

Epidermis Deep: Glabrousness in the Late Modern Age

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And all the carnal beauty of my wife
Is but skin-deep.
Sir Thomas Overbury
A Wife

Skin: Our Most Essential Home

Constantly shedding, regenerating, healing, protecting, and aging, our skin is at once our largest organ and, as Hilary Briggs describes it, “our most essential home” (17). With all the connotations of belonging and security that it possesses, the skin we live within is our complete covering—an *integer integument* that is, perhaps, indicative of the extent to which our notions of skin are for better or worse implicated in our notions of integrity. It is in this vein that the history of skin reads, at times, like a history of rogue epithelials, whose capacity to protect, regulate, and differentiate human bodies has been exercised on racial grounds (we need no reminder of the discriminations that mark world histories like embarrassing blemishes). At other times, skin has functioned as a site of constructive creative expression in private/personal and communal contexts. We may refer to the tattooing traditions of Chinese and Maori

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communities that are among many methods for denoting kinship, status, and belief known to the historians. Nina Jablonski is right to point out that it is “Through our naked, sweaty, marked-up skin, [that] we tell the world who we are” (quoted in Briggs 17). It certainly marks stages in the ageing process. Consider the softness of a newborn baby (the expression “smooth as a baby’s bum” comes to mind), the grazed knees and elbows so indicative of childhood rough and tumble, the specter of acne that haunts many adolescents, the time-telling wrinkles of adulthood that make their ideological transformation into the wisdom of old age.

These examples find skin expressing a certain normativity and, in this way, compliance to a particular set of cultural expectations. Thus, it remains to be asked, What are the implications for skin when we discover this home to be the house of anxiety—when, beneath this threshold of the physical self, there is found to exist some niggling sense of disempowerment, one that is at odds with the conceived expectations of a broader cultural context? The problem to which I refer relates to late (that is, radicalized) modern cultural conditions that promote the imperative of personal power and yet hinder its vital realization in everyday experience. The individual living in an industrialized (privileged minority) world is encouraged to believe that they should or must be able to achieve their highest potential (as the master of his or her own destiny that makes something of his or her life). Such a sentiment denotes the meritocratic face of a vociferously democratic society—the posture of Western modernity that, as Talal Asad puts it, is so “pregnant with positive futures in a way that no other cultural condition is” (15). But it would be misguided to suggest that there is not a less desirable underbelly to accompany such optimism. For late modernity gives birth to heightened anxieties with regard to social status and global risk scenarios, these being “risks derived from the globalized character of the social systems of modernity ... [such as] the risk of massively destructive warfare ... [and] the risks of ecological catastrophe [that] form an inevitable part of our horizon of day-to-day life” (Giddens 4). Thus, this discussion addresses contexts in which narratives of self-concern (bodily regimes) signify a retreat into the self, that is, into pre-established cultural shells. It is such shells, according to Bramann, that offer the individual “convenient guidelines, ‘identities,’ and a feeling of security in a world that would otherwise appear to be a mass of ‘humming and buzzing confusion’” (9). In particular, helping to “flesh out” an interdisciplinary discursive space for theories of *skin*, I focus on the cultivation of glabrous (hairless) skin.

In a way that intimates the following discussion I should like to clarify that the significance of risk in relation to skin regimes lies in the way that skin is used to deal with risk. In other words, it is as if skin were brought into the bargain of symbolic power and cultural capital. For where glabrousness, as the focus of a bodily regime, constitutes a program of self-empowerment, its cultivation can be theorized in terms of what Anthony Giddens calls “privatized ‘survival strategies’” (171). According to Giddens, privatized survival strategies are those practices of “psychic and bodily self-improvement” that an individual adopts in their appeal for personal control in the face of multifarious global “risk scenarios” over which he or she has no control (171). However, risk scenarios infiltrate many aspects of daily life. Thus, a consequence of this optimism is a somewhat narcissistic sense of entitlement that overlooks the way that countless indeterminable, thus uncontrollable, factors impact upon personal successes and failures. The individual *acts* in relation to, but is also acted upon by, other individuals and an array of cultural institutions (Giddens 14).

