Skin: An Assemblage on the Wounds of Knowledge, the Scars of Truth, and the Limits of Power

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I wonder how long the ghosts will stay with me?
And sometimes I wonder if holding on to the memories is holding me back?
It is difficult to explain how my skin remembers something that has not happened yet.
The familiar awaits me and this journey longs to leave the unfamiliar behind.
Muffins for Granny:
Stories from Survivors of the Residential School System
Nadia McLaren (director)

Woven through the discrete stories of survivors of the Canadian residential school system in Nadia McLaren's documentary film *Muffins for Granny: Stories from Survivors of the Residential School System* (2007) are scenes of McLaren baking muffins in the kitchen with family and friends for her grandmother. Why is baking muffins significant to how McLaren assembles her stories? To bake muffins constitutes an act of love and sustenance, a way to make a gift to her grandmother to replace the loss of love, respect, and dignity experienced in residential school. At her grandmother's school, white children were given muffins to eat. The indigenous children were left to consume the paper wrappings thrown away by the white children. Eating paper symbolizes the indignities of

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colonial violence, and like the consumption of words on paper without body, spirit, and feelings one is left hungry and wanting more.

The skin of truth and reconciliation represents an historical moment in which to think through the surface of things, to consider what penetrates beneath the porous surface of colonization and what can also seep through from below when "skin remembers something that has not happened yet."

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In the 1950s scientists experimented on the skin of Inuit children, testing the capability of skin grafting with tissue taken from one person's body and placed on another. The use of skin grafting to repair severe skin damage due to burns or disease is commonplace today, and this little miracle of science is, in general, appreciated. But Rhoda Kaujak Katsak knew of this scientific endeavour in its early days when experimentation and failure were part of its development.

> The big thing I remember, though, was that they took bits of skin off our forearms. First they made the whole skin area numb, then they took this very long, thin cylinder, like a stick, sharp on one end, and they kind of drilled it into my arm to cut the skin. They took the skin off, it was at the end of this little cylinder thing. It was all inside. They did that twice. Once they took the two pieces of skin off my arm, they put in skin from my sister Oopah and my brother Jake's arm. I got their skin, Jake got my skin and Oopah's, Oopah got Jake's and mine. I think my mom was there. Of courses we were her children, so she had to be there, maybe to consent or something like that. But I don't think it was a matter of her consenting, I don't think she thought of it that way. Then, after they did that, they put bandages on. It didn't hurt that much at the time. It hurt later, like a regular cut would, but it didn't hurt at all at the time because of the anaesthetic. (175)

The experiment failed in Rhoda's case. Today, she has a scar on her arm as a result of repeated attempts to make the skin adhere. But the skin stubbornly refused to take hold of her body, and this rejection of an apparently new layer of skin did nothing more than register the failure of a medico-scientific experiment. But this scar also tells another story, one of repetition and trauma. Here the scarred skin no longer resides within a scientific epistemology. Rather, it produces another storyline. In this story, let's call it the story of epistemic colonization, the skin of a child

perceived by scientific workers to be an available object for experimentation unfolds the complicity of the Canadian postcolonial nation state and scientific knowledge. This child is positioned as a subject of the state by the scientists and as so subject to federal policies to "assimilate" her body, her family, and her community into an impossibly undifferentiated mass of flesh, to obliterate the sign of difference her body is being made to signify. This sign of difference is not simply one of skin colour—although the properties of racial difference were no doubt part of the scientist's lexicon. The difference these bodies constituted occurred at a level of embodiment and the relationship of bodies to the environment. Such a relation is the basis for creating social and cultural ways of being and knowing. Western state-scientism cannot conceive of epistemic locations outside its own privileged terms of reference. This is one reason, perhaps, why embodied differences must be studied and "assimilated," otherwise their difference cannot be understood within the Western scientific episteme. These floating variables cannot forever be bracketed off, however, without causing a rumble of questions at a foundational level of knowledge production.

