

Fleshing Out the Act

The critical notion of “epidermalization” bequeathed to our time by Frantz Fanon is valuable here. . . . It refers to a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing them with qualities of “color.” It suggests a perceptual regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by its enclosing skin. The observer’s gaze does not penetrate that membrane but rests upon it and, in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the other body. —PAUL GILROY, *Against Race*

Before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.
—HORTENSE SPILLERS, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”

What is the skin? How does one experience one’s skin, in itself, for others? The skin provides a boundary between self and world that serves as both an entryway to the outside world and an enclosure of interior space. It provides us with our most immediate, sensual engagement with the world and others through touch, and yet, it is often the organ we think about the least, invisible and taken for granted. The skin we see, upon which so many signs of difference can be projected and inscribed—tattoos, skin colors, ornaments, birthmarks, scars—does not feel the way it looks; no matter how different two people may look their skins feel virtually the same. The skin reminds us of ourselves in a way that differs from how we think about ourselves in the abstract; the skin brings us back in touch with ourselves, literally, as bodies.

The skin, in a black context, has also been in modern times a master signifier for the specificity, the particularity, of race. It is the object produced by what Frantz Fanon and Paul Gilroy call “epidermalization.” It is the sign for

race understood purely as a scopic sight and the skin as the object of a specularizing gaze. This is the notion of black skin that Toni Morrison attempts to defamiliarize and deconstruct in a powerful scene in *Beloved* when the self-appointed preacher, Baby Suggs, gives an impromptu sermon in the forest to a congregation of ex-slaves.

During her speech, Baby Suggs asks everyone assembled to raise their hands and kiss them as a way of acknowledging, inhabiting, and loving their humanity. She then calls on the assembled crowd to focus on the profound nature of their status as “flesh”:

We flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You got to love it, you!*¹

With these resonant words, Baby Suggs encourages the community to remember that they are alive, that they are human, but also that as free subjects they can have a different relationship to their blackness than the one they grew accustomed to seeing reflected in the eyes of their masters. If one effect of objectifying blackness historically has been the hatred of black skin, Baby Suggs suggests that re-subjectification, finding and loving oneself, begins also at the level of the skin. This is not the skin as color, however—black is beautiful—but the skin as flesh, what can be touched rather than what can be seen.

In asking her congregation to love their blackness—in their feet, on their backs, in their hands, on their faces—Baby Suggs is not asking them to *see* themselves differently. Rather, she is asking them to rediscover themselves through a different sense of their bodies, one that bypasses the gaze entirely by beginning from a different sensory location, the sense of touch. When Baby Suggs calls on her congregation to raise the part of their bodies most relevant for touching the flesh, their hands, she primes them for extending their tactile, haptic experience of themselves, of their blackness as a form of embodied subjectivity, over the entirety of their skins and bodies. In this physical act, which becomes a public, communal dance, each member of her congregation acts out and witnesses, participates in and observes, an experience of black skin as something other than just a reified object—either of the gaze or of the subject. Rather, the skin serves here as a threshold, a point of contact, a site of intersubjective encounter, between the inner and outer self and between the self and

the other. Just the mere touching of skins, as William Faulkner described, can suddenly seem to shatter “shibboleths” of race and caste.²

Morrison’s novelistic representation of the flesh in *Beloved* resonates with, expands upon, and acts out the rich notion of the flesh Hortense Spillers invokes in her canonical essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” We are used to thinking of the skin, the surface of the body, as the baseline of what it means to be human, to be a body that matters. For Spillers, however, in the discursive order of modernity created by New World discovery, conquest, colonization, and enslavement, the “American grammar” of race fixes the black subject’s skin as merely the covering of a body already trapped in the symbolic order, a body marked and named by so many multiple investments and discourses that “there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.” This body-with-skin is an organic “resource for metaphor” but also a “defenseless target” for the aims of a racializing discursive order. This body is the victim of an original “theft” not just from the homeland but also from the African captive’s body’s “motive will, its active desire.” Spillers’s term for this body of symbolic capture throughout her essay is “the captive body,” by which she means a body captive in a new symbolic order with different social conventions and gendered norms than the home ground of the African transplant.³