Understanding this cyclic dynamic and using it to focus critical cultural negotiation finds the individual conducting his or her self reflexively. For some, in the context of a predominantly hedonistic society, the critical task of cultural reflexivity can prove both confronting and anxiety provoking, not least of all because it requires the individual to extend his or her scope of consideration beyond the pleasures of entertainment and immediate gratification and consider the broader implications of his or her practices. Thus, we may define reflexivity as “an immediate critical consciousness of what one is doing, thinking or writing” (Appignanesi and Garratt 73).

Perhaps it is in this sense, when aspects of the external world break in through the window and threaten to turn the home upside down, that the skin bears a form of culture shock or, as I later refer to it, border panic. The research reveals the parameters for a veritable “bodily praxis” whereby the individual seeks to reassert his or her self by way of skin-orientated bodily regimes, likely drawing on millennia-old associations between hairlessness and heightened social status. Where these associations also function as signifiers of an individual’s success in negotiating the external world, in negotiating status anxiety, cultivated glabrousness stands in as a form of skin activism. But, to the extent that it is culturally non-reflexive (for the retreat into purely personal pre-occupations pre-supposes cultural disengagement), such activism undermines the individual’s capacity to generate alternative (transformative) solutions.

Glabrousness is Next to Godliness: A Historical Context of Cultivated Hairlessness

Under normal circumstances, glabrous skin is the skin that can be found on the soles of a person's feet and on her or his lips, as well as on fingers and the palms of hands. It is the hairless skin which remains a feature of the human physical landscape. Just as this is so to a greater or lesser degree depending on the genetic makeup of the individual, hairlessness can carry a variety of meanings depending on the historical and cultural circumstances under which the individual happens to live. For Jablonski, the relatively glabrous human body has biological significance—denoting an evolutionary response to our survival instinct. She points out that “Over the course of human evolution, more sweat glands were needed to accommodate an increased range of activity [...]. It's great if you can sweat, but it won't keep you cool to sweat into a blanket of matted, wet body hair” (6). However, glabrousness has also held cultural significance for several millennia—affording a distinguishable physicality to notions of class, youth, femininity, and beauty. While the notion that beauty is only skin deep can be traced back to the writings of Sir Thomas Overbury (1613), the political dimension of cultivated glabrousness has a far more distant historical context. For this context, one that will enrich a subsequent analysis of glabrousness in the late modern age, we may turn briefly to the ancient world. It is important to point out that the following constructions of past glabrousness are connected to present bodily regimes in the sense that they demonstrate, as well as contribute to, a longer history in which glabrousness signified elements of status and self-regulation. The social and cultural circumstances surrounding skin differ between late modernity and ancient Egypt, for example. However, if we understand that the present is built upon the past, then the decision to give a past glabrous context remains useful in the task of acknowledging one aspect of skin's cultural journey. The modern Western world's ongoing and implicit adherence to ancient Greek notions of beauty is just one factor that serves to further strengthen this outward connection between past and present.

Glabrousness has long since held a practical cultural function. In order to promote personal hygiene, the ancient Egyptians often removed hair from most, if not all, of the body by way of shaving or, commonly, through a process known as sugaring. In particular, and in view of the risk that was run of infestation by lice, the children of ancient Egypt routinely had their heads shaven, except for a lock left on the left-hand side to symbolize their youth. However, hairlessness also became an expression of high social

status, with ruling class women's esteem for glabrousness seeing them practising the removal of all body hair except for the hair on top of their heads. An accepted part of a process of beautification and purification, it would seem that this trend of extensive hair removal can be traced back to Egyptian cosmology.

In ancient Egyptian cosmology, the pharaoh is a living God. In fact, each king was believed to be a reincarnation of the god Horus—presented in Egyptian literature as the son of Isis and her brother and husband Osiris (David 28). Depicted with outstretched wings and with a small empty throne on top of her head to symbolize Osiris's death, Isis is celebrated as the ideal woman throughout the ancient Egyptian pantheon. This high regard for Isis pertains to her role as wife as well as her role as mother (being the symbolic mother of the physical royal throne). The ancient Egyptians sought to live their lives in harmony with the gods, having no separation between the church and the state. Even though they didn't worship the natural world as such, they nevertheless used aspects of the natural world to express aspects of a divinity. With this in mind, one method of goddess worship is telling. Discussing the fascination with the "great mother goddess," Donald Tyson tells how the "priests of Isis shaved their heads and bodies and remained celibate to signal their personal devotion to her" (31). This is confirmed in representations of these priests, in which they are shown to be baldheaded and without eyelashes or eyebrows.

