely because our integuments are boundary organs that delineate “I” from “not I.”¹⁷² The emphasis on (quasi-)anonymity in skin portraiture, for example, underscores the idea that we are more likely or more comfortable touching strangers because we lack the intimacy to metaphorically touch them. Supporting this claim, scientific study suggest that we are even more likely to touch those strangers when we cannot see them so as to illuminate the fact that cultural prohibitions against touch are vision-oriented.¹⁷³ It would seem that within Western culture we do not often touch people whom we do not know as a result of prohibitions and taboos deeply rooted in our cultural consciousness.

When we are touched by a stranger or when we touch them in (lighted) social spaces, we are “disoriented” because cultural prohibitions regarding touch are in place to ensure that there cannot be an assimilation of difference across bodies.¹⁷⁴ Fleshing out Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analysis of perception and touch, Rosalyn Diprose suggests that being touched by a stranger is unsettling because it illuminates

¹⁷¹ Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, *In Touch with the Future: The Sense of Touch from Cognitive Neuroscience to Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Derrick De Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality* (Toronto: Somerville House, 1995).

¹⁷² For an analysis on cultural prohibitions on touch in the West, please see: Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, chapter 10.

¹⁷³ Montagu, *Touching*, 211–13. In order to make this assertion about tactility and the prominence of vision, Montagu references a scientific study carried out at Swarthmore College by Kenneth and Mary Gergen and William H. Barton (“Deviance in the Dark,” *Psychology Today* (October 1973)) where strangers were placed in both dark and lighted rooms. Those who could not see each other were more likely to touch (90% did so) and to experience sexual excitement. In the lighted room, on the other hand, there was almost no touching or experiences of sexual excitement. Experimenters concluded that people want to be close to each other through touch, but our social norms make it too costly to express these feelings as a result of our emphasis on vision.

¹⁷⁴ Rosalyn Diprose, “Community of Bodies: From Modification to Violence,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Culture Studies* 19, no. 3 (September 2005): 382.

difference between bodies that cannot be assimilated.¹⁷⁵ When we touch, we paradoxically inhabit our own bodies and, temporarily, the bodies of those we touch. Diprose asserts that there is a residual experience of “non-sense” caused by the act of touching because while I can touch and possibly temporarily inhabit you, I can never fully absorb you into my flesh. The paradoxical experience of touch not only confers and expresses meaning socially, but also highlights the differences between bodies through their skins.¹⁷⁶

For the purposes of this chapter, I do not provide an in-depth cultural analysis of touch precisely because Constance Classen’s *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (2012) does just that. Rather, I am interested in the ways touch “confirms relationships,” literally bringing bodies into intimate proximity across skin.¹⁷⁷ In addition, I am interested in the ways touch “represents a confirmation of our boundaries and separateness while permitting a union or connection with others that transcends physical limits.”¹⁷⁸

It is this desire to touch and to maintain differences between skins that makes Marks’s notions of “haptic visuality” and “haptic imagery” so useful for explaining the ways touch engenders self-reflexivity and empathy between bodies in skin portraiture. In *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema and the Senses* (2000), Marks argues that diasporic filmmakers fragment and magnify surfaces of bodies, objects, and environments in order to emphasize non-visual senses like touch. They do so to make room for embodied experiences like self-reflexivity and empathy because these experiences engender a “bringing near.” An emphasis on touch in Marks’s work, and in the films she discusses, works to question and disrupt the domineering power of vision in the West, opening up the possibility for new modes of representation and knowledge production in the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 385.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 387.

¹⁷⁷ Ruth Finnegan, “Tactile Communication,” in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Berg, 2005), 20.

¹⁷⁸ Stephen Thayer, “Social Touching,” in *Tactual Perception: A Sourcebook*, eds. William Schiff and Emerson Foulkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 298.

postcolony. Marks calls these contemporary films “intercultural cinema” in order to emphasize the fact that they are made by people who straddle two or more cultures as a result of colonization. More importantly, these filmmakers rely on touch in an attempt to regain what has been lost as a result of cultural dislocation and geographic migration—memories of home, culture, and nation, as well as experiences of cultural belonging.¹⁷⁹

Originating from Greek word *haptikos*, “haptic” means “to fasten.” For Marks, “In haptic visuality the eyes themselves function like organs of touch,” encouraging the virtual touching of skins across the skin of film.¹⁸⁰ Referencing art historian Alois Riegl’s use of “haptic” to refer to the tactile nature of Egyptian and Islamic painting, late Roman metalwork, textile art, and ornament, Marks includes the “low” traditions of weaving and embroidery associated with domestic and women’s arts in her consideration of haptic forms of visual expression.¹⁸¹ Specifically, Marks asserts that haptic cinema,¹⁸² which is a category of early experimental film within contemporary visual culture that focuses on a “stylized, flat rendition of deep space,” antagonizes optical vision insofar as it blurs the boundaries between surfaces so as to collapse the distance between skins.¹⁸³

Marks characterizes our engagement with haptics as a process through which “our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface,” which, by virtue of being interactive, institutes changes across bodies.¹⁸⁴ When this happens, Marks argues there is a

¹⁷⁹ Marks, *Skin of Film*, xi.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁸¹ Marks, *Touch*, 7.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 7-9. Haptic cinema is related to early iterations of experimental filmmaking that, through attention to flat, stylized renditions of deep space, permit the spectator to develop a sympathetic relationship with the images on screen. Examples of haptic cinema discussed by Marks include, but are not limited to, films that employ variable focus, such as Leslie Peter’s *400 Series* (1997-2000), Phyllis Balduino’s *In The Present* (1997) and *Nano Cadabra* (1998); films that utilize electronic manipulation (i.e., pixilation), such as Azian Nurudin’s *Sinar Durjana (Wicked Resonance)* (1992) and *Bitter Strength: Sadistic Response Vision* (1992), as well as Michael O’Reilly’s *Glass Jaw* (1993); and, lastly, those that take close panning shots of object so as to blur what they are, such as Dave Ryan’s *Haptic Nerve* (2000).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

“concomitant loss of depth—we become amoebalike, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes,” which constitutes what she calls an “ethical look.”¹⁸⁵ Marks is careful to warn us that haptic visuality is not the same as actually touching insofar as it is virtual, not physical.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, she warns us not to privilege one sense over another, despite her own vested interest in touch and olfaction, because, firstly, we live in a multisensory culture, and, secondly, by doing so we merely rearrange the Western hierarchy of the senses rather than challenge it through an equalization of the senses.¹⁸⁷

Haptic imagery is one that fragments and magnifies the surfaces of bodies, objects, and environments through the camera’s movement and close proximity to those very surfaces. Marks describes haptic cinema as a style that

indicates figures and then backs away from representing them fully—or, often, moves so close to them that for that reason they are no longer visible. Rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction. Haptic images pull the viewer close, too close to see properly, and this itself is erotic.¹⁸⁸

It is this element of “imaginative construction” that enables spectators to reflect on their own experiences of embodiment and project onto and into the film, which, for Marks, engenders a continual and permanent change to the films each time they are watched and interacted with. The camera’s movement and proximity to blurred surfaces disorients spectators, partially collapsing the distance between their own skins and the skins of film, which is why, Marks argues, these types of images are erotic. For Marks, the eroticism associated with intercultural cinema challenges conventions in portraiture because “haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., xvi, xvii.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁸⁷ Laura Marks, “Thinking Multisensory Culture,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 2 (July 2008).

¹⁸⁸ Marks, *Touch*, 16.

relationship between the viewer and the image.”¹⁸⁹ While haptic imagery is created through the fragmentation and magnification of surfaces, it is also the complete lack of narrative in the films Marks discusses, such as Mona Hatoum’s *Corps étranger* (1994) [Fig. 6-7], that permits spectators to self-reflexively and erotically engage with these images because imaginative construction is given free reign.¹⁹⁰

One response to haptic imagery is haptic visuality or “haptic looking.” Haptic visuality is a kind of tactile looking, in which the eye is “more inclined to move than to focus,” which permits the eye to “rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.”¹⁹¹ Haptic visuality describes touch-based modes of seeing that sensually attend to the texture and nuances of surfaces in such a way that does not permit one surface to override another, or for one perspective to dominate another’s. Haptic visuality is erotic because it enforces a “respect for otherness, and concomitant loss of self in the presence of the other,”¹⁹² which is precisely what Marks calls experiences of “mutual embodiment.”¹⁹³ The mutuality of these embodied experiences permits a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, due to the fact that haptics “mudd[y] intersubjective boundaries.”¹⁹⁴ Haptic cinema allows me to engage difference because it permits me to “come to the surface of my self (like Riegl hunched over his Persian carpets), losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be known.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹⁰ Marks, *Skin of Film*, 189-190.

¹⁹¹ Marks, *Touch*, 7.

¹⁹² Ibid., 20.

¹⁹³ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 194.

¹⁹⁴ Marks, *Touch*, 17.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

One well-known example of both intercultural and haptic cinema is Hatoum's *Corps Étranger*, a filmic skin portrait that traces the exterior and interiors of the artist's body with an endoscopic camera—a camera used to make magnified images of the “invisible” and hard to reach parts of our bodies, such as our internal organs. By using this type of medical camera, Hatoum is able to abstract herself and represent her body as a fragmented, magnified, moving landscape that blurs the boundaries between parts of the body. Meaning “foreign body” in French, *Corps étranger* refers to the foreign object (the camera) that has entered her body and also to the making foreign of that same body through filmic magnification, fragmentation, and movement. By representing her flesh and skin as abstracted patches [Fig. 6], Hatoum renders her body formless, dispersed across the screen as if it could leak out into and onto the skins of the spectators.¹⁹⁶

Projected onto the floor of a white, dimly lit cylindrical viewing booth [Fig. 7], *Corps étranger* asks viewers to step into the architectural space and become active participants rather than passive spectators. The sense of interaction with the skin portrait is achieved not only by stepping into the booth and under Hatoum's skin, but also by the haptic nature of the film achieved through the camera's close proximity to her bodily surfaces. As a result, spectators are engulfed, immersed, and enveloped by Hatoum's skinscape, which triggers a reflection on and negotiation of their proximity to the other (Hatoum and other spectators). The sense of action also manifests in the social setting of the museum or art gallery—when spectators enter the booth and become active participants, there is an element of sociality and relationality that culminates in a being and feeling together that would not be possible in traditional iterations of portraiture.

Compounding the sensuality of the skin portrait, Hatoum includes an accompanying soundtrack; spectators hear muffled, water-like gurgles and murmuring as the endoscopic camera makes its journey in, through, and across her skin. These sounds create the auditory illusion that they are inside the artist's body, literally under her skin.

¹⁹⁶ To watch a short clip of the video component of *Corps étranger*, please visit: *Corps étranger*, Mona Hatoum video performance, 2:45, posted by “rachwelle,” October 30, 2009, accessed January 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsci0WAd_Lk.

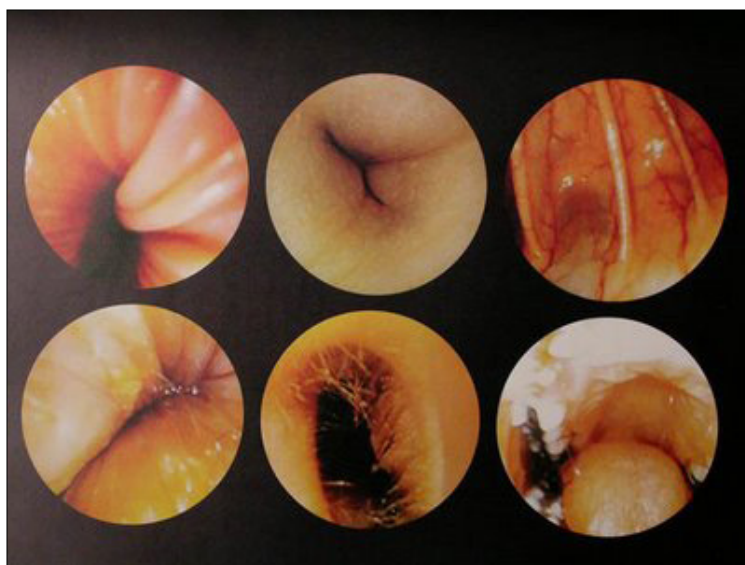


Figure 6: Mona Hatoum. Film stills from *Corps étranger*. 1994. Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure, video projector, video player, amplifier and four speakers. 350 x 300 x 300 cm. 6 minutes, 44 seconds. © Mona Hatoum Studio. Images reproduced courtesy of White Cube.

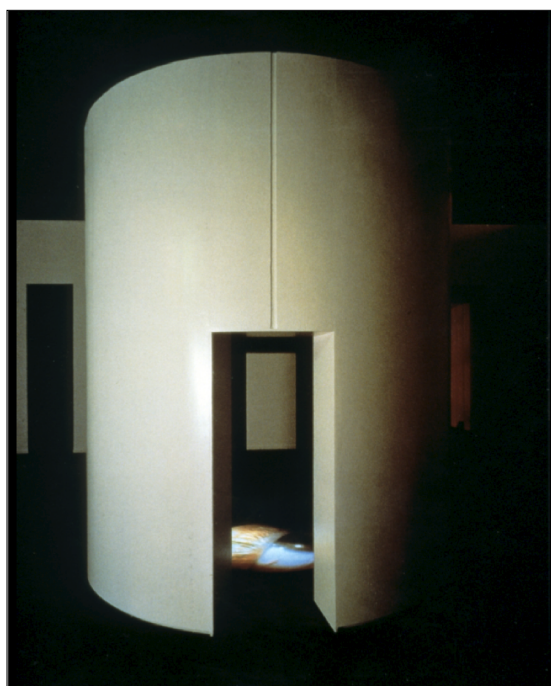


Figure 7: Mona Hatoum. Installation view of *Corps étranger*. 1994. 1 cylindrical structure, 1 video projector, 4 speakers, 1 video with surround sound. 6 minutes, 44 seconds. © Mona Hatoum. Photo © Philippe Migeat. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris. Image reproduced courtesy of White Cube.

To “get under someone’s skin” means “to annoy or irritate someone intensely,” “to fill someone’s mind in a compelling and persistent way,” and, lastly, “to reach or display deep understanding of someone.”¹⁹⁷ While the first two definitions are arguably the most popular in Western culture, it is the latter that is significant both for Hatoum’s installation and my conception of and experience with skin portraiture.

When spectators literally get under Hatoum’s skin, they intimately touch her as a result of seeing her differently (i.e., haptically) and come to understand her in non-traditional ways, which opens up new understandings of another based on touch. When we see Hatoum in this way, we are then able to know ourselves differently, which opens up the possibility for a deep understanding across bodies. Touch is further reinforced as the thing that connects disparate bodies on and off screen when the camera traces the exterior surfaces of the Hatoum’s body. At this juncture, spectators hear heavy breathing as if Hatoum is next to, on top of, or underneath them. The sense of intimacy works to partially collapse the distance between skins, but also to implicate a mutuality of touch—when I touch Hatoum, she, by virtue of brushing up against me, touches me.

The play of our tactile and auditory senses in this installation permits us to feel with Hatoum, despite the troubling fact that she is not actually there. This feeling with is made possible through imaginative construction, which not only opens up the space for the spectator to project onto the skin of Hatoum, and vice versa, but also for the triggering of an array of negative feelings and experiences (such as anxiety and claustrophobia). This free play of imaginative construction cultivated by haptic imagery permits a blurring of boundaries between bodies, which can collapse difference into sameness, and, as a result, permit reflexive and empathic experiences across skins cultivated by touch to be both positive and negative, inviting and repelling. It is to this paradoxical, near impossible feeling with—particularly within the context of feminine touch, women’s work, and the home—that I now turn my attention.

¹⁹⁷ Oxford Dictionaries, “Get under someone’s skin,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/get-under-someone's-skin>.

2.4 « Feminine Touch and Women's Work »

When we think of intimate forms of touch that take place in the home, our minds might wander to sexual relations between lovers. Yet there exist other intimate forms of tactile relations—those that are sensual and social. If experiences of touch are the underlying focus of the skin-as-home metaphor precisely because they make possible these reflexive and empathic experiences, then, by virtue of the Western ideology that frames the home as the domain of the feminine, the skin of women becomes central to this analysis.

The idea that the home is a feminine, domestic space was popularized in Western culture during the Victorian era (1837–1901), a time when industrialization was radically changing the socio-economic landscape that defined British culture.¹⁹⁸ These changes in turn triggered moral, social, health, science, and education reform.¹⁹⁹ As a result, the role of women in culture was re-defined in Britain and elsewhere across the West.²⁰⁰ While all women were deemed responsible for the upkeep of the family home, for example, many women (and children) of the lower classes were also forced to work. As a result, women of the middle and upper classes became “homemakers,” who not only kept house in the traditional sense of cleaning and cooking (or supervising such labours), but also became “tastemakers” through crafting, collecting, interior design, and curating.²⁰¹ In other words, the home was a product of not only feminine taste, but also laborious touch—a response to

¹⁹⁸ Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home* [1975] (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁹⁹ Laura J. Snider, *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²⁰⁰ Catherine Hall, et al., *Defining a Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Anita Rose (ed.), *Gender and Victorian Reform* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008).

²⁰¹ For a discussion of the history of Victorian women's work and handicraft, please see: Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–60.

the constraints of patriarchal culture. In turn, the domestic space of the home gave into and created a kind of domestic (if domesticated) agency.

In *As Long As It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (1995), design historian Penny Sparke argues that the nineteenth century saw the legitimization of women's work as it was viewed as a necessary contribution to modern society. In addition to creating and individualizing the home environment, which functioned as a status symbol and an outward communicator of identity for men, women set the moral tone of the cultural milieu by creating a stable, comforting retreat from the harsh realities of industrial, capitalist life.²⁰² However, women had little overt influence in/on the political and economic spheres of culture because they were essentially devoid of legal rights and regarded as "property,"²⁰³ which began to wane as a result of the British suffragist movement (1866–1928).²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the ideology that women were somehow less than men was further reinforced by the increasing popularity of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, which asserted that women are biologically inferior to men (an irony illuminated by the fact that the female body radically transforms through gestation and brings forth new life).²⁰⁵

While women were not expected to make many choices beyond the home, they were encouraged to make aesthetic ones within its walls. These aesthetic choices, therefore, became a kind of "feminine resistance" to the cultural dominance of the masculinity that rendered female embodiment silent, hidden from prying eyes.²⁰⁶ For

²⁰² Penny Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* [1995] (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2010), xx–xxi.

²⁰³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Caroline Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), particularly "Women on the Market," 170–191.

²⁰⁴ Sophia A. van Wingerden, *The Women's Suffragette Movement in Britain (1866–1928)* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1999).

²⁰⁵ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

²⁰⁶ Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink*, xxvi.

historian Glenna Matthews, “domestic feminism” is understood as a carving out of feminine space in culture through subtle micro-acts of resistance. These acts of resistance were achieved in the Victorian era through the decorative softening of the home’s surfaces via laborious crafting, positioning the home as an aesthetic stage on which to guide the morals of the men of the house.²⁰⁷ In other words, the house and its decorative surfaces become political when “feminine touch” and “women’s work” come to affect culture, resulting in observable changes.

For Montagu, the expression of sexual difference across cultures can be observed in “cutaneous behavior.”²⁰⁸ Writing from the perspective of a white, middle-class, male anthropologist, Montagu asserts that “Females are very much more apt to indulge in every sort of delicate tactile behavior than males.”²⁰⁹ While Montagu’s contribution to skin studies is noteworthy given that he was writing about touch when others were not, his observation prompts the question: Did he quantitatively witness women touching more than men across cultures? Or was he influenced by Western ideology and secondary research, which might have guided him to project cultural gender biases onto his observations of touch? Montagu observes that women “will pass their hands over a fabric in order to appreciate its texture or quality,” which he sees as a result of the fact that “fondling and caressing are largely feminine activities,” ostensibly informed by the fact that women touch and care for their young.²¹⁰

All humans have access to the same five senses (except, of course, in cases of genetic disorder or birth defect), and thus all humans have an ability to touch and feel. In fact, both boys and girls have “safety blankets” or stuffed toys, for example, which they fondle, caress, and even suckle as babies and toddlers, an activity that can persist into

²⁰⁷ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 66–91.

²⁰⁸ Montagu, *Touching*, 218.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13

adulthood. Thus we can see that it is not so much a gendering of the senses on a biological level that occurs (although an argument can be made for a correlation between reproduction, childrearing, and touch across women); rather, it is a *cultural* gendering of the senses—young boys, who become men, are taught not to touch and caress (and cry) because these activities are perceived as “feminine.” In turn, men who touch are perceived to lose their ability to (optically) dominate the world.

The obvious problem with a gendering of the senses (i.e., touch is feminine, vision is masculine) is not that women are perhaps more likely to be sensual, but rather the continued belief that women are only better at touching and feeling because they are deemed “less than” men and, as a result, seen as unable to rationally master the world through vision. Regardless of the problems associated with the gendering of the senses, Classen’s work on touch suggests that, firstly, there is such a thing as “woman’s touch,” and, secondly, the association between women and touch “evokes women as media of softness, comfort, and refinement, the symbolic and tactile counterpart to rough and tough men.”²¹¹ In contrast to Montagu, Classen acknowledges that the “ugly underside” of such a gendered attitude toward touch is that it “alludes to the corrupting effects of feminine sensuality.”²¹² Herein lies the rub: while I do not want to gender the senses as a result of cultural biases, which work to impoverish our cultural perception and definition of the senses generally, I acknowledge, at the same time, that it is precisely the aspect of corruption and antagonism associated with feminine touch that makes “women’s work” (e.g., crafting) politically and ideologically explosive. As such, there is an inherent sense of power associated with the softness and subtlety of feminine touch insofar as it connects bodies sensually and politically, as historian Laura Gowing points out.²¹³

²¹¹ Constance Classen, “Women’s Touch,” *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Berg, 2005), 203.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Classen's consideration of the gendering of touch excavates the idea of "women *as* touch," which metaphorizes woman as "all body, all feeling."²¹⁴ Taking advantage of this metaphorical positioning, Luce Irigaray controversially argues that women choose to occupy the realm of touch precisely because it is more rewarding than the optical world of men—because it creates a space just for them that speaks to and about them.²¹⁵ From this position, it is easy to see how Irigaray makes such a statement insofar as crafting, while done in the cloistered space of the family home, encourages inter-corporeal relations across skins that open up the space for new social, cultural, and sensual relations and opportunities across bodies.

A tactile, sensual, embodied mode of visual expression, crafting has historically been, and largely still is, associated with women despite the fact that men have always participated in crafting. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, embroidery, needlework, knitting, and even sewing became forms of "ladies' work" that resulted in an "artistic and sensory ghetto in which creative women were pressured by gender conventions to contain—and downgrade—their aesthetic aspirations."²¹⁶ Perceived as all surface as a result of its ornamental and decorative nature and its reliance on touch, craft offered women alternative forms of expression that acted as a contrast or complement, depending on your viewpoint, to the ocularcentric world of men.

Political in nature, art historian Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1985) argues that the craft-based practices, such as embroidery, that are often employed in contemporary art are used to critique the ways women's bodies have been limited by and marginalized in patriarchal culture.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26. For an excellent reassessment of Irigaray's tactile theory of vision, please see: Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²¹⁶ Classen, "Feminine Tactics," 228–29.

²¹⁷ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* [1984] (London: Women's Press, 2010).

Parker sees the coming together of bodies in the space of the home, through touch-oriented craft practices, as having the potential to create new realities for women—realities built upon an exchange of knowledge, narrative, and experience. More importantly, Parker asserts that “To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.”²¹⁸ Parker suggests that the transformation of “women’s work” into critical and provocative modes of artistic expression and political activism—by forging new realities through craft—helps redefine what it means to experience life as a woman. However, Parker is clear to point out that by engaging in what is historically a kind of visual expression understood to repress women, craft can, at the same time, reinforce patriarchal power insofar as women contribute to, expand, and pioneer a mode of expression designed by the patriarchy to cloister women.²¹⁹

“Femmebroidery” is a contemporary iteration of embroidery spearheaded by young feminist artists and crafters over the last few years. More than mere decoration and surface ornament, femmebroidery employs critical text and complicated images, as well as sarcasm, satire, and humor, to be politically provocative and ideologically antagonistic.²²⁰ Imagery depicting women’s embodiment as sexual, sensual, and abject—as in Sally Hewett’s body part embroideries²²¹ and Alaina Varrone’s “dirty” embroideries²²²—makes up a large chunk of femmebroidery designs. These types of radical embroideries question what it means to be a woman today. Tackling the ways women are disenfranchised by culture as a result of language, which is always already biased, Mo Morgan’s “feminist mantra” embroideries reflect patriarchal culture back at itself, recuperating sexist language

²¹⁸ Ibid., ix

²¹⁹ Ibid., xxi, 1–16.

²²⁰ I use the term “femmebroidery” to indicate the political, specifically feminist, overtones of much contemporary embroidery. However, I did not coin this term; rather, I discovered it on Etsy.com (a website where crafters post and sell their creations through virtual boutiques)—it is the name of an online shop, owned by Canadian crafter Maria A., from Alberta (accessed July 5, 2015, <https://www.etsy.com/ca/shop/Femmebroidery>).

²²¹ *Sally Hewett-Stitcher and Embroiderer*, accessed July 5, 2015, <http://www.sallyhewett.co.uk/>.

²²² *Alaina Verrone: Embroidery Artist*, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.alainavarrone.com/>.

and ideas to empower women (e.g., “gender was never binary”).²²³ While this relatively new sub-genre of craft—femmebroidery—has been noticed by art institutions, it is, by and large, disseminated across culture(s) by “amateur” crafters who sell their wares on online shopping platforms, such as Etsy.

An intersection of skin portraiture and femmebroidery, American artist Eliza Bennett’s *A Woman’s Work Is Never Done* (8 minutes; 2014) is a performance captured through photography and video that illuminates Parker’s warning that even while embroidery is appropriated for political ends through a radical re-envisioning of what craft is and what it can achieve, it can also reinforce those very histories of oppression. Set in a nondescript part of a home, Bennett, wearing a white satin housecoat reminiscent of something a middle-class woman might wear to do “housework,” sits by a window at a wooden table while she embroiders her left hand [Fig. 8]. Utilizing a variety of soft, almost flesh-coloured threads, Bennett stitches her skin with an abstract pattern that both follows and accentuates the distinct wrinkles, folds, and lines of her hand [Fig. 9]. As the video progresses, the camera shifts its focus to a close-up shot of her hand on her lap. Magnified, Bennett’s hand fills up the screen, drawing the viewers’ attention to the indexicality of her skinscape. It is through this magnification, and the visual circumnavigation of Bennett’s face, that this performance becomes a kind of skin portrait.

²²³ Katherine Brooks, “Feminist Embroidery That Says Something You Want To Say To Misogynists... With Thread,” *Huffington Post* (May 5, 2014), accessed July 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/05/mo-makes-things_n_5249631.html.



Figure 8: Eliza Bennett. Still from *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*. 8 minutes. Mixed media. 2013. © Eliza Bennett. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9: Eliza Bennett. *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*. Mixed media. 2013. © Eliza Bennett. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

In contrast to many, if not most, performances, viewers do not get to watch Bennett embroider herself in real time due to the editing of the video, which does limit the association between time and labour across crafting. However, Bennett's hand is aged by the embroidered "calluses" and worn down by the tiny holes the needle makes in her skin. In turn, Bennett's hand has a rough, rather than soft, appearance, which challenges the conception that feminine touch is delicate. Moreover, Bennett's performance asks us to think about the physical toll labour takes on the bodies of women. Despite the acceleration of time in the video, there is an implied slowing down and passing of time beyond the work itself—once Bennett removes the embroidery thread from her hand, her skin will heal, both bearing and erasing the traces of labour. The appearance of Bennett's hand highlights the subtle ways Western culture takes domestic labour for granted, but at the same time it offers viewers the possibility of new experiences of embodiment created by crafting with and through our skin.

This epidermal performance illuminates the ways women work on their skins, often violently, in order to meet or maintain cultural expectations of femininity and beauty. More to the point, as the work's title suggests, throughout the course of the average Western woman's life, this type of beautification and epidermal labour never ends. It is through the unexpected use of violence against one's own body that Bennett debunks the cultural myth that women's work is "light and easy" precisely because it takes place within the home.²²⁴ Bennett's violent, yet sensual, performance presents women as labouring machines, which reinforces Parker's warning; however, Bennett problematizes Parker's argument for the oppressive potential of embroidery by using her own skin as a medium, which presents the possibility that bodies could be crafted anew, particularly through *Haut craftwork*.

²²⁴ "A Woman's Work is Never Done," *Eliza Bennett*, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://www.elizabennett.co.uk/a-womans-work-is-never-done-text/>.

2.5 « *Haut Craftwork*: Crafting with Human Skin »

A craft-oriented branch of skin portraiture, *Haut craftwork* explores our relationships with our skins through experiences of embodiment, particularly feminine touch and sensual labour, and an emphasis on the tactile nature of crafting. Importantly, *Haut craftwork* is both part of and a response to a long history of women crafting decorative objects in the home as a form of “women’s work,” which is a political act of resistance *and* an activity that reinforces the oppressive nature of the home in Western history. Taking the German word for skin, *Haut*, and compounding it with *haute*, the French word for “high” (which, in relation to clothing and fashion, is used to denote something that is one-of-a-kind and handmade), *Haut craftwork* is a form of craft made exclusively from skin, or the illusion of it. A sub-category of skin portraiture, *Haut craftwork* takes up forms of crafting associated with women, such as embroidery, knitting, sewing, earthenware production, and miniature furniture design, which expands and even radicalizes craft by using flayed human skin, both real and illusionistic, as the material in which to create new experiences of embodiment.

Like all facets of skin portraiture, *Haut craftwork* places particular emphasis on the coming together of bodies through touch, both real and haptic, which permits reflexive and empathic encounters across bodies. While craft has been associated with women, which has perpetuated a cultural understanding that it is “soft” and “delicate,” *Haut craftwork* is anything but as a result of its use of and allusion to flayed skin, which is horrific precisely because it permits us total knowledge (of culture and the body) through the disruption of literal and metaphoric boundaries. *Haut craftwork*’s use of skin, a boundary organ, draws attention to the limits of the body and our dwelling in and as skin through an uncanny conflation of *cutis* (living skin) and *pelis* (dead skin). Moreover, the emphasis on touch brings bodies into an uncanny space of mutuality, or feeling with.

In contrast to Bennett’s performance and our cultural perception of craft as feminine, *Haut craftwork* ironically endeavors to bring bodies together through flaying, a violent, traumatic, and decidedly “unfeminine” act that breaks the body down so that it cannot connect across and through its surface. Flaying is culturally understood as taboo because it both dismantles and remakes the body, affording a total knowledge of what lies

beneath the skin's surface. To remove someone's skin by flaying is to take away their ability to touch and dwell, which makes them simultaneously more than and less than human. When a body is flayed, as we have seen in French Extremism, the identity of the subject is erased insofar as what makes them "them" is absent. *Haut craftwork* implies that in order to create these crafted objects from skin, bodies have to be flayed and identities obfuscated. *Haut craftwork*, therefore, literalizes what Classen calls the "dark underbelly" of feminine sensuality—by engaging touch and the sensual capacities of skin through crafting, women are repositioned within culture, given power to re-imagine and re-define what it means to be human by illuminating culture's fears (e.g., the dispersal of self) and desires (e.g., to extend the body and re-contour it; to get under another's skin).

Ultimately, the use of flayed skin, often illusionary, suggests that *Haut craftwork* illuminates a desire to experience embodiment differently, especially in the twenty-first century. Examples of *Haut craftwork* are numerous and span the crafting practices of both men and women; however, there is an overwhelming emphasis on *Haut craftwork* by women within the context of skin portraiture. Such works include the dermatological ceramic apothecary jars of Tamsin van Essen's *Medical Heirloom* series (2009), which transform sick and diseased skin into useful objects,²²⁵ and Joanneke Meester's stitched and stuffed *Pistol* (2004), made from skin removed from the her own abdomen,²²⁶ amongst others.

One work that uses illusionistically flayed skin as the base material for crafting is Dutch artist Margi Geerlinks's *Crafting Humanity* series (1997–98), which is comprised of a number of digitally manipulated photographs that "document" women in their domestic spaces crafting new bodies or body parts from skin. Focused on their work, each woman—one elderly woman embroidering a new ear in her library [Fig. 10]; another wiping off her pert, newly sculpted breasts in her sitting room [Fig. 11]; and a young

²²⁵ "Medical Heirlooms," *Tamsin van Essen*, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.tamsinvanessen.com/#/medical-heirlooms/>.

²²⁶ "Pistol Made of Own Skin," *Joanneke Meester*, accessed July 12, 2015, <https://joannekemeester.wordpress.com/2012/10/02/pistol-made-of-own-skin/>.

woman knitting a child in what looks like an apartment or hospital hallway [Fig. 12]—extends the body by creating the illusion that these bodies and parts have been made from the skin of another. These images take flayed skins and position them as life-giving in the sense that they appear to give each women power—the ability to hear, the ability to be more youthful, and the ability to reproduce. In other words, these women are re-imagining their embodiment by crafting humanity anew via skin. These images place visual emphasis on the intimacy of touch experienced between two skins, which positions crafting as a mode of sensual expression that allows new bodies to emerge anew from a meeting of skins. However, while these images offer new modes of living for these women, they do so at a cost: through the implied loss of life associated with flaying.

In *Book of Skin* (2004), Connor considers how our understanding of our bodily borders is dependent upon the state of our skins. In our cultural imaginary, we understand skin as dialectical—both dead and alive.²²⁷ When the skin is removed, as visually exemplified by *Martyrs*, for example, the skinless body underscores the importance of skin as a stand-in for who and what we are in culture. Originating in ancient Roman culture, the Latin word *pelis* means dead skin, skin that has been removed from a body, typically an animal, and transformed into something for human use, such as parchment or a vestment. In contrast to *pelis*, *cutis* refers to living skin attached to a body, often associated with humans, which explains our use of the word “cutaneous” to refer the skin in science and medicine. The visual conflation of *pelis* and *cutis* in *Haut craftwork* is unsettling because it blurs the boundaries between bodies, and between life and death, so as to bring bodies together. In his musings on *cutis* and *pelis*, Connor points out that the flayed body is one that is “partial” and “emptied,” which we read as “inhuman” and elicits a response of disgust.²²⁸ Women who craft with flayed skin and offer the allusion to the violent, traumatic flaying of a body offer an alternative vision of what crafting and touch-based modes of expression can achieve.

²²⁷ Connor, *Book of Skin*, 11.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.



Figure 10: Margi Geerlinks. Untitled. *Crafting Humanity*. Cibachrome, Plexiglass, dibond. 1999 © Margi Geerlinks. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11: Margi Geerlinks. Untitled. *Crafting Humanity*. Cibachrome, Plexiglass, dibond. 1997–1998 © Margi Geerlinks. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

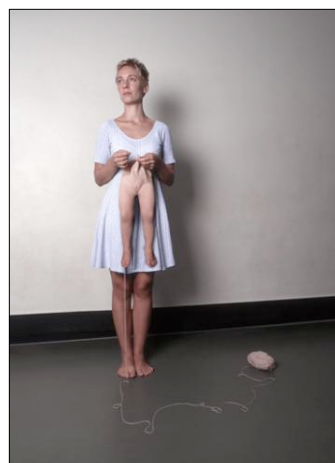


Figure 12: Margi Geerlinks. Untitled. *Crafting Humanity*. Cibachrome, Plexiglass, dibond. 1997–98 © Margi Geerlinks. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

While images of flayed bodies are easily found in contemporary visual culture, they date back to the medieval period as art historian Sarah Kay documents in her analysis of a number of medieval illuminated manuscripts.²²⁹ The idea of flaying has been present, often through stories and myths, in Western culture since the dawn of civilization. The flayed body is an important figure because it is associated with not just death but also transformation and rebirth. It would seem that a fascination with this flayed body was solidified in European culture during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods. In this specific cultural milieu, the ancient Greek myth of Marsyas and the story of St. Bartholomew were popularized and translated into a number of paintings and sculptures. In the story of Marsyas, when the satyr loses the flute-playing contest to the Greek god

²²⁹ Sarah Kay, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006); and, "Flayed Skin as 'objet a': Representation and Materiality in Guillaume de Deguileville's 'Pelerinage de vie humaine,'" in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imagining*, ed. E. Jane Burns (London: Palgrave, 2004).

Apollo, he is flayed alive—a scene famously depicted in Titian’s *The Punishment of Marsyas* (1570–75). More importantly, Apollo nails Marsyas’s skin to a tree, so that it can serve to others as a warning and symbol of hubris, an act designed to shame the satyr and render him invisible in and to culture. Despite this painful death and questionable defeat, Marsyas is reborn, transformed first into a figure of wisdom during Greek antiquity and then into a symbol of free speech in the proceeding Roman milieu.

In the story of Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles of Christ, he travels abroad to Armenia to spread Christianity and ends up flayed alive and crucified upside down, a punishment at the hands of King Polymius’s brother for converting the King to Christianity. As a result of this physical martyrdom, Bartholomew is transformed into a saint, which accounts for the common representation of him casually holding or draping his hide over his shoulder, most famously illustrated in Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* scene from the Sistine Chapel (1505–12)—in which the figure of Bartholomew is commonly thought to be a self-portrait of the artist²³⁰—and Marco d’Agrate’s statue outside of the Duomo di Milano (1562). That he drapes his skin as a garment in this way suggests that Bartholomew is completely at ease, and even rendered more powerful, without his skin.

For Kay, flaying is a theme that celebrates the loss of skin as a direct route to immortality.²³¹ Kay argues that in myth and stories, depictions of flaying do not simply illustrate an attempt to destroy the victim entirely; “The point is, rather, that the flayed skin heals the one who receives it, while the victim makes a full recovery, ready to be mutilated all over again in succeeding stories.”²³² In the case of Marsyas, for example, the satyr’s loss of skin lead to his increased visibility and immortality within ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Kay’s analysis of Medieval manuscripts illuminates the affective

²³⁰ Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo’s Nose: A Myth and Its Maker* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 31.

²³¹ Kay, “Original Skin,” 40.

²³² Ibid.

potential inherent in the act of flaying, leading to what she describes as an “ethics of reading skin” (both the skin of the parchment and the stories about flaying), which is charged with affect.²³³ In Kay’s understanding, the act of flaying promotes an infinite proliferation of body images (i.e., images of animal bodies conjured by the use of skin to create parchment or vellum,²³⁴ images of subjects being flayed; images of those flayed skins being worn, used, and transformed by others; and, images of the reader’s body brought to the surface through the act of touching and viewing the flayed skins of the animals and subjects within and across the illuminated manuscript) that work to bring bodies into relation.

While flaying is a theme popular across cultures and eras precisely because human culture has relied on the skins of animals to record language and civilization in the form of parchment and vellum, the historical use of real human skin for the production of domestic, crafted objects, such as book covers, for example, reinforces our anxious preoccupation with skin—it suggests that we want to preserve and transform ourselves through the removal of our cutaneous borders. By flaying the body and preserving the skin, the experiences of embodiment witnessed and recorded by the epidermis—particularly traumatic events—are immortalized and conveyed to others. Although persistent in our cultural imaginary, objects made of human skin are rare, and those that do exist may be omitted from archival or museological records because of their taboo nature.

²³³ Sarah Kay, “Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading,” *Postmedieval: Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2(1) (2011): 13-32, 17.

²³⁴ While often conflated, parchment and vellum are not the same. Parchment is an early form of “paper” made from the cleaned, stretched, and tanned skins of animals, such as sheep and cows. As a result of being made from mature animals, parchment often has an inconsistent appearance as a result of marks such as cuts, scars, and patches of discoloration, which clearly communicate parts of an animal’s experience of embodiment as an animal raised to be slaughtered for human consumption. Vellum, in contrast, is a higher quality form of parchment made from the delicate ivory skins of calves (in French the term *veau* means “calf”). As a result of their young age, calf skin is coveted for its uniform colour, as well as its mark- and blemish-free appearance. In turn, vellum was the preferred choice for important religious and political documents.

In 2006, Harvard University discovered a trio of rare books that appear to be bound in human skin in its collection.²³⁵ In response to speculation, Harvard had conservation scientist Daniel Kirby test the “person-bound” books, and he proved that they were actually bound in sheepskin.²³⁶ In order to know to what extent human skin has been used in the production of books, a scientific study would be required, but because the use of flayed human skin for the creation of objects is perceived as culturally taboo, the number of human skin-covered books in existence cannot be known insofar as archives, museums, and libraries will not or cannot coordinate such an extensive study of their holdings. What is known, as a result of a number of examples hosted in museums, is simply that human skin was at times used to bind books.

The Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, for example, has a number of human skin specimens in its collection, including three books concerning female reproduction that were partially re-bound in 1887 by Dr. John Stockton Hough, an avid collector of books, particularly historical and rare medical books.²³⁷ The skin used to partially re-bind Dr. Hough’s books was taken from the thigh of a woman named “Mary L. _____,” who had passed away from the complications of trichinosis and tuberculosis in 1869 at Philadelphia General Hospital, under Dr. Hough’s care. Tanning the skin in his own time (historians believed he used urine from patients’ bedpans and carried out the tanning in the hospital basement), Dr. Hough kept Mary’s skin for twenty years before using it as a book binding material. Why he kept Mary’s skin for so long before he used it to re-bind a medical text is unknown. What is known through the act of tanning, however, is that Hough made Mary’s skin immortal, an act linked to the immortalization of animal skins in taxidermy.

²³⁵ Samuel P. Jacobs, “The Skinny on Harvard’s Rare Book Collection,” *The Harvard Crimson*, February 2, 2006, accessed June 3, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2006/2/2/the-skinny-on-harvards-rare-book/>.

²³⁶ Karen Beck, “Old Books, New Technologies and ‘The Human Skin Book’ at HLS,” *Et. Seq: The Harvard Law School Library Blog*, April 4, 2014, accessed June 15 2015, <http://etseq.law.harvard.edu/2014/04/852-rare-old-books-new-technologies-and-the-human-skin-book-at-hls/>.

²³⁷ Beth Lander, “The Skin She Lived In: Anthropodermic Books in the Historical Medical Library,” *Fugitive Leaves*, October 1, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.collegeofphysicians.org/histmed/skin-she-lived-in/>.

In addition to books made from the skin of deceased patients, a number of anthropodermic books made from the skins of criminals exist. One such example is a book in the collection of the M Shed museum in Bristol, UK, which is bound in the skin of local criminal John Horwood. Horwood was put to death in 1821 for killing a girl with whom he had become obsessed. Hanged as punishment, Horwood was publically dissected, and his skin was used as the material to bind the book that recounted and documented his trial.²³⁸ What these examples highlight is a stunning lack of ethics surrounding the use and collection of these skins insofar as they were not donated, but rather taken from bodies that had no agency or power.

Despite our cultural awareness of the atrocities of World War II, which I will consider more thoroughly in the next chapter, crafted domestic skin objects confront us with an epidermal horror we do not want to face. However, if our fears of flaying were unfounded, we would not continue to represent and craft them, as in films like *Martyrs* and *Haut craftwork*, respectively. I now turn my attention to the touching skins of Jessica Harrison in order to flesh out precisely how experiences of reflexivity and empathy are triggered by the uncanny and macabre nature of crafted skin portraits.

