

3 Skin memories

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Remembered skins

We become aware of skin as a visible surface through memory. If someone touching our skin brings us immediately into the present, the look of our skin – both to others and to ourselves – brings to its surface a remembered past. It is a phenomenological function of skin to record. Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body's memory of our lives. But if skin constitutes a visual biographical record, by no means is this record historically accurate. As the vicissitudes of the inheritance of race in skin colour show, skin's memory is as much a fabrication of what didn't happen as a record of what did, as much fiction as fact. Indeed, the fact that we continue to invest the legibility of identity in the skin in spite of knowing its unreliability suggests skin to be a fantasmatic surface, a canvas for what we wish were true – or for what we cannot acknowledge to be true. Skin's memory is burdened with the unconscious.

If bodies can be said to have memories, those whose bodies malfunction highlight this fact; such subjects cannot forget their bodies, but are constantly reminded of their mortality. Certain theories of illness have located the skin as one site for the body's memory. In her cultural study of cancer, Jackie Stacey draws a notion of bodily memory from trauma and suggests skin as one site for registering this trauma. As she shows, one possible side-effect of chemotherapy is to strip the body of its hair and expose the skin as a surface on which allergic reactions to the treatment are recorded: 'scratch marks become scars and stay, a permanent reminder'; 'bodily memories [that] mediate against a complete forgetting' (Stacey 1997: 84, 100). The skin is 'the body's ambassador': 'it represents the interface between inside and outside . . . it meets the world. . . . Dermographia. Skin drawing' (Stacey 1997: 84). In a similar argument, I have described transsexual sex reassignment as an attempt to re-member through skin a sexed body that should have been (Prosser 1998). Largely a process of manipulating the

surface tissues of the body, sex reassignment realigns and reassigns, resexes, the skin. The difference between cancer treatment and transsexuality is illuminating, for whereas cancer-treated skin remembers the trauma that actually happened, transsexual skin remembers the fantasy that ought to have happened. Transsexuality reveals skin as a site for unconscious investment, a body memory or fantasy that failed to materialise.

Freud's bodily ego, which is a conceptualisation of body memory, gives a key role to the body's surface. Freud asserts in *The Ego and the Id* that: 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface' (1984: 364). Didier Anzieu reads Freud's 'surface' literally as the skin to formulate his notion of the 'skin ego'. The skin ego parallels, and integrates, skin with psyche:

The surface of the body allows us to distinguish excitations of external origins from those of internal origin; just as one of the capital functions of the ego is to distinguish between what belongs to me myself and what does not belong, between what comes from me and the desires, thoughts and affects of others, between a physical (the world) or biological (the body) reality outside the mind; the ego is the projection in the psychic of the surface of the body, namely the skin, which makes up this sheet or interface.

(Anzieu 1990: 63)

The skin ego is the interface between psyche and body, self and others. The self derives from the skin, from those first touches in childhood that create a sense of ourselves as contained and social. Anzieu rereads a later metapsychological essay by Freud to show how the double-layered structure of the ego replicates the skin: as the epidermis protects, the ego is surrounded; as the dermis records stimuli, the perception-consciousness system registers memories. Through analogy to the newly invented 'Mystic Writing-pad', this chapter seeks to explain how memories can be erased from consciousness and yet retained in the unconscious; and here again, Freud gives a key role to surface. For Freud the 'more interesting part' of the writing-pad is the interface between the wax tablet and the writing, for this surface allows the writing to be recorded and erased while the wax tablet below nevertheless retains inscriptive traces. As 'the appearance and disappearance of the writing' dramatises 'the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception', the unconscious retains as written traces memories that have been consciously forgotten (Freud 1984: 431, 433). It is precisely the writing-pad's/psyche's double-layered surface, what we might call the skin of the machine, that allows for this recording and erasure, this conversion of memory into the unconscious.

Anzieu's theory of the skin ego gives no stated place to memory. But as the ego is formed through our first experiences of our skin, it would seem that the skin ego takes shape through memory. Yet these memories may be unconscious, consisting of what Freud increasingly recognises as psychic reality: not memories of actual happenings, but fantasies real only in the unconscious. Anzieu's first inklings of

the concept of a skin ego, which occurred while he was a psychologist on a hospital dermatology unit (Anzieu 1990), reveal skin saturated with the unconscious. He finds that those with material skin damage suffer correlative damage to their psychic envelope. More fantasmatically, thus more revealing of skin as unconscious, those with skin disorders often uncover in psychoanalysis an originating and pathogenic psychic disturbance: if damage to the material skin can be remembered psychically, damage to the psychic envelope can be remembered physically. Thus, Anzieu writes: 'skin ailments are closely related to stress, to emotional upheavals and, more importantly . . . to narcissistic flaws and inadequate structuring of the Ego . . . the irritation of the epidermis becomes confused with mental irritation' (1989: 32–33). Psychic disturbance can inscribe on the skin traumatic memories according to the hysterical symptomatisations of the unconscious. Anzieu's skin analysands appear to remember in their skin conditions what they cannot consciously express. Self-mutilation, repeated self-scalding, the development of an overmuscular skin, the emission of foul smells, such non-accidental skin symptoms take Anzieu and his analysands back to a childhood memory or unconscious fantasy too traumatic to become conscious. These skin disorders appear as returns of an unspeakable repressed event.