Thus, given that ancient Egyptian life was "governed by religious principles," and although the ancient Egyptian's celebration of sexual diversity means that celibacy was unlikely a popular practice, a widespread and direct translation of the religious significance of glabrousness into its sociopolitical significance is plausible (David 139). Their desire for harmony with the gods also meant that the ancient Egyptians were responsive to the examples set by those on earth who were closest to them. Inevitably, the pharaoh and his wife occupied a unique position of influence for men and women alike through how they visibly negotiated aspects of the natural world. It is through belief and practice (through thinking and action) that the pharaoh's wife was able to communicate to other women that hairlessness was next to godliness. How they negotiated their body hair, by expressing their extant proximity to divinity, in turn denoted themselves as embodying this (and other) worldly power.

From this point onward, the sociospiritual, aesthetic, and sanitation motivations for glabrousness gradually extended their appeal beyond ancient Egypt to find expression through the classic two-dimensional and sculptural forms of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Glabrousness

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entered the canons, held by both cultures, of ideal human proportions and forms, demonstrating esteem for the hairless body in marble representations of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love, beauty, sexual rapture in the sense of both reproductive and non-reproductive sexuality, seduction, and fertility) including Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Cnidus* [Knidos] (ca. 350 BC), *Venus de' Medici*, among others, display an ideal of the female form as universally smooth, while sculptures of men usually incorporated some suggestion of pubic hair (indicating the cultural significance of glabrousness rather than the technical difficulty of carving hair).

Beyond Europe, glabrousness was also enjoyed in Ancient Britain. Julius Caesar (101–44 BC) observed how “The Britons shave every part of their body except their head and upper lip” (in Wright 494). Hair removal then fell out of public favour during the prudish Victorian era. Queen Victoria held hair in such high esteem that she was known to give “hair jewelry,” on one occasion presenting “Empress Eugenie of France with a bracelet of her own hair” as “the symbol of a close relationship” (Leslie 159). Hair jewelry was also worn as a token of remembrance by mourners, though Leslie points out that the death of Queen Victoria virtually put an end to these practices (160). What is evident is a correlation between ruling-class attitudes toward hair and their adoption within the broader community. Whether it is high esteem for, or an aversion to, hair that prevails in these historical contexts, its presence or absence becomes a social signifier—that is, notions of hair, power, and status are intertwined. Here is a key insight into the role of glabrousness as a privatized survival strategy for the symbolic (re)acquisition of a sense of self-empowerment in the late modern age.

Maintaining the Protective Cocoon: Glabrousness in the Late Modern Age

An association between hairlessness and social status is not merely a historical artifact but has extended into the late modern age and embedded itself in notions of symbolic power and cultural capital. The last fifty years or so have seen some resurgence in the normativity and popularity of glabrousness but, while the incremental diminution of hemlines in women's everyday fashion and beach attire has had a part to play, the function of glabrous skin as a signifier of high status and personal integrity has not been forgotten. This can be seen in an extant advertising campaign developed by Gillette for their New Embrace razor, in which the female viewer is presented with a catch-cry for self-empowerment: “Reveal your

inner Goddess.” It is less an appeal to status in a material sense for in a democratic society a desire for status is most likely felt by those individuals without it. Rather, it is an appeal to the physical demeanour of such qualities communicated to a mass audience. Where an individual’s sense of wealth is measured by how much money or possessions he or she has, illusions of status become commercially viable. As a spokesperson for Gillette explains, when pitching products to women, “We focus more on the emotional end benefits” (*New York Times*).