2.6 « Touching Skins: Jessica Harrison »

Exploring the skin-as-home metaphor, Scottish artist Jessica Harrison handcrafts diminutive ceramic sculptures from impressions of her own skin in the series *Handheld* (2009) [Figs. 13–21]. Comprised of nine miniature furnishings—a small chair, a sofa, an armchair, a grandfather clock, a rectangular dining table, a high-back chair, a straight high-back chair, a large round table, and a small round table—*Handheld* reflects on the ways we dwell in and as skin through touch, which is amplified in the tactile and sensual space of the home. By holding objects that appear to be made from her own flayed skin, Harrison explores, firstly, the paradoxical experience of touching one's self, of both

²³⁸ Eric Dean, "The World of Books Bound in Human Skin," *BBC News*, June 20, 2014, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27903742>.

touching and being touched simultaneously, and, secondly, the ways our skins make impressions on the world, and vice versa, permitting us to connect with and across the skins of others and objects. Importantly, Harrison’s exploration of (self-)touch via flayed skin encourages viewers to reflexively and empathically encounter their own skins.

Reinforcing the importance of touch in our daily lives, Harrison holds each diminutive object in her hand, capturing each experience of touch in a corresponding life-sized photograph. Holding each small furnishing away from her body, either by resting the object on her flat, extended palm or by grasping the base of the sculpture with her fingertips, Harrison visually detaches her skin from her body. Her face and the other parts of her body are completely obfuscated from view, which makes her (quasi-)anonymous. In turn, the series is able to engage a number of disparate bodies insofar as the boundary between “I” and “not I” is problematized by an absence of facial representation and the compounded fragmentation of the artist’s body (e.g., her actual body and its representation). In this arrangement, the life-sized scale of each photograph is important because it permits the viewer to make the leap of seeing Harrison’s arm as an extension of their own, despite the potential race and class differences. Harrison stretches the boundaries between herself and the objects she holds, as well as between herself and viewers.

Seemingly mundane, these furnishings reference an array of historical British design eras important to conceptions of home in the Western world. Upon closer observation, however, *Handheld* is generally executed in what can be read as the “Queen Anne style” (1720s–1760), which has been ingrained in Western consciousness as a result of its popularity in history. Flip through most issues of *Architectural Digest*, for example, and you will see the traces of this historic style in even the most eclectic of contemporary homes. Emphasizing line and form rather than ornament, utilizing curved shapes (ogees or “s-shaped” forms, such as cabriole legs) rather than those that are rectilinear, and displaying a preference for slender, yet plush forms (e.g., cushioned seats and high-back chairs), the Queen Anne style became (and still is) symbolic of middle- and upper-class domesticity, comfort, luxury, and refinement in the Anglophone world and beyond.

Illuminating the importance of touch in our daily lives, particularly as it pertains to experiences of dwelling in the home, Harrison's use of miniaturization points to the history and popularity of the dollhouse in the Western cultural consciousness. Dollhouses, despite being mass-produced during and after the Industrial Revolution (e.g., McLoughlin's folding paper dollhouse, 1890),²³⁹ and associated with the domain of children over the last century (e.g., Barbie's Dream House, 1962–present),²⁴⁰ first appeared in modern Western culture during the seventeenth century.²⁴¹ Called “baby houses” or “cabinet houses,” the first dollhouses were made of stacked display cases comprising a series of individually contained rooms. Each of these rooms illustrated a specific interior design style, which could be easily communicated to and translated by others. As a result, these cabinet houses functioned as educational tools. More importantly, these miniature domestic spaces were a reflection of their owners' taste, affluence, and power, as is clearly illustrated by Petronella Oortman's opulently ornate cabinet house (1686–1710), displayed at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.²⁴²

Cabinet houses, like the dollhouses of the eighteenth century, were laboriously made by hand, to scale (typically a 1:12 scale), with fine materials such as expensive wood, fabrics, ceramic, pewter, and glass. Taking years to craft, cabinet houses were often the price of a modest home, which is why royalty, the aristocracy, and the elite merchant class were the only ones able to afford them during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, during the nineteenth century, dollhouses shifted from being

²³⁹ To view the McLoughlin folding paper dollhouse, visit: “The New Folding Dollhouse,” *The Strong: National Museum of Play*, accessed July 15, 2015, <http://www.museumofplay.org/online-collections/1/32/107.3668>.

²⁴⁰ For a brief (design) history of Barbie's Dream House by Mattel Inc., see: Lauren Piro, “A Look Back At Barbie's Dreamhouse,” *Good Housekeeping*, October 14, 2014, accessed July 16, 2015, <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/home/a25364/barbies-dreamhouse-history/>.

²⁴¹ The earliest dollhouse recorded in Western history is one commissioned in 1558 by Albrecht V, Duke of Bavaria, which was originally intended for his daughter, but remained in the Duke's collection. (Leslie Paris, “Dollhouses,” *Girlhood In America*, vol. 1, ed. Miriam Forman-Brunell (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2001), 219).

²⁴² To view Oortman's cabinet house, visit: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/BK-NM-1010>.

predominantly the passion or hobby of wealthy adults to being a form of play and entertainment for children.

It is no surprise that during the Victorian period, an era that both emphasized the importance of the home and woman's role in it and saw an increase of industrial manufacturing, there was a drastic surge in the availability of dollhouses to the consuming public. Dollhouses are culturally interesting objects insofar as they are a way for children to orient themselves to culture and their respective future roles within it via a diminutive version of the family home, which acts as a microcosm of culture. A space of fantasy and imagination, dollhouses teach children what it means to be human because they permit them to explore dwelling in a variety of ways they cannot in real life as a result of their age and maturity, particularly through role-playing and touch. Dollhouses teach children to navigate the home, to exert power over its surfaces, and to imagine through touch. In our contemporary milieu, dollhouses are almost exclusively marketed to, bought for, and played with by little girls, which reinforces, firstly, patriarchal culture's arbitrary historical gendering of the senses and, secondly, the ways in which genders occupy the home, and possibly the skin, differently. While Harrison is clearly engaging a history of the dollhouse, she is, more importantly, focusing on the ways skins literally come into contact, brushing up against other skins in dwelling.

Holding each object in her hand with her arm outstretched against a white, softly lit background reminiscent of commercial portraiture, Harrison emphasizes the touch-based nature of dwelling in the home and as skin. By framing the images in this way, Harrison not only visually emphasizes the nuance and texture of her skin, making each wrinkle and fold easier to see, she also creates the illusion that viewers stand in her shoes, occupying her perspective and orientation towards each skin sculpture, which engenders a feeling of intimacy and proximity not granted by traditional conceptions of self-portraiture. By permitting viewers to occupy her perspective and bodily positioning, she brings them into each image, allowing them to be part of her self-portraits.

It is because of Harrison's choices regarding framing and perspective that viewers can experience a feeling with her that is atypical of portraiture, generally. By permitting



Figure 13: Jessica Harrison. Sofa. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 13.5 cm x 6.5 cm x 6 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14: Jessica Harrison. Small chair. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 4 cm x 4 cm x 7.5 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

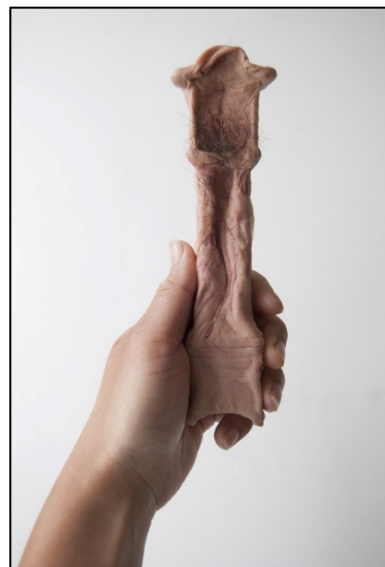


Figure 15: Jessica Harrison. Clock. *Holding* series. Mixed media. 13.5 cm x 6.5 cm x 6 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16: Jessica Harrison. Armchair. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 8 cm x 7 cm x 6 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 17: Jessica Harrison. Table. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 6 cm x 8 cm x 5 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

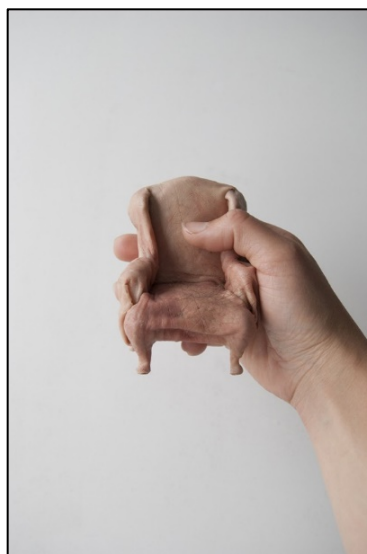


Figure 18: Jessica Harrison. High Back Chair. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 6 cm x 8 cm x 5 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 19: Jessica Harrison. Straight High Back Chair. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 5.5 cm x 4 cm x 9 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 20: Jessica Harrison. Small Table. *Holding* series. Mixed media. 5.5 cm x 5.5 cm x 6 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

viewers to assume her perspective in this unusual way, she forces them to become active, to encounter both the portrait and the skin of another through virtual touch, which engenders a certain amount of freedom to imaginatively project onto and into Harrison's skin. By doing so, viewers can reflexively think about and feel their own skins insofar as these photographs blur the boundaries between skins. Activating the viewer through participation, which can manifest as a visceral attempt to reject such an image/object's paradoxical and confusing nature, *Handheld* attempts to perforate the epidermal distance between bodies.

While *Handheld* to bring bodies together, which is underscored by her own doubling and touching of her skin (i.e., both the lived skin and its ceramic, indexical copy), the illusion of occupying Harrison's body and perspective brought about by the framing of each image may be supported or broken down depending on the race and class of the viewer because the artist's skin is white, a pale shade of Caucasian that appears smooth and manicured rather than calloused and rough. Harrison's fair colouration communicates whiteness, which is associated with a certain level of privilege denied to non-white people who might encounter *Handheld*. My own experience with the artist's skin as a fair, Caucasian woman cannot account for anyone else's experience and reality of bodily difference.

Despite the fact that a non-white body can assume Harrison's perspective and self-reflexively feel their own skin because of the framing of each image and each viewer's perspectival ability to stand in the artist's shoes, they cannot sustain the belief that they, the viewers, are Harrison, the subject. In turn, because I can more easily see my skin in Harrison's as a result of my race and class, my participation in the work may be more intimate and virtual than another's. So while viewers are activated, allowed to become participants in the self-portraits, they cannot simply just collapse into Harrison's skin since skin always already speaks to a particular experience of embodiment. In turn, *Handheld* illuminates the fact that while skin is something we have in common, it is not universally experienced. Nonetheless, the arrangement of these images opens up the space for the viewer to know themselves and others differently because, despite differences, they can connect at the level of their skins. This haptic and virtual connection experienced across

bodies is made through Harrison's representational conflation between living (*cutis*) and dead (*pelis*) skin insofar as the uncanniness of her real skin touching her "flayed" skin disrupts what we know about skin, and, as a result, how we experience it.

In order to create the appearance of *cutis* and *pelis* simultaneously in her sculptures, Harrison creates impressions of the tops and bottoms of her hands, the part of the body most associated with touch, in wet clay. Preserving each wrinkle, fold, and crease of her skin in the form of an embossed negative, Harrison fires the sculptures and then paints them with soft peach, pink, and cream tones that mimic her own skin colour. By doing so, Harrison creates the uncanny illusion that these furnishings are pulsating with life despite the fact that they appear to be made with her "flayed" human skin. The sculptures are not mere representational copies of Harrison's skin, but indexical ones that extend her skin into the world of objects, which problematizes the neat boundaries we imagine between bodies and objects. In the case of the small and large tables [Figs. 20 and 21], Harrison holds the miniature furnishings on top of her extended palm and photographs them at close range from above, the angle permitting her actual skin to illusionistically merge or meld with the skin of the objects. In the image of the large round table, the folds and creases formed in the lower region of her palm as a result of holding the object are mirrored and repeated in the bottom of the tabletop, which creates the illusion that the skin of the table and that of Harrison's hand are continuous and interconnected. This same illusion is repeated in the photograph of the sofa [Fig. 14], in which Harrison's flat palm appears to be connected to the skin of the sofa in a continuous pattern of wrinkles and exaggerated folds. Where Harrison's skin and the skin furnishings begin and end is difficult to visually discern, a blending that is humorously underscored by the images of the table [Fig. 17] and the straight high-back chair [Fig. 19]. In both of these examples Harrison holds each furnishing balanced on her fingertips, as if they sprouted forth into the world from her skin or that her skin has an inhuman ability to extend itself from her body and morph into any shape or form. In turn, *Handheld* enhances our ability to see the specificities of skin, and, by default, to touch.



Figure 21: Jessica Harrison. Large Round Table. *Handheld* series. Mixed media. 6.5 cm x 10.5 cm x 10.5 cm. 2009. © Jessica Harrison. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.

Through the laborious, touch-based process of making the ceramics, Harrison's furnishings allude to not only the history of a gendering of the senses and the association between crafting and sensuality, but also the practice of making objects such as clothing and furnishings with the skins of other bodies, typically animals. Significantly, though, Harrison does not "tan" her skin and make it into leather, as would be the norm when using skin as a material. Rather, she is at pains to preserve the illusion that her skin is still attached to her body, that it pulsates with a sense of life not as easily afforded to leather that has been scraped and stretched. In typical scenarios of leather tanning, for example, the chemical process of curing, the act of scraping fat and tissues, and even dyeing or bleaching changes the appearance and texture of skin so that it does not easily communicate the embodied experiences of the animal from which it came. Still, despite the attempt to erase the marks across the hide, as is most evident in cases of making parchment for illuminated manuscripts, for example, they are always there, such as scars and discolouration, affecting the reader's experience of the page insofar as the sheep's skin is uncanny, functioning as a double of their own.²⁴³ By refusing to tan her skin, Harrison amplifies and celebrates the specific nuances and intricacies of her own skin and epidermal experiences.

Echoing the ways we physically imprint on and are imprinted by the objects in our daily life, *Handheld* underscores the subtle ways our interaction with the skins of objects in our homes shapes and influences our experiences of embodiment and senses of self. For example, we all have objects of furniture in our homes that touch us on a daily basis, which, in turn, impact our being a skin. If I have a favorite chair, my body creates impressions in it over time as a result of it coming into contact with my skin, my weight, and my bodily form. This contact is evidenced by the sagging or wear and tear of the chair's fabric, the deflation of its cushions, and the fading of the wood stain on the chair's armrest, where my skin rubs against it over time. When I sit in my favorite chair, I feel comfortable because it holds my body in a way that is both familiar and natural to me. The chair feels natural to me because my body has impressed upon it in such a way that it has

²⁴³ Kay, "Legible Skins," 20.

molded to my form and epidermal surface. My body is, in return, impressed upon by the chair, as is made abundantly clear each time I sit in another chair and do not feel comfortable or at ease in it because my body is oriented to another form. Over time, a new chair will become familiar and comfortable to me as the result of a sense of mutuality between my skin and its skin. However, while I can describe in detail the ways we impress upon the skins of furniture and they impress upon us, this impression is often imperceptible precisely because we do not often consciously focus on these kinds of mundane, subtle, temporal experiences of touch. Harrison's work asks us to think about the ways we impress upon the world and how it impresses upon us via skin.

Despite their familiarity to us within the lexicon of Western interior design, and perhaps from our own experiences with them in our personal homes, Harrison's furnishings are both unusual and uncanny precisely because they look like skin but are, in fact, clay. Made not from wood or fabric, as one might expect, but rather from human skin that has been impressed into wet clay, Harrison's objects push viewers to confront our integuments as simultaneously alive—attached to a body—and dead—flayed from it. The confusion caused by the illusion, the slippage between Harrison's skin and its clay copy permits viewers to work through cultural fantasies of extending our bodies out into the world, away from ourselves, as well as the fears associated with the breakdown of that same extended body. While the illusion of flaying unsettles and intrigues, it is the photographs that document Harrison holding her own skin as furnishings that encourage viewers to acknowledge the sense of “non-sense” associated with the paradoxical experience of self-touch.²⁴⁴

For example, when I touch my right hand with my left, I feel both epidermal surfaces simultaneously, yet I cannot easily pinpoint the sensations of touch experienced by each hand independently of the other precisely because there is an intertwining of sensation as the skin folds over and brushes up against itself. On the surface, Harrison underlines the slippage between touching and being touched. It is this inability to reify

²⁴⁴ Diprose, “Community of Bodies,” 385.

touch or to clearly demarcate the multiple, simultaneous tactile sensations caused by self-touching that permits the subject to become sensorially apart from herself. In turn, this experience highlights the skin's paradoxical nature insofar as it is both a subject and object in *Handheld*. Overriding the chiasmic effects of skin, Harrison makes an indexical copy of her skinscape in clay, literally extending her skin from her body through a metaphorical flaying, which allows her to feel and know her skin, and experiences of touch, differently. By doing so, Harrison permits viewers the opportunity to feel with her rather than for her, made possible by her choice of framing and perspective, which is confusing and underscores the elusivity of touch, specifically, and experiences of embodiment, generally.

In his work on the chiasmic nature of touch, Merleau-Ponty argues that the experience of self-touch is confusing and elusive because of our inability to identify which hand touches and which hand is touched. Because this experience is simultaneous, we can never reify or fully know it. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty argues that the "chiasm" functions as a diagram or image that explains sensual experiences of embodiment through an overlap of sensation and the reversibility of perception experienced when the skin comes into contact with itself.²⁴⁵ While subjectivity requires the division or boundary between subject and object to be policed, touch temporarily dissolves or weakens that very boundary. Harrison evokes the chiasm by purposefully enacting self-touch in *Handheld*, allowing her to feel with herself. This experience of coming into relation with one's self is described by Merleau-Ponty:

I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching...In this bundle of bones of muscle which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of the other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries...to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Invisible and the Visible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.

²⁴⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London, Routledge, 1964) 93.

This personal description of the chiasm fleshes out the reversibility of perception and the experience of self-reflexivity engendered by Harrison's doubled skins. Significantly, the chiasm positions skin as an organ that can bring bodies that are normally separated into a shared or mutual space, where both touch and are touched.

Through the touching of extended and mirrored skin in *Handheld*, Harrison visualizes and materializes Merleau-Ponty's description of the way the chiasm bring skins into contact. Merleau-Ponty argues that that this sensual "dehiscence opens up [the] body in two," and, as such, in "[the] body touched and [the] body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment" that permits "things [to] pass into us, as well as we into the things."²⁴⁷ As such, the chiasm positions the skin as a porous, relational organ that has the potential to move us beyond a bi-directional model of self and other, instead cultivating a multi-directional and pervasive model in which body and world mingle. While this multi-directional model brings bodies together virtually, feelings of empathy are cultivated insofar as we all exist in and as skins and are oriented in such a way that we connect fragments of Harrison's body to our own via skin. In addition to feeling for and with another, *Handheld* encourages epidermal contact, both real and virtual, as a mode of sharing and expressing non-verbal accounts of experiences of embodiment.

The exploration of the chiasm in *Handheld*, whether deliberate or not, permits the viewer to acknowledge the skin of another and at the same time experience their own skin, despite the fact that the skin represented is not in fact their own. In their encounter with *Handheld*, viewers in some ways assume Harrison's perspective, which permits a sense of closeness to her skin, but they are also given the room to think of themselves and their own experiences of (self-)touch because the artist's face is absent. Giving viewers few cues as to who she is, Harrison puts the focus on touch and its associated experiences rather than the communication of identity. Seeing the anonymous skin of Harrison in such a way that permits me to read it as an extension of my own allows me to feel with her.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 123.

While these photographs are not haptic in the same way Marks describes in her analysis of intercultural cinema, they have haptic qualities and engender a kind of haptic looking that permits my eyes to brush up against and touch Harrison's skin. While I cannot actually touch Harrison or the epidermal furnishings made from impressions of her skin, as is always the case in haptic forms of looking, I can imagine myself in her shoes, which permits me to project imaginatively onto her skin and, in turn, to feel my own skin through a reflexive reaction. This sense of reflexivity, this feeling myself and thinking about my own experiences of touch and self-touch while I haptically touch Harrison, permits the emergence of feelings of empathy.

2.7 « Conclusion »

While Harrison makes visible and material Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm via her exploration of self-touch, *Handheld* encourages a meeting of skins, which permits new or unexpected experiences of touch to emerge within the realm of (self-)portraiture.

Challenging what a self-portrait is, Harrison's skin portraits encourage reflexivity (feeling myself through looking at Harrison's skin touching itself) and empathy (feeling with rather than for Harrison as my experience of touch and my skin are implicated by the image and its perspective). This coming together of skins undoes a history of traditional portraiture in that it permits two distinct experiences of embodiment to coexist without one overriding the other.

Harrison's emphasis on self-touch makes evident a cultural fear of losing our ability to touch as a result of flaying and a fantasy that we could touch more robustly if our skins were removed from our bodies. What underlies these fears and fantasies, as they pertain to our sense of self and experiences of touch, is a concern that we will become unable to dwell and, in turn, be both more than and less than human. The many female artists making skin portraiture and *Haut craftwork* explore this deep anxiety. This exploration of skin within the context of dwelling in and through the home positions what has been considered the lowliest of the senses in Western history—touch—as the very thing that can reconfigure what it means to come in relation to another. The uncanny and

potentially macabre nature of the flayed skins in Harrison's exploration of skin-as-home is not mournful or traumatic; rather, it is interpersonal and sensual.

In order to document our relationships with our skins in our daily lives and the ways our skins shape who we are and how we live in the worlds we occupy, those that engage *Haut craftwork* and touch, such as Bennett, Geerlinks, and Harrison, represent the skin in and through the space of the home. The home shapes and impresses bodies through experiences of touch, and vice versa. The work of these artists illuminates not only the reciprocal relationships skins experience without us being cognitively aware of them, but also the basis of human nature: dwelling and connecting to others via touch and being touched.

As a general sub-category of portraiture and a theory of bodily representation, skin portraiture breaks down the divisions between the represented subject and the viewer/participant-performer through experiences of touch, which makes possible heightened experiences of reflexivity and empathy. In this chapter I have outlined how touch and the sensual nature of skin portraiture permits bodies to connect, encouraging alternative experiences of embodiment, such as a feeling with that engages and engenders reflexive and empathic experiences. What is achieved by some examples of skin portraiture, such as those that permit a layering of skins in real and virtual ways, are radical experiences of relationality, which I will explore in the proceeding chapter. While by definition temporal and fleeting, *Haut craftwork* can productively lead to an experience of and appreciation for epidermal and bodily difference, which I will address more fruitfully in chapter four and the conclusion. When the emphasis is placed on the sensuous nature of crafting, the gendering of the senses, and the ways we dwell in our homes, skin portraiture can help us better understand the skin, expanding our thinking of it as a relational organ.

Chapter 3

3 « Skin-as-Clothing »

In his analysis of the representation of monstrosity in Gothic literature and postmodern horror films, aptly titled *Skin Shows* (1995), Jack (published as Judith) Halberstam argues that the skin “becomes a kind of metonym for the human.”²⁴⁸ The “colour, pallor and shape of the skin” represented in, by, and through monsters is the product of what Halberstam sees as “an emergent conception of the self as a body” that was formed during the nineteenth century, an idea I return to throughout this project in discussions of the skin-as-self metaphor.²⁴⁹ Investigating the ways Western culture has adopted this metaphor, Halberstam assesses the correlation between monstrosity and bodies caught in the crosshairs of dominant (biased) categories and conceptions of race, ethnicity, class, sex, and gender. He argues that the monstrous body can problematize categories and conceptions of identity because it is a product of them.²⁵⁰ Asserting that the skin is the “ultimate boundary,” Halberstam probes the connection between the skin’s surface appearance and formations of identity through examples of skins that are “too tight (Frankenstein’s creature), too dark (Hyde), too pale (Dracula), too superficial (Dorian Gray’s canvas), too loose (Leatherface), or too sexed (Buffalo Bill).”²⁵¹ The Gothic—which includes postmodern horror—“plays out in an elaborate skin show,” challenging the popular idea that identity is more than skin deep.²⁵²

By locating identity at the surface in the postmodern milieu, Halberstam explores the ways bodies and subjects are queered, and even rendered posthuman, when skins are

²⁴⁸ Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

layered as a result of their transformation into masks and clothing. Such a layering of skins engenders a metamorphosis that permits bodies to move beyond accepted categories of identity, which, in turn, permits sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, and ability, for example, to become flexible and porous rather than rigid and boundaried. A layering of skins, as is explored by Halberstam, creates a “monster,” and monstrosity engenders new conceptions of bodies and their experiences of embodiment.

In addition to an analysis of Buffalo Bill, the posthuman serial killer in Jonathan Demme’s film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) who murders women for their skins so that he can sew a “woman suit,” Halberstam looks at the queering of the female body in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* (1986). In his discussion of Stretch, the female protagonist who wears the flayed, bloody face of her male co-worker, Halberstam asserts that she is afforded an unusual sense of agency and power through a layering of skins. This layering of male and female skins queers Stretch’s identity, and identity categories in general. The power and agency afforded to Stretch are evidenced by her ability to fight off Leatherface, the film’s serial killer, albeit unsuccessfully (she is ultimately saved by another character). By wearing a man’s face, Stretch performs the masculine body, assuming the position of agency normally afforded to male protagonists.²⁵³ In the final scenes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*, when Stretch wears a male face, she transforms into someone who is male and female, masculine and feminine, disrupting the fixedness of identity categories. In turn, Stretch queers her identity by becoming a drag king.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ While I do not discuss a theory of masculinity or delve into men’s studies as a result of this project’s feminist focus and concern for difference, particularly difference read and represented by the skins of and made by women, an analysis of masculine skins and their representation within film studies would further flesh out the conceptions of gender and sexual difference I am addressing here. See: Santiago Fouz Hernández, (ed.), *Mysterious Skin: Male Bodies in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 157. “Drag kings” are traditionally female performers who alter their bodily contours and gender identity through various illusions and technologies (e.g., makeup, clothing, body-shaping garments, a deepening of the voice, and a change in affect and bodily gestures) in order enact a performance of gender that probes the stereotypes of masculinity.

By performing in drag, Stretch perforates boundaries between bodies, occupying a number of identity positions simultaneously. Stretch's queer skin is created from scraps of flesh, a poignant dramatization of the postmodern horror genre's "ability to reconfigure gender not simply through inversion but by literally creating new categories."²⁵⁵ Queer skins render bodies and identities strange, which makes possible radical relations between bodies and heightened experiences of embodiment. What lies at the heart of the skin-as-clothing metaphor is a simultaneous desire to be, and fear of becoming, radically relational with others.

The slasher film sub-genre of horror, which rose to prominence around 1974 (the year *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Black Christmas* were released in theatres), typically centers on the murder of a group of middle-class youths by a psychopathic killer as an act of revenge for some long-forgotten event that irrevocably traumatized the killer.²⁵⁶ In order to emphasize that traumatic event, slasher films often open with a flashback or opening sequence that "presents a woman's death and/or an image of her mutilated body," which acts as the catalyst for the killer's desire to punish his victims in the present.²⁵⁷ In order to emphasize the mutilated body on screen, the killer is always "pre-technological," identifiable by his choice of a weapon (chainsaw, knife, bladed glove, and so on) that permits him to rip, cut, and tear open the skin of women.²⁵⁸ The serial killer, who is the "outsider," is (almost)²⁵⁹ always a white male who is sexually disturbed,

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 139.

²⁵⁶ Sotiris Petridis, "A Historical Approach to the Slasher Film," *Film International* 12, no. 1 (2014): 76.

²⁵⁷ Vera Dika, "The Stalker Film, 1978–1981," in Gregory A. Waller, ed., *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 94.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁵⁹ I place "almost" in parentheses because the slasher film genre has expanded who can be the serial killer in recent years. For example, *Candyman* (1992), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995), *Candyman: Day of the Dead* (1999) is an American horror trilogy that features a black serial killer (who is actually an apparition brought back to life by his victims when his name is said aloud three times in a mirror). Candyman was a young man lynched during the 1800s (his hand cut off, he was smothered in honey, and tied to a tree where he died from blood loss and hundreds of bee stings), despite his wealth and education, for falling in love with the (white) daughter of a plantation owner. *Candyman*, by virtue of exploring the

aiming his punishment at those who sexually arouse him, which, in the heteronormative structure of most slasher films, are women.²⁶⁰ In this arrangement, a lone female protagonist is the one who typically survives.²⁶¹

Called the “Final Girl”—a term developed by Carol J. Clover in her analysis of gender roles and their representation in slasher films—this character always either delays the killer long enough to be rescued (as Stretch does) or kills him herself.²⁶² In turn, the defining feature of the victims (who are often female) is that they are always transgressive (e.g., they smoke, drink, do drugs, and have sex), which is positioned as an affront to heteronormative, patriarchal, misogynist conceptions of womanliness and femininity. The Final Girl, in turn, is not transgressive, which is why she prevails—she is too busy being chaste, intelligent, resourceful, and watchful to be killed. However, as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* and *The Silence of the Lambs* illuminate, it is the characters that transgress the limits of skin that queer bodies and make possible expanded conceptions of sex and gender within the broader scope of culture. While not a “slasher” film, *Silence of the Lambs* literally reconfigures the female body by transforming skin into clothing so as to present sex and gender as boundaryless.

On a general level, this chapter explores the skin-as-clothing metaphor. This metaphor has been present in the Western cultural imaginary since the Classical and early-Christian periods, cultural milieus that became fascinated with flaying as a form of punishment as recounted in myths and biblical stories, which I briefly discussed in the last chapter. Flaying is not only an extremely painful and time-consuming form of torture,

violent racism of colonial American history that created the killer, takes up racialized embodiment in ways that are uncommon in the slasher genre. However, the bodies of women function as the main focus of Candyman’s revenge, which works to reinforce the genre’s patriarchal character.

²⁶⁰ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30.

²⁶¹ Petridis, “A Historical Approach,” 78.

²⁶² Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, 35.

designed to “destroy the victim entirely” as Kay puts it; it also yields the materials with which to tailor a new body, which problematizes the neat boundaries we perceive between identity categories.²⁶³ In turn, this chapter gives considerable attention to the correlation between skin, clothing, and identity, particularly queer and posthuman identities. Seeking to better understand how and why skin has been transformed metaphorically and literally into a garment we can put on and take off at will, I turn to Buffalo Bill because he blurs the neat divisions between sex and gender through his creation of a macabre skin suit. Because flayed skin is, on the one hand, taboo and, on the other hand, the very thing that creates new bodies, new formations of identity, and new experiences of embodiment, its transformation into clothing illuminates Western culture’s quest for ever-changing body images, as well as its desire for more abundant experiences of relationality.

While flaying is a galvanizing issue in this chapter and across this bulk of this project, the act of flaying necessitated by Buffalo Bill’s quest to possess a woman suit without becoming a (transgender) woman permits a radical sense of relationality between him and others not otherwise possible. In turn, flaying makes radical relations possible, relations that permit us to experience difference beyond ourselves by wearing another’s skin, which expands and enriches experiences of embodiment. If we are to flesh out the ways we understand skin to function as a garment, what is clear is that the act of flaying lies at the heart of the skin-as-clothing metaphor, which is underscored by the films and skin portraits discussed in this chapter.

Once the terrain of wearing and queering of skin is explored below, I turn my attention to the skin-as-clothing metaphor and *Haut couture*, which is a sub-category of skin portraiture that acts as a kind of sibling to *Haut craftwork* discussed in the last chapter. Conflating the German word for “skin” (*Haut*) with the French term *haute couture* (one-of-a-kind, handmade garments), I merge the two in a discussion of a number of skin portraits that turn skin into clothing. In order to provide readers with a clear picture of *Haut couture*’s ability to achieve radical relations between and across bodies through a

²⁶³ Kay, “Original Skin,” 40.

layering of skins, I turn to an introduction to and an analysis of relationality and relational art. *Haut couture* is important because it re-imagines bodies and what they can do at the surface so as to problematize the fixedness of identity categories and lead to a greater celebration of difference.

The goal of this chapter is to not only unpack the skin-as-clothing metaphor, but also to exemplify the ways skin portraiture can achieve a sense of radical relationality, which I explore in the case study of Argentinean artist Ana Álvarez-Errecalde's installation *More Store* (2009–ongoing) [Figs. 30–33] at the end of this chapter. Álvarez-Errecalde's performance-based installation series engenders radical relations between subjects and skins because, firstly, it permits viewers to become participants in the work and thereby become socially relational in ways traditionally foreclosed in portraiture, and, secondly, through their participation in the work by way of wearing the skins of anonymous women (in the form of stretchy, cotton, photo-printed body suits), the participants become sensually relational, experiencing themselves and others differently. By permitting participants to wear the skin of another whose sex and race contrasts their own, for example, *More Store* encourages participants to experience themselves and others in ways that create the possibility of new embodied realities. In turn, *More Store* queers experiences of embodiment, rendering participants posthuman through its ability to unhinge identity categories.

3.1 « Wearing Skin, Queering Identity »

In contrast to his analysis of queer skins in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*, Halberstam maintains that *The Silence of the Lambs*, despite its focus on radical conceptions of identity—by way of Buffalo Bill's desire to have a “woman suit” and a female body regardless of his male gender identity—returns to normalized conceptions of gender binaries, which push Buffalo Bill into a zone of posthumanity rather than queerness. It is Buffalo Bill's inability to unify his sex and gender identity that permits him to become someone neither male nor female, someone beyond masculine or feminine conceptions of gender, *something* posthuman. In contrast to Halberstam's argument that Buffalo Bill is

posthuman and not queer, I argue that he is both: Buffalo Bill queers the skin as a result of his coming into radical relation with the skins of women, and he becomes posthuman as a result of the fact that he shatters and moves beyond binary conceptions of gender.

For those readers who have not seen *The Silence of the Lambs*, it follows FBI agent-in-training Clarice Starling (played by Jodie Foster) as she investigates the murders committed by Buffalo Bill (played by Ted Levine). Called “Buffalo Bill” because he skins the “humps” (the backs) of his victims, *The Silence of the Lambs* positions skin as the place where identity is decided. In the film Starling interviews psychiatrist and cannibal Dr. Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, hoping to learn about Buffalo Bill, who was once a patient of Lecter’s. During Starling’s first interview, Lecter gives her a clue to the location of his personal self-storage unit, where she finds the decapitated head of Buffalo Bill’s transvestite ex-lover, who has a moth lodged in his throat. When another body surfaces in West Virginia, Starling accompanies her mentor to do the autopsy, and there too they find a chrysalis moth lodged deep in the victim’s throat. Traveling to the hometown of Buffalo Bill’s first female victim, Fredrica Bimmel, Clarice realizes first that Bimmel and Buffalo Bill knew each other personally based on photographs uncovered in the victim’s bedroom, and second that Buffalo Bill is making a woman suit out of his victims’ skin [Fig. 22] insofar as the skin flayed from each victim mimics pattern shapes used to sew women’s clothing. In turn, Starling is led to the house of Bimmel’s previous employer—a seamstress—where she meets “Jack Gordon,” a.k.a. Buffalo Bill. Chasing him into the basement, Starling shoots and kills Buffalo Bill, saving his last victim.

Alongside Norman Bates, the fictional killer from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Buffalo Bill is arguably one of the most popular fictional serial killers of the twentieth century because he, like Bates, is modeled after the infamous American killer Ed Gein (1906–84).²⁶⁴ Notorious for exhuming and killing women for their skins and body parts in Wisconsin during the 1950s, Gein struck fear into the hearts of Americans during

²⁶⁴ Edward Gein is not considered a “serial killer” because he only killed two women. For a killer to be classified as a serial killer they must kill three or more people.

the time of his trial, which was widely covered by the media. Criminologist Eric W. Hickey argues that Gein’s creation of a “mammary vest” (a vest made from the skin of a woman’s chest and back) and a “nipple belt” (a belt made from nipples stitched together) signified a desire to get under his mother’s skin and become her—or perhaps simply re-create her—a desire that stemmed from his troubled relationship with her, as well as his desire to have sex reassignment surgery (he allegedly attempted castration more than once).²⁶⁵ By wearing a woman suit (or parts of it), detectives speculated that Gein acted out various transvestite fantasies, wanting to become a sexed female despite his heterosexuality and male gender identity. Theories about Gein’s motivations were developed by detectives based on the facts that he was a loner, his brother died suspiciously, and he had an intense closeness with his mother, Augusta Gein, who died in 1945.



Figure 22: Film still—Buffalo Bill sewing a “woman suit” from the flayed skins of his victims. Thomas Harris/ Ted Tally. *The Silence of the Lambs*. Directed by Jonathan Demme. 1991. Los Angeles: MGM Studios, 1997.

²⁶⁵ Eric W. Hickey, *Serial Murdered and Their Victims*, 7th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 81. Because police officers and detectives used brute force in their interrogation process (a detective hit him), Gein’s admission to his crimes, as well as details from his life that corroborate the above, were dismissed from the court record.

Buffalo Bill is critical to a consideration of the skin-as-clothing metaphor because he, like Gein, experiences what Halberstam calls “misidentity,” which permits him to be both queer and posthuman simultaneously.²⁶⁶ Misidentity is a ruptured identity, one that results from an inability to reify gender identity and the sexed body. This experience of monstrous embodiment cultivates a new body that moves beyond binary categories of sex and gender (e.g., male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual). This type of radical embodiment is only possible when epidermal boundaries are violated (through flaying) and transformed into a fabric with which to sew a new skin garment. By wearing another’s skin and layering two skins, Buffalo Bill experiences embodiment differently, albeit temporarily, which can jolt him out of his male sexed body whilst maintaining and preserving his male gender identity. To be clear, Buffalo Bill is not a transgender woman; rather, he wants to preserve his male gender despite his desire to occupy or transform into a sexed female body through his literalization of the skin-as-clothing metaphor.²⁶⁷ Because Buffalo Bill cannot reconcile these two sides of himself, he is a monstrous figure capable of disrupting the very categories that shape bodies and identities.

The Silence of the Lambs underscores the popularity and longevity of the skin-as-clothing metaphor in Western culture: wearing the skin of another person (or animal most commonly) allows the subject to transform their body and take on the powers (e.g., femininity, female sexuality) of the flayed body via a possession and wearing of their skin—an idea that has historically been embraced across cultures. For example, in the context of hunting animals and keeping their hides as a kind of talisman, skin can function as a stand-in for the power of an animal itself which, when worn by the human hunter, might be perceived to permit the subject to absorb aspects of that very power (e.g., killing

²⁶⁶ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 169.

²⁶⁷ In a recent interview director Jonathan Demme addresses the opinion that *The Silence of the Lambs* is an “anti-gay” and “transphobic” film, arguing that “[Buffalo Bill] is not a traditional ‘cross-dresser,’ ‘transvestite,’ or ‘drag queen’” (Marlow Stern, “Jonathan Demme on Gaza, Transphobia in ‘The Silence of the Lambs,’ and Meryl Streep as a Rock Star,” *The Daily Beast* (July 25, 2014), accessed July 25, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/25/jonathan-demme-on-gaza-transphobia-in-the-silence-of-the-lambs-and-meryl-streep-as-a-rock-star.html>). Demme argues that when the film is given a close read, it becomes evident that Buffalo Bill is not expecting or experiencing a “traditional” conception of gender transition insofar as he maintains his male gender identity but wants to occupy the sexed female body.

a grizzly bear and wearing its hide communicates the idea that the hunter is not only a formidable opponent, but also exceedingly strong and ruthless). Wearing the skin of an animal breaks down the boundaries between species, which indicates a kind of continuum or relationality of vital life and suggests the potential regression of the human to its “animal” or primal self that it at once forgets/represses. When a human wears the skin of another human, then, it would seem that the human becomes posthuman and possibly postgender.

For Halberstam, to be postgender is to cultivate a queer body *and* queer experiences of embodiment that not only defy the categories that prescribe value to bodies (male, female, straight, gay, and so on), but also achieve radically new relations among those bodies in a way that is beyond human. To “queer” the body does not imply that this body must occupy a space of queer sexuality. To queer is to make strange and different, which can be applied to a range of bodies, experiences, representations, and relations with others, objects, and environments that are not intelligible to dominant culture or the norms it enforces.²⁶⁸ While I will not give an overview of the terrain of queer theories and their histories here,²⁶⁹ I do suggest that by layering skins and creating a host of misidentities, even if temporarily, the skin-as-clothing metaphor opens up new experiences and conceptions of relationality in the twenty-first century.

As Nikki Sullivan and others make clear, while the term “queer” has been colloquially used to refer to homosexuality, both within LGBTQ communities and without, it has a host of other meanings: to render something strange, to refer to negative characteristics that one associates with others and not with the self, and to denote one’s

²⁶⁸ For an analysis of queer embodiment and queer object relations, please see: Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁶⁹ For a comprehensive, condensed review of queer theories, key terms, and queer histories, please see: Donald E. Hall, et. al (eds.), *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and Iain Morland and Annabel Wilcox, *Queer Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

difference, for example.²⁷⁰ Sullivan argues that to queer is “to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them.”²⁷¹ For David Halperin, who points out that to narrowly pin down a definition of “queer” would be a very un-queer thing to do, the definition is broad:

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. “Queer” then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative... [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.²⁷²

Halperin does not want to limit queerness to homosexuals insofar as it is a positionality that can be taken up by anyone who feels marginalized. That this marginalization is often tied to one’s sexual practices does not mean that “queer” is at all limited to sexual practices perceived and received as marginalized. At its core, queer is political.

One major criticism of the term is that it functions, as Gloria Anzaldúa points out, as a “false unifying umbrella” that a host of different bodies (those of “other” races, ethnicities, and classes) are shoved under, which works to homogenize differences across bodies.²⁷³ It is the ambiguity of the queer subject, particularly the transvestite and transsexual, that works against a homogenization of queer temporalities because they transgress and even dismantle the binary thinking that shapes cisgender conceptions of

²⁷⁰ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), v.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, vi.

²⁷² David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

²⁷³ Gloria Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer: Loca, Escrita y Chicana,” in *InVersion: Writing by Dykes, Queers and Lesbians*, ed. Betsy Warland (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1991), 250.

identity.²⁷⁴ Pointing out that gender inversion rarely has anything to do with homosexuality, Sullivan argues that in the history of medicine, the transsexual has been framed as pathological, a concept that Jay Prosser takes up in his germinal text about transsexual embodiment.²⁷⁵

Coined in 1949 by David O. Cauldwell, the term “transsexual” (*psychopathia transsexualis*) refers to a subject who desires to live as a member of the sex to which they do not belong. At the time, it was understood as pathological, and thought to have a “cure.”²⁷⁶ It was only during the 1960s and 1970s that the term “transsexual” was de-pathologized by Dr. Harry Benjamin, a German-born American endocrinologist who revolutionized sex reassignment surgeries and the establishment of sexual identity clinics.²⁷⁷ Benjamin, in contrast to Cauldwell, framed transsexualism as a medical condition rather than a psychological illness, and thus positioned surgery as the cure, making new body images available to those in need. Making a distinction between transsexuals and transvestites (the latter also colloquially referred to as “cross-dressers”—subjects who experience sexual excitement when they wear the clothes of the opposite gender), Benjamin argues in *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) that for the former, the genitals are perceived as a deformity that *must* be fixed through surgery.²⁷⁸

Linked to, but distinct from, the term “transsexual,” a “transvestite” is a person who does not experience an incongruent identity, nor do they want to live as the opposite

²⁷⁴ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction*, 99. A “cisgender” person is someone whose gender identity conforms to or aligns with their biological sex; not transgender.

²⁷⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²⁷⁶ David O. Cauldwell, “*Psychopathia Transsexualis*,” *Sexology* 16 (December 1949). For a discussion of the medical history and pathologization of transsexuals, please refer to: Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999), chapter 7.

²⁷⁷ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction*, 102.