The scar is a trace of unassimilable difference, a skin traumatized by the epistemic protocols of scientific advancement, its repeated attempts to find out the already ascribed limits of scientific failure and success. And yet, this trace of knowing that lies outside the scientific episteme also testifies to the failure of scientific-state-assimilation to obliterate other embodied knowledges and epistemic locations. Unfortunately, this other reading can only happen due to the scaring of Rhoda Kaujak Katsak's skin. Interestingly enough Rhoda does not lament this result:

> I remember with my skin grafts they told us that they were trying to find out if a person got burned if they could get a graft from sibling's skin. Maybe they thought Inuk skin was different from Qallunaat [white] skin, I don't know. It sure would have been nice to know what they were doing at the time! Anyways, the grafts didn't heal into my skin. Jake's and Oopah's skin fell off, and the holes healed over. Those anthropologists are very lucky the cuts weren't on my face … We were told to go back to that place a couple of times because they wanted to check to see if the grafts were staying. We went back, but it was nice to see them go and not stay. I remember being happy when Jake and Oopah's skin fell off my arm. I was happy that I disproved their theory. I have had the scars ever since. They don't go away. (177)

For Rhoda, the scar marks the failure of the experiment and affirms her body's autonomy from the scientific objectification to which it was subjected:

> Sometimes I wonder why people agreed all the time even when they didn't want to. I guess what it comes down to is that the Qallunaat have always been the people with the authority … It was normal for Qallunaat to ask us to come over and do things for them, even things like giving them our skin … We just did whatever they told us to do … people wouldn't follow what the Qallunaat say about hunting and stuff like that, but I guess we figured that the Qallunaat must know about beef, salads, scientific research, books? (176)

The scar returns her to a different form of knowledge for which "authority" is negligible compared, for example, to survival and community.

Rhoda's scarred skin also works as a palimpsest of historical events where the topography of the skin's surface area records the marks of time.

Indigenous children and youth were primary targets of institutionalized colonization through educational mechanisms and the production of Western knowledge. To regulate the indigenous child's body was to initial a process of skin-grafting, of scrapping away the matrices of learning and knowledge acquisition already in existence in indigenous societies and to replace that knowledge with a new skin of truth grafted onto the indigenous child's body in the form of Western scientific knowledge—but not as a producer of such knowledge, rather as its sacrificial object.

The biopolitics of Western knowledge engages in substitutions, from sacrificing the indigenous child's body to scientific knowledge and to the subject of experimentation. It separated skin from flesh and used the skin like parchment; it created writing machines to brand the skin with numbers. Can skin be anything more than an object of study for the rationalization of categories of human capital?

> Gwen and I walked home from school in the usual way and did the usual things, but just the sight of her was no longer a thrill to me, though I did my best not to let her know. It was as if I had grown a new skin over the old skin and the new skin had a completely different set of nerve endings. But what could I say to poor Gwen? How to explain to her about the thimble that weighed worlds, and the dark cloud that was like an envelope in which my mother and I were sealed? (Kincaid 91)

In her autobiographical fiction *Annie John,* Jamaica Kincaid tells the story of a young girl and how her transition to adulthood was motivated by a series of stages of increasing alienation from her mother and the once-loved space of household communion that existed between mother and child. This anti-*Bildungsroman* narrates the destruction of love in the colonial patriarchal encounter. It is not a story of the glorified "development" of the European individual subject for capital gains but a story of loss and the destruction of mother love for a feminized economy of care to be found in the field of nursing. The story ends with Annie's departure from the island of Antigua to the institutionalized educational opportunities of a nursing program in the benevolent and imperial motherland of London, England.

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The loss of the thread of connection between mother and child is contained by Kincaid in the image of "the thimble that weighed worlds." Whose world would survive in the scales of historical justice? Could the thimble tip the scales in favour of our desires for connection, for reconciliation? What would it take?