While this commentary runs the risk of framing glabrousness as a predominantly female concern, it is important to remain mindful of two points. First of all, glabrousness’s historical precedents are not limited to the female form. Secondly, glabrousness in males is also experiencing gradual resurgence. The pornography industry has made a notable contribution to these trends in both men and women, responding both to a comocliticism (to a preference for hairless genitals) and to the hypersexualization of sex (in the Baudrillardian sense perhaps), where an emphasis on the visibility of genitalia reinforces the immediacy of sexual activity and a kind of vital intimacy. The sexualization of hairless genitals is one reason why nudist organizations have tended to look down on them (no pun intended), with clubs being known to refuse membership to individuals who practise pubic hair removal. This has encouraged glabrousness enthusiasts to form their own organizations, such as the Nederlandse Smoothy Club, promoting “[t]he classical beauty of the smooth, hairless body” (WNN). United by the notion of the nudest nudist, the very phrase appeals to a sense of authenticity by connoting the self stripped back (though, of course, the project of the self is not a purely pubic phenomenon).

Central to the critique here are the conditions under which cultivated glabrousness becomes the surface-ready signifier of bodily emancipation, that is, the alleged material manifestation of an ordered and, therefore, conceivably legitimate social self. Perhaps it is in this way that the results of such a ritual might be compared to the fake Gucci bag or replica Rolex watch. But while theoretical grounding is found in Giddens’s notion of the privatized survival strategy and in de Botton’s views on status anxiety, this is not to propose a metanarrative for glabrousness today. Rather, it is to articulate one theoretical position among other possibilities—one position gained in view of particular cultural circumstances.

The Perils of Meritocracy

If a conceivable upside of cultivated glabrousness is its capacity to signify bodily emancipation, to announce an individual’s freedom from the

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shackles of social illegitimacy, then perhaps its concurrent capacity to reflect a certain disempowered complacency is a downside that brings us full circle. I make this point in view of Giddens's observation that the widespread acknowledgement of global risks, as an "aspect of modern institutions [means] that, on the level of day-to-day social behaviour, no one any longer gives much thought to how potential global disasters can be avoided" (171). I would argue that it is, however understandable, a concerning consequence that

[m]ost people shut them out of their lives and concentrate their activities on privatised "survival strategies," blotting out the larger risk scenarios. Giving up hope that the wider social environment can be controlled, people retreat to purely personal preoccupations: to psychic and bodily self-improvement. (Giddens 171)

While Giddens characterizes late modernism as a risk culture, he does not mean "that social life is inherently more risky than it used to be" but rather that it introduces "new risk parameters ... which previous generations have not had to face" (3–4). One of the new social circumstances is democracy—conceivably a global phenomenon through consultation with *The Economic Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy* (2007)—or, to reflect de Botton's specification, democracy's meritocratic dimension.

Alain de Botton explains how a democratic society differs from previous feudal societies in that in a feudal society individuals are resigned to their lot in life, never desiring anything more or less than what they are. A rich person can expect to remain wealthy and a poor farmer can expect to remain poor. Because a person's role and identity is determined by the limits of his or her social class, and these ranks are rigid, there is no desire for the spoils of a different class. However, in a democracy the distinctions between social hierarchies become highly unstable, and this leads to changes in people's expectations for themselves. In a democracy it is believed that as an individual you "can change your status according to your luck of talent" (de Botton, ep. 1, 00:04:29). Someone who is born into a poor family might grow up to become incredibly wealthy or to make a substantial contribution to their society. He or she might win millions of dollars on a lottery or be able to afford a decent education.

However, what presents as democratic optimism (this ideological social skin) actually belies an anxious underbelly, for so far as the absence of rigid social rankings leads us to believe that "those at the top merit their success, you [also] have to believe that those at the bottom must merit their failure"

(de Botton, ep. 1, 00:29:19). No one desires failure but, as de Botton puts it, “in a world in which everyone is supposed to be equal, but where there’s still a lot of inequality around, it’s hard not to take the achievements of others as an implicit reproach for everything you don’t have and haven’t done” (de Botton, ep. 1, 00:02:30). When our democratic age suggests that there is no longer any good reason to fail, other than through a person’s own negligence or laziness, the expectations that people have for themselves “have grown exponentially” (de Botton, ep. 1, 00:18:52).