²⁷⁸ Harry Benjamin, M.D., *The Transsexual Phenomenon* [1966] (Dusseldorf: Symposium Publishing, 1999), accessed December 5, 2015, <http://www.mut23.de/texte/Harry%20Benjamin%20-%20The%20Transsexual%20Phenomenon.pdf>.

gender, but who is sexually aroused (framed as a fetish) by wearing the clothes of the opposite gender periodically, which is why there is often an association between transvestites and sexual pleasure. In this case, the transvestite is concerned with dressing, with temporarily layering the skin in order to modify their appearance and achieve sexual release, rather than with becoming someone or something else. The transvestite does not impersonate, nor do they typically go out publically dressed as the opposite gender—unlike drag queens/kings, who perform gender in order to critique gender binaries and stereotypes, often through song, dance, and humour.²⁷⁹

Despite offering us a way to work through the differences between transsexuals and transvestites, Benjamin's views on identity cohesion and sexual orientation are highly problematic.²⁸⁰ In his "Benjamin Scale" or "Sex Orientation Scale," which is much like the "Kinsey Scale" designed by Dr. Alfred Kinsey during the 1950s, Benjamin constructed a seven-point scale that outlined three types of transvestites (pseudo, fetishistic, and true) and three types of transsexuals (nonsurgical, moderate intensity, and high intensity), positioning the heterosexual, gender-normative male as the category against which the other six categories were judged and conceived. One problem was the fact that Benjamin did not associate transsexualism with homosexuality, which meant that those born male, for example, who wanted to become female through surgery and hormone therapy, would be rejected if they identified as "lesbian." Benjamin regarded those who were rooted happily and comfortably in the gender that matched their sex, but nonetheless experienced the need to transform their bodies into the opposite sex, as "fetishistic transvestites," which meant they would be rejected for sex reassignment surgery. According to Benjamin, fetishistic transvestites lived as men, dressed in the

²⁷⁹ To clarify, drag queens and kings do not identify as the opposite gender insofar as they are typically cisgender and often homosexual or lesbian, nor do they, like transvestites, get sexual pleasure from this impersonation. This distinction is important because, historically, the terms "drag queen" and "drag king" have been collapsed into "transvestite." This is not to suggest that drag queens do not experience sexual arousal while in costume, or, have sex with each other while in drag—a practice colloquially referred to as "kai-kai" (Logo TV, "Kai-kai," *RuPaul's Drag Race Wiki*, accessed February 10, 2016, http://logorupaulsdragrace.wikia.com/wiki/RuPaul's_Drag_Race_Dictionary).

²⁸⁰ Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction*, 102.

clothes of the opposite gender periodically, rejected hormone therapy, and were rarely bisexual or gay, and experienced feelings of guilt, which meant they were not “true” transsexuals.²⁸¹ In contrast, pseudo transvestites could be hetero-, bi-, or homosexual, and the act of dressing in the clothes of the opposite gender was often tied to masturbation fantasies.²⁸²

Today we do not use the terms “transsexual” or “transvestite” openly or often. The term “transgender” has taken their place, offering contemporary culture an umbrella term under which to work through a range of identity positions and sexual orientations that Benjamin’s scale could not or would not address at the time. These older terms are now understood to be politically incorrect as they stem from a medical history that pathologized and medicalized gender inversion, leaving little room for the conceptions of gender fluidity present in much of contemporary culture and queer theories. In the case of what is now understood as the transgender person, there is a desire to render sex and gender cohesive, to unify them so as to “fix” the incongruity between sex and gender, which entails living as and becoming the sex that matches an individual’s gender identity. In turn, our understanding of the transgender subject cannot account for the misidentity experienced by Gein or Buffalo Bill. Being transgender requires a certain adherence and conformity to gender norms in the presentation and actions of the body in social spaces, which can be thwarted and problematized by the transsexual subject who chooses not to adhere to such clear-cut gender norms. I am not advocating that we return to using the terms “transsexual” and “transvestite” as they are highly problematic, requiring much unpacking in any given context, but rather that we consider the value of these terms when attempting to better understand Halberstam’s notion of misidentity as it pertains to the layering of skins.

“Transsexual” is the forebearer of the term “transgender” insofar as it has been used in Western history to refer to “a person who emotionally and psychologically feels

²⁸¹ Benjamin, *Transsexual Phenomenon*, 23.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

that they belong to the opposite sex,” or to “a person who has undergone treatment in order to acquire the physical characteristics of the opposite sex.”²⁸³ However, I would argue that, as the word itself suggests, a transsexual person is a person whose sex, rather than gender, is in question, particularly given our own postmodern milieu, which renders the subject always already fragmented and layered. My point here is that a person might want and need to change their sex, but not their gender identity, as is the case with Buffalo Bill. It is assumed that a person who desires to transform their sexed body would want a gender identity to match, as we see in cases of transgender persons who re-contour their bodies and become fully realized women or men. A transsexual person, however, might identify as a woman, physically speaking, yet not desire to re-contour their body in a way that “passes” as feminine (i.e., “butch”) or female (i.e., post-gender); such a problematization of the gender binaries that pit male against female and masculine against feminine has the potential to render them culturally unintelligible. In other words, transsexuals can occupy both male and female, masculine and feminine aspects of the human body, which Halberstam would argue renders them not only monstrous, but also posthuman.²⁸⁴

In a scene from *The Silence of the Lambs* Buffalo Bill stands almost naked in his dungeon-like basement, wearing a kimono, and says “I’d fuck me hard.” This statement reveals to the spectators that he is at pains to create the illusion that he has a sexed female body despite his male gender identity, and that he is aroused by the prospect of wearing a woman suit. These pains are literalized by the fact that he tucks his penis in between his legs and his scrotum up into his abdominal cavity (i.e., “tucking”), revealing to viewers his “vagina.” Part transsexual in that he does not want to alter his gender identity to match

²⁸³ Oxford Dictionaries, “Transsexual,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/transsexual>.

²⁸⁴ My nuanced understanding of and attention to the embodiment of transsexuals has been personally influenced by a neighbour I had during the completion of this project who generously shared stories of her experiences as a transsexual lesbian dealing with the Canadian medical establishment during the 1990s. As a result of identifying as a lesbian (previously a heterosexual man with children) and failing to present a fully realized “feminine” appearance and body, my neighbour does not conform to expected gender norms, which is why she was rejected for sex reassignment surgery decades ago.

his desired sexed body, and part transvestite insofar as he is aroused by wearing women's clothes (the goal being to wear a woman's suit), Buffalo Bill is both queer and posthuman. In turn, Buffalo Bill "divorces once and for all sex and gender or nature and gender and remakes the human condition as a posthuman bodysuit."²⁸⁵

While macabre and taboo, Buffalo Bill's flaying of female bodies signals a desire to radically relate to others more than it does a wish wholly to transform himself or move beyond himself. By wearing a suit fashioned from the skins of women, Buffalo Bill pushes the skin out of bounds through its transformation into clothing, which queers conceptions of sex and gender at the level of skin. The literalization of the clothing metaphor in *The Silence of the Lambs* permits radically new and even unexpected body images and experiences of embodiment to be imagined and manifested, which cultivate a meeting of bodies that is typically foreclosed when "I" and "not I" are clearly demarcated. A "situated bodily practice," Buffalo Bill highlights the fact that wearing clothing is embedded in our social world and fundamental to daily life, dating back to the dawn of early man and civilization precisely because it engenders relations between and across subjects.²⁸⁶

3.2 « Skin-as-Clothing »

The discussion of (serial) killers, real and fictional, who use skin as a material to craft new bodies and identities underscores two important factors of the skin-as-clothing metaphor's popularity: first, that deep within Western consciousness lies a desire to extend, layer, and alter our skins that is simultaneous with an intense fear and anxiety about the potential loss of our skins, and second, that a misalignment between one's body and mind, and/or one's sex and gender, often plays out across the skin. In Halberstam's most basic assessment,

²⁸⁵ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 176.

²⁸⁶ Joanne Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elisabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 34.

Buffalo Bill's skin is "too sexed." Skin becomes both a symbol of excess—the indivisible remainder of his incongruous identity—and a mere object that can be manipulated to impart new experiences of embodiment to its wearer.

Occupying an important place in most cultures, the making and wearing of clothes, as well as the style or fashionability of those clothes, point to the ways a specific culture imagines and defines itself. Understood as "[a] frontier between self and non-self," clothing promotes a meeting of the sensual, physical, affective, and social aspects of bodies.²⁸⁷ The dressed body is "so thoroughly embedded within the micro-dynamics of social order" that it comes to be shaped by the cultural field in which it is situated, which means that formations of identity are played out across the body's surface.²⁸⁸ For fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle, the body and clothing function dialectically insofar as "dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning while the body is a dynamic field, which gives life and fullness to dress."²⁸⁹

A good example of how clothing works on the body is the corset, which became a staple of women's fashion in the Victorian era. The corset kept the female body covered and secure, in compliance with moral sanctions on the visibility of skin and the expectations regarding gender roles in Victorian (patriarchal) culture, and at the same time literally re-contoured the body, making it more curvaceous (i.e., more feminine), thus becoming a kind of long-term, non-invasive body modification.²⁹⁰ The corset's effect on the body was not restrained to its surfaces; over time, it caused women's bodies to become physically weak (it often caused fainting spells) as a result of not using core muscles or being able to move, eat, or breathe freely. The physical limitations engendered by the corset permitted it to function like a prison, rendering women more "feminine" by making

²⁸⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985), 2–3.

²⁸⁸ Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," 36.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ For a cultural history of the corset, please see: Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Corset* (London: Berg, 2001).

them weak, demure, and reliant on men, thereby strengthening the cultural need for men to care for and protect women—and to keep their budding sense of political agency, signaled by the Suffragette movement, at bay.²⁹¹ Looking to the context of Victorian culture, in which increasing industrialization, capitalism, natural science, and politics re-defined the role of women in culture, we can see that the intense reformations taking place across culture were designed to control and re-contour society, and the corset is emblematic of this impulse. In contrast, in contemporary Western culture the corset is regarded as an expression of woman's rejection of the passive woman archetype, as is highlighted by corsetry's association with powerful sexual expressions such as S&M, kink, and fantasy, as well as pin-up culture.²⁹²

Because the type and style of clothes we wear are always a product of culture, dressing is a practice that locates us in and across culture(s). In addition to its critical role in rendering the body intelligible and valuable in socio-cultural spaces, clothing is also sensual and intimate insofar as it is a practice that encourages (self-)touch. When we put on clothes, we touch, grab, trace, and feel our epidermal landscapes. This kind of touch is private, allowing us a sense of relation to ourselves, helping us get to know our selves and our skins, and to work through our position in the larger socio-cultural field. At the same time, being a dressed body is not a private affair; it is a social one, which both requires and engenders tactile relations across bodies. For Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, clothing cultivates a network of social, cultural, and interpersonal relations that can bring bodies together through what they call a “fashioning of the frame,” which is the fashioning of one's identity, subjectivity through clothing, which, in turn, influences and is influenced by culture.²⁹³

²⁹¹ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 136–38.

²⁹² David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture* (Stroud, UK, Sutton, 2004).

²⁹³ Warwick and Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame*, xv and xvii.

Highlighting the ways clothes help form and translate conceptions of selfhood, clothing is not only a stand-in for the skin, it is also a transformative second skin that impacts our private, social, and cultural experiences. Alison Lurie argues that fashion functions as a language, as the title of her book—*The Language of Clothes*—suggests.²⁹⁴ For Lurie, clothing not only reflects culture, particularly its values, politics, and ideologies, but also acts as an interface through which we encounter and relate to various bodies and worlds across time and space. As such, the garments we wear act as “both a boundary and not a boundary,” simultaneously spawning and inhibiting social and sensual interpersonal contact.²⁹⁵

Suggesting that the skin-as-clothing metaphor is inherently Western because it reinforces the body’s autonomy over its surface, Benthien points out that modernity has aligned the appearance and health of skin with a person’s physiological and psychological characteristics, as is evidenced by the history of physiognomy (the study of facial features in order to divine knowledge about a person’s abilities and social value), which I touched on in the introduction and will discuss more fully in the next chapter.²⁹⁶ Benthien specifically uses the term “American” to refer to a general Western desire to control and shape our body images through the manipulation of skin. While cosmetic surgery has become readily available to Westerners as a result of cultural pressures to maintain appearances at the surface, it is also increasingly consumed by non-Western cultures, as evidenced by the popularity of skin bleaching²⁹⁷ and cosmetic surgeries²⁹⁸ such as

²⁹⁴ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1982).

²⁹⁵ Warwick and Cavallaro. *Fashioning the Frame*, xv.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24. Benthien notes that the skin-as-clothing metaphor became popular approximately two hundred years ago, a time when increasing knowledge about the body in science and medicine was closely associated with modernity. The popularity of the skin-as-clothing metaphor was and still is a result of the fact that it affords subjects the possibility of fashioning and controlling their bodily appearances through a tailoring of the skin, directly impacting how they relate in the worlds they occupy.

²⁹⁷ For analyses of the contested practice of skin bleaching, please see: Ronald E. Hall (ed.), *The Melanin Millennium: Skin Colour as 21st Century International Discourse* (New York: Springer, 2013); Joanne L. Rondilla and Paul Spickard, *Is Lighter Better?: Skin-Tone Discrimination Among Asian Americans*

blepharoplasty (an eyelid lift that attempts to create a more stereotypically Western eye shape, popular in Asian communities), in order to increase beauty, value, and power within a global world. It is important to note, however, that body modification practices such as cosmetic surgery are not only increasingly popular in North America; they are also increasingly *visible* within its contemporary visual and popular culture, as is evidenced by the wildly successful television drama *Nip/Tuck* (2003–10), which follows the life of two fictional plastic surgeons working in Miami, Florida.²⁹⁹

Acknowledging the ways our global neoliberalist existence has encouraged the regard of cosmetic surgery as a pastime and the idea that our bodies are things we work on, feminist scholar Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst argues that skin has become a “passive textile.”³⁰⁰ By framing the skin as an object, Hurst illuminates the fact that culture tries to override the inherent agency and subjectivity of our largest organ in order to attain and maintain body images that correspond to cultural norms and fantasies of beauty. Cosmetic surgery is primarily concerned with the creation and maintenance of an idealized skin, which is made possible by what Hurst calls “surface imagination.”³⁰¹ “A concept that refers to the powerful fantasy that a change to the exterior can enhance or alter the interior,” surface imagination correlates one’s value and worth with one’s appearance, cultivating a program of “self-creation” that permits the subject to treat the skin as a site of

(Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and Shirley Ann Tate, *Skin Bleaching in Black Atlantic Zones: Shade Shifters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016).

²⁹⁸ For analyses of how cosmetic surgery consumption in the non-West is influenced by Western conceptions of beauty, please see: Kathy Davis, *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences: Cultural Studies on Cosmetic Surgery* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Wendy Hua, *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 2013); and Meeta Rani Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism and the National Body* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

²⁹⁹ Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, “The Skin Textile in Cosmetic Surgery,” in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Sheila Cavanagh, Angela Failler and Rachel Alpha-Johnston Hurst (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 156.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰¹ Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, *Surface Imaginations: Cosmetic Surgery, Photography, and Skin* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2015).

“fantasy and projection” that can be controlled, rendering the body mutable.³⁰² In other words, culture has transformed skin through cosmetic surgery as a result of and in response to its desires, fantasies, and fears.

Cosmetic and reconstructive surgeries, therefore, offer certain subjects the ability to “fix” their bodies, which can entail more than a superficial desire to look, feel, and be beautiful. For example, in the case of many transgender individuals, the skin is positioned as a garment that can be tailored, put on, and taken off is underscored by the fact that many transpersons undergo sex reassignment surgery as well as a host of other surgeries designed to either “feminize” (e.g., breast implants, the augmentation of the buttocks and cheeks, rhinoplasty, eyelid and face lifts, the shaving of the Adam’s Apple, and chin recontouring) or “masculinize” (e.g., bilateral mastectomy, forehead lengthening, cheek augmentation, rhinoplasty, jaw contouring, Adam’s Apple surgery) their bodily contours. Prosser argues that while the attempt to alter the body image through “grafting, stretching, inverting, splitting, tucking, [and] suturing of the tissues” during sex reassignment and cosmetic surgeries create “new transsexual parts,” the skin is treated as a mere surface covering that can be tailored by the subject, as is exemplified by the exaggerated bodily contours of transgender musician, model, and performer Amanda Lepore.³⁰³

In a photograph taken by David LaChapelle [Fig. 23], Lepore’s feminine skin is highlighted, drawing the viewer’s attention to the seeming naturalness of her ample breasts and feminine contours. Playing with her transgender identity in a very tongue-in-cheek way, LaChapelle has Lepore holding up a slice of watermelon that has been cut from the melon positioned between her open, bare legs. The bright red slit in the watermelon becomes a stand-in for Lepore’s own (or desire for a) surgically created vagina while at the same time calling into question her sexual orientation insofar as she literally eats the fruits of her loins and labour, thereby denoting the possibility that she is a lesbian or bi-sexual. The watermelon blocks our view of Lepore’s vagina, which

³⁰² Ibid., 19.

³⁰³ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 66.

problematizes the notion that trans people must undergo or have undergone sex reassignment surgery in order to reify their sexed body with their gender identity and render their genitals useful and pleasurable. The humour of the image asks viewers to think through what precisely it means to be a woman and to be feminine in contemporary culture insofar as Lepore is both of these things despite the fact that she was born a man. The image also underscores the artifice of femininity, suggesting that, with the “right” body modifications, we can remove our skin and emerge reborn in the skin of another.



Figure 23: David LaChapelle. *Amanda Lepore-Any way you slice it, a woman*. 1998. Digital cibachrome print. 152 x 119 cm. © David LaChapelle Studios. Image reproduced courtesy of Jablonka Maruani Mercier Gallery Belgium.

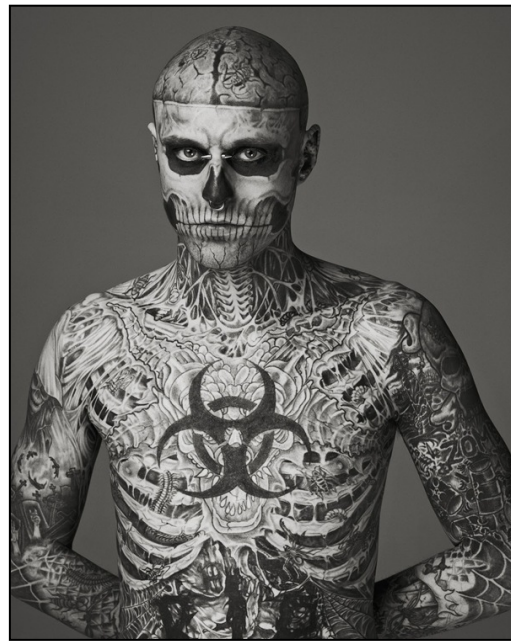


Figure 24: Film still - portrait of Rick Genest a.k.a Zombie Boy modeling for Thierry Mugler's 2011 Men's Autumn collection video ad campaign. © Thierry Mugler.

In Lemma's psychoanalytic analysis of body modification practices, she argues that when a person (it is implied that this person is cisgendered) undergoes drastic forms of cosmetic surgery that reshape the body's surface, they do so in order to incorporate and

reflect culturally instituted ideals of beauty and desirability, understood as an attempt to fuse the subject with the object.³⁰⁴ On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lemma argues, extreme tattooing can come to re-write the body's epidermal landscape, allowing the human form to become something other through *de*-idealization, what she frames as the "reclamation phantasy."³⁰⁵ "Skin markings," writes Lemma, "consistently serve the function of marking the self as 'different' from a designated internal and/or external 'other'—and this difference is what is on display."³⁰⁶ The subject, as such, creates a de-idealized body that is a challenge to cultural norms and dominant categories of identity.³⁰⁷ For Lemma, the de-idealized body is framed as giving a sense of control back to the subject who might feel out of control.

The heavily inked skin of Canadian model and actor Rick Genest (a.k.a. Zombie Boy) presents a striking example of Lemma's de-idealized body. Zombie Boy's rise to fame and notoriety in visual culture began with his appearance as Lady Gaga's skeleton lover in her music video for the pop song "Born This Way" (2011),³⁰⁸ which led into a job as a catwalk and video model.³⁰⁹ In a photograph of Zombie Boy by notorious celebrity and fashion photographer Terry Richardson from a 2011 Mugler campaign [Fig. 24], we can ascertain, firstly, that his epidermal surface has been altered through a long-term process of tattooing what seems like every square inch of his epidermal landscape. Tattooing has transformed Zombie Boy's skin into an object he can control, which, in turn, shapes how it moves in, through, and across bodies within culture. When we

³⁰⁴ Lemma, *Under the Skin*, 164.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁰⁷ Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003).

³⁰⁸ "Born this Way," Lady Gaga music video, 7:19, posted by "Lady Gaga Vevo," February 27, 2011, accessed January 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw>.

³⁰⁹ "Thierry Mugler Men's 2011 Fall/Winter," *W Magazine* fashion films, 3:35, posted by "W Magazine," June 19, 2013, accessed January 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fID4vu2aMeE>.

examine Zombie Boy's tattoos closely, it becomes clear, within Lemma's rubric, that his skin represents a total rejection of dominant ideals of beauty, as is reinforced by the representations of bugs, rotten flesh, torn skin, bones, and other hazardous warning signs across his skin. In turn, Zombie Boy's skin is a literal danger zone, one designed to keep others out or at a distance. Choosing to tattoo his face, which is perceived as one of the most taboo parts of the body to ink as a result of the fact that it is culturally understood as *the* part of the body that communicates identity (which is why so many tattooists refuse to tattoo faces), Zombie Boy transforms himself into a literal walking zombie skeleton, overwriting his humanity to become something other, a body that does not adhere to cultural norms of gender or conceptions of what it means to be human. Reinforcing the notion that skin is a garment, Zombie Boy appears half-dressed in Mugler's campaign video, which ironically de-emphasizes the clothes he is supposed to model and advertise.

The crux of Lemma's psychoanalytic analysis of skin is her argument that the alteration of the skin can psychically and physically give birth to the subject anew. In turn, skin becomes a kind of garment that can fashion an almost unlimited array of body images and relations across bodies. The clothing metaphor, therefore, not only highlights a human desire to relate via the skin, as I suggest in my analysis of Buffalo Bill, but also underscores the fact that with the right level of intervention humans can transcend their bodies and queer the skin, offering the possibility to attain and experience a number of (contradictory) body images. For example, with laser tattoo removal, skins like those of Zombie Boy can be "erased" and recreated anew through medical and cosmetic intervention. In turn, the skin becomes textile-like, able to be nipped, tucked, and decorated so as to not only create numerous, even contradicting body images, but also to engender a range of relations between bodies through its function as a garment.

Conceptualized as a "second skin" within theories of fashion, clothing functions not only as an extension of who we are (in a given moment in time), but as that which cultivates relations between and across bodies, objects, and environments. Stella North asserts that "clothing, for its part, needs to be to be reconceived as skin-like: bodily,

proximate, unsurpassable” in order to underscore its relational nature.³¹⁰ Because we exist in and as skins that wear clothing, North argues, “Clothing is thus both corporeally and intercorporeally significant.”³¹¹ As a result, clothing made from human skin, such as *Haut couture*, which I discuss below, amplifies the relational nature of clothing.

3.3 « *Haut Couture*: Sewing with Human Skin »

As discussed in the last chapter, the tactile crafting techniques employed in *Haut craftwork* bring bodies into a shared space, underscoring the important role reflexivity plays in cultivating feelings of empathy and mutual experiences of embodiment. In a similar fashion, *Haut couture*—a sub-category of skin portraiture that describes making wearable garments with human skin—engenders experiences of touch: to wear clothing made from skin requires not only a touching and meeting of skins, but also a layering and overlapping of them. This layering and wearing of skins and skin suits achieves radical relations between and across bodies that promote new experiences of oneself and others. *Haut couture* breaks down, expands, perforates, and stretches the identity categories that shape who and what we are precisely because it allows us a new body, one crafted from the skin of another. More than *Haut craftwork*, *Haut couture* focuses on experiences of relationality, which disrupt binary identity categories by re-contouring bodies through a layering of skins, which permits one body to temporarily inhabit another despite the differences and distances between them.³¹²

³¹⁰ Stella North, “The Surfacing of the Self: The Clothing-Ego,” in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds., Sheila Cavanagh et. al., 64-89 (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 74.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

³¹² It is important to note that the distinction I am utilizing here for the sake of clarity regarding skin portraiture’s achievements (i.e., that *Haut craftwork* cultivates empathy through a cultivation of self-reflexivity and *Haut couture* engenders the potential for radical relations between and across skins) is not meant to create two opposing types of skin portraiture insofar as skin portraiture always already encourages the simultaneous intermingling of experiences of reflexivity, empathy, and relationality.

Highlighting the macabre potential of skin portraiture, *Haut couture*, like *Haut craftwork*, use what appears to be flayed skin—that nonetheless looks as if it is still full of life and attached to a body—as the material in which to tailor new experiences, realities, and identities.³¹³ The blurring of boundaries between skin that is dead (*pelis*) and skin that seems full of life and vitality (*cutis*) imbues *Haut couture* (and *Haut craftwork*) with a sense of the uncanny. The conflation of skin and fabric, as highlighted in *The Silence of the Lambs*, underscores the fact that both are textiles that make relations between bodies possible.

A *Haut couturier*, therefore, is someone who creates garments from human skin; effectively problematizing the boundaries we perceive skin to uphold between and across bodies and their identities. Meaning “high sewing,” *haute couture* is regarded as the epitome of fashion in Western culture because it adheres to stringent rules—each garment must be custom-made and fit-to-order, one of a kind, handmade, and of the highest quality—first laid out by the French gatekeepers of *haute couture*, *la Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, in 1868.³¹⁴ *La Chambre Syndicale* is the trade union of high fashion, and it is responsible not only for upholding *haute couture* standards to this day, but also for affording legal protection regarding the copyright and intellectual property of *haute couture* designs (each look is photographed and catalogued as a unique product of French industry), providing education to uphold *haute couture*, as well as awarding the title of “*haute couture* house” to fashion houses, a status that is reviewed annually.³¹⁵ The concept of *haute couture* first appeared in Western culture in 1858, the year English textile shop worker-turned-couturier Charles Frederick Worth established his fashion house in

³¹³ To reiterate, *Haut couture* utilizes the German word, *Haut*, meaning skin, and compounding it with the French term *haute couture*, which designates a type of handmade, custom-designed, one-of-a-kind clothing produced without the use of technology such as sewing machines and sergers.

³¹⁴ Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), 13.

³¹⁵ La Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt à Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, “Historical background and composition” / “Mission, actions and goals,” *Mode Paris: La Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt à Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.modeparis.com/2/federation/article/economic-figures>.

Paris, effectively introducing the idea that there was a difference between a “fashion designer” and a “dressmaker.”³¹⁶ In 1945, *la Chambre Syndicale* tightened the rules of *haute couture*, stipulating that the garment-making process must include one or more fittings with the client, that the fashion house must have a staff of fifteen or more people, and that during each season the fashion house must present a collection of thirty-five runs (i.e., looks) for daytime and evening wear before the Paris press.³¹⁷ By the mid-twentieth century, the number of *haute couturiers* had dropped from over a hundred to only eighteen due not only to *la Chambre Syndicale*’s regulations, but also the extreme costs associated, the increase of mass production, and the appearance of synthetic fabrics on the market.³¹⁸ At the Spring 2016 season, only twenty-four fashion houses (some of which are not even classified as *haute couture* houses) presented at the Paris *Haute Couture* Fashion Week.³¹⁹

While clothing is relational and generally perceived as a positive and necessary thing within Western culture, there is a sense of horror and anxiety historically bound up in objects made from flayed skin that makes *Haut couture* taboo, even monstrous. While *Haut couture* has been shown in galleries and collected by museums in recent years, which underscores the increasing presence and acceptance of skin as a textile in visual culture, it is perceived as taboo because it symbolizes the destruction of the subject via the eradication of the epidermal boundaries that demarcate “I” from “not I,” boundaries that are the very foundation of the modern subject. While the specter of flaying is always present in *Haut couture* insofar as these garments and fashion accessories appear to be

³¹⁶ Diana De Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture* (Teaneck, NJ: Holms & Meier, 1990).

³¹⁷ Didier Grumbach, *Histoires de la Mode* (Paris: Editions au Regard, 2008), 94.

³¹⁸ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Fashion Empire: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 98.

³¹⁹ La Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt à Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, “Fashion Shows,” *Mode Paris: La Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt à Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://www.modeaparis.com/2/fashion-shows/Schedules/Haute-couture>.

made from flayed human skin, and exist within Western cultural history,³²⁰ these clothes are typically made from the indexical representation of it, achieved through various means and materials: photography, painting, textile production (including both animal and cellulose-based “vegan” leather production), silicone, polyurethane, and rubber, amongst others. Generally, *Haut couture* is not made with real human skin, but its indexical copy and realist representation. What makes *Haut couture* both fascinating and frightening, then, is the fact that the skins used to tailor new garments appear both attached to and flayed from the human body. However, there are examples of *Haut couture* made from human skin, such as a pair of boots (aptly called “shit kickers”), a pair of sandals, and a wallet by American artist Andrew Krasnow, whom I mentioned in the introduction chapter.³²¹

One of the most infamous *Haut couturiers* of the twentieth century is Ed Gein, who, as I already mentioned, made garments for him self out of the skin from the women he exhumed and murdered during the 1950s. Known within (North) American culture for gruesomely using the body’s boundary organ—the skin—as the primary medium for the creation of sexed garments, accessories, and even home furnishings, Gein was colloquially referred to as “The Woman Skinner of Wisconsin.” In addition to the “mammary vest” and “nipple belt,” Gein also made skin leggings and masks, in addition to a number of other domestic objects.³²² Convicted of murder but deemed criminally insane in 1968, Gein became a household name as a result of *LIFE* magazine’s coverage of the story in its December 2, 1957 issue, which fueled a cultural obsession with epidermal horror, as well

³²⁰ An important example of *Haut couture* made from human skin is the 17th century pants made from a corpse’s skin, called “necropants” (called “nábrók” or “death pants” in Icelandic). In Icelandic culture, these skin pants serve the purpose of producing wealth and money for the wearer. While they look real, these pants on display at the museum are a contemporary copy or reimagining of the historical, even mythical necropants. To view the necropants, please see: Iceland’s Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.galdrasyning.is/>.

³²¹ To view more of Krasnow’s *haut couture*, including the above-mentioned objects, please visit: “Of the Flesh: The Art of Andrew Krasnow,” *GV Art*, accessed January 28, 2014, http://www.gvart.co.uk/of_the_flesh.html.

³²² Paul Anthony Woods, *Ed Gein: Psycho* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995).

led to the creation of a host of quasi-fictional characters in popular stories and films.³²³ While the horror of Gein's epidermal crimes were seared into the American imaginary, his *Haut couture* and the corresponding photographic evidence catalogued by police no longer exist beyond reports and testimony, permitting it to become quasi-mythological—the Wisconsin police destroyed the skin garments and domestic objects post-trial, deeming them so taboo that they should not be seen by the public. In turn, only unverifiable photographs of some of Gein's *Haut couture* exist and circulate on the Internet, shrouding his *Haut couture* in mystery as a result of their intangibility.³²⁴

This lack of (visual) evidence of Gein's *Haut couture* interestingly echoes the “disappearance” of the human skin objects testified to have been made by and for SS Officers at Nazi concentration camps, such as Büchenwald, during World War II. Significantly, the media coverage of the Gein investigation and later his trial came on the heels of the U.S. War Crimes Tribunal (referred to as the Dachau Trials), which took place in Germany between 1945 and 1947.³²⁵ Accounts of Nazi officers using skins of prisoners to make *Haut couture*, such as handbags and boots, as well as domestic objects, such as saddles and lampshades, achieved a different image of horror than our previous discussions of flaying have touched on: one not mythologized (e.g., the Greek myth of Marsyas), or made palatable by martyrdom within religious contexts (e.g., St. Bartholomew), or made partially excusable on account of insanity (e.g., Ed Gein). Rather, they truly showed what horrors humanity was capable of in the modern age: the total eradication of boundaries effected by the militarization of culture and the normalization of

³²³ Francis Miller and Frank Scherschel, “House of Horrors Stuns the Nation,” *Life Magazine*, December 2, 1957, 24–31.

³²⁴ Judge Robert H. Gollmar, *Edward Gein* (New York: Pinnacle, 1981), 48.

³²⁵ The Dachau Trials were held to investigate the bulk of Nazi war crimes against Allied citizens, and 1,672 low-ranking officers were tried, most of whom were found guilty. The overarching impetus of the trials was the moral responsibility to ensure that these atrocities were legally accounted for, and to make sure that Nazi revitalization programs did not take place in the future. For an critical appraisal of the trials, see: Durwood Riedel, “The U.S. War Crimes Tribunal at the Former Dachau Concentration Camp: Lessons for Today?” *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 26, no. 2 (2006), accessed July 5, 2014, <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bjil/vol24/iss2/8>.

mass killing, which permitted the flaying of bodies to become understood as a “necessary” demonstration of power.

Included in the Dachau Trials was the Büchenwald trial, officially referred to as *United States of America vs. Josias Prince of Waldeck et al.* (Case 000-50-9), which tried many low-level officers accused of committing war crimes at Büchenwald labour camp between April 11–14, 1947. During the trial eyewitness accounts of skin objects made from the bodies of camp prisoners by Nazis surfaced.³²⁶ Accusing Ilse Koch (the wife of Commandant Karl Koch, the “overseer” of the camp) of collecting tattooed skin specimens from prisoners, and even having trophies made from their skins in the form of lampshades, gloves and handbags, saddles, and shoes, prisoners dubbed her “The Bitch of Büchenwald.” Not a Nazi officer *per se*, Koch was in charge of the female SS guards at Büchenwald, which granted her power over the officers at the camp. Koch was the only female tried by any war crimes tribunal post-war, leading to her status as one of “the most evil women in history” and inspiring the 1975 cult film *Ilse: She Wolf of the SS* (Dir. Don Edmonds).³²⁷ In the United States Koch’s trial was covered by *The Washington Post* amongst many other newspapers, which brought her epidermally-focused war crimes into the homes and imaginations of Western culture.³²⁸

While Koch was Gein’s predecessor, she obtained skins through different means and for different reasons, allowing her crimes to be understood as a sadistic power play rather than the result of misidentity, mental illness, and trauma. Rather than attempt to transform herself by wearing another’s skin, as Gein did, Koch rendered prisoner bodies sub-human, removing their skin in order to eradicate them. Witnesses repeatedly recounted her control over Büchenwald, her overt sadism, her affairs with SS officers, and

³²⁶ David A. Hackett, *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

³²⁷ Rob Carey and Ben Taylor, “Ilse Koch,” *The Most Evil Men and Women in History*. Dir. Miranda Twiss. Season 1, episode 8 (London: Channel 5, 2002).

³²⁸ Alexandra Przyrembel, “Transfixed by an Image: Ilse Koch, the ‘Kommandeuse of Buchenwald,’” trans. P. Selwyn, *German History* 19, no. 3 (2001): 369. In 1948, Koch was scandalously acquitted due to a lack of concrete evidence of her crimes (as a result of the “disappearance” of skin objects logged into evidence), but she was later arrested and tried by German courts, committing suicide in a Bavarian prison in 1967.

her obsession with the tattooed skins of prisoners, some of which were sent to Berlin for analysis and collection. It was testified that Koch often handpicked the skins she wanted in front of prisoners while they were still alive.

In the case of Gein, the flaying of women's bodies was an attempt to appropriate the sexed female body and achieve a radical form of bodily transcendence, which renders Gein's *Haut couture* talismanic. In the case of Koch, however, her desire for skin objects was motivated by a display of power, sadism, and domination over those she perceived as "less than" her, and thus the *Haut couture* created at Büchenwald function as trophies. In turn, the wealth of wearable skin garments found in visual culture in more recent years speaks to both a desire and an attempt by contemporary culture to break down boundaries between bodies and experience the skins of the self and others differently.

While these atrocities have receded into collective cultural memory, blurring the lines between fact and mythology, the twentieth-century penchant for human skin objects illuminates the distinction between skin as a talisman and skin as a trophy. In the history of early humans, leathers and furs were worn for practical reasons, the result of killing for food, as well as protection from the elements, and the belief that by wearing the animal's skin (wo)man absorbs its primal powers. Animal skins that function as talismans, therefore, become symbols of tribute to the power of the animal—often an apex predator such as a wolf, bear, or cat—made available to the human that wears it through the act of layering.³²⁹ When skin is a talisman, it communicates (wo)man's desire to be something more, something other than who and what (s)he is. When the skins of animals are celebrated and worn in this way, the skin garment is understood as a protective device rather than an object of display. Conversely, when skin becomes a mere trophy, the powers of the beast are seemingly diminished as a result of being conquered by (wo)man. In effect, the trophy displays human power over nature. In this scenario, the power of the animal, also often an apex predator, is coveted rather than celebrated. Unlike talismans,

³²⁹ Warwick and Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame*, 129. For a larger discussion of the transformative nature of fur as a second skin that shapes the body's image, see: Julia V. Emberley's *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), particularly chapter one, "The Sumptuous Details of History," and chapter four, "The Fecundity of Fur."

which take on a quasi-sacred life, trophies are hollow—quite literally, in the context of taxidermy—serving as superficial displays of power. However, in both cases, wearing or possessing the skin of an animal breaks down the boundary between the human and animal, which is another version of the posthuman—our animal nature.

Despite the lack of tangible evidence regarding Koch's skin objects and the lack of visual proof of Gein's *Haut couture*, these skin objects exist as a pervasive idea, permanently fixed in the Western cultural imaginary. In turn, *Haut couture*, whether real or not, perform an important symbolic function, standing in for a cultural obsession with and fear of losing our skins and, at the same time, for our desire to alter, re-contour, enhance, and extend our bodies, nation, and culture. What underlies the creation of skin garments in these examples is a desire to get under another's skin and to wear that skin in order to possess new body images, experiences, and even identities not available to us by relating at the level of skin.

Flirting with the idea that getting under another's skin permits new body images and experiences of embodiment to manifest, Alba D'Urbano's *hautnah* (*Close to the Skin*) series (1995-ongoing) [Fig. 25] is a clothing collection made from life-sized, high-resolution, digital photographic images of the Italian artist's naked body that are computer rendered onto satin-cotton fabric, later sewn into various "skin suits."³³⁰ Comprised of a wide-range of garment styles, including dresses, skirts, blouses, pants, and jackets, *hautnah* mimics the basics of many fashion lines. In order to create these garments D'Urbano re-worked and re-shaped the digital images of her body so that they could be sewn into seamless, lifelike, life-size skin garments, which transform the two-dimensional image of her skin into a three-dimensional object. Utilizing the trappings of the fashion industry, D'Urbano furthered *hautnah* by creating *Il Sarto Immortale* (*The Immortal Tailor*), a fashion show, installations of a "tailor's studio" and various iterations of "boutiques," and an online store. Creating a frozen installation of a "tailor's studio" (equipped with a waiting room/dressing room, and tailor's studio furnished with sewing

³³⁰ To view more examples of *hautnah*, please visit: Alba D'Urbano, *Couture*, accessed January 20, 2013, <http://www.durbano.de/couture/collection.html>.

machines, patterns, and fabric), and corresponding website entitled “Couture,”³³¹ D’Urbano explores “the relationship between bodies, external appearance, and technology.”³³² Echoing the limited and expensive nature of *couture*, *Il Sarto Immortale* presents *hautnah* to viewers as being a real line of clothes that cost anywhere from 800 to 3,700 Euros. However, these clothes cannot actually be purchased through the online store. The online store simply creates the illusion that these skin portraits can be possessed by (almost) anyone, which is underscored by the fact that the garments are listed as being available in a range of sizes (European women’s sizes 38–44/Canadian/American sizes 8–14), a sizing scale that not only reflects the “average” female body size, but also contradicts D’Urbano’s size and measurements in which the garments are made. Engaging the fashion industry and culture through *Il Sarto Immortale*, *hautnah* was originally exhibited as a live fashion show with a catwalk and models at Art Cologne in 1997. In December of 1997, at Galerie Becker in Darmstadt, Germany, D’Urbano furthered *Il Sarto Immortale* by transforming the art gallery into a makeshift clothing store. In this iteration D’Urbano created custom cloth boxes for the *hautnah* garments, which explored the association of luxury with high fashion. By mimicking the language, aesthetics, and display practices of designer boutiques, D’Urbano legitimizes the contemporary practice of turning skin into wearable garments, inviting others to try her on. In turn, *hautnah* and *Il Sarto Immortale* disrupts the reinforced link between identity and the skin’s appearance.

Permitting others to get under her skin, D’Urbano’s *Haut couture* imagines an overlapping of skins that transforms her body image into a headless self-portrait, which extends into the space and lives of others. D’Urbano notes that “[i]n order to realize the clothing of [her] own skin,” she had to make a suit that would underscore the skin’s ability to “filte[r], regulat[e] and sometimes determin[e] the entire network of

³³¹ Alba D’Urbano, *Couture*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.durbano.de/couture/index.html>.

³³² Alba D’Urbano, *Il Sarto Immortale*, accessed December 3, 2016, <http://www.durbano.de/sarto/index.html>.



Figure 25: Alba D'Urbano. *hautnah* collection. Blouse and skirt displayed as part of *Couture* online shop. Computer printed satin-cotton. 1995. © Alba d'Urbano. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist



Figure 26: Olivier Goulet. "Skin suit." *Skin Bag* collection. Rubber. 2002-ongoing. © Olivier Goulet.

relationships and exchange with the surrounding world.”³³³ This relational line of garments was intended to give others the “opportunity to go through the world hidden within the “[a]rtist’s [s]kin,” ostensibly experiencing the body and the world in new ways.³³⁴ While critical for its relationality, *hautnah* and *Il Sarto Immortale* has been criticized by fashion historian and theorist Ingrid Loschek for its “strangely shameless” presentation of nudity, which Loschek likened to the contested performances of contemporary artist Vanessa Beecroft who often takes over public spaces (i.e., the museum) with the performative presentation of nude or barely clothed models.³³⁵ In contrast to Loschek, I argue that these works are not shameless, nor are they superficial; rather, they are an attempt to make possible radical relations with others despite the fact that these relations are limited by the fact that the clothes cannot be made-to-order or purchased online, and that they, on a broader level, function as a critique to the capitalist fashion industry that urge bodies to alter their contours and surfaces through the consumption of vestments that precipitate a becoming someone and even something other.

Moving away from creating *Haut couture* with photographically transformed textiles, the rubber “skin” garments and accessories of French designer Olivier Goulet’s *SkinBag* line (2002–ongoing) [Fig. 26] can be customized to suit individual desires and preferences.³³⁶ In a press release, Goulet notes that “*SkinBag* is a relational tool, a vehicle of sensuality for touch as well as a way to question the alchemy between the captivating

³³³ Alba D’Urbano, “Hautnah,” *Alba D’Urbano*, accessed July 5, 2014. <http://www.durbano.de/hautnah/index.html>.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ingrid Loschek, *When Clothes Become Fashion: Design and Innovation Systems*, trans. Lucinda Rennison (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

³³⁶ *Skin Bag, Corps. Ext.*, accessed August 16, 2014, <http://www.skinbag.net/index.php>.



Figure 27: Nicola Costantino. Installation view of *Human Furriery* at Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel, 2002. © Nicola Costantino.



Figure 28: Nicola Costantino. Installation view of *Human Furriery*. Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel, 2002. © Nicola Costantino.



Figure 29: Nicola Costantino. Nipple Corset. *Human Furriery* project. Silicone and polyurethane. 2000. © Nicola Costantino.

and repulsive.”³³⁷ These garments and accessories are unique insofar as they are made from a soft, textured rubber akin to that of textured condoms, a relatively untraditional and erotically charged fabric that also functions a relational tool. Available in a range of skin tones and unexpected colours, the *Skin Bag* line is a thoughtful contrast to the Caucasian skin tones utilized across the bulk of *Haut couture*.