Yet skin memories may remember, not just an individual unconscious, but a cultural one. As he believes today's typical patient suffers 'from an absence of borders or limits' – 'He is uncertain of the frontiers between the psychical and bodily Egos, between the reality Ego and the ideal Ego, between what belongs to the Self and what to others' – Anzieu identifies a confusion of borders and limits as symptomatic of Western culture at the end of twentieth century (1989: 7). In the arms race, in 'insatiable consumption' and 'the increasing disparity between the rich nations and the Third World', in our violation of nature (Anzieu 1989: 6) – and, we might add, in our own current confusion in Eastern European wars between respecting national borders and trespassing them to protect international human rights – we no longer recognise definite boundaries. Anzieu's skin ego is as powerful a global concept as an individual one and it seeks to establish limits concurrently on both fronts: 'it seems to me a matter of the utmost urgency, in both psychological and social terms, for us to re-establish limits, restore some frontiers, mark out inhabitable, liveable territories for ourselves' (1989: 8). For if somatic transgressions remember psychic ones, psychic transgressions surely remember cultural ones.

Stigmatised skins

Among Anzieu's patients with skin disorders are many who clearly cannot forget their skin. Given the function of skin as a visual surface to record, it is ironic that the cultural ideal of skin should be skin that forgets. 'Good skin' is skin unmarked by the passage of time. 'Bad skin' means skin marked both by memory and as memorable; we do not forget bad skin. But why should marked skin be a site for social memory and consciousness? What psychic investment, what cultural

burdening, takes place on the skin, such that skin disorders can come to represent and embody, indeed to cause social comfort?

Erving Goffman's etymology of the term 'stigmatisation' gives flesh to the literal origination of the term. Stigmatisation begins as a practice on the skin:

The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided.

(Goffman 1968: 11)

Stigmatisation thus begins catachrestically on the surface of the body: the material marks on the skin remember, literalising on the body and signifying in the symbolic, the subject's social difference. This catachrestic memorialising sense of stigmatisation continues in the following two stages of the term:

Later, in Christian times, two layers of metaphor were added to the term: the first referred to bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin; the second, a medical allusion to this religious allusion, referred to bodily signs of physical disorder.

(Goffman 1968: 11)

While the Christian meaning positively values the literal skin markings as remembering a symbolic holiness (Christ's sacrifice), the medical meaning sees the literal defects as producing symbolic disorder, what Goffman calls a 'spoiled identity'. But common to all stages is the catachrestic memorialisation between bodily surface and subject's social status, between cutaneous referent and social sign. Stigmatisation thus suggests that marked skin may re-member a cultural unconscious. The way in which the literal slides into sign in stigmatisation conveys condensation and displacement, two of the hallmark dynamics of the unconscious; yet the marking out in all three stages refers to the subject's cultural placement. Skin disorders may be socially stigmatising because they remember what a culture would like to repress.

Such a notion is borne out, and the notion of a cultural unconscious is thus made useful, by recognising the role that skin plays in racism; for what is racism if not the categorical form of stigmatisation? At once the most epidermal study of racism and the most psychoanalytic – thus forging a link between skin and the unconscious – Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* argues that racism is better described as the 'epidermalization' of inferiority than its 'internalisation' (1967: 11). A black subject in a racist encounter is reduced to and through his surface. "Dirty Nigger!" Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"; in Fanon's dramatisation the interpellation fixes the black subject 'in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (Fanon 1967: 11). S/he becomes precisely *coloured* in that moment, a body re-membered by the racist white subject as only skin: 'the corporeal schema

crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema' (Fanon 1967: 112). Fanon's account, which extirpates the unconscious roots of racism and its somatopsychic sustenance, suggests that racism is perpetuated in its unconscious form – surely its most pernicious – in no small part through the skin, skin re-membering constituting social membership. If stigmatisation begins as a memorialising catachresis, as Goffman's account indicates, is it not possible, in accordance with the confusion between literal and signifier in catachresis, that differently marked skin (and this includes differently coloured skin) comes, not just to signify, but to call for and justify – and in the unconscious to cause – different symbolic treatment? This is not, of course, to justify racism; rather it is rather to grapple with the somatopsychic dimension of racism that perpetuates it ruthlessly in the unconscious.