An interest in the implications of heightened social expectations led American psychologist William James to theorize that self-esteem equals the level of success achieved by an individual divided by the pretensions that they hold with regard to what they should or must achieve (de Botton 55). If an individual has low self-esteem and wants to increase it, he or she must do one of two things; either increase the number of successes or decrease the number of pretensions by which life is lived, that is, reduce self-expectations. However, this becomes problematic in a democracy, for in the same way that the “inevitability” of a person’s lot in life is now viewed as a discriminating illusion, “we’re all now expected to succeed” (de Botton, ep. 1, 00:15:33). A feature of democratic society, meritocracy proposes that a person be judged on merit. An individual’s success is up to that person, meaning that the individual is held to be the master of his or her own destiny, wholly accountable for how well she or he does in life. For James, a democratic society is one in which the expectations are delimited and his “equation illustrates how every rise in our levels of expectation entails a rise in the dangers of humiliation” (de Botton 55).

The old saying “The sky’s the limit” reflects the kind of superficially positive but, nevertheless, quietly destructive sentiment to which I am referring. The individual believes that he or she should or must be able to achieve the highest potential even though such assertions “form the basis of irrational beliefs” that lead to “negative feelings” (Kidman 20). Where humiliation directly involves the visible self, where it is exposed as faulty, it follows that negative feelings about the individual’s abilities may cause him or her to turn against that very site of contention—skin, that site of risk between the private and public. In other words, to the extent that their body enables their physical negotiation of the external world, providing an interface between thinking and the manifestation of thinking as action, it is feasible that skin, as a site of expectation, might be called upon to stand in as the site of symbolic resolution. The retreat into cultivated glabrousness, then, becomes a matter of ritually disciplining a bodily demeanour, thus finding depilatory and epilatory practices denot-

ing “the stylised conduct of the individual within the contexts of everyday life, involving the use of appearance to create specific impressions of self” (Giddens 242). It becomes a veritable material manifestation of Debord’s “spectacular” observation that “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear” (in Mirzoeff 143–44). The skin is made responsible for both emotional and intellectual reassurances.

Seeking Refuge in the Physical Self: Inventing Solutions from Below

The assumption that we may become anything that we want to be in life, the irrational claim that we may succeed indefinitely if we only put our minds to it, grossly overlooks the countless indeterminable factors that have an impact upon our everyday lives, upon our freedoms. Our lives are continually impacted upon, for better or for worse, by other people, cultural institutions, and geographical circumstances, among other factors. As Giddens acknowledges, it is inevitable that the individual will act in relation to, *and* therefore be acted upon by, cultural forces (14). The enormous responsibility that is put on the individual can, through the gap between what is expected and the practicalities of a material reality, reinforce feelings of disempowerment and, in this way, feelings of failure. By contradicting a meritocratic ideology, the notion that the individual is not wholly in control of his or her life promotes anxiety by confirming a degree of powerlessness and by finding him or her conceivably out of step with the dominant assumptions of a broader cultural sphere.

Thus, the risk of humiliation in the social sphere, the risk of being seen as a failure, is far from the only one with which individuals come into contact on a daily basis. That is, the risks of shame are not the only circumstances in which the cultural assumptions surrounding skin are brought to the fore. The shortsightedness of a proudly experimental early Modernity has meant that only in rather recent decades have the implications of carbon emissions, peak oil, and the logging of old growth rainforests become matters of debate in the public sphere. But, while the polar ice caps are already melting, while we have been running out of crude oil since the very first barrel was pumped from the ground, and while greener alternatives are yet to be widely affordable, we may simply add these concerns to threats of terror and war, to the potential disasters caused by nuclear weapons (a number of which the world has already experienced), to the plight of countless starving families in other countries (171). We regularly negotiate a range of risk scenarios, whether these be the directly perceived

risks associated with driving a car or with pursuing sporting activities, or those scientifically perceived risks such as viruses (risks that require a microscope and a scientific training), or even virtual risks associated with hormone replacement therapy, with long-term low-level exposure to mobile phone radiation, to the peaks and troughs of the stock market (of great concern in the current global economic climate).