Making garments that are relatively gender neutral and designed to be unisex, which functions as a contrast to D’Urbano’s collection, for example, Goulet’s project “is an invitation to explore our selves and our environment,” providing bodies with “a guide to human mutation” that can achieve “optimal collective identification and networking.”³³⁸ What is similar to D’Urbano’s conception of *hautnah* is the idea that these garments function as relational, networking technologies designed to connect bodies. In other words, Goulet sees his own project as bringing bodies together collectively with a heightened sense of relationality between them. Goulet’s *SkinBag* website’s tag line reads, “And if the skin bag of your dreams doesn’t exist, we can realise it,” suggesting that not only do we understand our skins to be infinitely customizable, but we actively conceptualize them as garments that can be custom-tailored.³³⁹

Taking a dark turn, the *Haut couture* of Argentine artist Nicola Costantino’s *Human Furriery* project (1998–2013) [Figs. 27–29] echo those crafted by Gein insofar as they are made from patches of skin punctuated with orifices, such as nipples and anuses, that are sewn together. Unlike Gein’s clothing, the many garments of *Human Furriery* are made from the skins of men, and are designed for both women and men in a range of styles. By using skins of men, Costantino highlights the sexed nature of skin, offering us an alternative view of visual culture’s obsession with female skin, and explores the desire to get under another’s skin. While macabre, *Human Furriery* is made culturally

³³⁷ Olivier Goulet, “SkinBag Press,” *SkinBag*, accessed August 16, 2014. <http://www.skinbag.net/code/presse-dossier.php>.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Goulet, *SkinBag*.

intelligible and chic through the artist's installation of the garments in a public space dressed as a minimalist, white-walled boutique [Fig. 27] reminiscent of the most luxe and expensive high fashion stores.³⁴⁰

Comprised of men's shirts, jackets, and shoes, and women's dresses trimmed with human hair, coats, purses, and high-heeled shoes, *Human Furriery* is a wearable collection, taking inspiration from contemporary ready-to-wear styles and classic formal wear. Preserving the texture of human skin, nipples, and anuses, Costantino's collection is not actually made from skin; rather, the garments are made from injection-molded silicone and polyurethane. While the skins Costantino uses are made by industrial manufacturing processes, which contradict the definition of *Haute couture*, she then takes rubber-like fabric and handcrafts one-of-a-kind clothing. Textured, these garments are, at first glance, read within the space of the boutique as made from embossed leather and animal hair, rather than human skin and hair. In turn, *Human Furriery* uses the language of high fashion to give these skin garments an air of luxury and expense that D'Urbano's computer-printed satin-cotton pieces do not have, for example. In the boutique setting Costantino displays her garments not as works of art (despite the fact that the nipple corset is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York [Fig. 28]), but as clothing that can be touched and tried on. Though not sold to customers in the same way D'Urbano's series is sold online, thereby available to many, the effect of the installation encourages a relational meeting of skins in the coded space of the fashion boutique. By residing in both the boutique setting and museum collections, *Human Furriery* makes the underlying horror of flaying present across the series and *Haut couture* more palatable, even acceptable to us within the Western cultural imaginary.

Human Furriery is of special interest because the garments are made in a range of skin tones—soft peaches and pale pinks evoke Caucasian skins and brown shades evoke African and South Asian skin tones [Fig. 29]—so as to explore, whether unintentionally or not, race. By making clothing in a range of skin tones *Human Furriery* is racially

³⁴⁰ To view more of *Human Furrier* series, please visit: "Human Furriery," *Nicola Costantino*, accessed March 5, 2013, <http://www.nicolacostantino.com.ar/peleteria.php>.

diverse, which opens the work up to interesting musings on race and desire. In effect, the racial diversity of the series highlights how much of *Haut couture* is made by Caucasian artists whom, in turn, make garments with white skin.

Unlike *Haut couture* made from photographs of female skin printed on fabric (D'Urbano) and those created from gender-neutral, textured rubber skin (Goulet), which do not pass as real human skin and, therefore, do not as quickly bring us to the thought of the flayed body, *Human Furriery* gives the wearer the illusion that numerous men have been killed for the creation of these luxury garments. In turn, this series explores a violence against men that is not commonly found in *Haut couture*, which tends to focus on the skins of women. In turn, this series touches on a history of using men's skins for the production of *Haut couture* at Büchenwald. This connection is even more significant if we consider that, as an Argentine woman, Costantino has a heightened socio-cultural awareness of skin crimes, which speaks to the possible post-war circulation of skin objects in South America (which Dahl's short story, *Skin*, alludes to).

When worn, these clothes create an overlap of men's skin with women's, allowing the woman who dons such garments a feeling of dominance and power in a patriarchal world, which can be understood as an attempt to reverse the objectification of the female form in culture and fashion. By choosing to focus on the skins of men and, in turn, enacting a kind of metaphorical violence against men, Costantino literally allows us to get under the skin of the patriarchy in a very horrifying way. Interestingly, when men wear Costantino's *Haut couture* they enact the possibility of the patriarchy getting under its own skin, yet rather unintentionally so.

As such, we have to ask: what is at stake when we consciously and actively choose to wear clothing made from the (representation of the) skin of another human being? While this chapter attempts to answer this question, what is clear from the outset is that by wearing another's skin we get under their skin and can relate to them through their skins in new ways. While I have only introduced *Haut couture* within the context of the skin-as-clothing metaphor, I turn now to a deeper consideration of relationality in order to, in the

last section of this chapter, discuss the work of Álvarez-Errecalde, which illuminates the potential for radical relations within skin portraiture.

3.4 « Relationality »

Turning skin into clothing underscores the ways we both celebrate and covet bodies we find appealing. It is no surprise, therefore, that in colloquial tongue, we might say, “I just want to wear their skin like a suit” when we encounter a body that has attributes we desire and want to possess. What underlies such a statement is a desire to be altered through radical relations with others. By coming into contact and making a connection with another (subject and/or body), we perceive ourselves as having an opportunity to possess something other than who or what we are in that moment. In turn, *Haut couture* permits the mutual or co-creation of new body images and contours resulting from a meeting and overlap of different skins. In other words, when we wear skin garments, we simultaneously stay in our own skin and inhabit, albeit temporarily, the skin and body image of another. This experience is radical not only because wearing the skin of another is taboo, but because *Haut couture* cultivates new experiences of both self and other through a layering of skins. What results from radical relations between skins is the emergence of a new ephemeral body, one that can jolt us out of the (dis)comfort of our own sexed, gendered, and even raced skins and corresponding experiences of embodiment.

Although the word “relate” has more than one meaning, all of those meanings are tied to the action of “mak[ing] or show[ing] a connection” to persons, events, objects, and environments.³⁴¹ To be “related” to someone may mean to be “casually connected,” or to be “connected by blood or marriage.”³⁴² At the root of being related are the social and

³⁴¹ Oxford Dictionaries, “Relate,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/relate>.

³⁴² Ibid.

physical connections between and across bodies. To “relate to” means, firstly, to have concern for or reference to, secondly, to “feel sympathy for or identify with,” and, thirdly, “to give an account” or narrate.³⁴³ In these latter meanings, the connections between subject and others, events, objects, and environments are affective, shaped by subjectivity, perspective, and experience. When the verb “to relate” is transformed into an adjective—relational or relative—it becomes a way of describing certain types of connections, as is underscored by its definition: “Concerning the ways in which two or more people or things are connected.”³⁴⁴

While body studies since the 1990s has continued to focus on the fleshy nature of embodiment, paying particular attention to the ways gender impacts the experiences of bodies in the world,³⁴⁵ affect theories have increasingly framed the body as a process of becoming, rather than a fixed thing,³⁴⁶ a framework that turns to the virtual nature of affect and the sense of movement it generates within, without, across, and between bodies.³⁴⁷ Affects are those invisible and ephemeral experiences of bodies engendered by perception, movement, and the senses that are transmitted across bodies and environments, as Teresa Brennan argues in *The Transmission of Affect*.³⁴⁸ Brennan’s work on affect as a contagion critiques the long-standing Western belief, evidenced in psychoanalysis and psychiatry, for example, that the healthy person is an affectively self-contained subject impervious to this transmission.³⁴⁹ For affect scholars Melissa Gregg

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Oxford Dictionaries, “Relational,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/relational>.

³⁴⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

³⁴⁶ Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimensions of Science Studies,” *Body & Society* 10, no. 2/3.

³⁴⁷ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.

³⁴⁸ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 1–2.

and Gregory J. Seigworth, “[the] body is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in its relations—until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter,” which signals a widespread dis-identification with boundaries and self-containment in twenty-first-century life.³⁵⁰

Addressing the increasing bio-politicization of biomatter in contemporary life, Eugene Thacker argues that bodies have become increasingly relational as a result of what he calls the “post-biological threshold,” where the biomedical and technological realms of life collapse boundaries between the organic and inorganic, the material and immaterial, the living and the non-living.³⁵¹ Influenced by Thacker’s work, Patricia Clough, like Brennan, critiques the body-as-organism metaphor, born of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century modernity, which understands the body “autopoietically as open to energy but informationally closed to the environment, thus engendering its own boundary conditions,” in order to account for a new relational body that she calls the “biomediated body.”³⁵² The biomediated body is a body of our time—one that has expanded what a body is and can do (i.e., its affects) by transforming the body into information by way of labour within the realms of new media (e.g., digital photography) and biomedica (e.g., biocomputing and bioinformatics). Despite being transformed into information (i.e., code that is read by machines), the biomediated body does not usher in a future of disembodiment as one might think; rather, this complexification of bodily matter permits the creation of new bodies, bodies that are the product of and that engender nonlinear formations and relationships in the world. While I do not discuss biomedica at length in this chapter, I acknowledge the fact that wearing the skin suit of another permits the skin to become a kind of biomedica that alters our body images, albeit temporarily, creating new

³⁵⁰ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “A Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

³⁵¹ Eugene Thacker, *Biomedica* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

³⁵² Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedica and Bodies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008).

body images and information about bodies in the world, which creates and opens the body up to radical relations.

By focusing on the invisible aspects of bodies and theorizing humans as simultaneously “one and many,” affect theories help us better understand what it means to be human.³⁵³ Moving from affect theory to social psychology, Kenneth J. Gergen asserts that humans are at their core relational beings rather than bounded subjects, from which it follows that “there is no isolated self or fully private experience.”³⁵⁴ Gergen argues that by radically reframing human experience as being built on relations, we can effect political and institutional change. In this framework, Gergen suggests that humans are “multi-beings” who are always already in the process of becoming through past, present, and future relationships in the world. Understanding our selves as both one and many, as multi-beings, requires a re-orientation of subjectivity; the discomfort that results from this re-orientation opens up a space for alternative realities.³⁵⁵ Because multi-beings are constantly changing and being shaped by co-action (action with others through time; a collaboration and coordination with others), the idea of *the* subject becomes problematic insofar as, firstly, each relationship I have over time will shape who I presently am and who I will become, which means that there is no concrete “I,” and, secondly, each time I meet someone, what they perceive as my whole personality is merely but a fragment of myself in a given moment in time. Gergen argues, to be a multi-being—a radical alternative to the bounded subject—is to open one’s self up to conflict that can alter what a body is and can do.³⁵⁶ In turn, *Haut couture* offers the possibility of visualizing what it might mean to be a multi-being.

³⁵³ Lisa Blackman, “Affect, Relationality and the ‘Problem of Personality,’” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 24.

³⁵⁴ Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being Beyond Self and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xv.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 133–49.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

While affect theories and social psychology can account for the ways bodies are inherently relational, an ethics of relationality is needed if these relations are to create positive and consciousness-raising possibilities in the socio-cultural field. For feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti, radical relationality is precisely that which stops one body or subjectivity from overriding another's within relational encounters in the political and socio-cultural worlds we occupy.³⁵⁷ Braidotti frames subjectivity as a process or ontology of autopoiesis (i.e., the search for homeostasis, also referred to as “self-styling”), built upon “complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values” and dependent upon alterity—that is, the presence of another that confirms my subjectivity.³⁵⁸ Subjectivity is, therefore, built upon the foundations of the subject in relation to others and objects in the world (an idea that is also the foundation of Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory of object relations).³⁵⁹ Analyzing the turn to post-secularism (a turn towards spirituality, so to speak) in contemporary feminist thought, Braidotti asserts that contemporary technologies (biotechnology and biomedicine, virtual reality, the Internet, and so on) allow for new forms of inter-relationality, transforming subjects into nomadic, multi-relational, and connective beings.³⁶⁰

A heightened sense of relationality does not mean, however, that difference is collapsed into sameness in Braidotti's argument. Asserting that “a subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of relations of power,” Braidotti argues that “the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others.”³⁶¹ In this view, increased modes of relation with others would not only positively affirm difference and otherness, but also trigger an oppositional

³⁵⁷ Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6 (2008): 1-24.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 12.

³⁵⁹ Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works, 1921–1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1975). See also C. Fred Alford, *Melanie Klein and Critical Social Theory: An Account of Politics, Art and Reason Based on Her Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

³⁶⁰ Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times,” 12.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15

consciousness and political agency that engenders the possibility of alternative experiences in the world and in one's body. Braidotti argues that relationality becomes radical when those relations engender a greater accountability to others through what she calls "dis-identification." For Braidotti dis-identification is "the loss of habits of thought and representation" that work to keep the subject bound in her experiences within the socio-political realm. An experience of dis-identification, then, is both liberating and frightening insofar as it creates new realities and temporalities that are seemingly contested, antagonistic, and painful because they move against and beyond the normative patriarchal confines in which many, if not most, of us live. In order to come to a place of radical relationality, a place where relations engender positive affirmations, Braidotti argues that we must first tap into not only our collective desires but also our imagination. In this framework, *Haut couture*, for example, transforms skin into an "untapped media" through which a person could radically reposition herself and create drastically new realities within socio-cultural and political spheres.

Within art historical and film studies circles, a concern for empathy and relationality has emerged in order to draw attention to a critical need for ethical modes of spectatorship. In an analysis of her experiences as a spectator of American queer artist Ron Athey's reenactment of his iconic performance *Solar Anus*³⁶² at the Walker Art Center in 2006, art historian Amelia Jones describes the ways Athey's body is "synaesthetically available" to her through sight, sound, touch, smell, and (potentially) taste, but not "bonded to [her] body," a relationship that illuminates an ethics of spectatorship.³⁶³ Jones works through the ethical concerns and embodied experiences of her role as spectator, which will help us better understand the intimacy and reflexivity of skin portraiture, generally speaking.

³⁶² *Solar Anus*, Ron Athey performance art video, 2:31, posted by "rathey," accessed March 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKHxWI0JD38#password>.

³⁶³ Amelia Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and Radical Relationality of Meaning," *Parallax* 15, no. 4 (2009).

Like much of Athey's performance work, *Solar Anus* is concerned with not only questioning the body as it pertains to conceptions of masculinity and religious practice, but also wounding and the associated pain by invoking S&M. The fact that Athey is HIV-positive gives these performances a critical charge and sense of danger, as Jones recounts. The title *Solar Anus* refers to the tribal tattoo, representing the rays of a sun, inked around Athey's anus, which is prominently engaged in the performance. In this performance he inserts a number of objects, ranging from a pearl necklace to dildos in a range of shapes and sizes, which becomes painful, often resulting in wounding. Recounting how droplets of liquid (sweat? lubricant?) from Athey's performance hit her face, Jones admits,

In spite of my professional and intellectual embrace of the bodily vicissitudes of wounding, I am embarrassed to admit I found myself repelled on a gut level, afraid of his supposedly infectious blood...but also deeply concerned about the imminent health of the Ron I know as a friend, as he enacted his permeability in such a fearless and visceral way. This worry opened me to my own permeability, and I felt flayed, exposed and aware of my own limits, my own capacity to experience the effects of wounding as I flinched away from his bodily fluids. Perhaps, in fact, I project his body as representational in order to guard myself from its obvious liquidity, porousness and *woundedness*.³⁶⁴

While Jones's visceral reaction engendered feelings of empathy (the sense that his body could be hers) and an experience of relationality (the sense that their bodies are distinct yet connected through the senses, context, and time), she acknowledges the fact that the context of the performance shaped her response to it, which underscores the fleeting nature of relational experience, that the next time she watches the performance she might not feel or experience the same things.

Referencing film scholar Sue Cartwright's concept of "empathic identification" in order to unpack "the how" of Braidotti's concept of radical relationality, Jones writes, "I do not necessarily feel the other's feelings or imagine myself in his or her place [...], but rather recognize and even facilitate the otherness of the other," which is not only an identification that is "radically intersubjective and multisensory in its enactment," but also

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 50.

a “projective mode of identification that potentially produces effects that are not isomorphic with the apparent feelings of the character or subject being identified with—I can never ‘feel as you feel.’”³⁶⁵ In turn, Jones charts a concern for radical relationality within and across contemporary visual culture.

While Jones’s work on performance, the body, and experiences of embodiment has greatly contributed to the study of relationality in art history, French curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s contested and celebrated theory of “relational aesthetics” has since the 1990s legitimized the idea that the substance, meaning, and value of art may now be derived from the relations between bodies engendered by participatory action in the art gallery within and around the objects that comprise the installation.³⁶⁶ Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”³⁶⁷ The intervention of participation into the autonomy of the work of art permits relational aesthetics to bring bodies together and achieve—albeit problematically—experiences of relationality not traditionally afforded to spectators of autonomous art.

Underscoring relational aesthetics is the idea that the work of art can be expanded, re-configured, and democratized as a result of its basis in social human relations. An early example of the type of work that led Bourriaud to his theory of relational aesthetics, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Free)* (1992) is a performance in which the artist cooked for the spectators, making Pad Thai and curries, cultivating the socialization of and relations between the gallery-goers, who became participants in the work.³⁶⁸ Relational art

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 51; Jones is citing Sue Cartwright’s *Moral Spectator: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

³⁶⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Art*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 113.

³⁶⁸ Rirkrit Tiravanija, “Untitled (Free/Still),” 3:22, posted by “Museum of Modern Art,” accessed July 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xRx2s3FpSg>.

installations like *Free* permit a sharp, almost utopian increase in social, physical, psychic, sensual, and linguistic relations between strangers.

Despite Bourriaud's claim that the relations enacted through a work of art constitute the work itself, art historian Claire Bishop points out that the relations achieved do not go to work in any political or critical sense, so to speak, because these artworks are experienced as microutopias within the cloistered space of the art gallery, which is in and of itself a space of privilege.³⁶⁹ Bishop is clear that relational aesthetics does not necessarily have to incite or cultivate change, but she cautions that we need to be aware of what relations are being achieved, for whom, and where. The space of the art gallery is problematic because it is typically inhabited by a homogenous group of people that are middle to upper class, white, and educated, that does not reflect or stand in for the whole of culture(s), which engenders particular kinds of relations. Thus, Bishop suggests that the relationships engendered by Tiravanija present a utopian image of contemporary life that renders relational art exclusive rather than democratic.³⁷⁰

In order to counter Bourriaud and illuminate what an array of relations can achieve, Bishop analyzes the work of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra from the early 2000s, wherein the artist paid migrant workers to do illegal manual labour in art galleries and other public social spaces.³⁷¹ Bishop argues that through his (un)ethical attention to labour, Sierra reflects culture back on itself, illuminating the cracks in the capitalist system that shapes Western culture, becoming a sort of dystopic contrast to Bourriaud's utopic vision of relational art.³⁷² The relations engendered by Sierra's work occur between the migrant subjects rather than between spectators, which permits what Bishop calls "relational antagonism," to cultivate political and social change. Relational antagonism is precisely as it sounds: by creating relations that are unethical and negatively politically

³⁶⁹ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Art," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 71-74.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 71.

charged (e.g., illegally paying migrants to execute pointless manual labour), the relations engendered critique the ideological constructs (e.g., capitalism) that shape contemporary life. Paying these workers nominal amounts (mere dollars), Sierra exploits not only the labour of migrants caught in the crosshairs of capitalism and the law, but also the capitalist system that permits this labour to be transformed into profit. Selling documentary photographs of these labour-intensive performances for thousands of dollars, Sierra becomes what he critiques thereby antagonizing the system that permits his success and fame.

While I have only touched on relational art, the goal of this section is to illuminate the ways relationality is increasingly important to us during a time when it seems that because of technology, for example, our contact with the skins of others is decreasing in a physical sense for that of the virtual. In turn, this discussion of relationality, the affect theories that flesh out its role in our experiences of embodiment today, and relational art lead us to a deeper consideration of *Haut couture*'s potential for radical relationality in the relational art of *More Store*, which literalizes a cultural desire to brush up against skins that are different, so as to permit the possibility of getting both under the skin of another and out of our own skins.

3.5 « Relational Skins: Ana Álvarez-Errecalde »

More Store (2009–ongoing) [Figs. 30–33] is a participatory installation-performance by Argentinean artist Ana Álvarez-Errecalde that transforms high-resolution digital photographic portraits of forty nude, (quasi-)anonymous women into skin suits that are then worn by gallery-goers. These female subjects range in age from eighteen to seventy-five and represent an array of body shapes as well as races and ethnicities from diverse geographic locations, including Cameroon, Costa Rica, Brazil, Holland, and Iceland,

amongst others [Fig. 30].³⁷³ The diversity amongst the skin suits underscores a concern for and celebration of racial difference, which is not, as I have noted in my discussion of Constantino's *Human Furrier*, a commonality across skin portraiture. The one-piece bodysuits, made from computer-printed stretch cotton, permit gallery-goers the unlikely opportunity of not only trying on another's skin in order to celebrate difference, but also getting under another's skin so as to eradicate that very difference.

Designed with tight hoods that cover the gallery-goers' heads so as to more fully realize the illusion of stepping into and under another's skin, *More Store* is faceless. The skin suits made by Álvarez-Errecalde leave a gap in subject's epidermal surface, omitting the face. In turn, when the suits are worn, the participant-performer, their face replaces the subject's so as to blur, but not fully eradicate, the boundary between "I" and "not I." By doing so, *More Store* simultaneously complicates and reinforces the connection between the face and identity within Western culture. Flirting with, but also poking fun at the art historical notion that successful portraiture requires the representation of the subject's face to communicate identity outwardly to others, *More Store* engenders a layering and merger of skins between the subject and the participant-performer, creating the radical possibility of an infinite array of new co-constituted bodies within a portrait. Put slightly differently, *More Store* queers bodies and renders skin strange, achieving radical relationality between skins through the cohabitation of two skins and two sets of bodily contours in one bodily form.

Further complicating the boundaries between "I" and "not I," Álvarez-Errecalde attaches a tag to each garment, which lists where the skin suit was "made" (i.e., where the subject is from). Appropriated from the commercial fashion industry, these tags label each subject distinct and yet render them (quasi-)anonymous due to a lack of information regarding their ethnicity, language, class, orientation, preferences, values, and experiences. In turn, the subject is always elusive, never letting the participant-performer get under

³⁷³ To view a short interview with Ana Álvarez-Errecalde about her project and to see gallery-goers wear the skin suits of the subjects in a runway setting, please visit: "Ana Álvarez-Errecalde—More Store," 3:52, posted by "Cityofwomen," October 9, 2012, accessed June 3, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/51103078>.

their skin completely. Despite this, the tags inform the participant-performers that the subjects are alive and well (and not flayed), often living thousands of kilometers apart from their skin (suits). In turn, both the subjects and their skins take on lives of their own over time and across space, underscoring the notion that skin is a subject as opposed to a mere object (i.e., an organ) of the body.

Aside from the scant information provided by the tags, participant-performers must rely on looking at the skin of the subjects in order to better know them, to get closer to who and what they are as individuals. The act of visual observation, of gleaning information from the appearance of the subject's skin by looking at it and making judgments about its texture, elasticity, markings, and colour is complicated. On the one hand, as representations, virtual stand-ins for the real thing, rather than real flayed skins, the participant-performer's ability to experience the subject's difference vis-à-vis a tactile and sensual engagement with the texture, elasticity, markings, and colouration is complicated, rendered impossible through a visual flattening and smoothing of the skin. On the other hand, the participant-performer's ability to visually observe the subject is always already based on and informed by specific (biased) ideas about bodies that are shaped by their particular experiences in the world, which are ostensibly different from those of the subject. For example, how I see, touch, and generally experience the bodies of the each subject is shaped by my own biases, preferences, and desires regarding bodies (e.g., ageism, ableism, racism), which suggests that it is difficult to get outside myself. At the same time, this experience in/with a skin that is different from my own (i.e., wearing the black skin of a Cameroonian woman as a Caucasian Canadian woman) offers me an opportunity to experience race differently, to re-image my self as not bound by my race, or, to re-figure myself to accommodate drastically new epidermal appearances that are not otherwise possible. By doing so, *More Store* has the potential to make participant-performers more attuned to the realities of race and racialization, as well as the subtleties of racism beyond the confines of *More Store* and their own life.

Worn by a multitude of body shapes, *More Store* is democratic in that the garments range in height, shape, size, and, more importantly, stretch and shrink to fit disparate bodily contours, such as those of men, as a result of the elasticity of the cotton fabric.

Fitting a range of bodily contours, *More Store* can complicate and even temporarily reorganize the boundaries between sex and race, for example, when men wear a female skin suit of a different race [Fig. 33]. In turn, such a contrast between sexed and raced skins compounded with the life-like and life-sized nature of Álvarez-Errecalde's uncanny *Haut couture* visualizes a skin that is simultaneously *cutis* (skin that is alive, attached to a body) and *pelis* (skin that is dead, detached from the body).³⁷⁴ This conflation of living and dead skin amplifies experiences of discomfort, anxiety, and even amusement triggered by seeing one's self and others in a new co-constituted body achieved through a layering of skin.

In an accompanying series of photographs to *More Store* entitled *Histologías* (2011), displayed in light boxes that illuminate the images from behind so as to draw our visual attention to the meeting and layering of two disparate skins, Álvarez-Errecalde documents the uneasiness, awkwardness, discomfort, and even humorousness of wearing the skin of another human being observed when two participant-performers encounter one another within *More Store* (Fig. 33& 32). By putting the participant-performer in a state of being half naked (in one's own skin) and half dressed (in the skin of another), *Histologías* illuminates the fact that even if we go to the extreme of turning skin into clothing, we can never assimilate the skin of another or truly perceive it as our own, a fact that is underscored by the faceless nature of these suits.³⁷⁵ Captured intimately, each anonymous performer "struggl[es] with the impossibility of being in someone else's skin" [Fig. 33], pushing us to better understand the connection between skin and identity in Western culture, and to intimately appreciate, even love, a body that is different from our own.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Connor *The Book of Skin*, 11.

³⁷⁵ Ana Álvarez-Errecalde, "Histologías," *Ana Álvarez-Errecalde*, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://alvarezerecalde.com/portfolio/histologias/>.

³⁷⁶ Ana Álvarez-Errecalde, "More Store," *Ana Álvarez-Errecalde*, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://alvarezerecalde.com/portfolio/morestore/>.

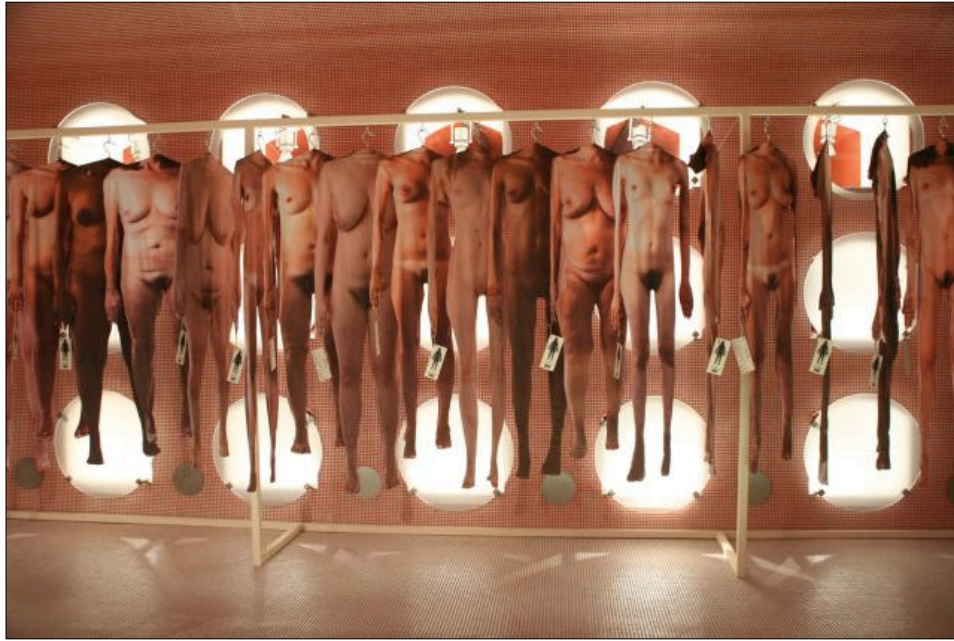


Figure 30: Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. *More Store*. Mixed media. 2008–ongoing. FAD, Barcelona, Spain, 2008. © Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 31: Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. *More Store* (formerly titled *Tallas*). Mixed media. 2008–ongoing. FAD, Barcelona, Spain, 2008. © Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Displayed on hangers, the uncanny skin suits of *More Store* are rendered fashionable, even desirable, through the artist's creation of a boutique setting [Figs. 30 & 31]. By setting up the exhibition space as a chic boutique, Álvarez-Errecalde touches on the ways capitalism and consumption impact our lives, body images, and experiences of relationality. Transforming gallery spaces and even storefronts in Europe and South America into clothing stores, Álvarez-Errecalde inserts *Haut couture* into the lexicon of capitalism. Equipped with metal racks, benches, soft lighting, change rooms for privacy, and sometimes mirrors, *More Store* manipulates the participant-performers into "consumers" despite the fact that these garments are not for sale and one cannot actually consume the skin of another insofar as the subject's skin is not actually flayed. By doing so, Álvarez-Errecalde visualizes the skin-as-clothing metaphor in a way that transforms skin into a commodity. Through the participant-performer's repetitious act of (attempting to) consume another's skin by putting it on and taking it off a new body is created, one that is co-constituted through a queering (layering) of skins. In turn, Álvarez-Errecalde illuminates the fact that consumption can alter conceptions of difference. By encouraging a repeated consumption of skin, *More Store* nudges gallery-goers to let down their inhibitions and reconfigure their epidermal boundaries so as to experience bodies differently. Despite the artist's attempt to create the same conditions of participation each time *More Store* is reenacted, changes in the architectural space of the boutique and socio-cultural context of its location shape not only the (radical) relations that comprise the work, but also the degree with which the installation critically engages capitalism as a structure that shapes and defines bodies and their differences.

While a feeling of anxiety and/or discomfort and/or humorous amusement can be triggered by wearing another's skin and seeing oneself in that skin, the fact that participant-performer's encounter each other in the same unusual and radical experience creates a shared space, an affective ground through which to grapple with their new appearances and co-constituted bodies [Fig. 32 & 33]. However, by adopting new epidermal appearances and creating a common affective ground, the participant-performers also enact the logic of capitalism by repeating the process of putting on another's skin as if it is new each time. In turn, *More Store* economizes skin, locating participant-performers and subjects within a relational economy that can eradicate

difference and pay attention to or reinforce difference through a meeting and layering of skins.

An example of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, *More Store* also exemplifies Bishop's notion of relational antagonism as a result of its situatedness within the lexicon of capitalism, which creates the opportunity for new political realities for bodies through a layering skins that engenders new and unexpected experiences of sexual and racial difference. By queering and creating a new co-constituted body, *More Store* challenges the fixity of the identity categories like sex, gender, race, and ethnicity responsible for shaping society and culture.³⁷⁷ By simultaneously highlighting difference (i.e., creation of new co-constituted bodies) and eradicating it (i.e., the partial loss of both the subject's and participant-performer's identity), *More Store* triggers experiences of reflexivity (e.g., a feeling oneself by looking at or being under the skin of another) and relationality (e.g., brushing up against another at the level of skin). In turn, the (quasi-)anonymous subjects and the participant-performers are intimately and sensually connected, permitting not only new experiences of one's self and others, but also a distancing of one's self from one's skin.

While new political realities can be achieved, such as a breakdown of identity categories through the creation of a new co-constituted body and a felt experience and new understanding of age, health, and even race achieved by a layering of skins, *More Store*, achieves a "re-worlding" of skins. What I mean by re-worlding is the slight, sometimes imperceptible permanent changes made to the skins of the subjects (i.e., as they are worn and stretched out over time) and the participant-performers (i.e., their experience of difference at the level of skin by getting under another's skin) over time, each time the installation is reenacted. In turn, this re-worlding of both skins question skin's role as a

³⁷⁷ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.



Figure 32: Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. *More Store*. Mixed media. 2008–ongoing. Vzigitalica Gallery, City of Women Festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2012. © Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 33: Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. *More Store*. Mixed media. 2008–ongoing. FAD, Barcelona, Spain, 2008. © Ana Álvarez-Errecalde. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

boundary (organ), as well as “the collective dimension of social experience,” which includes the collective dimension of skin.³⁷⁸ While *More Store* achieves sensual and social connections between bodies via their skins in ways that can unexpectedly become political (i.e., the defiance of cultural norms and ideals and expectations about sexed and raced bodies achieved in the new co-constituted body that results), the “how” of *More Store*’s ability to engender radical relations between bodies without collapsing the boundaries between “I” and “not I” must be fleshed out. In order to do so, I turn to art historian Kaja Silverman’s theory of an ethics of vision made famous in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996), a text devoted to assisting us in the daunting task of loving bodies that are undesirable because they are different than our own.

Exploring and (psycho)analyzing what it means to see, Silverman argues how and what we see (through the gaze or the look, in the image) is the product of our desires and anxieties, which are always already a product of the world (of representations) around us. As I noted earlier, the way I encounter the skin of a subject in the context of *More Store* (and *Haut couture*) is always already informed by my own visual observation and judgment of another’s skin, which is informed by my experiences in the world (as a Caucasian woman). This judgment then, and my ability to desire a body different from my own, is informed by my desires and anxieties about bodies shaped by Western conceptions of and reactions to dominant ideas about health, age, ability, and even race I have experienced. In turn, the body of another is always already different from my own, a body I want to assimilate rather than celebrate as a result of my reliance on ocular vision.

In order to mitigate this reinforcement of judgments and boundaries between “I” and “not I” demanded by ocular vision in order to both appreciate and celebrate difference, Silverman suggests that we look to what she calls “excorporative vision.” This kind of vision is different from ocular vision in that it attempts to appreciate difference not available to the body through an attempt to partially collapse the boundaries between “I”

³⁷⁸ Claire Bishop, “Introduction/Viewers as Producers,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London; Massachusetts: Whitechapel; MIT Press, 2006), 10.

and “not I.”³⁷⁹ When I look at the skin of another within the context of ocular vision, for example, I locate that “not I” in the center of my visual field, my perceptions, and actions in the world, which, in turn, erects and polices the boundaries between myself (the “I” I desire) and another (the “not I” that, on some level, repels me). Arguing that we are constantly erecting boundaries between self and other in order to reinforce our autonomy, Silverman suggests that we have a tendency to incorporate the Other as “I,” which she calls an “idiopathic” identification.³⁸⁰ When we incorporate this Other into ourselves, we forsake their difference because we are absorbing “not I” into “I,” which forecloses the possibility of radical relations necessary for the creation of positive affirmations, as described by Braidotti. Silverman suggests that when we look or gaze at the Other in an image, for example, our perspective is always already setting up and executing idiopathic identification. In order to achieve excorporative vision, then, Silverman points to “heteropathic” identification—a form of identification that does not attempt to assimilate the Other as “I” but rather attempts to respect that Other through radical relations and an ethics of vision.³⁸¹

In *More Store*, the discomfort, anxiety, or even comic relief caused by the act of layering skins to create queer bodies and the resulting creation of new co-constituted body images prevents us from absorbing the Other insofar as we are not just ourselves or the subjects. In this arrangement, we become someone new when our skins are overlapped with another’s and our bodily contours are altered as a result of that mutual meeting of skin. Two bodies occupying the same bodily contours through a doubling of skins allows each a sharing of experience that can reflexively and empathically connect them. The act of wearing another’s skin permits the participant-performer to consider the skin and experiences of embodiment of another while, at the same time, and reflect on and feeling their own skin and experiences of embodiment, which is further complicated by the fact

³⁷⁹ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 74.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

that the result is a queer body created by its co-constitution. This feeling and thinking through the skin while wearing the subject's encourages a productive encounter with difference insofar as it is impossible to consolidate these two body images into one form since they are both, as a result of their radical relationality, equally distorted.

More Store further reinforces an inability to absorb the "not I" into "I" insofar as the skin suits worn by the participant-performers never look or fit quite right. When clothes do not fit right, we are consciously drawn to our skins and made hyperaware of them, which causes us to focus on, and even obsess over, how we feel and act in the world. This heightened experience of our bodily boundaries in *More Store* can open up new experiences of embodiment that provide insight into our own experiences in and as a skin, as well as the unique differences of others. While *More Store* garments do not pinch, tug, rub, or pull on the skins of participant-performers because they are made from a highly pliable fabric, they do bring the participant-performers into a heightened state of visual and phenomenological awareness that the skin that envelops them is not their own, which engenders an opportunity to come closer to desiring difference.

Extending Silverman's notion of "heteropathic" identification to skin, I argue that for there to be an ethics of spectatorship or relation, the participant-performer cannot "devou[r] bodily otherness" through an incorporation or absorption of "not I" into "I."³⁸² When a participant-performer wears the skin of the represented subject, a queer body is produced, foreclosing the total eradicate of bodily difference. Excorporative vision, which is the result of such a merger of skins, has the ability to "induce the spectator not only to 'depart' from him or her self, but also to effect a 'transition' to something else."³⁸³ *Haut couture* is a new kind of visual language that allows the portrait to become something more, something queer, through the cultivation of alternative experiences of embodiment

³⁸² Ibid., 24.

³⁸³ Ibid., 91. For further reading related to Kaja Silverman's theories of the ethics of vision and how they are taken up in skin studies, please see: Shawn Thompson's "Disrupting the Skin-Ego: See-Sickness and the Real in *Flagellation of the Virgin*" and Sheila Cavanagh's "'White Trash': Abject Skin in Film Reviews of *Monster*" in *Skin Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Sheila Cavanagh et al. (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).

via an overlapping and meeting of skins. In turn, the cultivation of excorporative vision engenders a way in which to relate ethically across bodies within the boutique setting of *More Store*, illuminating how Braidotti's theory of radical relationality might function within the context of skins made with "flayed" skin within *Haut couture* and beyond.

3.6 « Conclusion »

While not the product of a gruesome flaying in real time, which, within myth and stories illustrates an attempt to destroy the victim entirely in order to engender transformation, *Haut couture* doubles the skin of the subject in such a way that problematizes the boundaries we erect between ourselves and others, and the boundary represented by skin.³⁸⁴ Through a virtual flaying of the subject, *More Store* both celebrates and even eradicates difference in the creation of new co-constituted body images, which underscores the paradoxicality of skin. Exploring phenomenologist Drew Leder's idea that the body in pain can register experiences of embodiment typically elusive to the subject because pain activates a heightened perception of the body vis-à-vis the site of injury, *Haut couture*'s "flayed" skin suits trigger the amplify sensorial perceptions of one's self and others. This amplification of sensorial awareness and experience creates the space for relations to emerge between and across skins. Specifically, the layering and meeting of skins observed in examples of *Haut couture* opens up the body, even permanently alters it through their mutual re-worlding, is what achieves radical relations across and between bodies. This evocation of pain associated with flayed skins across *Haut couture* encourages a feeling of psychic, physical, sensual, and social discomfort, permitting us to know others and ourselves differently.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁴ Kay, "Original Skin," 40.

³⁸⁵ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 79. It is important to note here that Leder's argument that pain jolts the subject into a heightened sense of awareness of their body is, in part, inspired by Scarry's argument (in *The Body in Pain*). Scarry argues that pain is experienced spatially and that it is something that cannot be verbalized because of its elusive, intermittent nature. As a result, pain brings the subject into a space of newfound awareness of the body.

Throughout this chapter I have explored the (art) historical context of clothing made from human skin in order to better understand the human desire to relate to others. By doing so I have considered skin's role in visual culture beyond portraiture through analyses of historical events and persons, and horror films so as to better understand why Western culture is fascinated with flaying and transforming skin into clothing. What is clear is that flayed skins are symbolic of a cultural fear of and a need to reinforce boundaries, which is not surprising when we consider the fact that the modern subject is understood to be a bounded subject (which is slowly changing in the twenty-first century). Interestingly, while flayed skins illuminate a cultural desire to reinforce the boundaries between "I" and "not I," flaying represents the opportunity to extend bodies in time and space, and to make the body something other than what it already is.

The reoccurrence of flaying and its representation across skin portraiture highlights the fact that we now live in a world where there is an increasing sense of physical and sensual distance between bodies, ostensibly the result of a virtual closeness made possible by technologies such as the Internet, smartphones, and social media applications. In turn, this reduction in physical nearness within culture becomes glaringly apparent in the context of *More Store*, which, through a layering and meeting of skins, engenders radical relations between strangers. Ironically, through flaying, an act that is culturally understood as an attempt to eradicate difference and possess the other, *Haut couture* engenders new bodies and queer skins so as to enact new embodied possibilities and political realities. Underscoring the emphasis on increased and more robust relations between skins is the fact that flaying both questions and reinforces our sense of autonomy, which, within Western culture, is a necessary component of identity-formation.³⁸⁶

Extended beyond clothing to the realm of portraiture, *Haut couture* problematizes the autonomy of not only the subject and the participant-performers, but also the portrait.

³⁸⁶ French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage"—the infant's recognition of itself in a mirror as separate from rather than an appendage of their caregivers—signals the formation of subjectivity and entry into the symbolic order, is perhaps the most influential iteration of this idea. (Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stages Formative of the *I* Function," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, 75-81 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006)).

Haut couture is culturally significant because it shows us we often desire to get under another's skin precisely because it is different, which, in turn, becomes a way to alter, even enrich our experiences of embodiment. Wearing another's skin engenders not only a host of queer skins that bring us closer to expanding and even dismantling conceptions of difference, such as sex, gender, race, and ethnicity, it also permits new co-constituted bodies to emerge that force us to question an ethics of relationality and the possibility that new socio-cultural and political realities for all bodies can be achieved at the level of skin.

Chapter 4

4 « Skin-as-Screen »

Signposted by Frantz Fanon's psychological study of the effects of colonial domination in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), postcolonial theory takes up skin as an *object* of racial analysis while privileging it as a *subject* affected by and bearing the traces of imperialist ideology.³⁸⁷ The positioning of skin as both a subject and an object permits postcolonial theory to celebrate the paradoxical nature of our integuments: it both perforates and stretches the ideological boundaries installed between bodies in the colony. Framed by Fanon as the nexus of colonial power in the colony, skin is theorized by Homi K. Bhabha and Sara Ahmed as that which is capable of destabilizing the specters of that power in the postcolony.³⁸⁸ Skin factors into analyses of racial difference because it is morphological (i.e., constantly changing and subject to alteration) insofar as it can take on numerous raced appearances, which is exemplified by performances of "passing." Through passing, which is the performance whereby the raced subject alters the frame through which their skin is seen and judged (via change of clothing, affect, hairstyle, and use of language, for example), and a refusal to pass (i.e., to place exaggerated visual emphasis on one's racial and cultural ambiguity), skin portraiture can illuminate how racially and culturally in-between skins have an ability to bring cultures together and carve out new experiences of cultural belonging in the postcolony.