In June 2009, the Governor General of Canada Michaelle Jean engaged in a heroic act of tipping the scales of justice by the simple act of eating seal meat. Animal rights groups protested the act as a barbaric endorsement of seal hunting and the use of seal skins by the international fur fashion industry. In an earlier book *The Cultural Politics of Fur* I examined British and American animal rights activism and its imperialist encounter with indigenous hunting practices under the banner of an emerging "green" economy. I argued that embedded within indigenous storytelling technologies was an ethics of animal-human relations that had much to teach the Western world and its well-educated neo-liberal proponents about the political kinships involved in human-animal relations. Michaelle Jean's simple gesture transformed the biopolitical landscape as it openly challenged the European Union's ban on all seal products and re-situated it as a continuation of the much longer history of European imperialism.

Perhaps the second skin that provides such a thick reading of history could be shed in order to make room for another skin that in Nadia McLaren's words "has not happened yet." When the practitioners of neo-liberalism acquire enough courage to be open to the sustainable knowledges of animal-human relations embedded in indigenous hunting and distribution

practices, then perhaps the skin of these truths and reconciliatory practices will be acknowledged, respected, and recognized.

This issue of *ESC* sets out to explore the contestations and regimes in and around the truths written on skin historically, geopolitically, psychoanalytically, materially, and poetically. Despite the limits of the scientifico-imperial epistemology, "skin" writes back and remembers. The essays in this collection assemble different ways the skin responds to power by re-writing itself through body, words, feelings, and a creative spirit of discovery. To discover in this sense is to witness how the body dis-covers the skin from the oppressive regimes to which it is subjected, to trace its sensuous perceptions, and to allow it a moment of release.

In "Narrative Skin Repair: Bearing Witness to Representations of Self-Harm," Angela Failler addresses the question of how narrative methods productively address the traumatic images of self-harm depicted in Hope Peterson's film *Surface Damage*. Here, the skin that absorbs and contains memories of abuse receives moments of release through the self-cutting of the flesh. The repetition of the act of self-cutting in the film reproduces the traumatic tension between the desire to disclose the way pain is inflicted by a culture of cutting and how making this "self-evident" requires the artist to cut into her own flesh. In other words, to produce the evidence involves an ironic act which must necessarily distance the viewer from the pain but, at the same time, allow the viewer to register the tragedy of this act of self-cutting. Irony is essential because it ensures the minimalization of an aesthetics of horror. The French artist Orlan engaged in a public performance of a plastic surgery. While her work stimulated the fearful experience of the monstrous and the grotesque, her public performance lacked a necessary irony and, thus, fetishized the culture of cutting and failed to release its tragic dimension. Her public surgery created a spectacle of the culture of cutting (which you can see on reality TV on any given night, where surgeries are regularly shown and discussed), but it did not create a space from which to heal from such violence.

Anne Milne's "Reading My Skin: Experiential and Creative Explorations in Skin Cancer" turns her personal experience with skin cancer into a creative exploration of a traumatic tension between perception and self-knowledge. She is presented with two choices: surgery or radiation treatment; to scar or not to scar, that is the question. The solitariness of being in one's skin is dramatically represented by Milne's experience of the repeated trauma of dissociation, of unanticipated events like an unexpected feeling of abjection in the aftermath of day surgery, or comments that come from outside the body and do not match up with the enormity

of one's sense of singularity, or doctors who scrutinize her face as if it were a surface for the scientific discovery of things. Skin is a landscape of discovery, both inner and outer.

To discover skin is also to discover, as in the case of Salvador Dali's autobiography, the "interface between innocence and experience, interior and exterior, and the stability and tractability of his own highly celebrated public persona." Julia Pine theorizes the limits of skin in Dali's text. She traces a threefold conceptual apparatus: skin as the body's exterior, skin as the abject other, and skin as his central conceit for "casting off of the old skin of his former [European] atheist, Surrealist and revolutionary self" in order to replace it "by a new [American] religious, reactionary, and classicist persona." Thus, for Dali, to discover skin was to imperialize and exploit the interface between subject and other.