To the extent that the modern Western world has been raised on taken-for-granted diets of privilege and entitlement, it may be presumed that to constantly think about “larger risk scenarios” would be opening ourselves up to multiple anxieties. However, it is generally accepted that such risks are a normal and inevitable part of living in an era of radicalized modernity. Instead, the difficulties of “living in a risk culture ... [c]oncern anxieties generated by risk calculations themselves” (Giddens 182). Giddens’s point that “[m]ost people shut [out] ... the larger risk scenarios. Giving up hope that the wider social environment can be controlled,” we may understand how the focus of the individual can become redirected on to the chief locus of trust—the body, whereupon the removal of hair represents the filtering out of threats to cognitive security. After all, as Giddens asserts, “‘Filtering out’ is the task of the protective cocoon” (Giddens 182). It is one that, in this context, sees the individual turning inward for gratification.

Perhaps a fair assumption to make would be that the successful management of global risks requires the efforts of global powers but, if feelings of powerlessness are instrumental in a turn toward the comfort of authority (as if it were the reassuring mother figure, the homemaker in many a gendered stereotype), what is the likelihood of this powerlessness steering the individual into a dead end? I ask this question because, providing grounding for Giddens’s contextualization of survival strategies, Christopher Lasch points to a lack of psychic security that stems from a “[d]isenchancement with governmental bureaucracies,” returning the responsibility to the individual by prompting him or her to search for alternative solutions (xxv). Giddens says that trust “is basic to a ‘protective cocoon’ which stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality” (3). However, when this trust is placed in others, when it can be said that government bureaucracies assume the position of a society’s primary caregivers in the adult world, disillusionment with government agencies ruptures basic trust and promotes anxiety. In other words, in a way that finds the individual attempting to re-establish their personal compass, “The inadequacy of solutions dictated from above now forces people to invent solutions from below” (xxv). To follow John Ralston Saul’s thinking, such feelings of disempowerment point to a democracy that has

been turned on its head, as if it has no teeth, as if it has no power, as if it only can react, because [...] we've engaged in a form of almost unconscious suicide by allowing these enormously important powers to escape from our hands to the international arena without before, let alone at the same time, getting equivalent binding powers for the common good.

In the face of potential disaster, new courses of action warrant attention. But what does this mean for skin? There emerges the need for the kind of protective cocoon that may be readily accessible, readily maintainable, and that may draw on what is conceivably most reliable, that is the individual's own body. It is possible to conceive of the privatized survival strategy, in part at least, as a consequence of a broken trust—a retreat into the space of domestication.

However, it stands to reason that the conditions for solace in the domestic realm are not available to all who live in the industrialized world. For many women, for example, the domestic realm constitutes their only realm of existence. This might be due to class, sexual, and racial as well as gender experiences and categorizations. Furthermore, where domestic violence or sexual abuse takes place, the domestic sphere can also be experienced as a sphere of broken trust. The skin of a domestic violence or sexual abuse victim might be found to constitute a battered and emotionally distressing home. Thus, there are contexts in which a retreat into domesticity is neither possible nor desirable. Even though skin is still in the frame, so to speak, these possible factors problematize the notion of skin-as-home by broadening the field of inquiry to include the physical contexts of home when what is happening here is that a foundation for such theory is being forged through a concentration on the symbolic capital of the skin that exists within the context of an ethical domesticity. In other words, there is a difference between the skin-orientated aftermath of physical external forces having left their mark and the socio-cultural mechanisms in the negotiation of which skin is used symbolically. In each case the skin can be contextualized as a site of repair but for different reasons, and, while they are linked, the former moves into an area of consideration that exists beyond the limitations of this discussion. Nevertheless, addressing the skin-as-home problematic using these alternative pathways would mean augmenting or elaborating upon my central thesis.

For now, skin is being contextualized as a site of repair where attention to the details of the skin, to the maintenance of hairlessness, contributes to an overall and ongoing project of psychic rehabilitation made (symbolic) flesh. It is a project that forms a trajectory of self-capability

into the future that can be likened to an expression of hope in the face of conceived hopelessness, and in a way that perhaps harks back to the religious feelings invested in the godly glabrous bodies of the ancient world. If one cannot be the master of his or her own destiny, at least one may maintain the illusion that he or she is the master of his or her own domain—making steps to express mastery over the skin, thus over what Briggs calls “our most essential home.” The body, that all-encompassing home where thinking becomes action, becomes the site of a bodily praxis, subject to practices that have formed in the light of available information as to how the individual believes that what he or she is doing in relation to his or her broader cultural context. It can be said, here, that practices geared around the cultivation of glabrousness are also organized around notions of control and self-affirmation. They stand in as strategies exercised for the purpose of maintaining a sense of personal well-being and some confirmation of one’s own control over the external world (that is signified by way of visible control over the visible body).