For renowned postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe, the postcolony is an age of many temporalities, "enclos[ing] many *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another: *an entanglement*."³⁸⁹ Due to the migration caused by the collapse of colonial domination, the postcolony becomes a space of racial

³⁸⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

³⁸⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Sara Ahmed, "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned Into a Nigger': Passing through Hybridity," in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: Sage, 1999).

³⁸⁹ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001), 14.

and cultural displacement that highlights the connection between subjectivity and temporality.³⁹⁰ In turn, contemporary scholarship on the “postcolony figure” often considers the ways a meeting, overlapping, touching, and intermingling of cultures and races takes place in, through, and across skins within certain cultural and historical milieus. It is no surprise then that postcolonial theory works diligently to deconstruct the myriad ways skin colour shapes identity and experiences of embodiment.

A critical visual language and a strategic mode of representation, skin portraiture underscores and probes the notion that the colonized are always “overdetermined from without.”³⁹¹ Fanon’s watershed idea suggests that raced skins have been transformed into screens onto which the fears and desires of dominant white culture may be projected, which then manifest and circulate through Western culture as stereotypes.³⁹² In order to contribute to contemporary postcolonial studies of race, this chapter uses the skin-as-screen metaphor as a conceptual scaffold to work through the ways skin is marked from without *and* from within.

Marked skins, such as those that are diminished by racist paradigms that de-value non-white skins in the colony or those that are impressed upon by the postcolony subject so as to blur the boundaries between cultural and/or racial groups, are critical to an exploration of raced skins because they are the product of colonial ideology and postcolony resistance, respectively. Framed by a feminist point of view, this chapter extends the work of both Bhabha and Ahmed by focusing on the experiences of embodiment and cultural belonging of sexed, mixed-race, multicultural, and ethnically diverse women. Because colonialism is always already patriarchal, this chapter positions woman as the essential postcolony figure because she bears the marks of sexual difference across and through her skin simultaneously with racial difference, which adds an extra dimension to her experience of difference not afforded to men. What is significant about

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 15.

³⁹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 87.

³⁹² Ibid., 99.

this postcolony figure is that she is marked both from without and from within as a result of her ambiguous skin colour. The postcolony figure's cultural hybridity and racial in-betweenness permit her to move in, between, and through cultures. In order to highlight the disruptive nature and political power of the postcolony figure, this chapter explores passing as a performance that is a mode of survival in the colony and a mode of political resistance in the postcolony.

Woman is critical to a fleshing out of postcolonial theory's work on race and racialization because she is the figure of sexual difference through which racial difference can be thought or theorized. Feminist scholars such as Clare Counihan criticize the postcolonial theories of Fanon and Bhabha for grafting racial difference onto and into sexual difference, due on Fanon's part to his grounding in psychoanalytic thought and on Bhabha's to his failure to locate and position woman's sexual difference in the postcolony.³⁹³ Counihan argues that in postcolonial theory, woman is both the necessary object of his [the male postcolonial theorist's] desire that enables the discourse of his desire for difference and the necessary object that disguises—masks—the real object of that desire: the utopic nation defined by the absence of any sexual *or* racial difference.³⁹⁴

Postcolonial theory has been criticized from feminist perspectives as a theory through which difference is lost, rather than recuperated and celebrated. In turn, the skins of women “become a location, a terrain on which racial difference expresses itself” in order to “produc[e] subjectivity for men.”³⁹⁵ The failure of male postcolonial scholars like Fanon and Bhabha to account for and locate female experiences of embodiment is, for Malini Johar Schueller, the result of analogizing race and sex, reducing sexual difference

³⁹³ Clare Counihan, “Reading the Figure of Woman in African Literature: Psychoanalysis, Difference and Desire,” *Research in African Literature* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2007).

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

to racial difference, and perpetuating an underlying belief that race is *like* sex.³⁹⁶ Through a consideration of passing and a refusal to pass in the (post)colony, a critical analysis of difference as it relates to skin colour can expand feminist postcolonial analyses of embodiment.

In both the colony and the postcolony, self-marking is understood as a critical appropriation of colonial power in an effort to disrupt, destabilize, and disarm it. By marking the skin in order to change or confuse its appearance, through either the performance of passing (a marking from within) or a resistance to passing (a marking from without), the postcolony subject destabilizes the ideological boundaries between bodies that support the project of colonial domination. The two case studies utilized in this chapter to flesh out what is at stake in a performance of passing and a resistance to it are the film *Skin* (2008), directed by Anthony Fabian, and the skin portrait series *Profile* (2002) by contemporary South African artist Berni Searle [Figs. 39–47]. *Skin* is a biographical film about Sandra Laing, a young South African girl who attempts to pass as both white *and* black in order to survive being marked out for her racial ambiguity and difference during the height of apartheid (1948–94). *Profile* is a performance-based photographic skin portrait series in which the artist marks her skin from without by impressing culturally significant “souvenir” objects into it, enacting her refusal to pass as either black or white, which I argue is an act of political resistance. This chapter argues that skin and its ambiguous colouration can destabilize and disrupt colonial power, either through the failure to pass successfully (Laing) or through the refusal to enact a performance of passing (Searle).

While located in different moments in the history of South African apartheid, these two case studies underscore the fact that culture is located at, in, and through skin—and, in turn, skin is located at, in, and through culture. South African culture is important because it has only recently become racially and culturally integrated, following the abolishment of apartheid in 1994. Because the meeting, clashing, and intermingling of the

³⁹⁶ Malini Johar Schueller, “Analogy and (White) Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 11 (2005): 63–92.

many cultures and races in South Africa was seen as taboo during apartheid as a result of a racist paradigm, the female postcolony subject is marked for her race differently than the female subject in other countries such as Canada, which is, for many, not a postcolony space, but one in the process of decolonization.³⁹⁷ By writing this chapter from the perspective of a white Western woman situated within Canada, I thus also acknowledge that, while there are similarities between Canada's and South Africa's histories of colonization and the disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples, their distinct historical and cultural contexts have shaped both countries' respective conceptualizations of skin colour.

Colonized by the British and French but populated by many races and cultures, Canada owes its famous sense of cultural hybridity and racial in-betweenness to its many, sometimes racially-charged, immigration recruitment and assimilation campaigns, which encouraged the meeting, intermingling, and overlapping of race and culture in one place.³⁹⁸ Through a historical program of forced cultural assimilation, the Canadian government attempted to collapse cultural difference into sameness, and thus, in effect, institute its own kind of apartheid, as is evidenced by the historical push to sequester indigenous people to remote northern reservations. For Canadian historian Eva Mackey, the segregation of indigenous populations away from dominant (white), urban populations permitted non-white persons to be defined against the notion that Canadian culture is one that is unmarked (i.e., white). In turn, Canada only became "multi-cultural" in relation to a white centre, making the intermingling and mixing of race and culture, now a hallmark of contemporary Canadian identity on the global stage, to become secondary. As a result of various immigration campaigns and assimilation strategies, Canadian identity and culture was and still is required to exhibit a certain openness to race not demonstrated by the

³⁹⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 4-7.

³⁹⁸ Eva Mackey, "Settling Differences: Managing and Representing People and Land in the Canadian National Project," in *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). In this chapter Mackey discusses the ways Canada's project of nation building was a dual process of population management and the creation of a cohesive national identity. She further argues that Canada's identity as a "tolerant" country built on cultural plurality is ambiguous and contradictory because it was built on the myth of "white settler innocence" that hides the oppression of indigenous peoples and the social inequalities that shape Canadian identity (26).

Dutch colonizers of South Africa. As a result of the spice trade, Dutch colonizers in South Africa were not interested in founding a new cultural space through a mixing of cultures; rather, they were focused on dominating the indigenous people in order to take over resources and situate themselves in a logistical and geographic position of power. As such, the Dutch erected strict ideological boundaries between the colonizers and the colonized on the basis of skin colour so as to maintain racial purity and reinforce their domination over non-white bodies. In this process, the indigenous cultures of South Africa were marginalized by rather than assimilated into the colony, and thus racial difference was preserved and policed.³⁹⁹

Thus, while I risk oversimplifying the two countries' respective histories of colonization, I am doing so to make the point that these postcolonies have produced hybrid cultures and new racial identities in radically different ways, which opens up the possibility of multiple postcolony figures. That both countries are "multicultural," a term American literary scholar Christopher Miller is suspicious of insofar as it elides the many discrete units of difference that make up the postcolony, underlines the necessity of expanding an analysis of race and experiences of racialization beyond one's own cultural vantage point or racial identity.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, it is widely agreed that in the postmodern, postcolonial world that we inhabit, local identities are deeply imbricated with global politics, which positions South African culture to "'speak' in interesting ways to, and of, the rest of the world."⁴⁰¹

By expressly positioning woman as the postcolony figure, this chapter thus works to flesh out a study of difference, considering the impact race *and* sex have on experiences

³⁹⁹ Historically, Canada's program of cultural assimilation reached its peak during the mid-twentieth century, which led the way for an exodus of indigenous peoples from colonial settlements (i.e., major cities) into the northern landscape away from colonial control (Mackey, "Settling Differences," 36). As such, not all cultures were "successfully" assimilated because many of them (i.e., indigenous populations) were not given a choice.

⁴⁰⁰ Christopher Miller, "Literary Studies and African Literature: The Challenge of Intercultural Literacy," in *Africa and the Disciplines*, ed. R. Bates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 217, 226.

⁴⁰¹ Duncan Brown, "National Belonging and Cultural Difference: South Africa and the Global Imaginary," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 4 (December 2001): 759.

of embodiment and cultural belonging. Moreover, this discussion reinforces the female body as a potent and sensual site of political resistance that can illuminate the cracks in the colonialist system by marking the skin from within and without. By framing skin as paradoxical and morphological organ that allows for the movement of the subject in, between, and through cultures, this chapter frames the performance of passing and its refusal can blur boundaries between bodies. In considering passing, this chapter positions the skin-as-screen metaphor as the very thing that underlies not only conceptions of cultural belonging as it pertains to race, but also a refusal to pass in the postcolony. Before examining passing, however, I first turn to want to the meaning, history, and appearance of the skin-as-screen metaphor in Western culture in order to highlight the idea's rootedness in the modern, Western idea that skin is a metonymic stand-in for the person.

4.1 « Skin-as-Screen and Nineteenth-century Physiognomy »

When we think of the word “screen” (noun), a number of definitions come to mind: a moveable or fixed device that provides shelter; an ornamental or functional partition; a light-reflective surface on which motion pictures, etc., may be projected; an external surface of a television or radar receiver on which an electronically created picture or image is formed; a part of a (computer) monitor in which images and information are displayed; and anything that protects or conceals.⁴⁰² While they hide, protect, and/or shelter, screens also act as surfaces through and onto which the formation and movement of images, text, and ideas can take place. When we shift our focus and explore “screen” as a verb (i.e., “to screen”), we think of a practice that selects, rejects, and groups (people, objects ideas, etc.) through systematic examination. Inherent in the act of screening is the seeking out and underscoring of difference. However, to screen a movie, for example, is to project moving images for others to look at, watch, and ostensibly enjoy. This use of the

⁴⁰² Oxford Dictionaries, “screen,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed December 31, 2014. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/screen>.

verb “to screen,” therefore, emphasizes a link between the act of projection and a sense of pleasure.⁴⁰³

Re-conceptualizing the female body as a surface and form that is projected onto, early feminist film theorists such as Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, and Joan Mellen, for instance, analyzed mainstream cinema and its histories in order to understand how women have been represented as passive.⁴⁰⁴ Through its appropriation of psychoanalysis as a tool to deconstruct how women’s sexuality is exploited and the female body objectified by patriarchal Hollywood film,⁴⁰⁵ Laura Mulvey’s watershed essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) extended feminist film theory to a consideration of sexual difference. Mulvey identified how (male) pleasure is associated with the act of looking at and projecting onto women’s bodies, thus theorizing that female bodies were overdetermined from without and representationally delimited by male desire. When male spectators watch a film, they identify with the male protagonist and obtain a sense of visual pleasure (scopophilia) from the erotic impact of the female’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.”⁴⁰⁶ This “to-be-looked-at-ness” is based on a range of gender stereotypes (a demure attitude, big eyes, pouty lips, a curvaceous figure, perky bosoms, a seductive voice, and so on) that represent and thus position woman as passive. In turn, she becomes an object of

⁴⁰³ For an analysis of the ways in which skin has been considered as screen, please see: Steven Connor, “Fascination, Skin and the Screen,” *Critical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1998), and “Integuments: The Scar, The Sheen, The Screen,” *New Formations* 39 (1999).

⁴⁰⁴ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974); Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973).

⁴⁰⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁰⁶ While I have only touched on Mulvey’s watershed work of feminist film theory as a way to underscore the importance of the screen metaphor to contemporary culture and academic research, scholars like bell hooks (see: “Oppositional Looks: Black Female Spectators,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992)), for example, work against Mulvey, arguing that “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” refuses to approach the female subject as anything other than white, heterosexual, and middle-class and fails to account for the ways female spectators can take back their agency by critically watching films and enjoying them from a number of vantage points.

the male gaze, losing her subjectivity so that the men on and off screen can maintain theirs. This gaze is a series of “looks” that transforms men into voyeurs who project onto woman-as-screen so that she becomes “the bearer of meaning” rather than “the maker of meaning.”⁴⁰⁷

One key historical source in modern Western culture for feminist film theory’s use of the skin-as-screen metaphor is nineteenth-century physiognomy, a line of inquiry that was more racially than sexually charged. The historical moment in which physiognomy rose to prominence is important to the screen metaphor because it was influenced by Enlightenment thinking during the eighteenth century, which encouraged the defining, ordering, categorizing, and hierarchizing of the world through biased observation in the nineteenth century. A distinct branch of knowledge now firmly viewed as a pseudoscience, physiognomy visual observed a person’s facial features in order to glean “objective” information about the subject’s character and cultural value. Framing the skin as a screen and stand-in for the subject based on biased conceptions of race, culture, ethnicity, and sex, physiognomy relied on the proliferation of images to reinforce its claims about the correlation between appearance and identity. Unlike dermatology of the same period, which also relied on observation and image-making practices to communicate its theories and findings, as we saw in the Introduction, physiognomy negatively shaped the cultural perception of non-white skins in Western culture.⁴⁰⁸

Originating in ancient Greek culture, the word “physiognomy” translates to “a person’s nature” (*physis*) that is “interpreted” and/or “judged” (*gnomon*). Physiognomy owes its place in modern Western culture to Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), a Swiss poet and mystic who argued that by studying an organism’s physiological systems, that individual’s depths and character could be known from without, revealed in the shape, appearance, and textures of the body’s surface. In this context, skin was perceived as a

⁴⁰⁷ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 804.

⁴⁰⁸ For a discussion of the importance of nineteenth-century dermatological images to skin portraiture, please see the introductory chapter to this project.

mere surface covering the muscles, cartilage, organs, and bones that gave shape to a body, and, as a result, to a particular type of person with specific attributes, often determined by their race and/or ethnicity. Specifically, Lavater argued that through visual analysis of a subject's forehead, eyes and eyebrows, nose, mouth and lips, teeth, chin, and skull, their intangible attributes and faults could be known from without in a totalizing manner.

Criticized for its basis in subjective observation rather than empirical findings, and for its blatant disregard for the ways a person's behavior and actions contributed to their character (pathognomy), physiognomy was seen by many at the time as superstitious, racist, and sexist. Lavater argued that it was a science because it had its own set of fixed principles (designed from a Western, patriarchal position of privilege) that could "be imparted by words, lines, rules and definitions."⁴⁰⁹ Despite the skepticism surrounding physiognomy, Lavater's ideas spread across the West due to their translation from German into English and French editions. Even more important to the success of physiognomy in the nineteenth century were the popular portrait images that illuminated the many circulating books on the subject. Images, particularly portraits, allowed Lavater's biased ideas to become easily accessible across populations with varying degrees of literacy.

In order to further visually reinforce and popularize its ideas, physiognomy came to rely on caricatures (images that render their subjects in a simplified or exaggerated way). Appealing to the masses with an air of humor, caricatures oversimplified subjects' appearances and overstated their faults through a reliance on contour lines. Visually reducing the character and identity to a few lines that highlighted and drew visual attention to the "flawed" areas of the face, such as the slope and shape of the nose, the wrinkles around the mouth, and the muscles around the eyes [Fig. 34], Lavater was able to make sweeping claims and negative judgments about people based on their appearance,

⁴⁰⁹ Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Physiognomy* (London: Cowie, Lo and Co., 1826); B. John Cross, M.D., *Physiognomy: An Attempt to Establish Physiognomy Upon Scientific Principles* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1817).

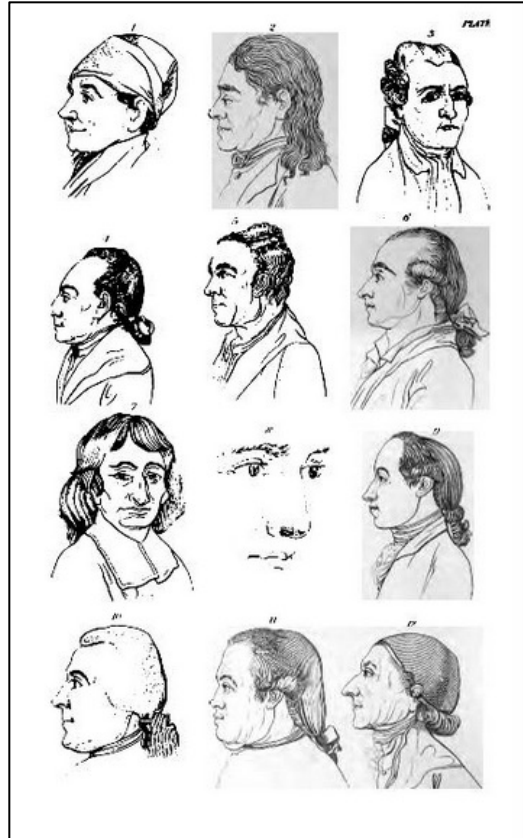


Figure 34: Image plates XXII, figures 1–12 in Johann Caspar Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1878, page 126.

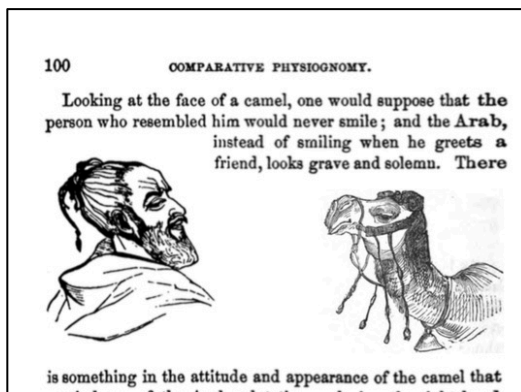


Figure 35: “Camels” image plates in Dr. John Redfield’s *Comparative Physiognomy*. 1852. Page 100.

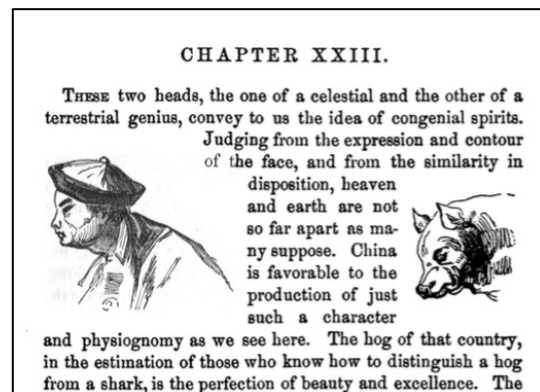


Figure 36: “Hogs” image plates in Dr. John Redfield’s *Comparative Physiognomy*. 1852. Page 167.

which he then coded into a recognizable system of representation.⁴¹⁰ By relying on images, physiognomists positioned the skin as a passive screen onto which Western fears and desires could be projected.⁴¹¹ Under the auspices of what Richard T. Gray calls a suspicious “altruistic pan-humanism,”⁴¹² nineteenth-century-physiognomy would institute a racist and sexist “physiognomic world view” that would degrade the character of non-white bodies and non-European cultures.⁴¹³ For example, in Lavater’s physiognomic analysis of the head of a “Moor” (African) he argues that the stubby nose (in contrast to the slender, narrow Western European nose) and the fieriness in the eyes suggest an “animality” and “powerful passions.”⁴¹⁴ Gray argues that Lavater’s characterization of the African subject as *indifferent* (i.e., lazy) and *stupid* (i.e., incapable) illuminates the prejudices that form the basis of this reading.⁴¹⁵

In later examples, such as the comparative physiognomy of Dr. James Redfield, races are correlated with animals in order to position those who are non-white as animal-like and, as a result, *less than* their white, Western counterparts.⁴¹⁶ For instance, Redfield linked the appearance and character traits of Arabs to camels [Fig. 35] and the Chinese to

⁴¹⁰ Describing the subject located at the top left of Figure 34, Lavater writes: “Evidently no strength of mind. Commonness, not stupidity, in the outline of the nose; want of strength in the parts about the eye. The lower muscles of the nose, and the wrinkles of such a mouth, are almost decisive marks of feebleness.” (Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: William Tegg and Co., 1878), 127).

⁴¹¹ Interestingly, the many theories of physiognomy written and published during the nineteenth century do not take up skin as a specific focus even though it is implicated in the biased “art” of physiognomic face reading. This is a result of the fact that physiognomists saw the body’s underlying structures (bones, cartilage, muscles, etc.) as the forms that shaped, quite literally, a person’s attributes, such as their intelligence or feeble-mindedness, for example.

⁴¹² Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2004), 107.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ James W. Redfield, M.D., *Comparative Physiognomy: Resemblances Between Men and Animals* (New York: Redfield, 1852).

hogs [Fig. 36], amongst other offensive comparisons, in order to delimit their abilities, intellect, and cultural advancement. By including a copious number of image plates, Redfield (and others) could visually reinforce negative stereotypes, demarcating and devaluing racial and ethnic difference. Comparative physiognomy underscores the racism that lies at the heart of physiognomy, explicitly demonstrating how the practice has negatively shaped the representation of raced skins.

Lavater, Redfield, and others were not simply observing various subjects in order to know them; rather, they were “reading” them from the biased vantage point of white, heterosexual men of privilege located at the nexus of power in Western culture. It is no surprise, then, that physiognomy was taken up as a way to correlate a person’s appearance and their tendency towards mental illness or criminality, for example.⁴¹⁷ Relying on images to communicate observations and judgments as “proof,” physiognomy transformed skin into a screen that could be marked and from without on the basis of its racial divergence from white, Western norms.

4.2 « (Post)Colonial Epidermal Screens »

Fanon’s writing in *Black Skin, White Masks* about his experiences of being black in the colonial French state of Algeria during the early twentieth century represents a watershed moment in anti-colonialist thought. Outlining an anti-racist humanism built around a critical study of skin colour, Fanon illuminates how racialized experiences of embodiment work to maintain colonial domination. Fanon argues that the colonial racist paradigm

⁴¹⁷ Sir Alexander Morison, M.D., *Physiognomy of Mental Illness* (London: Longman & Co., 1840). With the advent and popularization of photography, French police officer Alphonse Bertillon applied the methods of physiognomy and anthropometry to create a photographic catalogue of criminals. By focusing on the bodily measurements and facial features of each subject, Bertillon was able to empirically ground his biases and judgments in order to devise and image a “criminal type.” However, the idea of a “criminal type” is not exclusive to Bertillon. Italian criminologist Caesar Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* (1876) was an influence insofar as it argued that the criminal is “born” (*delinquente nato*) as a result of genetic “anomalies”—physical and psychological—that manifest as traits that can be linked to primitive peoples, animals, and plants. (Caesar Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006)).

labels the colonized black subject as “Negro” in order to mark their skin from without.⁴¹⁸ Through this act of marking, colonizers negatively shape the subjectivity of the colonized “other.” Specifically, Fanon describes how black bodies within the colony are embroiled within a politics of assimilation that promotes and/or forces the wearing of a “white mask,” which dislodges the colonized from their culture and engenders a fragmented sense of self.⁴¹⁹

In much of the literature on experiences of race and racialization in the colony, “skin colour” is understood as a concept that is socially constructed and employed by colonizers in order to subjugate certain bodies on the basis of their epidermal unintelligibility (i.e., non-whiteness).⁴²⁰ This unintelligibility is made intelligible through stereotypes that circulate in culture, formulating what Fanon calls a “racial-epidermal schema.”⁴²¹ This schema is designed to mark the colonized out for their blackness while devaluing blackness against the ideal of whiteness. Describing this experience of violent racialization and cultural exclusion as a result of his skin colour, Fanon uses the concept of “epidermalization” to account for the ways experiences of self, others, objects and/in the world are shaped and denigrated by the physical, psychic, perceptual, phenomenological, and social aspects of dominant culture’s anti-black racist paradigm.⁴²² In the colonial milieu, the body of the colonized is projected onto and transformed into a screen that is marked from without, and Fanon demonstrates that it is at the margins of the body—the skin—that the colonized (black, African) is pushed to the margins of the dominant (white, Western) culture in the colony.

⁴¹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 42.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁴²⁰ Ian F. Haney Lopez, “The Social Construction of Race,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁴²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 84.

⁴²² Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Social Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 51.

What is perhaps most important about Fanon's work is its ability to illuminate the fact that colonial power is achieved through an economy of skin that trades in epidermal capital. This economy values white skin and devalues black skin so as to inform and maintain the disenfranchisement and dislocation of the colonized through the skin-as-screen metaphor. The strength of this economy is highlighted by the epidemic of skin bleaching practices in countries like Ghana and Jamaica, for example, both of which were colonized by Britain.⁴²³ Having assimilated the ideal of whiteness, many Ghanaian and Jamaican women seek cosmetically and chemically to transform their black skins with lightening creams, a literalization of the donning of the "white mask" that Fanon describes. From a dermatological point of view, the use of harsh creams is dangerous and life threatening,⁴²⁴ but from a cultural point of view, the effects are desirable. Women who lighten their skin do so to gain the privilege of being seen as more beautiful, affluent, and powerful than their dark-skinned contemporaries precisely because both Jamaican and Ghanaian cultures privilege lightness and associate it with mobility as a result of their colonial histories.⁴²⁵ Margaret L. Hunter's research on colouration and complexion reinforces the idea that skin is an economy; Hunter argues that "light skin color works as a form of social capital for women" insofar as those "women who possess this form of beauty (capital) are able to convert it to economic capital, educational capital, or another

⁴²³ Jemima Pierre, "'I Like Your Skin Colour!': Skin Bleaching and Urban Geographies of Ghana," *Feminist Review* 90 (October 2008). In Ghana, the popularity of skin lightening amongst women has created a skin colour ideal that is unattainable because it is the result of an intersection of local and global concepts of race and beauty. Christopher D. Charles, "Skin-Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica," *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (2003). Charles argues that due to an assimilation of white culture, many Jamaican women have lightened their skin as a form of self-hatred, illuminating reverse racism as an effect of colonization.

⁴²⁴ Melanie Miyanji de Souza, "The Concept of Skin Bleaching in Africa and its Devastating Health Implications," *Clinics in Dermatology* 26 (2008). De Souza notes that bleaching causes skin atrophy, thinning, and breaking, which can promote keloidal scarring, various forms of dermatitis, lesions, abnormal hair growth, dilated blood vessels, and infections.

⁴²⁵ While I mentioned Ghana and Jamaica briefly, bleached skins are visible globally, underscoring an unwavering association of light skins with beauty, power, and capital. For an analysis of the global phenomenon of skin bleaching, please see: Yaba A. Blay, "Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy: By Way of Introduction," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011).

form of social capital.”⁴²⁶ What is significant about this economy is that it is built on a racial hierarchy that has popularized and normalized an idea that white skin is “colourless skin,” the norm and standard by which difference is judged.⁴²⁷ It is not necessarily the case, however, that Jamaican and Ghanaian women lighten their skins specifically to be read as white; their actions can also be understood as an attempt to be read as something other than black.

Given the current climate of political violence surrounding race and racialization, it is no surprise that many probe this economy of race through critical representation in order to disrupt it. What is reinforced by an examination of this economy is the fact that skin is either a gateway into dominant culture or a dam that bars one from it, as is illustrated by both skin portraiture and contemporary forms of body modification such as tattooing that I touched on in the previous chapter. While self-portraits are the primary focus of this chapter, examples of critically marked skins abound in everyday life, often functioning as personal micro-acts of political aggression. These acts work to destabilize the colonial power that continues to shape the experiences of black skins.

In contemporary African American culture, particularly in amateur and professional sports and music or social groups, there is evidence of a drastic increase in the number of custom-designed, large-scale tattoos being inked into the skins of men.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ Margaret L. Hunter. *Race, Gender and the Politics of Skin Tone*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 37.

⁴²⁷ I use scare quotes to underscore the fact that there has been a turn towards a study of whiteness within the twentieth century. Scholars like W. E. B. Dubois, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison were the forerunners of such a study from an African American perspective. By the 1990s, work by white scholars emerged in order to critique the socio-cultural construction of whiteness, such as Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993). Extending this line of argument, Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, vols. 1 and 2 (Brooklyn: Verso, 1994; 1997) reinforced the notion that “white skin privilege” perpetuates a system of racial hierarchy that goes almost unnoticed. Unlike Chicano, black, or women’s studies, whiteness studies fails to celebrate its own subject.

⁴²⁸ Andrew Gottlieb, *In the Paint: Tattoos of the NBA and the Stories Behind Them* (New York: Hyperion, 2003). I single out men as a result of the literature and visual evidence to confirm the increase in custom-designed, large-scale tattooing on large parts of the body (arms, legs, chest, back) in African American sports and music communities. However, that is not to suggest that African American and Afro-Caribbean

These tattoos are understood by sociologists and postcolonial theorists as critical modes of recording, remembering, retelling, and remixing the subjects' cultural and ethnic origins in the colony while, at the same time, signifying their belonging to a number of socially elite cultural groups in the postcolony.⁴²⁹ Shaped by personal experiences and the artistic milieu in which they are designed, the tattoos in the NBA, hip-hop culture, and rap music communities effectively disrupt the colonial racist paradigm by marking the skin in order to reinforce its blackness. Socially, culturally, and physically powerful men transform their skins into inked rather than raced landscapes, re-writing and re-inscribing culture into their skins in order to disrupt the racist specters of a history of colonialism that has shaped contemporary African American life. As such, tattoos become a form of re-narrating blackness and black culture, championed by Fanon in order to upset the balance of power that has worked to keep black skins either in white masks or at the fringes of dominant white culture.⁴³⁰

4.3 « Marking Skin From Within: Sandra Laing »

Moving from a brief examination of new cultures founded in, across, and through skins by way of marking from *without* (e.g., bleaching and tattooing), this chapter now turns its

women do not have tattoos that are prominently and controversially placed and that become associated with their personas (e.g., rapper Eve's cat paw prints and singer Rihanna's Egyptian imagery).

⁴²⁹ Todd Boyd, *Black, Rich and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip-Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2003). I make a note here about the association of tattoos with an elevated sense of social status due to the expense of custom-designed, large-scale tattoos. On average, a seasoned artist charges anywhere from 100 to 500 Canadian dollars per hour. The amount of hours required to design and ink a custom, large-scale tattoo, such as a sleeve, for example, ranges upwards of 15 to 25 hours. Once associated with the "low" or "degenerate" parts of culture, tattoos in the twenty-first century are now coveted artworks and powerful political statements.

⁴³⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 204. Fanon says: "I find myself one day in the world, and I acknowledge one right for myself: the right to demand human behaviour from the other. And one duty: the duty never to let my decisions renounce my freedom. [...] I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life. In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself."

attention to the inverse process of marking from *within*, in the form of the performance of “passing” in the colony. In this framework, the colonized person marks herself on the outside through a reorientation of her internal ideas about how she looks, is perceived by others, and moves through spaces that privilege, for example, a particular mode of racialized embodiment. Passing is a mode of survival in order to pass through the dangerous, racist spaces of culture. This marking, while it manifests in external changes in the subject’s appearance, it is motivated from within, and is therefore, an attempt to appropriate the appearance, body language, and mode of speech of those belonging to another more socially powerful culture. By changing her appearance, the subject, if successful, usurps the power and privilege associated with the dominant raced culture that controls or shapes the socio-cultural spaces in which a body is racialized. By moving through and across multiple cultures, the colonized show us, firstly, that the skin is highly morphological and, secondly, that passing reinforces the Western belief that the skin is a stand-in for the subject on the outside, but something that can become chameleon-like through a reorientation of one’s racialized identity on the inside.

Passing is understood as an embodied practice and technology that permits the subject to drastically change her surroundings and cultural context by altering and modifying her appearance, which stems from an internal or psychological need to be seen and valued differently as a mode of survival. The irony of passing is that the subject does not actually alter the colour of her skin (i.e., mark the outside in an indelible way); rather, she alters the frame through which her skin is seen and read. Ahmed argues that within the context of the colony, passing is often a strategy available to light-skinned or biracial persons who want to “secure something unavailable to them.”⁴³¹ By co-opting the cultural capital of those (typically the colonizers) who have security, the colonized subject can alter their sense of power and privilege. Ahmed is clear that passing is not a uniform performance insofar as it engenders varying and rather specific experiences of power and privilege depending on its context.

⁴³¹ Ahmed, “Passing through Hybridity,” 92.

In the context of South African apartheid passing is often framed as a mode of survival: the trauma and violence of being incorrectly or illegally raced were life-or-death matters. According to human geographer David Delaney, in order for passing to take place, a few “assumptions” must be met: space has to be segregated by boundaries, these boundaries have to be porous, and there have to be “sentinels” (who can be fooled) that police those boundaries.⁴³² For Delaney, a crossing of boundary lines becomes a crossing of “colour lines,” triggered by the desire or need to assume a new or different identity.⁴³³ The literature on passing illuminates its twofold motivation: to escape domination and oppression as a result of one’s skin colour and/or to unhinge the fixed-ness of race as a result of skin colour by taking up the status and privilege of the dominant race. However, what Delaney misses that Ahmed does not is the fact that people pass for different reasons, in a number of differently coded spaces and diversely experienced temporalities. Delaney’s criteria for passing do not account for those who are white (Afrikaner) and need to pass as black (African), a reversal of the terms of race associated with passing in the colony that is addressed in the film *Skin*.

In Afrikaans, the word *apartheid* means to “be apart.” It was a system of social and racial segregation legally enforced by the ruling white minority in South Africa. As early as 1904, the South African government used the categories of “African” and “coloured” to categorize people with black and mixed-race skin, respectively. Prior to this, Africans were classified as “non-Europeans.” The term “coloured” was institutionalized with the Government Commissions of Inquiry in 1937, although government officials could not agree on the definition of the term insofar as to be mixed-race means that there is no possibility of racial purity— and an absence of racial purity means that difference and sameness exist simultaneously. For feminist art historian Virginia MacKenny, the “coloured identity exists then in a place of constant slippage—‘Other’ is here both black

⁴³² David Delaney, “The Space That Makes the Race,” *Professional Geographer* 54(1) (2002): 9.

⁴³³ Ibid.

and white, but also neither black or white: same but different, and rejected as such by both sides.”⁴³⁴

The *Population Registration Act* of 1950 classified all citizens by racial group, allowing the ruling white minority to institute oppressive modes of racialization that unjustly delimited and devalued black skins. Positioning indigenous Africans as labouring “savages” unworthy of political and cultural equality, apartheid illuminated the economy of skin that allowed the continued domination of indigenous peoples. In order to legally delimit non-whiteness, apartheid politics and laws made it illegal for blacks to enter the same shops and attend the same schools as whites. It was also illegal to marry a person of another race. The penalties for racial mixing could amount to a jail sentence and the loss of one’s children. As a result, the lives of people like Sandra Laing were in a perpetual state of danger under apartheid.

The birth of many illegal biracial children spoke to the violent collision of cultures in colonialist South Africa, and led the government to further police racial borders by “confirming” race through “empirical” tests. One such test was the infamous “pencil test,” based on visual and tactile observation of a person’s phenotype from a biased, scientifically uninformed position. Unlike the DNA testing technologies invented in 1985 and readily available today, which can decode a person’s racial origins with empirical precision by assessing the genetic race markers encoded in skin cells, hair, blood, and other bodily fluids, the pencil test was qualitative, based on subjective observation and judgment.⁴³⁵ The pencil test is as ill-conceived and absurd as it sounds: a pencil was placed in the hair of a person of suspicious racial make-up, and if the pencil fell to the floor when the subject in question shook their head, they were legally classified as “white.” If the pencil stayed in the “frizzy” curls of the hair, the subject was (re)classified as “coloured.”

⁴³⁴ Virginia MacKenny, “Post-Apartheid Performance Art as a Site of Resistance,” *Agenda* 49 (2001): 20.

⁴³⁵ For an analysis on the problems DNA testing to prove race and tribal identity within the context of indigenous claims to land in North America, please see: Kim Tallbear, *Native American DNA* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Set in South Africa during the height of apartheid, *Skin* is a biographical film about Sandra Laing (b. 1955; played by Sophie Okonedo), a woman who was born to an Afrikaner (white) family but appears mixed-race. Based on Judith Stone's biographical book about Laing, *When She Was White: A True Story of a Family Divided by Race* (2007), *Skin* highlights the ways the body's outermost edge has been historically and problematically understood as a stand-in for the entire person. The film shows spectators the dangers of being a raced woman during apartheid insofar as colonialism is always already patriarchal and thus affords women less movement, agency, and power than their male counterparts. The crux of Sandra's story is that she is not marked from without simply because of her racial difference and epidermal ambiguity; she is marked out and expelled from both Afrikaner and African cultures due to her sexual difference. By first disobeying her father and later disavowing her husband, Sandra disrupts patriarchal power, which, I argue, destabilizes colonial power.

Identified as white by her loving parents, Sandra's skin colour becomes a legal problem in 1965, when she is ten years old. Due to her visible, yet ambiguous, racial difference, a number of students and their parents make formal, racist complaints demanding that Sandra be expelled from her whites-only boarding school. The irony is that she already occupies the margins of the school's social system due to her lack of epidermal capital and failure to pass as white even before she is removed from the school and sequestered in her family's home. These scenes of her life in school underscore the racism normalized in and by Afrikaner culture and the reality that the school is a danger zone that corporeally punishes and socially isolates her as a result of her skin colour. Like skin, Sandra is at once an obtuse and porous boundary.

Removed from school by two police officers after she fails the pencil test, Sandra is re-classified as "coloured." This reclassification means that she could be removed from her family home. Confused, Sandra asks one of the African house women if she is black. The woman responds by holding up her own arm so as to emphasize its darkness. In this gesture, a comparison of skins positions Sandra's as just *too* light to be black, yet also not white and, as a result, not Afrikaner. It is at this moment that Sandra realizes that because of her skin colour, she does not fit in anywhere.

Appalled by the school's actions and the government's act of racial classification without their consent, Sandra's parents, Abraham (played by Sam Neill) and Sannie (played by Alice Krige), fight for a reversal of their child's reclassification. In 1966, they take their case all the way up to the Supreme Court, where a geneticist argues that Sandra's skin colour and hair texture are the result of a genetic atavism—an evolutionary throwback that allows ancestral genes to override and/or mutate current genes, effectively changing a person's "natural" phenotype. Taking on the status of a scandal in the media, the Sandra Laing story and legal victory forced a paradigm shift in the ways race would be classified in South Africa: regardless of appearance, a person would be the same race as their parents. In turn, Sandra became a figure of colonial destabilization at the level of the law.

Caught between her father's desire for her to be a good Afrikaner woman—to marry a white man and produce white children (which she cannot do, genetically speaking)—and her sense of comfort with and in African culture due to her appearance of blackness, in her early adulthood Sandra embarks on a double performance of passing within both Afrikaner and African cultures. Attempting to please her father, Sandra goes on arranged dates with Afrikaner men, but she is referred to as a "Negro." Regardless of her efforts to appear Afrikaner through hairstyle, mode of speech, body language, and fashionable dress, Sandra cannot pass, a fact made evident by the many people whispering about and staring at her on her date with a white man at a "whites-only" ice cream parlour. Overwhelmed by the pressure of unsuccessfully passing in a racist social space, Sandra excuses herself from the table while her date eats his sundae and escapes out of a bathroom window into the arms of Petrus, a local African man who delivers vegetables to her father's store. This encounter signifies Sandra's realization that it is in African culture that she belongs insofar as she can never pass as white in the racially tense climate of apartheid in South Africa.



Figure 37: Film still- Petrus chasing Sandra as a result of his misfortune in Swaziland. Judith Stone *Skin*. Directed by Anthony Fabian. 2008. London: BBC Films, 2009.

Learning of her secret and illegal relationship with Petrus, Sandra's father has her locked in jail for three months. Angry with her father, Sandra disobeys him and leaves with Petrus to live in Swaziland and raise the child that she is illegally carrying. As a result Sandra is disowned by her family. Her act of choosing one culture over another, regardless of her inability to belong fully to either, illuminates not only her newfound sense of agency as an adult woman but also the fact that colonial racism is shaped by patriarchal power; she is perpetually at the mercy of men who seek to control her sexuality.

Embarking on a new life as an African woman, Sandra's skin colour is celebrated by Petrus as good luck charm and a symbol of beauty precisely because it is light. However, the traumatic experience of displacement, migration, and disenfranchisement brought on by the bulldozing of many Swaziland shantytowns brings about a change in Petrus, and despite his love for Sandra, he develops a hatred of her skin colour, which he sees as directly linked to the colonial power and domination that have ruined his life. Specifically, Petrus loses his general store and delivery business and proclaims that Sandra's skin colour is bad luck, "outing" her as Afrikaner to her African social group. It

is here that Sandra's performance of passing fails for the second time, reinforcing the fact that her skin marks her as belonging to neither Afrikaner nor African culture, but rather a third space. After numerous physical attacks [Fig. 37], Sandra leaves her husband, taking her children and starting a new life, a life not shaped by the demands, desires, and fears of the men who seek to dominate her precisely because she is ambiguously raced. In the years following her emancipation from patriarchal power, Sandra comes to see herself as a woman who is *both Afrikaner and African*, happily living as a mother, wife, lover, and businesswoman in the post-apartheid postcolony.

4.4 « Marking the Skin from Without: Berni Searle »

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha engages the work of many female artists and writers in order to support his argument that at and through the gaps between social and racial groups, difference can be transcended through the creation of new hybrid cultures. For Counihan, the figure of woman seems to be everywhere in Bhabha's work, "elsewhere and otherwise," which is a departure from the work of Fanon.⁴³⁶ It seems that Bhabha's attempt to address the invisibility of women in Fanon's work translates into his own through his continual use of and attempt to make hypervisible woman as *the* figure of difference precisely because she is perceived of sexed in advance of being raced. As Counihan points out, however, Bhabha does not account for the ways in which women experience racialization differently than men, or for the many differences between women. As a result, difference melds into sameness because Bhabha cannot "sustain a discussion of her difference *as difference*."⁴³⁷ What is problematic across postcolonial theory for scholars like William J. Spurlin and Sara Suleri, amongst others, is the collapse of sexual difference into racial difference, an operation that forecloses the possibility of differences

⁴³⁶ Counihan, "Reading the Figure of Woman," 170.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

between and across women.⁴³⁸ The elision of sexual specificity in favour of focusing on racial difference is further problematized when Western feminists transform Third World women into a flattened composite image that disregards the ethnic and cultural nuances that shape experiences of race and sex differently.⁴³⁹

However, by constantly referring to women as figures of difference *par excellence*, Bhabha asserts that woman is the postcolony figure best able to locate the formations of new cultures. Bhabha's assertion provides the intellectual space to work through the ways ambiguous skins challenge definitions of race and experiences of cultural belonging in the postcolony. While the creation of hybrid cultures and in-between racial identities across and through the bodies of women does encourage new historical and cultural possibilities, Ahmed is suspicious about the potential for the mixed-race subject to be hybrid insofar as "hybridity is determined by the very structure of the colonial address which demands both the disavowal and affirmation of difference."⁴⁴⁰ Like Bhabha, Ahmed sees the acts of re-inscribing and re-writing culture into the skin as having the potential to destabilize colonial power and engender cultural transformation.⁴⁴¹

It is in response to this loss of sexual specificity for racial difference that Berni Searle's skin portrait series *Profile* (2002), an antagonistic refusal to pass in the postcolony, takes up the desire to maintain difference, through a marking of the skin from without. Confronting the specters of racism lingering in the South African postcolony by

⁴³⁸ William J. Spurlin, "Resisting Heteronormativity/Resisting Recolonisation: Affective Bonds Between Indigenous Women in Southern Africa and the Difference(s) of Postcolonial Feminist History," *Feminist Review* 95 (2010); Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1992).

