

Ahmed, Sara and Jackie Stacey, eds.

Thinking Through the Skin.

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The Transformations Series in which this book appears explores the gendered dimension of a critically contested sites such as the sexual, racial, national, colonial, and the spatial. This collection, edited by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, both of whom teach in one of the most vibrant feminist programs in the UK, attempts to read skin and how it becomes meaningful within culture. As such, it attempts to move beyond discourses on the body, intensely theorised by the likes of Jane Gallop, Judith Butler, Elaine Scarry, Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway among others. The work is divided into three sections, each of which are enjoined to achieve different outcomes: to explore the alternative discourses of skin, its relationship with the other, and its function in other places. The first part is entitled "Skin Surfaces" and contains essays on the materiality of skin and the multiplicity of its meanings. The essays in this section range from the discussion on the relationship between clitoridectomy and body art, on assaults on the skin, on the autobiographical narratives of the skin, and the skin of pregnant women. The second section of the work is entitled "Skin Encounters" and deals with how interactions and encounters challenge Western assumptions about the self and the other. The five essays deal with the question of race and colonial power relations written on the body: Elspeth Probyn's work on white skin and its desire for the other; Tina Takemoto's noteworthy essay on performative art that explores the relationship between race, health and gender; how slitting and cutting the body provides a voice for people who self-harm; the politics of touch in Sartre and de Beauvoir; and the norm, subjectivity, and embodiment as critiqued by the presence of conjoined twins. The last part contains essays that emphasise raced skin in other places with a final essay on posthuman bodies. Of particular note is Jennifer Biddle's essay on the metaphoric/metonymic link between skin and land for a group of Indigenous Australians, the Warlpiri.

The collection is located very firmly within post-structuralist and/or psychoanalytic feminist thought and covers a wide range in its focus on different aspects of its subject within Western epistemology and culture. The work is important because it focuses on the skin, the longest, and the oldest organ in the human being and, therefore, bestowed with a long history for the subject and within the very construction of subjectivity in modernity. This collection is very thought provoking and exciting for its truly inter-disciplinary approach to a new frontier of embodiment.

One question that arose for me after reading these essays is the absence of articles that deal with touch, which is, after all, one of the primary functions of the skin. Indeed, of all our senses—touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight—it is

the touch that is ranked the most primitive (the foetus develops a skin like membrane within two months of development) but also the most complex. Unlike smell and sight, which are limited to specific sensory organs, touch and the skin provide information over the *entire* body, with the ability to judge pressure, temperature, and vibration. Additionally, some parts of the body such as our genitals, our hands, have more receptors of touch than others. The skin has a double function: to perceive information about pressure, pain, vibration, etc., and to function as a sign of the quality of perception. Thus a person's character is visible on their skin; the coarseness of the person is indicated in the quality of their skin. There is a history to the sense of touch (and, therefore, the skin) in that it is considered the lowest of the senses with sight being given the status of the highest. In the early Middle Ages, touch was associated with the libido and by the time of the Renaissance became associated with brute sexuality with absolutely no connection to love. By the time of the Enlightenment, touch was closely linked to the acquiring of empirical data, physically direct, but lacking the ability to analyse the data. Thus touch became linked with the irrational and the female in eighteenth-century thought. In the twentieth century, the replacement of the sense of touch with that of sight is central to the psychoanalytic framework for the maturation of the subject. The subject is forced to repress its sexuality and transfer its energies to socially permissible acts. I draw attention to the sense of touch even though the work explicates skin because only by including the sense of touch, I think, that the history of the skin becomes visible. Surely, skin means different things at different times, and the dislocation from history relocates skin as being outside of, even prior to, history. The essays in this collection, though very sophisticated for the most part, very occasionally display signs of an essentialised comprehension of skin.

The second issue that came for me is also related to the importance of engaging with history when using post-structuralist frameworks. If post-structuralism is central to the excavation of otherness, then it is an otherness that seems to be produced within subjectivity in modernity. Modernity demands a dichotomous epistemology and the reading of skin, inevitably, falls within this structure. Here, skin functions as a repressed, oppressed term and the various representations of it in the text want to give voice to that erased, overlooked aspect of embodiment. Otherness as other, that which falls outside the ambit of modernity and dichotomy, seems to be a rare characteristic of skin. It must be remembered that modernity, historically, was linked to colonialism, which should have made it more receptive to the plethora of other forms of thinking and being. Yet, modernity and postmodernity have reduced colonised forms of knowledge to its dichotomous structure. Jennifer Biddle's essay captures a hint of the other forms of thinking in her essay on the Warlpiri comprehensions of

skin. One is forced to ask: Does black skin only function within discourses of power? Is there another meaning to it that bypasses issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which are so central to our constructions of subjectivity? Surely, there must be more to our senses and subjectivity than these, something that is irreducible to and goes beyond these four aspects. I think it is important that a new discourse, as here on the skin, must boldly dare to go where post-structuralist thought doesn't always choose to go.

But I must admit that, notwithstanding my petty criticisms, a collection that gets the reader debating, disagreeing, excited and thinking has more than adequately fulfilled its job.

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