The rupture in an individual’s conceived capacity to engage productively in the external world suggests that there exists another dimension to bodily self-concern. Giddens effectively rephrases Lasch’s theory of a relationship between the “apocalyptic nature of modern social life” and a “hunger for psychic security” that gives rise to narcissism (171). Perhaps the narcissistic individual will be one of those who, to draw from Giddens, performs something of a civil inattention reincarnate by turning inward to that very site of contention, contradiction, the psychic and physical self. Insofar as it marks the biological counterpart of this theoretical construct, the skin becomes that bodily metaphor for the trustworthy cocoon now implicated in the symbolic suturing of this rupture. It might seem that, while bodily self-concern compensates for a broader cultural impotence, for the revival of a sense of personal control, it constitutes narcissism when manifest as a kind of psychosocial *excrescence*—one that, to borrow the rare seventeenth-century rendering of this word, can be taken to mean an *exuberance* as much as “excrescence” connotes an “overblown pride” (876). However, Lasch summates that narcissism

is not merely a pretentious term for self-interest. Far from reflecting the “alarming growth of ego,” narcissism signals the loss of ego, an invasion of the ego by social forces that have made it more and more difficult for people to grow up or even to contemplate the prospect of growing up without misgivings bordering on panic. (xxi)

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Thus, it is possible to theorize the skin-orientated bodily regime as a form of border panic where, to pursue this metaphor, anxiety threatens to run out all sense, all appearance, of personal calm. It is in this context that hair removal finds the individual sweeping the perimeter (or having it swept by a more experienced technician), as if to be checking for points of weakness, for signs of intrusion, in the hope that steps might be put into place to help patch up any identifiable damage. It is implied that what we are dealing with, then, is a form of damage to the ego wherein the skin, as the self's immediate home, is identified as the site of systematic interrogation. The skin quite literally forms the body's protective cocoon yet also plays into psychic security by being symbolically protective. In this way, the skin is "the defensive protection which filters out potential dangers impinging from the external world and which is founded psychologically upon basic trust" (Giddens 244). Thus, what we detect is cultivated glabrousness as a bodily regime that stands in to compensate the individual for this conceivable distance between an ethical collective responsibility and a sense of being ill-equipped to practise this ideal in a material reality.

Furthermore, Lasch has pointed to the cult of celebrity that is present in contemporary social life, generated by the mass media in America as a catalyst for the narcissistic impulse (though this phenomenon, and in turn Lasch's comments on it, are applicable to a vast majority of a media thirsty West). For Lasch, "The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the 'herd,' and make it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence" (21). Once again, we find the thread of status anxiety creeping into the frame. The global circulation of status symbols simultaneously communicates expectations of success and material wealth, or personal empowerment, to a mass audience while failing to take into account the day-to-day impact of greater local and global circumstances.

A case in point is the ongoing *L'Oréal* advertising campaign in which the viewer is exhorted to spend money on the product because "Because I'm worth it." To the extent that the central message encourages the individual to believe that she operates in a culture in which self-expression is valued above collective responsibility, *L'Oréal* plays into, thus helps perpetuate, an individual's belief "that he or she is 'special' and unique" as well as "a sense of entitlement," that are two narcissistic personality traits, as listed among others in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2000). Here we find such impulses being performed on the exterior of the human body—upon that *integer integument*, skin.

A culture of narcissism erodes the potential for activism and practices of resistance by using an emphasis on physical appearance to perpetuate discrete, benign, bodily narratives. Not only has “[t]he ritual of reading the Sunday papers replaced going to church,” the pristine airbrushed and flesh-exposing images communicate quite clearly that, in the late modern age, the Goddess remains glabrous, as too does the God, but both he and she come at a price—an ancient ideological idea that has been packaged for mass consumption. But how many of us really achieve such a height? So long as our lives don’t “conform to the dominant status ideals,” people will continue to be “subtly rebuked” by the glitz, glamour, and beauty of the fame brimful press (de Botton, ep. 3, 00:04:21).