⁴³⁹ Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 62–63.

⁴⁴⁰ Ahmed, "Passing Through Hybridity," 97.

⁴⁴¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 71; Ahmed, "Passing Through Hybridity," 104. While Ahmed does not specifically use the terms "re-writing" and "re-inscribing," she does make the argument that when the subject lacks knowledge of difference, storytelling becomes a way of re-interpreting the past and a way of "recognizing the mis-recognition that structured [the subject's] subjectivity." In this way, a communicating across bodies (an alternative formation of passing) does not "suture the gap" between cultures, "but makes visible its inevitability through engagement."

marking her body, Searle obscures and impresses objects into her skin. By marking the skin for its cultural difference in advance of it being marked from without by dominant culture, Searle signifies her refusal to pass as any one particular racial, cultural, or sexual identity. Searle's work firmly rejects the impending collapse of racial and sexual difference predicted by Bhabha's argument.

Due to the historical and cultural context of trauma that shaped the embodied experiences of many "coloureds" born during apartheid, the refusal to attempt a performance of passing signified by the marking of the skin is understood as a political act of resistance precisely because it is an antagonistic appropriation of the methods used by colonizers to delimit the colonized subject in the colony. The postcolony woman who marks her skin illuminates the cracks in the façade of a patriarchal-colonialist system by reclaiming her body, sexual identity, and sense of fragmented, multi-directional cultural belonging. In this framework, skin becomes the political ground on which a battle for difference can be fought and won, as we saw in *Skin* when Sandra Laing becomes a postcolony figure that can not only contest, but also change the letter of the law.

Given the use of the naked body as a form of political protest in South African history—such as in the Dobsonville protest of July 12, 1990 when a group of forty African women stripped naked to form an epidermal boundary between their shantytown and the bulldozer meant to destroy it—it is no surprise that many contemporary South African female artists have reflected on these feminist histories by emphasizing their own skins in their performance art practices. By removing their clothes and showing their skins, feminist artists such as Searle, Tracey Rose, and Nandipha Mntambo, amongst others, position their bodies as active sites of political resistance and protest. Skin becomes a porous interface that brings together race and sex and allows for multi-directional formations of culture and experiences of embodiment. Searle in particular focuses on her skin and its colouration, a thematic consistency that is illuminated by artwork titles such as *Colour Me* (1998-2000), *Discoloured* (1999), *Colour Matters* (1999), *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999), *Off-White* (1999), and *Snow White* (2001).

Searle confronts the ways women have been sexualized and objectified in Western art and visual culture by presenting herself nude throughout her oeuvre. Typically performing for the camera rather than for a live audience, Searle distances herself from the gaze of others, echoing the passivity of women represented in Western film. By doing so, Searle flirts with and reinforces the screen-like nature of women's sexed skins in order to carve out the nuances of being both raced and sexed in South African culture. The fact that Searle's performance oeuvre is always recorded suggests that she not only "screens" her skin within the exhibition space, but also transforms her skin into a literal screen that divides. Consistent across her performances are acts of self-touching that activate Searle's body as a site of rebellious sensual and political agency. Through the calculated marking of her naked body as a medium to challenge the patriarchal foundations that delimit women from without, Searle exorcises from the postcolony the specters of colonial racism, violence, and domination.

The visual and sensual attention to her "tanned" coloured skin underscores Searle's racial in-betweenness: her parents are German–English and native African, and her grandparents come from Saudi Arabia and Mauritius. Neither black nor white, neither Afrikaner nor African, Searle often deals with her fragmented sense of self and split sense of cultural belonging in her work by continually marking or making over of her skin. For example, in *Snow White*, a performance commissioned for the exhibition *Authentic, Ex-centric* at the 49th Venice Biennale, Searle's body is covered with atta flour that falls from the ceiling, leaving her skin whited out as it is juxtaposed against an onyx black floor, which also throughout the duration of the performance becomes white. Curator Olu Oguibe reads this whiting of skin as an "erasing" of indigenous culture as a result of colonization.⁴⁴² In contrast, as noted by art historian Annie E. Coombes, a whiting out of the skin in South Africa's Zulu and Xhosa cultures can signify the body in a state of transition and change.⁴⁴³ In this performance Searle collects and kneads the flour, actions

⁴⁴² Barbara Pollack, "Feminism's New Look," *Art News* 100 (8) (September 2001): 132–136, 136.

⁴⁴³ Annie E. Coombes, "Skin Deep/Bodies of Evidence: The Work of Berni Searle," in *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, eds. Sarah Hassan et al. (Ithaca: Forum for African Arts, 2001), 197.

that echo the bodily movement of making roti, a traditional Indian flatbread, which signifies both her remembrance of her multi-ethnic roots and the exploration of her body in a state of racial transition and change. The personal significance of these bodily actions is linked to Searle's experience of watching her Mauritian grandmother make roti in her youth. In this example, Searle uses the sensuous capacity and memory of her body to form movements that become a kind of storytelling.

Snow White becomes a way for Searle to re-member the fragments of her cultural origins on the one hand and to radically alter her raced appearance as an act of resistance against the performance of passing on the other. Searle's penchant for covering her skin with materials such as flour, spices, oil, and henna politicizes the body by reinforcing the skin's rootedness in culture, and even within the domestic space of the home I referred to in Chapter two, despite its colour, temporality, and morphology. Moreover, her consistent engagement with touch across her performances celebrates the skin as a sensual, porous, flexible organ that can disrupt and destabilize boundaries between bodies and worlds by bringing the two together.

Comprising eight identically framed and cropped digital photographs exposed on transparent Plexiglas, *Profile* is a larger-than-life self-portrait series that represents the artist as the title suggests—in profile position. In *Profile*, Searle's facial likeness is obscured by her choice to capture the skin at such close range, surrounded with dark shadows, so that the subject is represented as a series of magnified skin fragments. The crux of this series is not a covering of the skin in order to downplay racial identity and cultural in-betweenness through reinvention; rather, it is about the marking of the skin from without by impressing numerous culturally specific and emotionally loaded domestic souvenir objects into the skinscape as a way for Searle to reinforce her multi-directional, multi-faceted postcolony identity.

Arranged in two cross-shaped formations made up of four images each, which hang from cables dropped from the ceiling, *Profile* is more of a sculptural installation than a series of autonomous self-portraits. Viewers are forced to walk around the images in order to see each one individually [Fig. 38]. As they do so, they are enveloped in Searle's

skin portraits, a spatial arrangement that encourages a sense of unexpected intimacy with and proximity to Searle's raced and sexed epidermal landscape. This arrangement also challenges traditional portraiture as singular, autonomous images by placing the photographs in conversation, each one looking forward to or at the next, thus generating and encouraging interactivity, agency, and movement.

Most important to the critical weight of such a series, however, is how Searle challenges patriarchal representations of women and the colonialist ordering of raced skin through the formal qualities of these images (cropping, positioning, and lighting) and the conceptual performance of marking her skin, respectively. Searle fragments her skin by visually focusing on her cheeks, magnifying and cropping the photographs in such a way that her facial features are hard to discern against the dark shadows that creep across the margins of her face. While not completely anonymous insofar as these images are self-



Figure 38: Berni Searle. *Profile*. 2002. Installation view at Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa. © Berni Searle.

portraits that do show the artist's face in profile, and, therefore, communicate the intangible parts of herself outwardly, Searle challenges the expected communication and transmission of her facial likeness through her use of lighting techniques. By employing *chiaroscuro*, an Italian Baroque technique of representing the subject dramatically through the juxtaposition of extreme light and shadow, Searle not only obscures her face, but also draws the viewer's attention to the textural nuance of her marked skin. Echoing artist Barbara Kruger's famous artwork *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* (1981), Searle's images illuminate the skin as a screen onto which dominant patriarchal culture projects its notions of sex or race while simultaneously reversing and thus challenging this gaze. By making this double operation visible, Searle destabilizes the patriarchal domination of women's bodies in life and art.

Playing with Renaissance tradition, Searle represents herself in profile not to preserve her "feminine" dignity and identity as an object owned by men (e.g., fathers and husbands), as was the *modus operandi* of portraits of women during the fifteenth century, but to focus on her marked skin by obscuring her facial likeness.⁴⁴⁴ The dark shadows that erode the visibility of her facial features exaggerate and poke fun at the patriarchal desire to cloister women from prying eyes. However, by marking herself with culturally significant objects, including a British souvenir spoon [Fig. 39], a Christian cross [Fig. 40], a Dutch windmill paperweight [Fig. 41], a *rakam* (Muslim prayer) plaque [Fig. 42], South African love beads [Fig. 43], a British imperial crown [Fig. 44], a bunch of cloves [Fig. 45] and an apartheid-era anti-riot shield [Fig. 46], Searle punctuates the smooth landscape of her skin and problematizes the appearance of femininity in both culture and portraiture, coding herself as an active subject rather than a passive object. Moreover, her strategic use of *chiaroscuro* permits Searle to appear androgynous, queering her representation and any gendered reading of these self-portraits. Appearing both female

⁴⁴⁴ For a general introduction to the gendered modes of representation pervasive in early modern culture, please see: Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); David Brown, *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Giverva de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and, Meg Lota Brown and Kari Boyd McBride, *Women's Roles in the Renaissance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005). To learn more about the ways women influenced portraiture, please see: Catherine King, *Renaissance Women Patrons* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).



Figure 39: Berni Searle. "Spoon." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120 cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.



Figure 40: Berni Searle. "Christian Cross." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120 cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.



Figure 41: Berni Searle. "Dutch Windmill." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120 cm. 2002. ©



Figure 42: Berni Searle. "Rakam." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120cm. 2002. © Berni Searle



Figure 43: Berni Searle. "South African Love Beads". *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120 cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.



Figure 44: Berni Searle. "Crown jewels." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 cm x 120 cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.



Figure 45: Berni Searle. "South African anti-riot shield." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 x 120cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.



Figure 46: Berni Searle. "Cloves." *Profile* series. Duraclear lambda print, 98 x 120cm. 2002. © Berni Searle.

and male in the photographs permits Searle to complicate the way her gender identity is perceived by viewers, which, in turn, problematizes the ways in which women are both represented within portraiture and experienced by culture. Searle's rejection of Western conceptions of femininity is exemplified by her short, neatly cropped "masculine" hairstyle, a hairstyle often associated with (butch) lesbians, and her refusal to cover her skin and feminize it with the application of make-up, for example. Therefore, it is both the formal qualities of these skin portraits (i.e., the fragmentation, magnification of her skin and use of *chiaroscuro*) and her disavowal of culturally approved modes of communicating femininity (i.e., long hair and wearing make-up) permit her to disrupt the not only patriarchal notions of femininity, female sexuality, and beauty, but also racist conceptions of skin colour within the postcolony.

While Searle's use of cropping, positioning, and lighting disrupts the patriarchal representation of women as passive objects so as to reinforce her androgyny, which is an important aspect of her own move to confuse the patriarchy, it is the marking of her skin that complicates the racist spectres of colonial domination in the postcolony. Searle chooses cultural artefacts that have an air of domesticity with which to mark her skin, raising questions about the "impact of boundaries on a more personal level" and "broader questions about borders."⁴⁴⁵ Focusing on the "the role of heritage, religion, colonialism and apartheid in constituting often conflicting notions of borders," Searle, by extension, considers the impacts of concepts like nation, nationality, and nationalism.⁴⁴⁶

Searle's marked skin is a medium that bears the traces of her complicated experiences of race and racialization, cultural belonging, and cultural identity as a Cape

⁴⁴⁵ Rory Bester, "Interview with Berni Searle" (originally published in *The Field's Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens*, eds. Rory Bester and Amanda Carlson [USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, 2003]), *Michael Stevenson Gallery*, accessed December 10, 2014. http://stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/texts/text_bester.htm.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Town woman who is “not quite white.”⁴⁴⁷ When considered individually, the eight souvenir objects seem antagonistic. Rather than having to move in and across culture through the appropriation of another, more powerful and culturally identifiable racial identity achieved through a performance of passing (as white, for example), Searle transforms her skin into a literal screen through which many races and cultures pass. By impressing these diverse objects into her skinscape, Searle refuses to pass as someone and something other than the multi-ethnic and mixed-raced person she is. By marking her skin in this way, Searle literalizes the screen metaphor in order to problematize and critique the cultural idea that skin’s appearance is a stand-in for the entire person and that the skin’s colouration is indicative of the culture(s) to which one belongs.

Searle’s powerful refusal to align herself with any one particular cultural or racial identity is evident in the array of objects she uses to modify her epidermal appearance. The silver spoon is a mundane and domestic item often collected by tourists; it thus signifies a vicarious appropriation of other cultures, as well as the excess of capitalism denied to many female postcolony figures insofar as the once useful spoon (to eat with) becomes use-less, a fetish object. Additionally, within the English language a silver spoon is synonymous with privilege, class and (inherited) wealth (e.g., she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth). By impressing the spoon on the side of her face rather than putting it in her mouth, Searle underscores her own lack privilege made possible by wealth. The cross refers to both Searle’s German heritage and the imposition of Christianity on the colonized in South Africa. Taken more literally, race becomes Searle’s literal cross to bear. The windmill symbolizes the Dutch colonization of South Africa, and as a paperweight emphasizes how Afrikaner culture exerts pressure on the African cultures so as to reinforce the ways skin bars and bears the weight of colonialism. The *rakam*, an embossed Muslim prayer plaque often found in the private space of the family home, recalls Searle’s Saudi Arabian family heritage and thus to her Middle Eastern culture and

⁴⁴⁷ In *Not Quite White* (2000) Searle presents herself to viewers covered in off-white pea flour against a background of measuring tapes. Making reference to the classification of bodies based on their appearance and measurements in the ethnographic study of other cultures, Searle explores the ways phenotypes, such as skin colour, have been erroneously judged and positioned as stand-ins for the entire person in Western culture.

the Muslim faith. The African beads are associated with indigenous South African cultures, particularly the Zulu, of which Searle is a member. These small, geometrically patterned, handmade beaded textiles are a method of communicating love, kinship, and family between tribe members. Called “love letters,” they are symbols of luck and are given as gifts, functioning as a form of non-verbal communication that excludes European colonizers. In contrast, the imperial crown references Britain as *the* dominating nation and violent force of Africa’s colonial history. The bunch of cloves symbolizes the role of the spice trade in the history of colonization in Africa. It is because of the exploration associated with the spice trade that thousands of people were eventually displaced and made slaves in order to further the imperialist expansion of European power overseas. The apartheid-era anti-riot shield is perhaps most clearly linked to the specific context of South African colonization. Worn on the uniforms of the police who maintained the borders between races and cultures in the colony, the shield works to remind the viewer of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), which policed dissident behaviour in the colony and incarcerated anyone resistant to the South African regime.

By holding each object and pressing it into her cheek for long periods of time, Searle creates embossed negatives of these cultural symbols in her skin. By doing so, Searle reflects a positive image from the perspective of colonialism as its negative iteration. Searle literally inverts images of power and thus power itself so as to at once reflect and reverse these effects. By temporally altering her skinscape through direct sensual contact with these souvenir objects, Searle marks herself from without in advance of culture marking her for her racial ambiguity or cultural hybridity. As such, *Profile* gives a visual language to Searle’s fragmented and overlapping sense of self as a postcolony figure. It is at the fleshy boundary of Searle’s body that she can open up a new space of multi-cultural belonging in order to challenge the ways in which a colonial racist paradigm marks and devalues the colonized from without through a forced alignment with one particular cultural group rather than many.

Arguing that the postcolony figure is multi-directional, floating in, through, and between many worlds, Bhabha takes up the question of boundaries and how they impact the formation of new cultures in the twenty-first century.⁴⁴⁸ Bhabha, by way of Heidegger, suggests that boundaries are not only edges where something stops; they are also, according to the ancient Greeks, “that from which something begins its presencing.”⁴⁴⁹ Bhabha conceives of culture as boundaryless due to the hybridity cultivated by the meeting, overlapping, and intermingling of many diverse (and even opposing) racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in the postcolony.⁴⁵⁰ Searle’s skin, marked from without, is thus a screen that at once reflects and illuminates the multi-directionality of her various identities. This marking from without in advance of culture becomes a way to re-inscribe and re-write culture into her skin. Searle’s performance positions skin as a boundary organ that is culturally boundaryless.

Reassessing what culture means in light of a collapse of racial and ethnic boundaries in the postcolony, Bhabha argues that the postcolony figure is disoriented and experiences a disturbance of direction because she is rooted in neither the past nor the present, located neither inside nor outside culture.⁴⁵¹ Searle highlights her location in the “beyond” to which Bhabha refers by visually exploring skin as the meeting place of opposing, contradictory cultures. In turn, Searle experiences a “restless movement on all sides” as a result of her multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural identity.⁴⁵² Searle’s racial ambiguity and ethnic in-betweenness antagonize and intervene in dominant culture precisely because she functions as both white and black, both Christian and Muslim, etc., so as to open up new modes of interpersonal and intercultural communication in the beyond. The unknowable and un-representable nature of this interstitial “beyond,” in

⁴⁴⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, 77.

⁴⁵⁰ In this framework the postcolony is both the Eastern colony after colonization, such as South Africa, or the Western urban centers to which the colonized have migrated.

⁴⁵¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 57.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

Bhabha locates the postcolony figure, allows for the re-inscription and re-writing of culture.⁴⁵³

For art historian Liese van der Watt, Searle's works "beg a racialized analysis" insofar as we cannot ignore the blatant "barbed play on racial categories and classification" present in her many performances.⁴⁵⁴ However, van der Watt suggests that the work is not solely about race—it is more broadly about the oscillation between visibility and invisibility.⁴⁵⁵ Invoking Searle's early work, which involved the strategic covering of her skin to obscure her appearance, van der Watt argues that the artist represents herself as "multiple selves, situated in continual movement between appearance and disappearance, which invoke ideas of reinventing the self over and again."⁴⁵⁶ What van der Watt identifies as reinvention reads here as a desire to pass in and through culture by covering the skin. Unlike van der Watt, I argue that Searle's art is not about a reinvention of self through a performance of passing that works to reify the cultural fragments that shape her identity. Rather, it is a celebration of her racial in-betweenness and cultural multi-directionality, achieved through a performative interrogation of the limits of the body—the skin and its colour—by making marks. By marking the skin, Searle refuses to pass, or to engage in a politics of passing, so as to attempt to halt the collapse of cultural and racial difference in service of achieving a homogenized identity.

By marking her skin, Searle refuses to pass as black or white, African or Afrikaner, calling into question what "self" and "identity" mean in the postcolony. Passing is ineffective because it forces the subject to align herself with one particular culture at any given time rather than form a new identity based on a multi-directional amalgam of those

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Liese van der Watt, "Disappearing Act" (originally published in *Art South Africa* 1, no. 4 [Winter 2003]), *Michael Stevenson Gallery*, accessed December 3, 2014. http://stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/texts/text_vanderwatt1.htm.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

cultures and their attributes. Moreover, self-marking allows Searle literally and simultaneously to re-inscribe the many contradictory cultures to which she belongs onto her body. Within my analysis Searle's work is understood as a crisis of reading the raced and sexed subject as culturally intelligible within the social and cultural "constraints [that] temporarily fix subjects in relations of social antagonisms."⁴⁵⁷ Ahmed argues that passing, because it cannot embrace or account for racial duplicity or hybridity, cannot transgress racial borders in a way that undermines the stability of racial categorization, which makes Searle's refusal to pass as black or white critical to an understanding of the ways skin portraiture fleshes out experiences of racialization.⁴⁵⁸

While human geographers Delaney and Steve Pile emphasize that passing is a mode of survival in the colony, necessitated by the ways spaces are coded, defined, and policed, for feminist postcolonial scholars like Ahmed, passing is understood as a suspicious political response to colonial oppression insofar as it does not recapitulate the defining features of each facet of cultural identity and belonging experienced by the postcolony figure.⁴⁵⁹ For Ahmed, passing works to reinforce racial categorization insofar as the subject takes on the identity of one cultural group over another in distinct moments in time, which leads to the loss of the other facets of the multi-directional postcolony figure. By refusing to pass via a marking of her skin from without, Searle destabilizes the supposed fixity of racial categories, showing viewers that culture is in fact located at the margins of body—the skin. Moreover, this refusal illuminates a desire to be seen and celebrated as a paradoxical figure, one that is *both/and* rather than *either/or*, which opens up new possibilities for the formation of racial and cultural identity in the postcolony.

⁴⁵⁷ Ahmed, "Passing Through Hybridity," 92.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 92–94.

⁴⁵⁹ Steve Pile, "Skin, Race and Space: The Clash Of Bodily Schemas in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Cultural Geographies* 18, no.1 (2010).

Ahmed, "Passing through Hybridity," 92.

Acknowledging that passing is an attempt to form a new identity, Ahmed argues that the subject must come to assume an image that constitutes itself.⁴⁶⁰ In turn, the image comes to be the (flattened) metonymic stand-in for the subject, the same way the skin acts as a stand-in. It is through an appropriation of a mental or cultural image—through passing—that the colonized subject forges a new temporary identity and sense of cultural belonging. However, Ahmed suggests that in passing, “subjects assume images which they cannot be or fully inhabit, but the images they assume are *already differentiated*.”⁴⁶¹ This ability to transform one’s identity cannot elide the ways in which raced skins are marked out by culture. Passing is “the transformation that takes place in the assumption of an image,” which is temporal, rather than a permanent means whereby the subject becomes someone or something else entirely.⁴⁶² For Searle, this seemingly violent marking her skin, which can be read as a critique on South Africa’s troubled colonialist context that colours cultural production generally, is a way to illuminate the fact that she can never fully assume a singular cultural identity or position insofar as she belongs to many distinct cultural groups simultaneously. In turn, these marks can be understood as political acts of rebellion against the South African state. Regardless of how her racial ambiguity is read at first glance, the temporality and morphology of the skin underscores the failure of passing: not long after each performance, the marks in her cheeks disappear, returning her skin to its original (ambiguous) texture and appearance.

In Ahmed’s view, this crisis of “not belonging” for the black subject who passes is a “crisis of knowledge, of knowing there is always a danger of *being seen*.”⁴⁶³ For Searle, the act of being seen is precisely the point—by being seen as *both white and black, both German and Saudi Arabian*, for example, she disrupts the specters of colonial racism that attempt to define and categorize her cultural and racial identity, which is a political act of

⁴⁶⁰ Ahmed, “Passing Through Hybridity,” 92.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 95.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 94.

resistance against the specters of colonialism. By challenging the possibility of racial, ethnic, and cultural classification, Searle disrupts the colonialist belief that the subject can be reduced to the appearance of their skin and can be made a screen onto which dominant culture can project its fears and desires.

4.5 « Conclusion »

While Bhabha champions racial in-betweenness and cultural hybridity insofar as they engender new conceptions of culture, he does not account for the loss of racial difference that takes place across the skin of the mixed-race subject. The loss of racial difference that results from of a meeting, overlapping, and intermingling of cultures in the postcolony was reinforced and even propagandized by *Time* magazine's "New Face of America" (1997) special issue on immigration. The issue's cover image was a frontal portrait of a woman of ambiguously raced identity and cultural belonging. While the story argued that the immigration of many races and cultures into the United States would birth the world's "first multicultural society," the subtext of such a storyline was a fear over the collapse of racial categories and the obliteration of racial difference. Accompanying this loss of racial difference is a fear that the breakdown of the social and cultural hierarchies of Western culture would negatively alter life in America. What the issue did not address textually, it accomplished visually, which was to position woman, the subject of sexual difference *par excellence*, as the ad-hoc spokesperson for a multicultural utopic vision of American life to come.

It is for this reason that this chapter has argued that the postcolony figure could very productively be a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural woman—her sexual difference carves out difference in advance of the collapse of racial difference in the postcolony championed by Bhabha. The ambiguously raced skins of Laing and Searle question the fixity of racial categories born of colonization precisely because they challenge the position and highlight the potential agency of women caught in the crosshairs of patriarchal power and colonial racism within the postcolony.

The above discussion of passing in the colony as explored by the film *Skin* and a refusal to pass in the postcolony illuminated by *Profile* signals the importance not only of the skin-as-screen metaphor in shaping Western conceptions of race, racialization, and cultural belonging, but also of a feminist point of view from which to destabilize the patriarchal nature of colonialism and racialization. By taking culture and reorienting it through their skin colour and sex, skin becomes the ground through which competing and contradictory formations of identity shaped within the colony can both reinforce and undo sexual and racial difference, as is most clearly exemplified by the fact that Searle, unlike Laing, is very clearly androgynous in appearance. It is through the marking of the skin that alternative and multi-directional experiences of embodiment and cultural belonging can be achieved within the context of the South African (post)colony.

It is important, therefore, within considerations of race, racialization, and experiences of racialized embodiment to pay attention to and work through the specific nuances and differences between skins of women. Being both sexed and raced permits women within the (post)colony to probe, complicate, disrupt, and change perceptions and conceptions of difference at the level of skin, which effects lived experiences of culture and the letter of the law. By focusing on the skins of mixed-race, multi-cultural women, this chapter has also identified the postcolony figure as one capable of redefining raced and sexed identity, celebrating difference, and creating new political realities for other women. In turn, mixed-race, multi-cultural women like Searle and Laing become figures who can, albeit problematically, challenge, disrupt, and even dismantle the specters of both colonialism's racism and patriarchy's sexism through a marking of their mixed-race, seemingly homogenous looking skin, offering us a way to better understand they ways difference impacts experiences of embodiment. By addressing the ways racial and sexual difference are experienced at the level of skin within the postcolony, this chapter has considered the ways marked skins can contribute to the celebration, reinforcement, and politicization of difference within Western culture. However, with this emphasis on the celebration of difference, this chapter leads us to a consideration of the inverse: a loss and eradication of difference within culture cultivated by the skin-as-technology metaphor, a loss that is exemplified by the increasing presence of chimeric skins made through tissue culturing practices within bioengineering and transgenic art.

Chapter 5

5 « Skin-as-Technology »

In the Spanish thriller *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*; 2011) directed by Pedro Almodóvar, plastic surgeon Dr. Robert Ledgard (played by Antonio Banderas) successfully creates an artificial skin named “GAL.”⁴⁶⁴ The word *gale* in French means “scab,” which works to linguistically reinforce the film’s portrayal of skin as a paradox: both a vulnerable envelope and an armour-like organ. Created through transgenic (meaning “across genes”) tissue culturing, a process that, in this case, enables genetically different skin cells to intertwine and grow into a new skin while maintaining their species-specific traits at the cellular level, GAL is a chimera.⁴⁶⁵ Both texturally delicate and resistant to insect bites and burns, GAL is a “super skin” made from human and domestic swine cells, respectively, and designed to protect the body from harm. Robert’s quest to create a transgenic skin is triggered by the death of his late wife, Gal, who committed suicide after she was badly burned in a car crash. GAL permits the human body to become something more than—and other than—human due to its ability cross the human–animal divide. GAL is important to a study of skin because it is characterized by a loss of visible differences across skins through the preservation of difference at the cellular level.

The Skin I Live In is a film of impressive visual proportions that does without the viscera found in a number of contemporary skin-related horror movies belonging to the genre of New French Extremism, discussed in chapter three.⁴⁶⁶ Instead of underscoring and probing cultural fears and fantasies of losing skin through flaying, which Anzieu’s

⁴⁶⁴ *The Skin I live In* (*La piel que habito*). Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. 2011. Spain: El Desso S.A.

⁴⁶⁵ Within mythology, a chimera is a fantastical creature made from the parts of diverse animals, even humans (e.g., in Persian culture the “manticore” is a creature with the body of a red lion, the face of a human, the front teeth of a shark, and the wings of a bat). In biology, a chimera is an organism containing a mixture of genetically different tissues, formed by processes such as fusion of early embryos, grafting, or mutation.

⁴⁶⁶ Quandt, “Flesh and Blood.”

reading of the myth of Marsyas⁴⁶⁷ positions as socio-cultural phenomena precipitated by our collective understanding that skin ensures our “entirety and identity”⁴⁶⁸ precisely because it obliterates the entirety and identity of others, Almodóvar illuminates the ways the subject can be dispersed, yet remain intact, across human and nonhuman bodies through a biomedical intertwining of skins. The film highlights the fact that the creation of transgenic skins in the real worlds we occupy has altered our cultural perception of our boundary organ and, moreover, our relationships to/with boundaries.

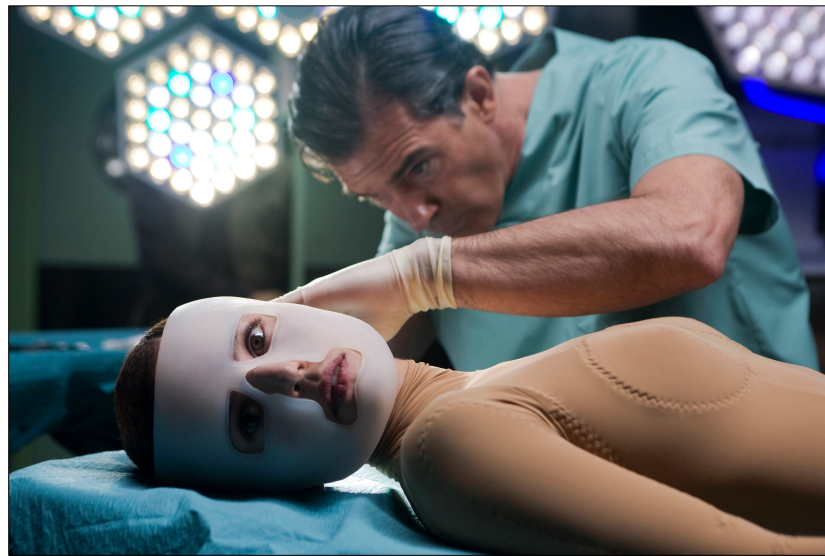


Figure 47: Film still. *La piel que habito* (*The Skin I Live In*). Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. 2011.

⁴⁶⁷ Anzieu, *Skin Ego*, 46–55.

⁴⁶⁸ Steven Connor, “A Skin that Walks,” (presentation, Arts and Humanities Research Center, Royal Holloway University of London, February 13, 2002), accessed January 2016, <http://stevenconnor.com/skinwalks.html>.

Throughout the course of this project various skin metaphors—skin-as-self, skin-as-home, skin-as-clothing, and skin-as-screen—and their particular contexts and histories have been explored to help us better understand elusive experiences of embodiment, such as reflexivity, empathy, and relationality. As an extension of its concern for experiences of embodiment, this project has taken a secondary focus: the ways cultural perceptions of difference are shaped and transformed by, as well as contested across, skins. How we think about our outermost edge is communicated by the ways we represent it in the world(s) around us. In short, skin portraiture illuminates what it means to be human from a variety of socio-cultural vantage points. The visual attention paid to flayed skins, both literal and figurative, across this project exposes a human desire not only to explore boundaries between bodies, but also to communicate and celebrate experiences of embodied difference at the level of skin (e.g., sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and even ability). The emphasis on flayed skins across skin portraiture gestures towards a human compulsion to eradicate difference, which, rather interestingly, if not ironically, is precisely what brings bodies together within the experience of the portraiture sub-genre. Whilst the history of skin portraiture is, like the skin itself, paradoxical, there is a move away from the wholesale eradication of difference vis-à-vis flaying towards the preservation of differences at the cellular level of skin within bio-art. A branch of contemporary art that not only appropriates biotechnologies used in biomedicine and bioengineering, bio-art also utilizes human and animal “biomatter” (skin, tissue, blood, DNA samples) as the material to create aesthetic and conceptual objects. Like *Haut craftwork* and *Haut couture*, concepts I discuss in chapters two and three, bio-art skin portraits eradicate visible and/or surface differences between bodies. However, unlike *Haut craftwork* and *Haut couture*, these technologic skin portraits are transgenic and chimeric, pointing to our radical, yet possible skin futures.

Taking the skin-as-technology metaphor as the focus of this last chapter, I look to our embodied futures cultivated and enhanced by skin. The technology metaphor is appropriate for the end of this project because it forces us to rethink, firstly, what we know about embodiment when confronted with a loss or eradication of visible differences across and between skins precipitated by biotechnologies and, secondly, what that loss of difference means within a cultural milieu that champions the idea that bodies are

boundaryless and fluid, rather than bounded and autonomous. In order to alter course but stay on track in terms of fleshing out skin portraiture as an idea, a mode of representation, and a visual language, I use these last pages to explore the ways skin—a boundary organ—engenders, rather ironically, a collapse of boundaries between bodies and species through the creation of chimeric skins within transgenic art and tissue culturing practices.

Chimeric skins are of interest because on the one hand, they attempt to eradicate difference at the visible level of the skin, and on the other they facilitate radical relations between skins based on invisible differences found at the cellular level. Defined as an organism that “contain[s] a mixture of genetically different tissues, formed by processes such as fusion of embryos, grafting, or mutation,” a chimera is created from the intertwining of disparate body parts (cells, tissues).⁴⁶⁹ Unlike a hybrid born through the reproductive merger of two disparate organisms in order to achieve one new uniform species with some of the characteristics of its parents or biological predecessors, a chimera is a wholly new species with disparate parts. The chimera is an amalgam of bodies that exist independently but in relation to one another in such a way that does not permit one species (i.e. pig) to partially override another (i.e. human). In the case of transgenic art and tissue culturing, chimeric skins are the result of newly aligned but independent cells and genetic information that intertwine and grow into a new skin. The chimeric skin is the result of a co-mingling of species-specific traits, such as the smoothness found in human skin and the toughness attributed to pig skin, as represented by *The Skin I Live In*. What takes place at the cellular level is what philosopher Shannon Sullivan calls a “mutual co-constitution” of skin that achieves a “re-worlding” of those very skins, making new socio-cultural and political realities for bodies based on expanded conceptions of difference.⁴⁷⁰ In turn, chimeras are monstrous, existing on the liminal edge between species and organisms. If we consider the analysis of race in the previous chapter, then it becomes

⁴⁶⁹ Oxford Dictionaries, “Chimera,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed August 15, 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chimera>.

⁴⁷⁰ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 1.

clear that those who occupy the interstitial zone between bodies and their differences can offer us new modes of embodiment, as well as socio-political realities.

The technology metaphor is critical to our thinking about skin because it signals the cultural reconceptualization of bodily difference and the reorientation of epidermal limits between and across bodies. In order to understand what the collapse of epidermal and species-specific boundaries within bio-art means for culture, I examine Julia Reodica's *HymNext* project (2004–2008) at the end of this chapter because it imagines a new reality for bodies predicated on the idealized notion that racial and sexual differences between bodies can be altered, even celebrated and expanded, through an epidermal rearranging of difference at the cellular level. Before that, however, I consider the role (bio)technology plays within contemporary life in order to understand the impact the technology metaphor has had on our experiences with and representations of skin. In thinking about what the technology metaphor does, I also use part of this chapter to consider some of the ethical implications of biotechnology, namely the advent of an economy based on the cultivation and sale of biomatter and the laws that only recently have come to govern the collection, use, and display of artworks and specimens made with human tissue. Once I explore the ethical, economic, and legal aspects of biomatter, albeit briefly and selectively, I move on to a discussion of bio-art and transgenic art in an attempt to contextualize bio-art skin portraiture as a future of portraiture in the expanded field. In addition to an in-depth examination of Reodica's work, I touch on a number of other transgenic bio-art case studies, such as the skin portraits of Jalila Essaïdi, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, and ORLAN, which help explain the ways our understanding of difference is changing today. By the end of this chapter, which signals the end of this project for the time being, readers will be encouraged to think about some new technologies that exploit skin's affective and vital nature.

5.1 « Skin-as-Technology and the Twenty-first Century Bioeconomy »

In our contemporary milieu technologies are so ubiquitous that they often go unnoticed and taken for granted, yet they play a major role in everyday relations with others, as anyone with a smartphone can confirm. Having infiltrated many, if not most, aspects of human life, technology is now a requirement for living. Ranging from “simple” forms of technology (e.g., automated cashiers, digital imaging practices, and the Internet) to complex forms of technology (e.g., artificial intelligence, genetically modified foods, and *in vitro* fertilization), technologies mediate various aspects of life.⁴⁷¹ Technologies shape not only how we live in the many worlds we move through and inhabit, but also how we live in/with our skins *and* experience the skins of others. Our epidermal thresholds are immediately implicated in our technological world: we brush up against and interact with them in our everyday lives. Moreover, with the influence technology has on life, our fleshy skins are increasingly replaced with virtual ones online. This level of epidermal distance between bodies and sense of disembodiment in the twenty-first century are underscored by the diversity of virtual reality systems and softwares (e.g., Oculus Rift, Virtuix Omni, Playstation VR, Gear VR, HTC Vive) now available for mass consumption and the ever-increasing engagement with and popularity of fantasy-based Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPG; e.g., World of Warcraft or Elder Scrolls: Tamriel Unlimited, among many others) worldwide. In this context, bodies and worlds are reduced to a layering of virtual skins online that implicates our ability to relate to others in sensual ways. It would seem that our increasing dominance over nature, exemplified by the human-built physical and virtual worlds, is changing not only the ways

⁴⁷¹ I use scare quotes around the word “simple” to suggest that while these types of technologies have become ubiquitous, making them seem naturally a part of human life, the majority of us we do not know precisely how they work or reflect on the possible negative outcomes of such technologies.

we communicate with others, but also culture itself, an idea reinforced by cultural theorists Thomas Hughes and Gary Krug.⁴⁷²

When we think about technology and technology metaphors, we might reflect on the ways bodies have become increasingly technologized, made apparent by the common use of pacemakers and prostheses, for example. By technologizing skin (and other parts of the body) scientists, engineers, doctors, and artists explore the limits of the body and life through what cyberfeminist organization subRosa call “New Flesh Technologies” (NFTs).⁴⁷³ New Flesh Technologies include, but are not limited to: body building, aesthetic surgery, hormones, drugs, sex transformation surgery, tissue culturing, and stem cell technologies, all of which point to the wholesale neoliberalist idea(l) that suggests bodies *must* be worked on. NFTs have changed and challenged our relationships with our skins because they are rewriting what skins are and can do. It is no surprise, then, that skin portraits produced within the context of transgenic tissue culturing and bio-art literalize the technology metaphor by way of altering skins, and, in turn, our fleshy and sensual realities.

In *The Skin I Live In*, Robert takes skins cells from both domestic swine and humans in order to create a super skin, technologizing the body’s outermost edge so that it is impervious to burns and insect bites. The impetus for the creation of such a skin is his desire and need to replace what he has lost: his wife, and, subsequently his daughter. In everyday life, the motivation for creating transgenic species, tissues, and organs in biomedical research and bioengineering practices is not very different; biomedical experimentation works toward an ability to replicate that which is lost or damaged through the creation and growth of replacement body parts. The creation of usable replacement body parts, such as a large organ like a liver, has become a reality: bioengineers have

⁴⁷² Thomas G. Hughes, *Human-Built World: How to Think About Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Gary Krug, *Communication, Technology and Cultural Change* (London: SAGE, 2005), specifically Chapter 1, “Technology as Culture.”

⁴⁷³ subRosa, “Sex and Gender in the Biotech Century,” in *BioMediale: Contemporary Society and Geonomic Culture*, Dmitry Bulatov, ed. (Kaligrad, Russia: The National Center for Contemporary Art, 2004), <http://biomediale.ncca-kaliningrad.ru/?blang=eng&author=subrosa>.

grown a transgenic liver made from human and mouse stem cells.⁴⁷⁴ Without the use of stem cells, scientists could not grow fully functioning organs like a liver because tissue culturing cannot, on its own, create a capillary system that ensures the growth of a protective skin comprised of epithelial cells for that organ, a fact that has been explored by bio-artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, an artist–research duo who specialize in transgenic art and tissue culturing.⁴⁷⁵ It would seem, then, that skin is written into every organ cell in the body, playing an important role in cellular anatomy and the biotechnological extension of bodies. Tissue culturing, in turn, highlights the importance of skin, as well as its paradoxicality: it is *both* a viable source of biological data required for the production of future bodies/parts *and* the very thing that keeps progress at bay.

While the word *technology* is defined as “machinery or devices developed from scientific knowledge,” “a branch of knowledge dealing with engineering or applied sciences,” and “the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes,” we can understand it, more generally, as something that alters, even enhances, life.⁴⁷⁶ Whilst not man-made in the same sense, skin’s functionality, agency, and role as a relational organ make it a technology. Beyond the many roles it plays within the body, skin is a technology of embodiment insofar as it both makes possible and aids human experiences of empathy and relationality vis-à-vis touch. It is because skin serves such an immediate role in the metabolic, respiratory, digestive, reproductive, psychic, and sensual functioning of the

⁴⁷⁴ Nirmala Mavila, et. al, “Functional Human and Murine Tissue-Engineered Liver is Generated from Adult Stem/Progenitor Cells,” *Stem Cells Translational Medicine* vol. 5 (August 2016): 1–11. Scientists have taken human and mouse liver stem/progenitor cells and cultured a liver organoid, which was implanted in a mouse. An organoid is a three-dimensional organ-bud grown *in vitro* that shows realistic microanatomy of the organ. An organ-bud is, in the simplest of terms, the cellular foundation or building block of an organ. The organoid grew into a fully functioning liver with bile ducts, blood vessels, hepatocytes (cells involved in bile production), amongst other cells required for it to function, in the mouse, but has not been tested in humans.

⁴⁷⁵ Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, “Growing Semi-Living Sculptures: The Tissue Culture & Art Project,” *Leonardo*, 35, no. 4 (2002): 365–370, 369. Epithelial tissue is a sheet of cells that cover a body’s surface or line a body cavity, including organs, such as the digestive and respiratory systems. In addition, epithelial cells cover the walls of organs located in the closed ventral body cavity (i.e., heart, liver, kidneys).

⁴⁷⁶ Oxford Dictionary, “Technology,” *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed September 3, 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/technology>.

human body, and critically shapes one's identity and experiences of embodiment, that advances in biomedicine—such as the growth of transgenic skins within tissue culturing and the creation of chimeras—frighten us.

Even more unsettling is the fact that transgenic tissue culturing celebrates rather than attempts to diminish the skin's ability to be “out of bounds,” an idea explored and visualized by the Canadian horror films *Rabid* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1977) and *Splice* (dir. Vincenzo Natali, 2009).⁴⁷⁷ These films represent and communicate the feelings of fear and uneasiness associated with bioengineering precisely because they focus on the eradication of boundaries and differences between species. While the films' representations of the use of transgenic tissue culturing and bioengineering are seemingly fantastical, their respective explorations of the chimera—chimeric skins and transgenic species—within contemporary culture are not: they are reflections of humankind's manipulation of skins and bodies in the real worlds we occupy, a practice that has existed longer in culture than many of us realize.