A flexibile membrane for transcribing the story of the self in our contemporary moment, skin also served as a communication technology in early seventeenth-century English prose. Stephanie Shirilan provides a thoroughly engaging reading of the meaning of skin in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* and Francis Bacon's posthumously published natural history *Sylva Sylvarum*, which also appeared with the fictional utopia *The New Atlantis* appended. Shirilan reads these texts against the grain of contemporary scholarship in the literary histories of science and the body. Rather she explores the "thickness" of early modern skin as plural, composite, and membranous.

When skin is mobilized to write back to power, its techniques for doing so, such as tattooing or skin piercings, are by no means homogeneous in how they negotiate the signifying powers of oppression, repression, and abjection. In "Skin and Self-Indictment: Prison Tattoos and Heroin Addiction," Kevin McCarron reads the abundant references to tattooing in contemporary literature as an allegory of literary production and its meaning-making of and through the body. In essence, tattooing constitutes a first act of consciousness about the relationship of the body to its environment. For the prisoner, tattoos unsettle how the law and its juridical institutions write the body as an object of incarceration. In response to the tattooed incarcerated body, however, McCarron distinguishes between, on the one hand, the heroin addict's contradictory piercing of the flesh as the mark of a desire for transcendence from the body and, on the other hand, the criminal's use of his skin to display his body's power outside of the law. The figure of the Nazi tattoo in American prisons and in its literary re-presentation signifies the racism of white supremacy, especially directed toward African-American inmates. Here the tattooed skin is not

to be transcended but, rather, mobilized as the text of a racial power that is intended to be consumed by its readers.

While skin tattoos belong to a racial logic of reading skin as a chromatic surface of differential meaning, racial politics in the United States also incorporated other meanings to the politics of skin-writing in the form of the alien abduction narrative. In a memoir published in 1966 by Betty and Barney Hill and titled *The Interrupted Journey: Two Lost Hours "Aboard a Flying Saucer,"* David Drysdale examines how this purportedly true account by an "interracial couple" of their experience with aliens aboard a space ship tells us about American anxieties over race. In situating this fascinating text contrapuntally with Paul Gilroy's theorization of racial discourses, Drysdale presents the following compelling argument: "Much as Gilroy imagines a future where race as the construction of visible external signifiers of the skin has been supplanted by the minute scale of the nanotechnological, *The Interrupted Journey* posits a blending of racial signifiers past the point of recognition, rendering race as a text that can be read only at the subdermal level—in the structure of the abductee's skin." Similarly, David Prescott-Stead sets out to excavate the deep meanings of skin in his essay "Epidermis Deep: Glabrousness and Privatized Survival Strategies in the Late Modern Age."

Prescott-Stead theorizes the turn toward Western bodily regimes as a response to anxiety due to the pressures of global "risk scenarios." How, he asks, does the cultivation of glabrous (hairless) skin constitute a program of self-empowerment, a "privatized survival strategy" in a world increasingly dominated by the fear of large-scale catastrophes such as ecological disasters, warfare, or other natural and unnatural events?Focusing on the cultivation of glabrous skin, it is possible to trace a desire for certainty in an environment where the individual appears to have little or no control. Prescott-Stead brings the intimate and the global together in a provocative account of corporeal activism.

In the final three contributions to this volume, we turn to the textual and visual poetics of skin's offerings. In her extraordinary six-sequence poem, "Dermographia: (Desire)," Emilia Nielsen plays the dermographer and writes the skin as if she is wearing its language inside out. There is a lusciousness in Nielsen's language; you can not only taste the words but also feel the desire for *touch* in them.

In his essay, "Skin Aesthetics as Incarnation: Gilles Deleuze's Diagram of Francis Bacon," Jakub Zdebik sets out to intercept Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) and *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) through Gilles Deleuze's philosophical engagement

with the theme of incarnation. Zbedik deploys the figural representation of skin as a zone of elasticity for rendering the transcendental in the surface materiality of the epidermis.

This collection concludes with two poems by Diana Reid, *How to Eat a Mango* and *If Asked to Predict the Weather*, that will create waves of laughter and delight throughout your body and leave goose-bumps in their wake.

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