Thus, we may detect a disjuncture in the membrane between thinking and acting, a decomposition of a sociopolitical praxis. While not gender specific, the female constituent is significant in this equation. As Tiggermann and Kenyon surmise,

the idealization of youth carries the political agenda of powerlessness, and arises at particular times when women become too powerful. The impossible prescription for a “young” beautiful body is a source of great dissatisfaction, and many studies document that women show much greater dissatisfaction with their bodies across the board than do men. Further, physical appearance tends to be much more important for a woman’s global view of her self-worth than is the case for a man. (874)

Under interrogation is a broadening dislocation between the local and the global, that is between commodity-driven personal dispositions and a range of global risk scenarios (global warming, political climate, threats of war) that nevertheless have an impact directly upon everyday experience. Distracted by self-concern, the individual’s cultural disarmament threatens a basic trust in an ability to realize the conceivably positive future which entails self-empowerment through cultural reflexivity and, in this sense, self-actualization.

Patrolling the Border: Keeping up Appearances

The bodily regimes of the Pharaoh’s wife show glabrousness to have been, at least in part, politically motivated. Examining the politics of the epidermis in the context of a late modern age has meant picking beneath the surface of notions of *skin* where they relate to notions of self as a socially formed entity. Using this point of entry into a *theory of skin* has helped to further understand its role in the intersection of cultural thought and

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cultural behaviour—an inside/outside of thinking/doing in which our skin, as that membrane (the virgule within each of these binaries), remains in question, a point of contention. If our skin effectively “tell[s] the world who we are,” how we “cultivate” our skin says much about how we confront the implications of this message. Rather than indicate who we are, our skin can also be used to communicate a personal ideal, how we want to see, or want the world to see, ourselves. What has been shown here is how the skin becomes a site of symbolic suture, that is, a context for the ritualistic reconciliation of the gap between an individual’s expectations of personal empowerment and what is produced, that is, his or her despair in the face of the critical devices that inevitably impact upon day-to-day life.

There exists a context of self-involvement where bodily regimes, as methods of achieving the glabrous aesthetic, stand in as opportunities to regain a sense of personal empowerment. In this context, hair removal, as a form of bodily discipline, symbolizes the emancipation of the body from its physical limitations in the external world (thus constituting a form of status signifier). The resulting glabrousness provides a metaphor for the socially competent self, although it fails to make a critical cultural impact. In other words, the pursuit of glabrousness does not seem to support alternative solutions that hold sway beyond ideological ideals. Rather, perhaps the pre-established cultural shell upon which they draw (dating back to the ancient world) means that the privatized ritualization of skin treatments such as cultivating a socially legitimated illusion marks a form of self-deception. A socially useful form of praxis seeks to explore alternative solutions, but there is no indication that waxing, shaving, plucking, and lasering fulfill these criteria.

In contrast to an apocalyptic rupture, the smooth, clean external membrane stands to reinvigorate a sense of hope in the purity and cohesiveness of the self and in its capacity to survive—externalizing a message of sanctity that denotes an aptitude to weather the storm. Furthermore, hair removal, as ritual, constitutes a form of catharsis by affording the individual a claim to control in the physical world (worn like some socially necessary illusion) that also affords temporary relief from discomforting negative emotions. Thus, there exists a context in which hair removal enables the individual to feel emotionally restored without actually requiring him or her to face the self-confronting and far less convenient task of critically engaging with the reason, or reasons, why such feelings exist in the first place. A self-reflective catharsis is made manifest as the silky smooth physiognomy of an escapist counter-narrative. It is here that self-control is found well

within in the confines of a symbolic gesture, all the while remaining distinctly outside the limits of critical cultural engagement.

To the extent that our cultural practices are acts of communication through which we may express who we are, who we think we are, and who we would like others to conceive us to be, cultivated glabrousness finds skin at the centre of such activity. There is a degree of irony present in the way that, while history supports the extant association between hairless skin and cultural empowerment, late modernity also provides us with the conditions for its subversion. Consulting the privatized survival strategy for interpretive cues to examine cultivated glabrousness has been to undermine a conceivably calm exterior and to consider how its vitality extends only epidermis deep.

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