Throughout mankind's history, “traditional” forms of biotechnology, such as the creation of grafted hybrid plant species and the production of staple foodstuffs like bread, cheese, beer, wine, and vinegar achieved through chemical reaction, have shaped culture(s).⁴⁷⁸ While seemingly simplistic, these traditional forms of biotechnology have paved the way for advanced iterations like the Human Genome Project (1990–2003), humankind's greatest achievement in its quest to master the invisible foundation of the body: its genetic code. By mapping the body's code, which has been aided by stem cell

⁴⁷⁷ *Rabid* is about Rose, a woman who suffers a car accident and requires radical emergency surgery that utilizes morphogenetically neutral skin grafts applied to her chest and abdomen wounds. After waking from a coma associated with the accident, Rose develops a taste for blood caused by the red, phallic-shaped stinger growing out of her armpit, which permits her to drain her human victims and turn them into zombie-like creatures. *Splice* is about a pair of married genetic engineers who create new hybrid species through the splicing of animal DNA under the auspices of revolutionizing science. Taking their work to an unethical level, the pair splice human DNA with the wife's DNA in order to “breed” a human-animal chimera named Dren (at first female, Dren changes into male after puberty) that ultimately kills and rapes the husband and wife, respectively.

⁴⁷⁸ Eduardo Kac, “Introduction: Art That Looks You In The Eye: Hybrids, Clones, Mutants, Synthetics, and Transgenics,” in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*,” ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 1.

genomics, humankind gets closer to unlocking its meaning so as to rewrite, reimagine, and represent bodies *and* the worlds we live in. What is imagined as a fantastical possibility within Gene Roddenberry's wildly popular science-fiction television and film franchise *Star Trek*, for example—the total eradication of genetic illness and disease—will, one day, be a reality.⁴⁷⁹

Shifting attention from human bodies to animal and plant bodies, a number of recent genome projects have altered not only the natural, but also the socio-economic worlds we occupy, as is evidenced by the genomic study of the white fly (a fly that invades and devastates agricultural crops) and the study of cannabis (a plant used for both medical and recreational purposes that has been decriminalized or legalized in a number of Western states), amongst others.⁴⁸⁰ What has resulted is the transformation of life into information, or what philosopher Eugene Thacker would call the emergence of “biomedia”—the merging of computer science and molecular biology, genetic and computer codes.⁴⁸¹ With this merger, life is reduced to data that can influence social policies (e.g., labour regulations, private health, legislation, law enforcement) resulting in

⁴⁷⁹ Stem cells are cells are undifferentiated cells of a multicellular organism that can give rise to indefinitely more cells of the same type, as well as differentiate into other cells. Stem cells not only repair and replace damaged cells, which means they have the power to heal, but they are also the foundation of multicellular life. For example, our skin is comprised of stem cells that permit them to shed and regrow many times over the course of our lives. Due to the healing nature of stem cells, scientists are studying them in an attempt to cure disease and injury. (Canadian Stem Cell Foundation, “What is a Stem Cell?” *Canadian Stem Cell Foundation*, accessed September 1, 2016, <http://stemcellfoundation.ca/en/about-stem-cells/what-is-a-stem-cell/>.)

⁴⁸⁰ To view these open-source genome projects, please visit United States National Center for Biotechnology Information for genomic data on the whitefly (accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genome/?term=whitefly>) and the Cannabis Genome Research Initiative (accessed July 15, 2016, <http://cannabisgenomics.org/>) for information on the marijuana genome. Due to increasing interest in genome mapping, many genome projects' data is available to all researchers (and the public) for free online.

⁴⁸¹ Eugene Thacker, “What is Biomedia?” *Configurations* 11, no. 1 (2003): 47–79, 52. See also: Eugene Thacker, *Biomedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). For meditations on the correlation of flesh and data, please see: Philip Thurtle and Robert E. Mitchell, eds., *Data Made Flesh: Embodying Information* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and *Semiotic Flesh: Information and the Human Body* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

what pioneering bio-artist Eduardo Kac calls “genocracy”: “the false belief that genes alone can determine matters of life and death.”⁴⁸²

Even more alarming is the fact that because biomatter (tissues, organs, blood, and DNA) is a source of information, it has been transformed into something that is bought and sold, creating its own global economy, which Melinda Cooper calls the “bioeconomy.”⁴⁸³ This bioeconomy, also referred to as a “tissue economy” by Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell, has become so powerful—and, at times, illegal and unethical—that laws now control how human tissues are collected, used, and displayed.⁴⁸⁴ In this paradigm, all bodies become what Kenneth Fish calls “living factories,” often forced to labour through the creation and donation of biomatter without the subject’s knowledge or consent.⁴⁸⁵ Bodies labour without realizing it insofar as humans who undergo biopsy and surgery, and animals used for scientific and medical research, for example, do not have the information or capacity to consent to the donation of their biomatter. In the case of humans, biomatter obtained through biopsy and surgery is perceived firstly, as bodily “run-off” that would otherwise be destroyed, and, secondly, is often legally viewed as property of the institution which removes and stores those samples, tissues, and organs, permitting medical institutions like hospitals to override the need to obtain what is called “informed consent” from patients. In the case of animals, they are understood as less than human because they are perceived as not having the cognitive or linguistic ability to understand they are born into a life of servitude or communicate their wants and desires to humans who extract parts from their bodies for human benefit. Therefore, both humans and animals supply biomatter to corporations and medical or scientific institutions to create new drugs, medical treatments, and

⁴⁸² Kac, “Art That Looks You In The Eye,” 1.

⁴⁸³ Melinda E. Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology & Capitalism in the Neo-liberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), chapter 1, “Life Beyond the Limits: Inventing the Bioeconomy.”

⁴⁸⁴ Catherine Waldby and Robert E. Mitchell, *Tissue Economy: Blood, Organs, and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸⁵ Kenneth Fish, *Living Factories: Biotechnology and the Unique Nature of Capitalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

advancements in bioengineering, for example, all of which generate profit. In this bioeconomy bodies are rarely remunerated. Because biomatter can be regenerated *ad infinitum* within bodies over time, humans and animals have become factories, sites of free labour that are never compensated by the bioeconomy. As such, the bioeconomy is built on unethical foundations. However, due to the unethical nature of much biomatter collection practices, laws now exist to curtail the exploitation of bodies.

As a result of the increasing technologization of bodies through the bioeconomy, a number of Western countries have instituted laws pertaining to the collection, use, and display of human tissues. Interestingly, the same legal protections are not afforded to animals, precisely because they are not considered equal to humans within the culturally instituted hierarchy of species, an idea that is increasingly contested within bio-art. For example, the United Kingdom has instituted legislation like the *Human Tissue Act* (2004) in order to “regulate the removal, storage, use and disposal of human bodies, organs and tissue.”⁴⁸⁶ To uphold this act, the Human Tissue Authority (HTA) polices the use of human tissues, including their display as both specimens for learning and art objects.⁴⁸⁷ The most famous example of an art exhibit that utilizes human tissues is *Body Worlds*, an educational art project comprised of skinless, plastinated human and animal bodies created by German anatomist Gunther von Hagen.⁴⁸⁸ The exhibit toured all over the world, but was not well exhibited in the United Kingdom after mid-2002 (only twice) due to the

⁴⁸⁶ *Human Tissue Act*, 2004, C. 30, accessed June 5, 2016, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/30/contents>. Please note that Scotland has its own Human Tissue Act legislation as of 2006.

⁴⁸⁷ Please see the Human Tissue Authority’s *Code of Practice 7: Public Display*, accessed June 5, 2016, <https://www.hta.gov.uk/guidance-professionals/codes-practice/code-practice-7-public-display>, for further information pertaining to obtaining licenses for the public display of human tissues.

⁴⁸⁸ *Body Worlds* is an exhibition of dead, skinless bodies and body parts donated to Gunther von Hagen through his body donation program predicated on informed living consent of the donors. Famous for inventing plastination in the 1970s, a technique used to preserve bodies and to stop tissue decay by injecting chemical agents in the body tissues, von Hagen has preserved hundreds of bodies, often posing the bodies in order to create narratives that speak to the life, activities, and cultures of humans. Appearing alien, the bodies that comprise *Body Worlds* are skinless, allowing viewers to see their internal parts typically invisible. A number of religious and legal controversies surround *Body Worlds*.

provisions of the *Human Tissue Act*.⁴⁸⁹ However, because animal tissues are not included in the Act, von Hagen was permitted to exhibit a version of *Body Worlds* dedicated to animal bodies (referred to as *Animals Inside Out*) in May 2016 at the Center for Life, Newcastle without a license from the Human Tissue Authority.

The events that precipitated this influential *Human Tissue Act*, while tangential to a consideration of the ways skin is technologized in science and art, are important insofar as they underscore the problem with biotechnologies that use bodies and their matter: informed consent is often disregarded, poorly defined and understood, or unobtainable. The *Human Tissue Act* came into being five years after the Alder Hey scandal, which involved the unethical and illegal collection of organs without informed consent from the families of approximately 850 infants and children between 1988 and 1995 at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool, a project overseen by Dutch pathologist Dick van Velzen. The scandal was triggered by a public inquiry into the extreme infant mortality rates at Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI) in 1999, which came to light after the death of an 11-month-old infant, Samantha Richard, who died in 1992 after undergoing open-heart surgery. After demanding to see the pathologist's report in 1996, the child's mother discovered that the hospital had kept the infant's heart without her authorization. A public inquiry uncovered a collection of over a thousand organs between the Alder Hey and Walton hospitals. In 2001, the Alder Hey Report (also called the Redfern Report) was published, revealing not only that the hospitals had collected and stored organs unethically and illegally,⁴⁹⁰ but that Alder Hey had removed thalamus glands from living children during cardiac surgeries, which were then sold to a pharmaceutical company in exchange for donations, and that it had kept over 1,500 fetuses that had been miscarried, aborted, or

⁴⁸⁹ *Body Worlds* was exhibited at the Atlantis Gallery, London, UK, from March 23-September 29, 2002. After the *Human Tissue Act* was passed, the only full exhibition of *Body Worlds* to have been exhibited was in 2008 whereby the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry and O2, London, both applied to the Human Tissue Authority and were granted licenses to display plastinated human beings. Since 2008, *Body Worlds* has been exhibited with only animal subjects, called *Animals Inside Out*.

⁴⁹⁰ Michael Redfern, et. al., *The Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry Report* [Liverpool, United Kingdom] Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry, January 30, 2001, accessed September 1, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-royal-liverpool-childrens-inquiry-report>.

stillborn in storage.⁴⁹¹ Sadly, van Velzen was not prosecuted, and he left England in 1995 only to be hired in Canada by IWK Grace Health Center in Halifax, where he was also fired in 1997 for the improper dissection of hearts and placentas.⁴⁹²

As a result of this scandal, the *Human Tissue Act* now polices the use and display of human tissues, which has impacted artists like Andrew Krasnow, mentioned in the introduction, who works with donated human skins and now has to obtain a special license to exhibit his artworks to the British public despite the fact that the human skin he works with is obtained through consent from living donors.⁴⁹³ In Canada, the legislation regarding the donation of human tissues, which is province-specific, is not concerned with the public display of these specimens as is evidenced, for example, by the fact that *Body Worlds* has been exhibited and highly celebrated at the Ontario Science Center and other Canadian locations. However, like the U.K., Canada does have federal regulations pertaining to the safety of cells, tissues, and organs processed for transplantation.⁴⁹⁴ In addition, the *Assisted Reproduction Act* makes it illegal to clone human beings or to create chimeras through assisted human reproduction techniques (i.e., the grafting of human

⁴⁹¹ David Batty, "Alder Hey Report on Use of Children's Organs," *The Guardian* (January 30, 2001), accessed September 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2001/jan/30/health.alderhey1>. The families of the children whose organs were stolen settled out of court, receiving a mere £5000 per child. In 2003, more than 2,000 families sued the National Health Service (NHS) for removing body parts from patients.

⁴⁹² "Ex-IWK Found "Incompetent," *CBC News* (December 5, 1999), accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ex-iwk-doctor-found-incompetent-1.171598>.

⁴⁹³ Simon Ings, "Walrus Made from Human Skin Appears in its First Public Photo," *New Scientist* (August 20, 2015), <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn28073-walrus-made-from-human-skin-appears-in-its-first-public-photo/>. Krasnow's last show in the UK, *In The Flesh*, was exhibited at the GV Art Gallery in London from October 1, 2008 to January 17, 2009.

⁴⁹⁴ *Safety of Human Cells, Tissues and Organs for Transplantation Regulations*, SOR /2007-118, accessed July 7, 2016, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/compli-conform/info-prod/cell/index-eng.php>. In the United States the use, transplantation, and sale of human tissues are federally operated: cells and tissues, including bones and skin, used for human transplantation, implantation, infusion, or transfer are regulated by The Center of Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER), and the transplantation of vascularized organs (e.g., kidneys, the pancreas, the heart, and lungs) that is overseen by the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA).

testicular or ovarian tissues in animals) regardless of the intended use or application.⁴⁹⁵ Perhaps even more important in our biotechnological milieu is that fact that ownership of and control over human tissues is contested in Canada. The Ontario Superior Court ruled that whomever or whatever agency or institution possesses the tissue owns it, which both ignores issues of informed consent⁴⁹⁶ and violates Canadian health laws that stipulate patients have the right to control and own the information associated with their bodies.⁴⁹⁷ As such, new federal law is required to address the contradictory use and ownership of human tissues within Canadian biomedicine and biotechnology.⁴⁹⁸

While my focus in this chapter and this section is not the economic potential or legal issues tied to biotechnologies, I discuss them here in order frame the ethical issues wrapped up around the use of biomatter within bio-art. How biomatter is sourced, under what conditions, for whom, and to what end are great concerns for culture precisely because biotechnology and its processes are, at times, highly unethical and even illegal. As such, the bioeconomy and emerging laws reinforce biomatter as a form of information

⁴⁹⁵ *Assisted Human Reproduction Act*, Statutes of Canada 2004, C. 2, accessed, July 7, 2016, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/a-13.4/fulltext.html>. Like Canada, some U.S. states make it illegal to create human-animal chimeras, but there is, overall, an increased focus on and attention to furthering the biotechnological research needed to create chimeras for human benefit, as illuminated by the University of Minnesota's cutting-edge chimera program that has grafted, spliced, and fused human cells and tissues into farm animals such as pigs and sheep (Antonio Regalado, "Human-Animal Chimeras are Gestating on U.S. Research Farms," *MIT Technology Review* (January 6, 2016), accessed September 5, 2016, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/545106/human-animal-chimeras-are-gestating-on-us-research-farms/>).

⁴⁹⁶ Sara Halwani, "Ontario Court Finds that Hospitals Own Human Tissue, Ignores Consent Issues," *Just Biotech* (June 18, 2014), accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.justbiotech.ca/ontario-court-finds-that-hospital-owns-human-tissue-ignores-consent-issues/>.

⁴⁹⁷ Timothy Caulfield, "Who Owns Your Tissue? You'd Be Surprised," *The Globe and Mail* (June 20, 2014), accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/who-owns-your-tissue-you-d-be-surprised/article19256582/>.

⁴⁹⁸ Yamri Taddese, "Focus On: Provinces Should Create Laws on Excised Human Tissues," *Law Times* (April 4, 2016), accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.lawtimesnews.com/201604045313/focus-on/focus-on-provinces-should-create-laws-on-excised-human-tissue>.

and as a kind of property,⁴⁹⁹ which in turn informs the ethical concerns associated with bio-art.⁵⁰⁰

5.2 « Transgenic Skin Portraits: (Un)Ethical Skins »

A diverse genre of contemporary art, bio-art is not solely concerned with skin, despite the interest in tissue culturing within transgenic art practices over the last fifteen years.

Reliant on biotechnologies, bio-art engages genetic engineering, tissue culturing, and cloning to create aesthetic and conceptual objects made from live tissues, bacteria, living organisms, and life processes. Bio-artists manipulate bodies in order to create life or living forms, utilize medical and scientific imagery or representations, and/or explore some contested theory of the life sciences, as defined by Claire Pentecost.⁵⁰¹ Because bio-art is an extension of science within visual culture, bio-artists are artist–researchers who possess the requisite knowledge and practical skill to work in laboratories and with other scientists.

Credited with coining the term “bio-art,” Eduardo Kac first used it in 1997 to describe *Time Capsule*, a performance-installation that took place on November 11, 1997 at Casa das Rosas, São Paulo, Brazil. Important to the history of bio-art, *Time Capsule* is a mixed-media work comprised of a microchip (identification transponder tag) encoded

⁴⁹⁹ See Katerina Sideri’s *Bioproperty, Biomedicine, and Deliberative Governance: Patents as Discourse on Life* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014) for a meditation on the ways biotechnologies have patented biomatter and processes involving biomatter, which has, in turn, altered not only the bioeconomy, but also the laws that govern it.

⁵⁰⁰ Different from biotechnology, bio-art, firstly, does not serve any practical purpose to advance biomedicine, and, secondly, it appropriates biotechnologies. As such, bio-art encourages us to consider the moral implications in the creation of life for art (Nora S. Vaage, “What Ethics for Bioart?” *Nanoethics* 10 (2016): 77–104). Additionally, the creation of living tissues as a form of art has also garnered concerns regarding the collaboration of biologists and the disposal of these tissues (Olivia Solon, “Bioart: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Using Living Tissue as a Medium,” *Wired* (July 28, 2011), accessed August 25, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2011/07/bioart/>).

⁵⁰¹ Claire Pentecost, “Outfitting the Laboratory of the Symbolic: Toward a Critical Inventory of Bioart,” in *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism and Technoscience*, ed. Beatrice da Costa (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 110.

with Kac's identity (i.e., his name and species), which was implanted into his skin and later web scanned remotely in order to retrieve the information and input it in a U.S. animal registry.⁵⁰² Transmitting the live performance on a local television channel and on the Internet as a webcast, Kac attempted to eradicate boundaries not only between himself and technology, but also between geographic and cultural locales. By entering himself into an animal registry to prove that wet technologies could store digital information, Kac dissolved the boundaries between humans and animals. In effect, *Time Capsule* pokes holes in the ideological and physical boundaries that separate nature and culture, and human and animals, ostensibly setting the tone for future bio-art projects. In turn, Kac positioned the exploration and eradication of boundaries as the underlying focus of bio-art. Engaging the problem of wet interfaces (i.e., living tissues) hosting digital information, *Time Capsule* is a literalization of the technology metaphor within art.

Ranging from “simplistic” iterations like geneticist Hunter Cole's *Living Drawings*⁵⁰³ (2004–ongoing), made with bioluminescent bacteria, to more complex forms like Kac's infamous *GFP Bunny* (a.k.a. Alba; 2000–2004)⁵⁰⁴—a “glowing” transgenic rabbit created in collaboration with scientists⁵⁰⁵ by splicing the green fluorescent protein gene found in jellyfish, *Aequorea victoria*,⁵⁰⁶ into the zygote of the rabbit's mother—bio-art utilizes biomatter from animals in order to reimagine what bodies achieve when they

⁵⁰² Eduardo Kac, “Bio Art: From Genesis to Natural History of the Enigma,” *Eduardo Kac*, accessed August 15, 2016, http://www.ekac.org/bioart_kac.pdf. Originally published in *Imagery in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Oliver Grau, 57–80 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).

⁵⁰³ To view Cole's bacteria drawings, please visit: “Living Bacteria Drawings,” *Hunter Cole: Representing Science as Art*, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.huntercole.org/artgallery/livingbacterialdrawings/>.

⁵⁰⁴ To know more about Kac's *GFP Bunny*, please visit: “GFP Bunny,” *Eduardoo Kac*, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html#gfpbunnyanchor>.

⁵⁰⁵ While Kac is internationally famous because of Alba, he did not create her alone. As a result of the help of zoosystematician Louis Bec, and scientists Louis-Marie-Houdebine and Patrick Prunet at the National Institute of Agronomic Research in France, the ownership of Alba was contested, and, in the end, she was kept indefinitely at the institute where she died as a lab specimen. It was Kac's intention that Alba become a family pet and live the rest of her days with his family.

⁵⁰⁶ While seemingly radical within the context of art, splicing the jellyfish GFP gene into a (rabbit) zygote is a common method of proving genetic material has been transferred from one species to another within transgenic bioengineering.

are unrestricted by boundaries. By doing so, bio-art simultaneously celebrates and exploits what Donna Haraway calls the “animal turn” of our contemporary milieu.⁵⁰⁷ This concern for and exploration of human–animal boundaries illuminates the fact that we are living in an “interspecies” paradigm, one that no longer positions the human as the “dominant object of analysis” (an idea that is ironic if we consider the fact that animal bodies are always already engaged in and exploited by research that benefits and enhances human life).⁵⁰⁸ The interspecies nature of bio-art shows us that “relationships *between* different forms of biosocial life and their political effects” can encourage new relations across and realities for bodies within culture.⁵⁰⁹

As I have already noted, “transgenic” means “across genes.” In turn, transgenic art, as defined by Kac, is a mode of art production that makes “use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism, or, to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, in order to create unique living beings.”⁵¹⁰ Utilizing molecular genetics to modify bodies and cultivate interspecies communication at the cellular level, transgenic art creates chimeras, which, as I discussed earlier are liminal species and organ(ism)s comprised of disparate parts, living on the edge between bodies and species. The liminal nature of transgenic species and organisms is important to the conceptual nature of bio-art insofar as it engenders what curator Jens Hauser calls a state of “inbetweenness.”⁵¹¹ Inbetweenness is a “transition zone,” one that prompts us to take note of the fact the division lines between bodies are quickly collapsing within twenty-first-century culture and science.⁵¹² The merger of disparate genes within

⁵⁰⁷ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 2007).

⁵⁰⁸ Julie Livingston and Jasbir K. Puar, “Interspecies,” *Social Text* 106, 29, no. 1. (Spring 2011): 3–14, 4.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹⁰ Eduardo Kac, “Transgenic Art,” *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 6, no. 11 (December 1998): n/p/n.

⁵¹¹ Jens Hauser. “Who’s Afraid of the Inbetween?” *Sk-interfaces*, ed. Jens Hauser (Liverpool: FACT and Liverpool University, 2008), 6–16.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

the laboratory to create chimeras signals a cultural desire to engage in a technologically overseen process of becoming. For Hauser, this becoming something other than “allows major shape-shifting events to occur,” which have the power to reorient culture and its relationship with non-human species so as to reconceive the notion of difference.⁵¹³

Seemingly radical and cutting-edge within the context of contemporary art, the creation of transgenic species is not new to culture or science—ornamental plants (e.g., roses) and animals (such as dog, cat, and bird species), specifically pets, have existed for well over a century. Today, transgenic animals range from mice to pigs and are used for the betterment of human health, as in the creation and use of transgenic mammals in the study of AIDS and obesity and for the creation of better treatments for genetic disorders like cystic fibrosis.⁵¹⁴

Beyond the study of human health, transgenic animals help solve everyday problems. Bioengineers at AMSilk, a German biotechnology company based in Munich, as well as Dr. Randy Lewis and his lab at the Utah State University, for example, have spliced the silk-spinning genes from golden orb spiders into goats. These “spider-goats” produce spider silk proteins in their milk that can be processed and refined into a strong, biodegradable fabric. Marketed as Biosteel™ by AMSilk, spidersilk fabric is used in high-performance sportswear and footwear, medical and technical textiles, and interior and automotive design. Ideal for use in bulletproof vests and protective gear, spider silk is stronger than Kevlar and steel, highly elastic, super lightweight, and impervious to extreme temperatures.⁵¹⁵ Despite the spider-goat’s chimeric nature at the genetic level, it

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Louis-Marie Houbedine (Ed.), *Transgenic Animals: Generation and Use* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), specifically T. Sorg and M. Mehtali, “The Use of Transgenic Mammals for AIDS Studies,” 427–434; B. B. Lowell, “Genetically Modified Mice in Obesity Research,” 449–454; and G. McLaughlan and D. J. Porteous, “The Role of Mice Models in the Development of New Therapies for Cystic Fibrosis,” 435–444.

⁵¹⁵ While AMSilk is the only company to mass-produce these spider silk biopolymers, Dr. Randy Lewis at the State University of Utah has landed a deal with the U.S. Army to create spider silk for military testing (Mitch Shaw, “Utah State Lands Contract With Army to Produce Spider Silk,” *Standard Examiner*

acts and looks just like any other goat, revealing an interesting occurrence across many of the transgenic species and organisms created within bioengineering and bio-art: differences at the visible level of skin are commonly absent (e.g., the spider-goat does not have eight spider legs as one might imagine, in a mythological sense).

Employing techniques and technologies used in Lewis's lab, bio-artist and bioengineer Jalila Essaïdi's project *2.6g 329m/s* (a.k.a *Bulletproof Skin*; 2011–2014) explores this loss of difference at the level skin, literally, through her creation of an ironic transgenic skin designed to reinforce differences between bodies vis-à-vis its ability to stop a bullet.⁵¹⁶ Made by injecting golden orb spider silk into human skin, *Bulletproof Skin* is a chimera insofar as it is part human and part spider, becoming a super skin that echoes the one created by Robert in *The Skin I Live In*. Yet, like most transgenic species, organisms, and tissues, there is no visible presence of the spider at the surface level of the skin. In fact, *Bulletproof Skin* looks like many other cultured skins: wet, delicate, semi-transparent, and uniform in coloration (in this case a pale, whitish shade visually devoid of life). By creating a bulletproof skin, Essaïdi forces us to consider whether or not skin is the ultimate boundary, a thought complicated by the fact that *Bulletproof Skin* is not entirely bulletproof as its name suggests—it cannot stop a bullet at high speeds, rendering it impractical for police and military personnel. What is underscored by Essaïdi's project is the idea that liminal skins have the power to, as philosopher Hannah Landecker theorizes, alter both the temporality and the plasticity of bodies.⁵¹⁷

Invented in 1907 by American biologist and anatomist Dr. Ross Granville Harrison, tissue culturing is, like many other scientific practices and biotechnologies

(December 16, 2015), accessed September 5, 2016, <http://www.standard.net/Military/2015/12/15/Utah-State-lands-contract-with-Army-to-produce-spider-silk>.

⁵¹⁶ For more information of *Bulletproof Skin*, and to watch a video of the skin being tested, please visit: Jalila Essaïdi's website, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://jalilaessaidi.com/2-6g-329ms/>.

⁵¹⁷ Hannah Landecker. "Living Differently in Time: Plasticity, Temporality and Cellular Biotechnologies," *Culture Machine* 7 (2005): 1–15. Accessed August 2014. <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/26/33>.

utilized within bio-art, a somewhat traditional method of exploring and questioning boundaries between bodies within science.⁵¹⁸ Increasingly available to contemporary artists, as has been made possible by SymbioticA (a “wet” laboratory at the University of Western Australia run by Catts and Zurr) for example, tissue culturing not only questions difference observed and experienced at the level of skin, but also explores the possibility of radical relations between bodies through the creation of chimeric skins. By creating such skins, bio-artists like Essaïdi, Catts and Zurr, ORLAN, and Reodica, amongst others, reimagine bodies and worlds through the creation of boundary-less skin made from the biomass of both humans and animals. In turn, these creations push (skin) portraiture into the expanded field by doing away with the representation of the subject entirely. What I mean by this is visible likeness, which is historically associated with the representation of the subject’s appearance (i.e., face) within traditional conceptions of Western portraiture, is eradicated, traded in for a focus on genetic likeness. This kind of genetic likeness is “invisible,” seen only through technology and by specialists that can read the markers that both separate and intertwine one genetic code and another. Visible differences between subjects become irrelevant within bio-art skin portraiture because transgenic tissue culturing practices creates chimeric skins that collapse the visible differences between bodies/species, a fact that is underscored by the uniform appearance across transgenic skins (i.e., wet, thin, semi-transparent, lumpen, almost colourless, seemingly devoid of life) created within bio-art.

Possibly the most significant artists working with tissue culturing, Catts and Zurr argue that their creation of three-dimensional transgenic skin sculptures signals the birth of a new class of being, one that is not easily defined or classified because it is “semi-

⁵¹⁸ Dr. Ross Granville Harrison (1870-1959), Associate Professor of Anatomy at John Hopkins University (1899–1907) and Bronson Professor of Comparative Anatomy at Yale University (1913–1938), discovered tissue culturing in 1907 by utilizing bacteria culturing practices and techniques, such as the “hanging drop” method, to grow a nerve cell from embryonic frog tissue. The hanging drop technique takes cells and suspends them in a small drop of liquid, such as plasma or other media that permits tissue growth, within an inverted watch glass, which slows rate of evaporation to enable short-term observation of microorganisms and growth of tissues (“The Hanging Drop Tissue Culture,” *The Embryo Encyclopedia Project*, accessed June 5, 2016, <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/hanging-drop-tissue-culture>). The hanging drop technique permits the growth of life otherwise restricted by the flat plane of culture (Petri) dishes.

living.”⁵¹⁹ The semi-living is the biomass of bodies, such as tissues, that live beyond the bodies from which they were culled through “intensive technological intervention to prevent transformation to a non-living state.”⁵²⁰ Disassociated from bodies, the semi-living is not referred to as a subject, but exists somewhere between subject and object, life and death, precisely because its existence is linked to utilitarian and economic value. In short, the semi-living is fragments of bodies that take on a liminal life of their own.⁵²¹

The semi-living creates what Catts and Zurr call the “Extended Body”—an amalgamation of the human extended phenotype and tissue life—that becomes “a unified body for disembodied living fragments.”⁵²² Resulting from the intertwining and celebration of differences at the cellular and genetic levels, the Extended Body does not concern itself with visible bodily differences pertaining to species, age, race, and sex important to other kinds of bodies. In turn, the Extended Body is an “ontological device” that draws our attention to the contemporary need to “re-examin[e] current taxonomies and hierarchical perceptions of life,”⁵²³ an artistic and conceptual view of life mediated and augmented by technology.

Through their Tissue Culture & Art (TC&A) project, Catts and Zurr grow transgenic skins in a variety of forms and shapes by seeding biodegradable polymer scaffolds with human and animal cells that, over time, intertwine and grow into a new skin. In order to grow the skins, Catts and Zurr place the scaffold seeded with cells in a bioreactor. A bioreactor is a manufactured apparatus that supports a biologically active

⁵¹⁹ Catts and Zurr, “Growing Semi-Living Sculptures”; Ionat Zurr, “Complicating Notions of Life: Semi Living Entities,” in *BioMediale: Contemporary Society and Geonomic Culture*, ed. Dmitry Bulatov (Kalingrad, Russia: The National Centre for Contemporary Art and The National Publishing House, 2004), accessed August 20, 2016, <http://biomediale.ncca-kalingrad.ru/?blang=eng&author=zurr>.

⁵²⁰ Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, “Towards a new class of being: The Extended Body,” *Artnodes* 6 (2006): 1–9, 2.

⁵²¹ For an analysis of the related concept of liminal life, please see: Susan Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at Frontiers of Biomedicine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid., 1.

environment by sustaining a chemical reaction in a nutrient-rich medium to culture cells. Often made from stainless steel and glass, bioreactors are typically cylindrical in shape and vary in size. A bioreactor controls the environmental conditions required to culture cells, such as the temperature, pH levels, nutrient concentrations, and levels of dissolved gases. Considered art objects in their own right, bioreactors play an important role in the creation and display of these transgenic skins. If the skins are removed from the bioreactors, they die because they do not have the requisite circulatory system to keep them living independently or the epithelial protection from the dangers of the environment (air and bacteria). In other words, bioreactors function as technological vitrines that offer both life support and a means to exhibit the delicate skins to the public without killing them. Catts and Zurr consider their skin sculptures to be semi-living precisely because they can grow and live, but only with the aid of a technological life support system.

In order to obtain the cells for the creation of semi-living skins, artists working with transgenic processes like tissue culturing have three options. The first option is obtaining immortal cell line samples purchased from cell repositories.⁵²⁴ This first method supports a for-profit biomass economy historically intended to be non-profit and aid scientific and medical research, which is riddled with ethical concerns.⁵²⁵ While Catts and Zurr do not always use immortal cell lines in their work, and favour animal-based cell lines over human ones when they do, those cells are never obtained with consent insofar

⁵²⁴ Immortal cell lines are cells that, as a result of a mutation, undergo division indefinitely, which can be sustained *in vitro*. Not to be confused with stem cells, which also divide indefinitely, immortalized cell lines are, more often than not, taken from biopsies of cancerous organs and tissues in humans and from animals that have experienced some form of either naturally occurring or forced genetic mutation.

⁵²⁵ In 1951, researcher George Gey at John Hopkins University received a sample of cervix tissue from Howard Jones, who had taken the sample from Mrs. Henrietta Lacks (a woman being treated from cervical cancer) without consent. Isolating a mutated cell from the sample, which he called "HeLa," Gey propagated the cells *in vitro* and created the first immortal cell line. Gey then sent out the immortalized cell samples to colleagues worldwide in an attempt to aid scientific research through non-profit avenues, an act that resulted in the cure for polio. Cloned in 1955, and owned by a number of cell repositories, despite its not for profit origins. The HeLa cell line is now involved in over 11,000 patents, representing a multi-million, if not billion, dollar industry. (Hannah Landecker, "Immortality *in vitro*: A History of the HeLa Cell Line," in *Biotechnology and Culture: Bodies, Anxieties, Ethics*, Ed. Paul Brodwin, 53–72 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). For more information on Henrietta Lacks, please see: Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Crown, 2010).

as animals cannot provide it, and those same animals are always already indentured to human beings for human benefit. The second way, which is the more ethical and inexpensive choice, is to obtain biomatter and biological data by sampling one's own cellular materials through biopsy. This option is ethical insofar as it is based on donation and informed consent. However, regular human (skin) cells cannot divide indefinitely like stem cells and immortal cells, thereby requiring the help of an immortal cell to grow into a three-dimensional art object. The third way is by harvesting cells through the dissection of animals carried out in abattoirs for the industrial food complex. While artists like Catts and Zurr note that they prefer to "scavenge" biomatter from slaughterhouses and their own bodies rather than pay for it, this type of biomatter is not entirely free from ethical concern insofar as these cells represent the mass killing of animals for human consumption. With that said, one might view the decision to use animal biomass "runoff" from abattoirs as a conscious choice to utilize the entirety of the animal rather than disregard and waste it. In this view, using scavenged biomatter could be viewed as ethical, even responsible.

By using biomatter to make skins that function as art objects, the TC&A Project raises a number of ontological and epistemological questions, such as: what is life and how do we value and classify it? While the TC&A Project does not solely investigate skin, Catts and Zurr take skin as their point of reference as is evidenced by projects like *Victimless Leather* (2004), amongst others, that "probe accepted ideas of life and identity, the concept of self, and the place of human beings in regard to other living beings in the environment."⁵²⁶

Exploring these questions and concerns, *Victimless Leather* [Fig. 49] is a tiny, stitchless semi-living tunic dress/top created by seeding immortal cell lines (3T3 mouse cells) on a scaffold in the shape of a tunic. The artists use the immortal mouse cells to form the connective tissue of the dress and human bone cells to make it stronger, able to maintain its shape once the growing skin subsumes the biopolymer scaffold. In short, *Victimless Leather* is a chimeric skin that attempts to offer ethical solutions to our cultural

⁵²⁶ "Jonat Zurr," *Symbiotica*, accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/residents/zurr>.

love (problem) of wearing and possessing garments and objects made from leather, treated and tanned animal hides. By creating this new transgenic leather, Catts and Zurr speak to the growing trend to create alternatives (such as plant-based leathers made from mushroom skins and pineapple foliage) to tanned animal hides in the textile industry.

Victimless Leather is ironic. Firstly, there are victims—the mice. Secondly, the utopia imagined by Catts and Zurr’s creation of a “victimless” alternative to animal-based leather is dystopic—animal hides are exchanged for animal and human biomatter, which sustains the use of animal and human bodies for profit. Nonetheless, *Victimless Leather* explores the ethical implications of how both the fashion and biotechnology industries are shaped by capitalism, probing the value of life itself at the level of skin even if it does not critically investigate the ways skin mediates and can offer us alternative modes of embodiment that could radically transform how we perceive difference.

Two works that go further to investigate these critical questions are ORLAN’s *Harlequin Coat* and Reodica’s *HymNext* project, the latter of which I discuss in the next section. Exploring the epidermal limits between bodies, infamous French performance artist ORLAN, known for her plastic surgery performances of the 1990s, questions what it means to be a raced at the level of skin in *Harlequin Coat* (2007) [Fig. 50].⁵²⁷ Made at SymbioticA by crossbreeding skin cells *in vitro* taken from human donors, including herself, ranging in age, race, ethnicity, and sex, ORLAN explores a loss of difference at the visible surface of bodies.⁵²⁸ Exhibited in the group show *Sk-interfaces* at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool (February 1 – March 30, 2008),

⁵²⁷ For those not familiar with ORLAN’s oeuvre, she is infamous for her plastic surgery performances of the 1990s, *The Reincarnation of Saint-ORLAN*. ORLAN’s transformed her face into an amalgam of different features deemed beautiful within Western art history: the chin of Botticelli’s *Venus*, the nose of Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Psyche*, the lips of Francois Boucher’s *Europa*, the eyes of Diana (as depicted in a 16th-century French School of Fontainebleau painting), and the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*.

⁵²⁸ ORLAN, “Harlequin Coat,” *Still Living*, accessed March 13, 2017, <http://www.stilliving.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/pages/artists/orlan.htm>.

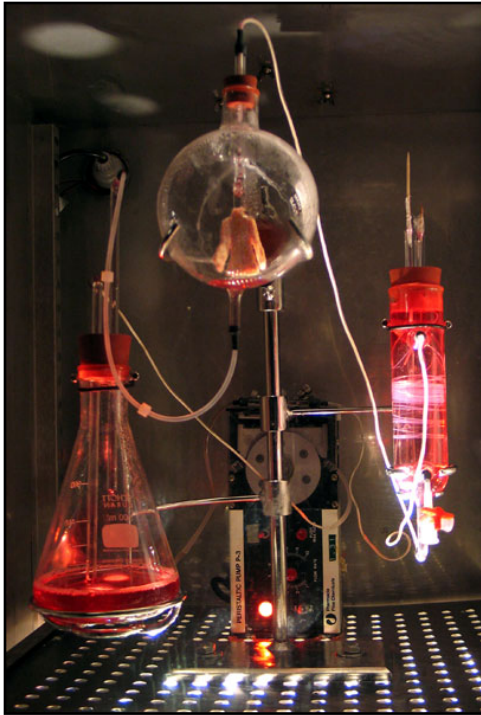


Figure 48: Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr. *Victimless Leather*. Mixed media. 2004. © Tissue Culture and Art Project. Image reproduced courtesy of the artists.



Figure 49: ORLAN. *Harlequin Coat*. Mixed media. 2007 © ORLAN. Image reproduced courtesy of the artist.

ORLAN's complex installation comprises a number of bio-art skin portraits, which underscores the shift from the singular body in traditional portraiture to the plurality of bodies within transgenic bio-art skin portraiture. Questioning the boundaries between species through an exploration of hybridization, both as a concept and as an action, ORLAN, like many artists working to create chimeric skins, utilizes animal cells (immortal cell lines) in order to literally flesh out human skin cells that cannot divide indefinitely in order to grow large enough to fill a Petri dish.⁵²⁹

A large installation of over twenty skins, *Harlequin Coat* looks just like it sounds: a coat-shaped structure made out of brightly coloured transparent Plexiglas, designed with a multi-coloured diamond-shape pattern. Each of the diamond shapes comprising the coat is filled with a diamond-shaped Petri dish containing an individual transgenic skin grown in a laboratory. Echoing the costume worn by the historical harlequins of Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, ORLAN's coat installation is symbolic of the trickster insofar as it both explores the visible collapse of differences between bodies at the level of skin (each skin growing in the Petri dishes looks the same) and entails an intertwining of disparate skins at the cellular level so as to reinforce difference at cellular and genetic levels. Referencing Serres's use of the harlequin as a metaphor for multi-culturalism in his book *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (1997), ORLAN imagines skin as the very thing that can make this new paradoxical future a reality. However, the visible collapse of differences between each of the transgenic skins installed within the coat illuminates the notion that, on a racial level, multiculturalism can lead to the loss of visible differences between skins. In effect, *Harlequin Coat*, like many bio-art skin portraits, becomes ironic insofar as all the skins look alike: wet, thin, delicate, semi-transparent, and colourless. Despite this irony (i.e., the homogeneity and colourlessness resulting from an intertwining of racially diverse skin cells in an attempt to celebrate and reinforce difference), *Harlequin Coat* creates the possibility for a emergence of new kind of transgenic species that shatters the boundaries between bodies, which, if imagined on a global scale, would alter culture

⁵²⁹ Burcu Baycan, "Into the Body of Another: Strange Couplings and Unnatural Alliances of *Harlequin Coat*, *The Performing Subject in the Space of Technology: Through the Virtual, Towards the Real*, eds. M. Causey, E. Meehan, and N. O'Dwyer, 17-33 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 20.

insofar as all bodies would be raced in the same way, and therefore, our conception of difference would change. What the *Harlequin Coat* does is occupy an alternative space of being, one that is experienced at the fringe of many bodies, which connects bodies raced and sexed differently. *Harlequin Coat*, therefore, is an assemblage that visualizes the collapse of racial and sexual specificities possible in our not-so-distant future as a species.

While ORLAN attempts to put the focus on the human element of the work, these skins are made with the help of immortal cell lines obtained from the bodies of labouring laboratory animals. Thus ORLAN does not bypass the unethical nature of the biomatter industry despite her attempt to envision and imagine a body unfettered by difference. In fact, because she obtains the bulk of her skin samples from willing participants, there is no discussion of ethics by the artist associated with this work. While it is important to consider the (un)ethical nature of transgenic art, ORLAN's emphasis on willing participation permits us to focus on more pertinent questions, such as "what happens when racial boundaries collapse?" rather than "how were these cells obtained?" or "who owns these cells?"

5.3 « Re-Imagining Difference: Julia Reodica's Chimeric Skins »

In the post-humanist era of the twenty-first century, bioengineering has created a range of chimeric skins that have engendered opportunities for the disruption of boundaries between bodies. By crossing the human–animal divide, these skins illuminate the fact that what we think is a contained body is actually leaky and, as a result, monstrous.⁵³⁰ For Margrit Shildrick, the biomedical body is monstrous because it is "corporeally ambiguous," challenging the systems of classification and various cultural hierarchies that

⁵³⁰ Shildrick, *Posthumanism*, 1996; Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and Bio-Ethics*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

privilege some bodies (i.e., humans) over others (i.e., animals).⁵³¹ Shildrick argues that in order to develop a radical feminist bioethics in the postmodern era, we have to encounter bodies and their experiences in the world anew through the reorientation of difference, which can conceive of new forms of embodiment.⁵³² Based on the chimeric nature of the extended body of transgenic art, for example, the biomedical monster challenges the idea that bodies are sovereign and autonomous insofar as this kind of physical leakiness made possible at the cellular level “constitute[s] an invasion” in the context of culturally instituted boundaries.⁵³³

Exploring that leakiness as a way to rethink difference, American artist, nurse, and researcher Julia Reodica’s *HymNext* project (2004–2008) takes the skin of the sexed female body—the hymen—and technologizes it through transgenic tissue culturing, allowing vaginal skin to replicate, grow, and thrive beyond the body as a work of art in order to question the biological boundaries between sexes.⁵³⁴ By culturing her own vaginal skin cells, Reodica creates a series of five radical self-portraits. The self-portraits are radical precisely because they move portraiture beyond representation, which is not the norm within skin portraiture, and beyond portraiture, generally, by using her sexed biomatter (vaginal epithelial cells) as the material in which to create self-portraits. In turn, her likeness is eradicated at the surface of these lab-grown hymens, forcing us to consider the likeness of one’s DNA, which is invisible to the naked eye.