Two narratives may be invoked here to support this proposition about the role of skin colour in the perpetuation of unconscious racism. One is Toni Morrison's thesis that the entirety of American literature – and of American history – has constructed white American subjectivity by re-membering blackness as otherness, a blackness that it yet seeks to repress and subject to a national amnesia (Morrison 1993; Morrison 1994: 256–7). The other narrative consists of the response to the Stephen Lawrence report in Britain which, following the racist murder of the black teenager, was the first public document to condemn institutional racism in Britain (Macpherson 1999). The night of the report's publication, Lawrence's (black) memorial stone in Eltham, South London was daubed with white paint; this act that sought to white out, literally and symbolically, the realities of racism in contemporary Britain, was symptomatic of the desire to forget at the very moment the country was enjoined to remember what a nation couldn't bear to have rendered conscious – its racism. Both narratives, which are equally literal and literary, reveal skin colour as a crucial canvas for the construction of racism and then for its repression, for the unconscious dimensions of racism in two nations's cultural memories.

If the black subject is stigmatised in a racist unconscious, are the subjects who bring to the surface this stigmatisation of skin, skin 'disorder' threatening social disorder, light-skinned black subjects? Like skin-disordered subjects, such subjects, perhaps for not very different reasons, are burdened with their own and others' skin consciousness. Though by definition their skin is not marked out – some can blend in, some can pass – it is precisely their blending and passing that literalises transgressed boundaries. In her account of what it means to be a 'white black American,' an African American with white skin, Judy Scales-Trent describes how her skin colour remembers – recalls and materialises – transgressed racial boundaries. 'Living on the margins of race . . . black and white at the same time', she is a 'skinwalker'. Her movement through the world exposes and violates a dual construction of race: 'this system of rigid dualism . . . fosters so much anxiety when people don't fit into the categories neatly, when people "transgress boundaries"', yet 'in order for me to exist I must transgress boundaries' (Scales-Trent 1995: 7, 32, 12). Scales-Trent's 'skinwalking' powerfully suggests the historical reasons behind the anxiety over interstitially coloured skin. Originally, light-coloured black skin enabled passage from the master's plantations into his house and then

perhaps from there to freedom, this literal skinwalking involving transgression of broken boundaries. But *Notes of a White Black Woman* is moving for the way it peels back the layers of pain and guilt impacted in racial stigmatisation. Helpless to prevent an involuntary passing, Scales-Trent suffers, toward black African Americans, 'the guilt of a survivor' (1995: 17). She wonders how many light-skinned blacks 'like I, went into the civil rights field, in some measure as a means of expiating our sin – of how we look' (Scales-Trent 1995: 69). Her coming out as white black woman (it is important that it is white that is the subordinate modifier here) and her work as a black civil rights lawyer is perhaps, she bravely acknowledges, an unconscious attempt 'to atone as a way of escaping the rage of our darker brothers and sisters' (Scales-Trent 1995: 69). She is still unconsciously atoning for the stigmatisation of her light-coloured, transgressive skin.

Vitiligo incarnates the transgression of the colour boundary. Consisting of the death of melanin cells in the epidermis, though it can strike any race, vitiligo threatens greater loss for those with dark skin because the loss of colour is greater and thus more noticeable. Rather than attempting to posit an uncutaneous intrapsychic self, vitiligo self-help publications encourage an acknowledgement of the investment of psychic self in skin by urging a process of mourning in vitiligo sufferers (Lesage 1997). Such a concern suggests a coloured skin ego – a racial skin ego. As they lose their colour, what memory of self, of skin, of race is shed? Some folklore beliefs about vitiligo, however, suggest that cultural stigmatisation is enmeshed with these psychosomatic recognitions of the investment of self in skin – Goffman's thesis with Anzieu's. Medical sociologist Anne Hill Beuf documents one belief among African Americans that vitiligo is God's punishment for those blacks who wished they were white; the skin disease is, in this rendition, a deserved realisation of unconscious, unspeakable desire to transgress (Beuf 1990). And the fact that in East India, vitiligo is seen as prefiguring leprosy, and that both vitiligo and leprosy are collapsed into 'leukoderma' (Beuf 1990: 45) – literally meaning 'white skin' and a term that can equally refer to Caucasian whiteness – again shows how light-coloured skin comes to carry the weight of the stigmatisation of racial transgression in a cultural unconscious.

If even for white subjects skin disorders are stigmatising, is it because in a cultural unconscious so concerned with literal and symbolic boundaries, skin disorders unconsciously (again condensing and symbolising – catachrestically) remember a skin that refuses the borders of that foundational cultural divide – of race? Surely what is transgressive (and thus deserving of stigmatisation) about such differently marked skin is that it shows – forces into consciousness – the fact that racial difference, the alignment of race with black and white, is but a fantastic construction, not a real border at all, but precisely one repeatedly produced and memorialised in a racist unconscious.

Autobiographical skins

If the concept of stigmatisation inscribes or writes out a psycho-sociosymbolic signifier on the skin, this catachresis is reversed when skin-disordered subjects