Transgenic, the *HymNext* project collapses the boundaries between humans and animals, culture and nature by using bovine epithelial cells and rodent smooth muscle cells to grow new skins. Grown on bovine collagen scaffolding, *HymNext* literally fleshes

⁵³¹ Margrit Shildrick, “‘You are there, Like My Skin’: Reconfiguring Relational Economies,” in *Thinking Through the Skin*, eds. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (New York: Routledge, 2001), 160–173, 160.

⁵³² Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies*.

⁵³³ Shildrick, “Like My Skin,” 161.

⁵³⁴ To view a short video that helps to explain *HymNext* from the artist’s perspective please see: “Julia Reodica, USA: The HymNext Project, 2004-2008,” 3:04, posted by “componentgeek,” October 10, 2012, accessed May 6, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/51185298>.

out Reodica's skin cells with animal cells because human cells cannot grow indefinitely on their own. As a result, Reodica's hymens are chimeras, created through the mutual co-constitution of skin across species. By watching the migration of the cells at the microscopic level over time, adding more cells when needed to ensure the growth of these chimeric skins, Reodica encourages interspecies communication through self-experimentation.

As a result of being the product of both human and animal skin cells, and being sexed, Reodica's chimeric hymens challenge the fixedness of biological boundaries between bodies insofar as they are imagined as having the potential to be transplanted into a range of bodies, including those of men. Whilst not actually transplanted into any bodies precisely because they are semi-living—they cannot live outside the bioreactor in which they were originally grown—Reodica's hymens are symbols of what the future of embodiment could lead to through a meeting of skins at the cellular level, regardless of species or sex. These hymens died, making them unviable for any (imagined) transplantation once they were taken out of the bioreactor and placed in small Perspex vitrines for display purposes. Whilst more conceptual and aesthetic than practical, Reodica's hymens represent not only a collapse of sexual difference between human bodies, but also the potential for skins to cross racial boundaries policed by biology insofar as she is of Asian descent and those that are imagined to implant her skins would ostensibly occupy a host of racial identities and skin colours. Moreover, because the hymens are transgenic, Reodica endeavors to collapse all boundaries between bodies, including those that are species-specific. In turn, these hymens point to possible skin futures.

A hymen, by definition, is a thin, elastic skin barrier that grows inside the vaginal cavity, acting as a kind of shield, literalizing the boundaries that police the inside and outside of the female body. The loss of the hymen is a symbol for female sexual development in culture insofar as the barrier between the outside world and the cervix is absent. As such, many cultures view the hymen as a sign of purity and virginity. For Reodica, reproducing her vaginal cells “gestures toward the one-time occurrence and breakage of the biologically virginal hymen” so as to stretch the temporality *and* elasticity

of her body.⁵³⁵ Because the hymen is neither inside nor outside the vaginal canal, it occupies a liminal space. This liminality is illuminated when the artist envisions the hybrid skins as being incorporated into many bodies, such as those of men. Therefore, the hymen reinforces our contemporary desire to occupy the “inbetween,” spaces between boundaries, so as to permit the skin to occupy a third space that can alter how we experience bodies and embodiment.⁵³⁶ Reodica’s project throws the skin into “symbolic and linguistic flux...that allows the general perceptions of the skin to be re-examined, challenged and to evolve into new meanings.”⁵³⁷

What makes these “hymens” noteworthy in our current medical milieu is that they take up the recent medical trend of “re-virginizing,” achieved by hymenoplasty surgery. While the hymen may be torn and ostensibly lost as a result of the use of penetrative feminine hygiene products or strenuous physical activities that do not involve intercourse, there is at play the desire to keep or make pure the female body across certain cultural and religious contexts. For some, this surgery would enable women “to ‘gift’ their virginity to their partners” and potentially secure cultural and religious acceptance by treating the sexed hymen skin as a precious commodity, a set of beliefs that further reinforces the existence of what I called an epidermal economy in the preceding chapter.⁵³⁸ This surgery, while not nearly as common as vaginal rejuvenation, for example, points towards the increasingly meaningful cultural value of vaginal skin.

In her *HymNext* project, Reodica does not just grow hymens as they are encountered and experienced in the human body; rather, here they are designed on an aesthetic level as a result of being grown on custom-designed Petri dishes made by the

⁵³⁵ Julia Reodica. “Touch Me, Feel Me,” in *Sk-interfaces*, ed. Jens Hauser (Liverpool: FACT & University of Liverpool Press, 2008), 73–74, 73.

⁵³⁶ Hauser, “Who’s Afraid of the Inbetween.”

⁵³⁷ Reodica, “Touch Me, Feel Me,” 73.

⁵³⁸ “Hymenoplasty in a Nutshell,” *Toronto Cosmetic Clinic*, accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.tcclinic.com/surgical/hymenoplasty/>. On average, this cosmetic surgery costs 2,800 Canadian dollars.

artist, which encourages new layers of meaning to be made at the level of skin. Each of the five Petri dishes have distinct symbols molded into their polished metal surfaces, which permit the lab-grown skins to follow the individual contours of each Petri dish in order to become both decorative and symbolic [see Figs. 51–55]. Moreover, the crafting of such Petri dishes reinforces Reodica’s role as not only a biomedical researcher, but also an artist who creates aesthetic objects. Each of the five designs refers to the female body and its capabilities as a technology of life that can, for Reodica, bring forth new life forms across the shared spaces of bodies.

The “Unisex Hymen” [Fig. 51] is grown in the shape of the unisex symbol commonly understood to signal the acceptance of or desire for equality between females and males. This play on equality highlights Reodica’s effort to undo cultural values associated with sex and a loss of the hymen insofar as she imagines a reality where men can also implant these skins so as to experience their own sex and bodies differently, coming closer to an appreciation and celebration of the specificities and cultural pressures put on the female sex. In regards to women who might want to install one of these hymens, Reodica imagines a reality where women can not only re-virginize themselves, which has a range of socio-cultural implications, but also alter the appearance of their vaginal skins (which is already a trend in culture as a result of cosmetic surgery technologies such as skin bleaching and skin tightening). Becoming liminal skins, Reodica’s hymens gesture towards gender equality and function as a point of entry into a conceptual and fleshy third space between female and male, human and animal, nature and culture.

Reodica’s “Power Hymen” [Fig. 52] is grown into the shape of a winding vortex around a central vertical axis in order to, according to Reodica, attract the powers of the universe to aid the lovers in their physical union. This hymen represents not only the intertwining of skins at the cellular level in bioreactors and Petri dishes, but also the leveling of difference across sexes. Implied by the union of the sexes is the idea that the eradication of difference could provide humans with new modes of embodiment that could birth a new kind of human, perhaps one who could regenerate and engage in autogenesis (self-birth).

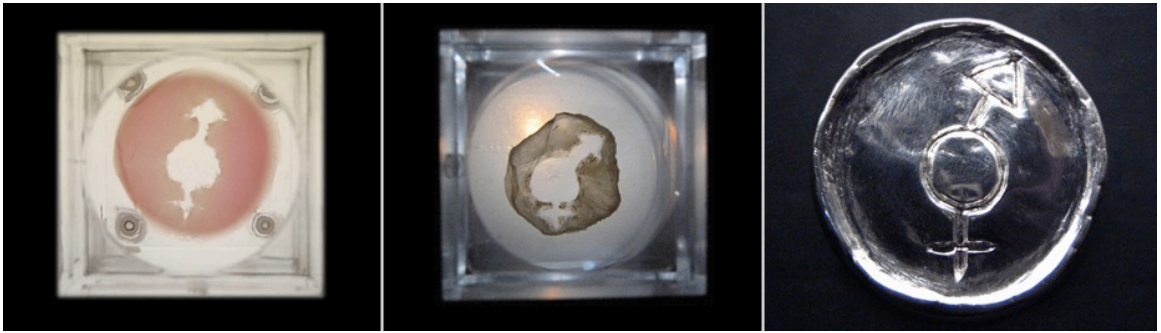


Figure 50: Julia Reodica. "Unisex Hymen," *hymNEXT* project. Mixed media. 2004-08. © Julia Reodica. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.



Figure 51: Julia Reodica. "Power Hymen," *hymNEXT* project. Mixed media. 2004-08. © Julia Reodica. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.

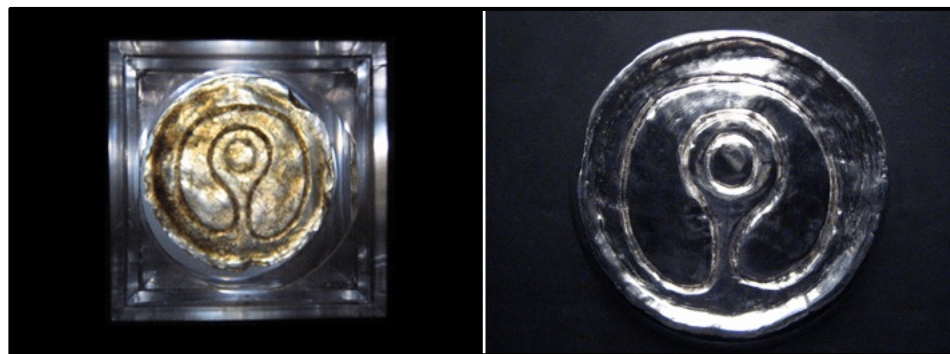


Figure 52: Julia Reodica. "Mother Hymen," *hymNEXT* project. Mixed media. 2004-08. © Julia Reodica. Image reproduced with permission of the artist

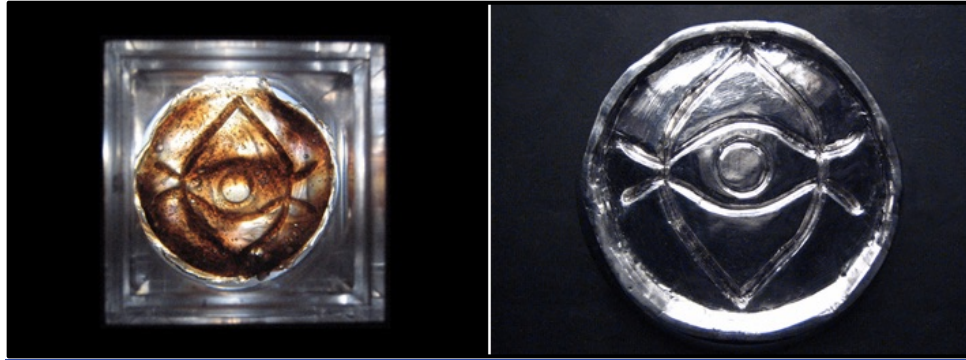


Figure 53: Julia Reodica. “Vesica Piscis Hymen.” *hymNEXT* project. Mixed media. 2004-08. © Julia Reodica. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.



Figure 54: Julia Reodica. “Duo Flame Hymen.” *hymNEXT* project. Mixed media. 2004-08. © Julia Reodica. Image reproduced with permission of the artist.

The “Mother Hymen” [Fig. 53] celebrates maternal influences through its representation of the womb. The sharing of such a sexed skin between females and males points toward a future whereby human reproduction, particularly gestation, could be shared across bodies regardless of sex. While the hymen is not symbolic of gestation and birth, the presence of this symbol in a lab-grown hymen points to a desire in culture to permit men the opportunity to experience pregnancy and childbirth, which has been experienced by transgender men as a result of their biological capabilities as female-sexed bodies. In turn, this sharing of pregnancy and childbirth would engender a radically new picture of not only sexed embodiment and human physiology, but also political realities that define, shape, and even limit the experiences of both men and women. In this new vision of embodiment and biology, traditional roles of “mother” and “father” would be redefined, if not eradicated, so as to permit a new vision of human culture based on caregiving, which is genderless. As such, this hymen becomes a symbol of humankind’s surpassing the laws and boundaries of nature that constrict human experiences of sex and difference. While the representation of the womb in a transgenic skin does not in and of itself permit the birth of a genderless culture, Reodica explores the leveling of female biological capability through the hymen, an epidermal stand-in for female sexuality.

The “Vesica Piscis hymen” [Fig. 54] is a tribute to the sacred math symbol comprised of two circles overlapping to form a shared space between them (i.e., a Venn diagram). When looked at more closely, this design can be understood to symbolize the birth canal. The birth canal is reimagined as a technology of relationality that could birth a new class of beings, which would reconfigure what bodies can do in nature and achieve in culture. The shared space created by the overlap of two circles is significant because it signposts the skin’s ability to connect bodies through touch *and* create the potential for “mutual experiences of embodiment” theorized by Marks.⁵³⁹ If we could mutually experience embodiment, we could come closer to feeling with another, rather than feeling for them, which, as I argued in chapter two, has the power to shatter the cultural idea(l)s that privilege some bodies over other bodies. In Marks’s theorization of mutual

⁵³⁹ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 193.

experiences of embodiment, touch could connect bodies and permit new political realities for bodies insofar as skin is *a* common ground all humans share, regardless of their sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or ability.

Finally, the “Duo Flame hymen” [Fig. 55] symbolizes, for Reodica, two lovers joining in matrimony. The conjoining of two flames into one new flame reinforces the possibilities of and the desire for “co-constitutive re-worlding” of beings at the level of skin within *HymNext*.⁵⁴⁰ By joining in the union of matrimony, Reodica imagines skin as something that can alter culture and be altered by it through the birth of new transgenic skins. While one could take this symbol literally, matrimony can function here as a metaphor for the intertwining of skin at the cellular level. Equalizing bodies, the dual flame hymen imagines relationality and the skin as having the ability to drastically rewrite what we understand to be the autonomous subject.

What viewers encountered at the *Sk-interfaces* exhibition (2008) curated by Jens Hauser at FACT, Liverpool University, were dead, preserved hymens presented in ornate decorative boxes akin to those that might house expensive jewelry. By displaying them in this way, Reodica elevated the hymen skin to a precious object worthy of cultural contemplation. In this way Reodica turns likeness literally inside out, bringing the skins we cannot see to the surface of the body in skin portraiture and, even more importantly, moving beyond representation by privileging genetic and cellular differences. As such, Reodica asks us to consider the impact skins have on not only our sexed but also our human experiences of embodiment by blurring the cultural divide between sexes and species.

The result of a transgenic merger of divergent cells, Reodica’s hymens are designed as a new form of body adornment that could bring lovers, bodies, skins, and even species together in new ways by challenging epidermal and ideological boundaries. In turn, Reodica, like many other artists working in transgenic tissue culturing, imagines an alternative reality to the one we live in, a reality not confined by the idea that skin is the

⁵⁴⁰ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 1.

ultimate boundary. Reodica explains that the hymens are “gifts” to be shared intimately and sensually. In turn, the project attempts to bring bodies together in a radical way—through the transplantation of hybrid skins into and onto human bodies. I use the word *attempts* because these hymens were never transplanted precisely because the skins died when they were taken out of their bioreactors to be displayed for exhibition. Even if they were kept within their bioreactors and transplanted into and onto other bodies as a surgical procedure, the autoimmune response of the host body (the creation of T-cells to destroy the foreign cells) would pose a challenge. Despite this challenge, the transplantation of human skin and transgenically-derived replacement skins is possible—for example, to heal extensive surface wounds like burns when the patient’s body does not have enough healthy skin to cover the wounded site. As such, transgenic skins are not impossible to incorporate into the human body; they are merely difficult, which illuminates the idea that skin is a powerful boundary organ that can be perforated. At their root, Reodica’s hymens function as conceptual scaffolds rather than literal body adornments.

However, *if* the hymens could be incorporated onto and into new host bodies, embodied experiences of men would expand and those of women would be altered. In the case of men who might surgically install one of these hymens, they would be able to challenge gendered conceptions of worth and value. In the case of women, they too would become new bodies composed of both human and nonhuman cells, permitting the individual experiences of embodiment tied to female sex to be shared across skins, particularly across those of other women. This would engender what feminist scholar Adrienne Rich might conceptualize as a physical and cellular, rather than social, “lesbian continuum.”⁵⁴¹ Moreover, the assumption of a foreign hymen in or on *any* body would open up possible challenges to the cultural constructedness of gender based on cultural valuations of sex. In the context of *HymNext*, Rich’s continuum has bled across species boundary lines, generating a wholly new conception of embodied relations.

⁵⁴¹ Adrienne Rich., “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985*, ed. Adrienne Rich. (New York City: WW Norton, 1986), 23–75.

What is achieved by Reodica's utopic vision and artistic production is the realization of philosopher Erin Manning's notion of a "leaky sense of self."⁵⁴² This sense of leakiness becomes a metaphor for radical relations between bodies that prompts a "tending-toward" the bodies and worlds of others. Tending toward is a caring for, a sharing of experiences with the other that has very real socio-political effects. Manning argues that a tending-toward happens when a body "senses-with" the bodies of others "across a layer of strata" that is actual and virtual, concrete and abstract.⁵⁴³ In the case of bio-art skin portraits, this tending-toward is a literal rather than virtual reaching out and co-mingling of cells. Because we cannot see species- and sex-specific differences at the level of skin, we have to think haptically about these skin portraits; we can only see differences between bodies through a microscope with a trained eye. The effect of (the possibility of) surgically installing one of Reodica's skins is a meeting of species, the dissolution of differences, and a sharing of lived experiences. The moving across these layers of strata cultivates what Manning calls "body-worlding."⁵⁴⁴ Body-worlding is the production of new experiences of embodiment made possible by non-hierarchized relations.⁵⁴⁵ Manning is careful to note that this tending-toward does not happen "on the skin or in the body" insofar as it is a "complex feeling-assemblage that functions as an interstratum between different co-constitutive milieus."⁵⁴⁶ In Reodica's bio-skin portraits, however, body-worlding takes on radical meaning insofar as it is the actual meeting and merger of cells, which permits a fleshy exploration of the leaky sense of self that characterizes bodies in the twenty-first century.

This tending-toward in technologically sustained environments, such as bioreactors and Petri dishes, achieves a third space of being and embodiment that reorients and

⁵⁴² Erin Manning, "What If It Didn't All Begin and End with Containment? Toward a Leaky Sense of Self," *Body & Society* 15, no. 3 (2009): 33–45.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

restructures bodies, cultures, and worlds. This third space is the result of interspecies and interpersonal communication that collapses the boundaries between skins so as to permit new conceptions of what it means to “liv[e] across and through skins.”⁵⁴⁷ What is achieved by such a co-mingling and reconstitution of cells in Reodica’s project is what Sullivan calls a “transactional” mode of embodiment.⁵⁴⁸ The transactions experienced by bodies and cells in *HymNext* implicate both humans and animals, illuminating “the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship of organisms and their environments” often ignored by culture.⁵⁴⁹ Whilst Reodica underscores humanity’s control over nature vis-à-vis tissue culturing and biotechnology, the collapse of boundaries between bodies illuminates the fact that nature is far more flexible than culture acknowledges. The transactions between bodies engender the possibility that we could, one day, stop privileging one body, one sex, one culture, or one species over another. Sullivan argues that “[t]o understand bodies as discursively constituted through their transactions with the world is to acknowledge that merely existing in the world is to have effects upon it.”⁵⁵⁰ As such, *HymNext*’s production of leaky, monstrous bodies vis-à-vis a sharing of transgenic skins has the potential to alter both our experiences of embodiment and the worlds our bodies inhabit.

What is at stake in *HymNext* is the breakdown of the perceived boundedness of bodies by their containing skins. The radicality of relations achieved at the cellular level suggests that we could expand conceptions of self and culture by assuming, even if temporarily, the experiences of another via the assumption of foreign sexed skins. In turn, *HymNext* privileges a radical experience of intercorporeality, which can engender a host of new body images. Each time a new skin is made in a bioreactor, Reodica and other transgenic artists increase the chance of an interspecies, intersex future that could, perhaps problematically, alter what it means to be human.

⁵⁴⁷ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 2001.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

5.4 « Conclusion: Skin Futures »

Focusing on the technologization of skin, this last chapter has examined what skin can do when boundaries between species are eradicated at the surface level but preserved at the cellular level. Specifically, this chapter functions in contrast to the previous case studies (the home, clothing, and screen metaphors) insofar as the celebration of differences vis-à-vis the reinforcement of those differences takes place at the cellular level, ostensibly giving transgenically cultured skins a homogenous appearance. One that is whitish in colour, semi-transparent, moist, and texturally delicate, permitting transgenically engineered and cultured skins to look seemingly indistinguishable from one another. Whilst problematic in some ways, the collapse of boundaries and the potential eradication of differences between bodies represented by the creation of lab-grown chimeric skins and transgenic bio-art skin portraits is a reconceptualization of humanity, its culture, and its politics, which could potentially lead to a radical re-envisioning of human bodies.

Made from both human and animals cells, bio-art skin portraits aestheticize and conceptualize life beyond the confines of skin as the ultimate boundary. In turn, the technologization of skin, prompted by the increased technologization of life and bodies, more generally, in the twenty-first century, underlines the notion that bodies are bound more by concepts and ideologies than they are by skin. Bio-art skin portraits underscore the irony of the idea that skin is the ultimate boundary and the thing that stands in for the subject's identity and value within culture. By technologizing skin, the world of biotechnology is changing what the skin can do and achieve, which in turn permits skins to exert greater influence on worlds and bodies over time, as is foreshadowed by skin portraiture's interrogation of experiences of embodiment and manifestations of difference.

Whilst merely one metaphor amongst what seems like an unlimited range of skin metaphors, skin-as-technology extends bodies, alters their temporality, and creates a new class of being—the semi-living. The semi-living, whilst only one kind of skin portrait, collapses visible differences between bodies to create a new body that is fluid and boundary-less, and impacts conceptions and experiences of sex and race. In turn, biotechnologies exploit the vitality of skins, permitting bodies to communicate and relate regardless of the (species-) specific differences between them at the cellular level,

rendering life fluid at the level of skin. It is no longer outside the realm of possibility to suggest that biotechnologies like tissue culturing foreshadow a future wherein visual differences between bodies and species are lost. These erasures will undoubtedly have both positive and negative effects that will in turn alter what we define as human and/or living. By offering a new vision of humanity, bio-artists like Reodica and ORLAN also propose a radical posthumanist vision of feminism that could drastically change the way we live in the world and relate to others.

This is to say that the technology metaphor is important not least because it creates new skins—skins that are, in some ways, less fettered. However, when differences become the same, bodies become homogenous, forcing us to think cautiously about the creation of new bodies via technologies that give humans a greater perceived sense of power over and control of nature. The skin-as-technology metaphor forces us to think about difference in ways that might frighten us: through the disruption of the boundaries between “I” and “not I.” Transgenic tissue culturing is frightening precisely because it has the power to rewrite, reconfigure, and reimagine bodies, and, as a result, cultures. Despite, or because of, the potential collapse of differences between human and animal bodies, bio-art skin portraiture offers us a glimpse of a future in which bodies can move beyond the confines of difference and experience alterity in new ways.

Beyond tissue culturing and the creation of chimeric skins within bio-art skin portraiture, a number of emergent technologies are interfacing with skin in order to alter the ways bodies move through and experience the world as well as the ways they relate to one another. Skin has become an organ of extreme interest to scientists, engineers, artists, and inventors for its capacity to emit and receive information in a variety of ways, making it the perfect surface through which to reimagine the world and the bodies contained in it.

The Korean Institute of Technology, for example, recently developed an epidermal battery that is a thermoelectric power generator, which uses the body’s heat as it radiates out from the skin as an energy source that can supply technological devices, such

as cell phones, with ten times more energy than a regular battery.⁵⁵¹ Invented more for convenience than any environmental concern, the epidermal battery none-the-less illuminates the fact that skins are technologies in their own right essential to not only the life of bodies, but also the life of culture. This harnessing of the skin's natural ability to regulate heat and the body's homeostasis could one day be used to further reduce our carbon footprint. This tiny thermoelectric battery forces us to wonder whether or not we could do away entirely with petroleum, if we could rely on not only solar, but also epidermal energies. However, in this line of thinking, bodies could also be turned into indentured labouring factories, creating power for a future world (as already imagined in the popular film *The Matrix*, 1999).

As an organ that filters and mediates the psychic and somatic aspects of the subject, skin is also, as I have argued throughout, an affective organ that communicates the experiences of bodies that are elusive and not easily communicated with words, such as when we are embarrassed and the skin flushes with blood, causing changes in colour tone. Linked to shame, blushing can communicate when a person is uneasy or embarrassed, bringing bodies together in a shared space of experience and altering social and cultural contexts.

In the world of soft sculpture and wearable technology, Sensoree, a San Francisco-based design firm, has created a "mood sweater" that communicates the wearer's mood through electrodes placed on the throat near the larynx that translate the vibration emitted through the skin caused by changes in the subject's speech patterns (e.g., their cadence, tone of voice, and pitch). This data is sent, in turn, to LED lights embedded within the garment's textile.⁵⁵² The mood of the wearer is calculated by a Galvanic Extimacy Responder, which is the same technology used in lie detectors. The wearer's mood is then communicated through visible changes in the sweater's colour. In this case, the

⁵⁵¹ Sun Jin Kim, Ju Hyung We, and Byung Jin Cho, "A Wearable Thermoelectric Generator Fabricated on a Glass Fabric," *Journal of Energy Environmental Science* 7 (January 2014).

⁵⁵² For a look at the Mood Sweater and other wearable technologies being developed by Sensoree, please visit: <http://sensoree.com/artifacts/>.

technologization of skin here becomes a way for the subject to communicate their feelings, experiences, and thoughts in ways that reach beyond the verbal realm. The information provided by this technology has the potential to help us better relate to others by feeling with them. Alternately, this kind of technology could also be harmful insofar as it would expose the subject to others in a way that is visual, rather than verbal, which could lead to physical and emotional altercations in their social, cultural, political, and romantic aspects of life, particularly when others are unsympathetic to the vulnerability of such a garment and technology.

These advances in wearable technology reinforce the important role the skin plays in our lives, illustrating that it functions as more than a protective garment or a mere object worn *on* the body. It has, instead, the potential to function as an empathic, relational meta-organ that brings the sensing parts of bodies together and further permits bodies to come together through experiences of reflexivity and touch. By encouraging a feeling with another at the level of skin, skin portraiture opens us up to the possibility of productive relations across bodies, which can lead into new modes of expression, language, and sensation and, by extension, future political realities.

Chapter 6

6 « Afterword »

How to be skinny:

1. Look in the mirror and notice that your body is covered in skin.
2. Say, “Wow, I’m skinny.”

Congratulations, you are now skinny.⁵⁵³

Over the last few years, the “body positive” and “fat acceptance” movements have brought bodily difference to the forefront of Western visual culture. Feminist in orientation, both movements work towards the same goal: smashing the patriarchy and positively changing dominant culture by teaching people how to value their bodies. In turn, the body positivity and fat acceptance movements are political because they enrich and change culture by problematizing and re-defining patriarchal conceptions of health and beauty as they pertain to the appearance or thickness of skin. Rejecting body biases that affect millions of people, these movements turn structures of power associated with epidermal appearances and bodily contours on their head.

The recent emergence of plus-sized models working in the mainstream fashion industry, for example, registers a paradigm shift in our cultural milieu, one that has precipitated a radical reassessment of what it means to be desirable today within dominant culture.⁵⁵⁴ Underscoring this shift, models Tess Holiday (a US size 22) and Ashley

⁵⁵³ This humorous how-to how to be skinny joke was originally created for social media by Do The Hotpants. DoTheHotpants, “How to be Skinny,” accessed December 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/DoTheHotpants/>.

⁵⁵⁴ I am not suggesting that fat people are not desirable in general or that only recently fat people have become desirable as a result of these political movements. Western culture has a history of preferring the appearance of “curvy” or “fecund” bodies, a fact that is evidenced by the representations of female bodies during the Classical era of ancient Greece and then later during the European Renaissance period, amongst others. However, there does seem to be a association between desiring a fat body in contemporary

Graham (a US size 16), amongst others, are signed to “skinny” modeling agencies (Milk Management in the UK, and Ford Models and IMG models in the US, respectively).⁵⁵⁵ This fact not only expands the so-called limits of the fashion industry and *haute couture*, but also begins to unravel the culturally normalized and violent practice of body/fat shaming. Body/fat shaming is a public practice of calling out or demeaning a person based on their body’s appearance, weight, shape, and/or size, which often takes place virtually and is called “trolling”. Those who body shame others ostensibly feel justified in their actions because fat bodies are culturally understood as willfully ignoring health and beauty expectations put in place by dominant, patriarchal culture. The increased presence of fat bodies within an industry that caters to skinny conceptions of beauty and power exemplifies the fact that the Millennial Generation (also known as Generation Y; persons born during the early 1980s) is challenging dominant culture by celebrating bodily difference, particularly fatness.⁵⁵⁶ For example, Graham’s occupation of the cover of magazines that speak for and reinforce patriarchal conceptions of beauty, such as *Vogue* and *Sports Illustrated*, and her role as a new judge on the popular reality television show *America’s Next Top Model*, is radically re-shaping the ways in which 18-35 year-old women and men, among others, understand the “three B’s”—beauty, brand, and boss. What Holiday and Graham practice is the once cliché notion “beauty is skin-deep”. What I mean by this is the popular idea within Western culture that beauty is not and should not be measured solely by the surface appearance or epidermal thickness of a body (i.e., fatness), despite the patriarchal, misogynistic standards that permit thinness to function as a stand-in for beauty, but by a person’s intangible features such as personality. By cliché I

patriarchal culture and fetish, as is illuminated by the popularity of “BBW” (Big Beautiful Women) or “Bear” (overweight hairy gay men) pornography, for example.

⁵⁵⁵ To learn more about Holiday and Graham, please visit their professional websites. Tess Holiday, accessed January 3, 2017, www.tessholiday.com. Ashley Graham, accessed January 3, 2017, <http://www.ashleygraham.com/home>.

⁵⁵⁶ In the fat acceptance movement, also known as the fat liberation movement, the term “fat” is the preferred adjective used to talk about bodies that are politely viewed and referred to as “plus-size,” “curvy,” “chubby,” “husky,” “stocky,” and “full bodied.”

am referring to the fact that this idiom has been so popular and relied on so heavily to locate beauty in and on fat bodies over the years that the body positive and fat acceptance movements have antagonistically overturned and rendered it not only outdated, but also wildly inaccurate. It would seem, then, that a surplus of skin has opened up new the possibility for new communities, new relations across bodies and cultures, and new experiences of solidarity.

Despite the groundbreaking work of Holiday, Graham, and others, the increased visibility and celebration of fat bodies and thick skins in popular visual culture remains largely the result of the virtual, grassroots nature of the body positive and fat acceptance movements. Relying on the increased connectivity between bodies across socio-cultural and geographic locales via social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snap Chat, and Twitter),⁵⁵⁷ activists like Holiday and Graham disseminate and popularize their political mantras in the form of catchy hashtags that go global (the most notable being Holiday's #effyourbeautystandards campaign).⁵⁵⁸ The use of social media permits activists to craft their own uncensored media content and to personally connect in lived, fleshy ways so as to then communicate with a wide-range of people virtually.⁵⁵⁹ Taken up at the local level by social media users in small towns and big cities, this kind of visual and virtual advocacy addresses an array of body cultures (i.e., fat-hetero, fat-queer, fat-bisexual, fat-trans, fat-Latinx, fat-black, fat-African, fat-Muslim, fat-Asian, fat-(dis)abled,

⁵⁵⁷ For an introduction to what defines what is argued to be the third wave of the fat acceptance movement (i.e., use of social networking platforms), please refer to Cat Pausé, "Express Yourself: Fat Activism in the Web 2.0 Age," in *The Politics of Size: Perspectives from the Fat Acceptance Movement*, ed. Ragen Chastain, 1-8 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015).

⁵⁵⁸ Hashtags (the hash character—#—also known as the number or pound signs) are a type of label or metadata tag used on social media networks and microblogging services that makes it easier for users to find messages and posts within a specific theme or content. In turn, an archive of posts is created under each hashtag. For a comprehensive list of the body positive hashtags (#effyourbeautystandards, #nowrongway, #stylehasnosize, #DropTheStigma, etc.) spreading the body positive movement globally and locally, please see: Volup2, "The Ultimate Plus Size Hastag Guide!!!" (January 16, 2017), accessed January 16, 2017, www.volup2.com/blog/2017/1/14/plus-size-hashtags.

⁵⁵⁹ For an analysis of the ways fat bodies are utilizing social media to advocate change, please see: Lauren Gurrieri, "Stocky Bodies: Fat Visual Activism," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 197-209.

fat-punk, fat-Goth, so on and so forth, as well as hybrid combinations of these body cultures) that may not otherwise come together. By doing so, these mantras and political ideas can reach, impact, and empower an array of disparate, intersectional bodies so as to encourage political change in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive. In turn, these virtual, grassroots movements foster the acceptance of epidermal differences, and work to dismantle patriarchal ideologies that have kept socio-cultural progress at bay.

In this paradigm, “different” bodies, bodies that do not comply with the rigid standards of patriarchal desire (a desire that privileges white, heterosexual, young, able and slim women), become instead potent symbols of political progress and freedom.⁵⁶⁰ Yet, the progress made by body and fat activists, does not mean that fat bodies escape criticism.⁵⁶¹ As such, the fat acceptance movement, which, for activist and author Jane Feuer, sprang out of the 1970s women’s liberation movement and runs parallel to black and gay liberation movements of the same era, is integral to the success of the body positive movement generally because it continues to radically re-think what bodies are worth and what they can achieve based on their appearances and epidermal thickness.⁵⁶² What is subtly reinforced by these movements is the idea that while skin has been and still is predominantly understood as a metonymic stand-in for the entire person (a topic

⁵⁶⁰ I use quotation marks to reinforce the idea that all bodies are different from one another, and to illuminate the notion that difference is always already defined in relation to patriarchal, dominant, antiquated conceptions of bodily appearance, coherence, and value.

⁵⁶¹ The body positive movement has been harshly criticized as an “excuse” to be fat, lazy, and unhealthy (Rutvi Mehta, “Body Positivity Has Become an Excuse to Be Unhealthy,” *XO Jane* (April 6, 2016), accessed January 3, 2017, <http://www.xojane.com/issues/body-positivity-has-become-an-excuse>), despite the fact that the movement teaches self-love and tolerance. Another criticism is that the movement is designed by and caters to white women (Ashleigh Shakelford, “The Body Positivity Movement Still Looks Too Much Like White Feminism,” *Wear Your Voice: Intersectional Feminist Media* (April 19, 2016), accessed January 3, 2017, <http://wearyourvoicemag.com/body-politics/the-body-positivity-movement-still-looks-like-white-feminism>). A third criticism is that the movement has tried to sexualize fatness while ignoring the idea that a person’s appearance is the first thing that is judged by others (Maureen Collins, “Why the Body Positivity Movement Doesn’t Work,” *The Federalist* (June 7, 2016), accessed January 3, 2017, <http://thefederalist.com/2016/06/07/why-the-body-positivity-movement-doesnt-work/>). Many, if not most, of these critical articles are not peer-reviewed, and are thus opinion pieces, which should always be critically scrutinized.

⁵⁶² Jane Feuer, “Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women,” in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz, 181-200 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

discussed at length in the introductory chapter), the structures of thought that define “power” within patriarchal culture are changing. Yet, despite the great efforts to encourage body acceptance and dismantle this particular form of violence towards the body, many other forms of violence such as racism, remain firmly embedded in patriarchal culture. These attitudes are being fought by body positivity and fat activists who encourage disparately shaped bodies into relation online. However, what becomes clear in this particular political framework that celebrates bodily difference is the notion that the “appearance” of skins, rather ironically, both maintains and disrupts the cultural prejudice toward fat bodies.

Functioning as not only a physical boundary that keeps bodies separate, but also an interface that connects bodies, skin’s paradoxical nature makes it integral to assessing and finding solutions for the increasing levels of bodily violence and horror witnessed in cultures across the globe. Throughout this project I have purposefully touched on body violence and skin horror in every chapter in an effort to highlight the ways skins, actual and metaphoric, are integral to human life and cultural progress. The body’s surface—skin—is both a symbol of and a catalyst for change, which is why skin portraiture is such a timely theory of representation. How bodies are represented in and across culture(s) is a critical focus for a deeper understanding of humanity that holds a particular relevance for its future. The visual language employed to represent difference within skin portraiture (i.e., fragmented, magnified, and anatomized images of skin) is an extension of culture and its language(s) and values, offering unexpected visual avenues with which to access shifting social beliefs and judgments about bodily difference.

In order to flesh out the complex role the skin serves in our experiences of embodiment, as well as the political-cultural realities shaped by skin, I have turned to a number of skin metaphors throughout this project. Skin-as-self, skin-as-home, skin-as-clothing, skin-as-screen, and skin-as-technology metaphors help explore the many ways skin informs experiences of embodiment and conceptions of difference in both past times and in the present. This project’s emphasis on the connection that skin has to conceptions and experiences of difference have helped frame skin as the body part that can unlock new political futures and realities for culture(s). Contemporary artists have re-conceptualized

(self-)portraiture by re-figuring the subject at the level of skin. Skin portraiture assesses bodies and their differences in ways that have not previously been art historically or culturally possible. By putting conceptual and aesthetic emphasis on difference, whether it is a reinforcement of difference or a collapse of difference, both of which can be celebratory and political, skin portraiture urges us to feel with others and move beyond our own bounded-ness in skin to re-write cultural and political realities. As a theory of representation, a visual language, and a political mode of expression, skin portraiture's emphasis on lived, fleshy bodies urges us to think about skin as a broad metaphor for living, one that connects bodies, and has the potential to align those bodies in solidarity within a time of political, technological, and cultural fragmentation.

While this project has not been able to address each and every skin metaphor currently in play within (visual) culture, or indeed all of the political issues and social traumas linked to the body's epidermal appearance, it is my hope that what has been presented is sufficient to prompt readers to reflect on their own skin experiences and those of others. In a move to radically expand skin studies within the arts and humanities, and beyond, I have tried to "get under the skin" of readers by addressing traumatic, sometimes horrific, stories, images, and histories. My use of diverse case studies in art, film, and narrative accounts which emphasize body horror and epidermal violence, have directly addressed and simultaneously danced around the topic of flaying. With this specific focus on the loss of skin alongside the elucidation of skin's role as a stand-in for the person, I have worked towards jolting readers out of their own skins, and perhaps pushing them to deepen their desire and ability to connect, relate to, and empathize with themselves and others.

As a political mode of representation, skin portraiture can shock us out of our complacency with and support of outdated, biased, and violent patriarchal ideas and ideals about bodies. Given that the current political climate evidences a struggle to accept and celebrate bodies of all types, it would seem, then, that skin portraiture has far more to offer culture in the battle against patriarchal violence than what has been written across and accomplished in these limited pages. In order to lead a full-bodied existence, an existence that challenges current political realities, we must celebrate our skins, rub up against each

other, cause friction, relate in new ways, and propose celebratory and fleshy protest in order to enact change that will lift up, rather than drag down, our bodies.

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Curriculum Vitae

Heidi Heather Kellett

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2005 Bachelors of Art, Honours

York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2008 Master's of Art

Fellowships:

2013-14 Doctoral Fellowship, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

Select Scholarships:

2016 125th Anniversary Scholarship, Society of Graduate Students, Western University

2013-14 Western Graduate Student Research Scholarship, (fall, winter and summer), Western University

2013-14 Doctoral Scholarship, Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), Awarded/Declined

2012-13 Western Graduate Student Research Scholarship, (fall, winter and summer), Western University

2011-12 Western Graduate Student Research Scholarship, (fall, winter and summer), Western University

2010-11 Western Graduate Student Research Scholarship, (fall, winter and summer), Western University

2010 Provost's Graduate Scholarship, Western University

Awards:

2014 Western Graduate Thesis Research Fund, Western University

- 2013 Western Graduate Thesis Research Fund, Western University
- 2011 Alumni Award, Western University
- 2007 Heisey Award for Academic Excellence in Graduate Art History (scholarship), York University
- 2006 Department of Art History Award for Academic Excellence, York University
- 2004 The Konopny-Fischtein Family Award for Academic Excellence in Art History, York University
- 2003 Louis Odette Sculpture Award for Excellence and Achievement in Sculpture, York University
- 2002 Louis Odette Sculpture Award for Excellence and Achievement in Sculpture, York University

RESEARCH

Select Publications:

Heidi Kellett. "Skin Portraiture: Technology, Transgenic Art, and Difference in Contemporary Visual Culture," *Body and Society*, edited by Marc Lafrance. Special Issue-Skin. London: Sage, *forthcoming*.

Heidi Kellett. "Skin Portraiture: Relational Embodiment in Contemporary Art." In *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone*, edited by Caroline Rosenthal and Dirk Vanderbeke, 239-270. Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

Heidi Kellett. "Santiago Sierra: The Homo Sacer and the Politics of the Other." *Inferno: Journal of Art History*, Vol. XII (2007/08): 37- 47.

Select Conferences:

- 2014 Association of Art Historians (AAH), Royal College of Art, London, UK. Paper presented: "Skin Portraiture: The Epidermal Communication of Pain and Cultural Belonging"
- 2013 *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone*, Friedrich Schiller University, Germany. Paper presented: "Relational Skins: A Somatic Understanding of Contemporary Art"
- 2012 Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Annual Conference, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec. Paper presented: "Skin Portraiture: Embodied Representations in Contemporary Art"

- 2009 Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA) Annual Conference, Boston, Massachusetts. Paper presented: “Contemporary Tattoos and Graphic Design: Embodying the Popular”

Conference Panel Chair:

- 2013 Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Annual Conference, Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta. Panel: “Skinscapes and Skinterfaces: Bodies and Embodiment in Contemporary Art”
- 2013 “(Re)Activating Objects: Social Theory and Material Culture” Visual Arts graduate conference, Western University, London, Ontario. Panel Chair, “Bodies as Meaning-makers”
- 2009 Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA) Conference, Boston, Massachusetts. Panel Chair, “Tattoos and Tattooing I”

Curatorial Projects:

(Co-curator) Heidi Kellett and Damian McGrath, *Art of the Human Canvas* exhibition, Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art (MOCCA), Toronto, June 2007

Art Projects

--with Dave Kemp. *Skin Portraiture* (2014) exhibited at *Life and Limb* exhibition April – May, 2014. Orillia Museum of Art.

Public Talks:

- 2012 Ignite London, London Cultural Plan, London, Ontario. Public talk: “Tattooed Relations: History, Identity and Community”

Guest Lectures:

- 2013 “Haus of Gaga: Art History, the Archive and Feminist Remix Practices in Lady Gaga’s use of Contemporary Fashion”, What (Not) to Wear: Fashion, Textiles and Art II, VAH 2236G, winter, University of Western Ontario.
- 2013 “Contemporary Tattoo in London,” ART NOW II, VAH 2275B, winter, University of Western Ontario, London.
- 2009 “Research Methodologies in Art History”, Introduction to Visual Studies I, LBST 1B03, fall, Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto.

2009 “Tattoo: The Contemporary Evolution of Design?”, Graphic Design History, VISC 2B39, winter, Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto.

Courses Taught:

2013 History of Modern Design (VISD 2B01), summer, OCAD University, Toronto

2013 Art and Popular Culture (VAH 1052G), winter, Western University, London

2012 History of Modern Design (VISD 2B01), summer, OCAD University, Toronto

2012 Art and Popular Culture (VAH 1052G), winter, Western University, London

2011 History of Modern Design (VISA 2B01), summer, OCAD University, Toronto

2011 Art and Popular Culture (VAH 1052G), winter, Western University

2010 Graphic Design History in the 20th Century (VISC 2B39), summer, OCAD University, Toronto

2009 Graphic Design History in the 20th Century (VISC 2B39), summer, OCAD University, Toronto