In contrast, those who are liberated have another bodily entitlement. They can imagine themselves as a body outside of the symbolic order, as the more universal body of the human covered by flesh. For those in this subject position, “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’” that is, another sense of the body that is a remainder of the body concealed and covered over in discourse. The skinned body that remains left behind by both physical captivity and cultural capture is what Spillers means by the “flesh.” The flesh is also the organ on “the person of African females and African males [that] registered the wounding” of the traumatic transatlantic passage — it offers a “primary narrative [of] its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.” This flesh, in other words, is not simply raw, human matter; it represents a body that also shows, that reveals, the markings of the symbolic order on its skin. It is a supplement to the black body that merely (re-)enacts its symbolic marking and naming by using the skin of race as a covering over/ of human flesh.⁴

The flesh represents the body that sits on the very edge, on the underside, of the symbolic order, pre-symbolic and pre-linguistic, just before words and meaning. It has yet to be sealed away into an image or bodily ideal. Instead, it is the underside or rough side of the bodily surface and image subsequently sealed over with racial meaning. The flesh is the side of the skin, the hide,

upon which we see the scratchings of discourse. These marks of inscription are not the naturalized and normalized racial fantasies and myths of modernity. Rather, from the perspective of the flesh, they are the non-sense marks with no meaning or signification beyond their reality as traces of violence—“the anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue . . . eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet.” It is this scratched up, fleshy body, the body made subject to racially and sexually sadomasochistic acts, a body that shows the very edges and seams of its cuts and splits, which is then covered over by the skin of race: “These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color.” In *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*, this is the body the following readings of black male performances are meant to rediscover and explore. In four signature black acts, the skin is a heuristic representing the intersectional meeting point of a black body subject to symbolic and imaginary capture in racializing discourse and imagery (race as a social construction) and a bodily subject whose sensory and relational (re-) presentation of self (race as an inscription on the flesh) occurs in the experiential space of performance.⁵

I am also asking us to stay attentive to the multiple scripts of the skin that shape black subjects’ interpersonal, intercultural, social, and everyday performances. Rather than forgetting about the skin, the post-racial call for us to move beneath or beyond blackness, we need a richer sense of the mind-body relation between the psyche and the skin, that is, how a historical process of seeing and understanding the skin as object and other, the site of difference, shapes the psychic formation of black subjects for whom the skin is also a bodily mode of relating to the world and others. Despite its prominence in racial thinking, black cultural studies and critical race theory have yet to develop a serious notion of the skin, a theoretically articulated account of blackness as a cutaneous medium and bodily contact zone through which modern subjects negotiate and enact a profound desire to see difference. This desire, a product of colonial modernity that leads to an alienating separation from the body, is bad enough for the black subject during slavery. The subsequent tragedy is that, even after slavery, black flesh never reclaims itself. The experience of a doubly split-off double consciousness, the epidermalized black body split off from the skinned body without an image, remains an inherent condition of modern black subjectivity.

It is no surprise that Spillers references W. E. B. Du Bois and his notion of

the color line from 1903 in the opening of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Both for Spillers and here in *Skin Acts*, this establishes the dawning of the twentieth century as a particular kind of conjuncture in which black masculinity suffered from this unacknowledged, alienating separation of the black body in its skin from the register of the black self as flesh.⁶ Perhaps the primary consequence, for Spillers, of losing our concept of blackness as flesh is the subsequent inability to see black subjectivity within the frame of a relational humanity. As she puts it, in this “atomizing” of the captive body as flesh divided from itself, “we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification.”⁷ Very specific conditions shaping black subjectivity in the United States during the twentieth century have impacted the historical evolution of a notion of the black male self as a closed, autonomous, self-sufficient subject sealed away in his skin. In each cultural moment described here, these conditions have unique, historically specific features related to the emergence of the New Negro at the start of the twentieth century and in a later iteration during the 1930s, and the emergence of a decolonized black subject in the mid-twentieth century and later in the political and cultural movements for independence of the 1960s and 1970s.

Bert Williams’s and Paul Robeson’s performances during the first three decades of the twentieth century are shaped by the reconstruction of the enslaved black self that two generations of New Negroes undertook in the wake of emancipation and Reconstruction. Harry Belafonte’s and Bob Marley’s performances occur at a slightly different conjuncture, during the era of decolonization initiated in the Third World at midcentury and continuing into the next two decades. The space between these two eras marks the shift from the black male subject’s objectification to his interpellation as a subject of desire, with neither of these processes of public definition and recognition bringing him any closer to Spillers’s notion of the flesh as the lost experience of a wounded, relational black body. Instead, during these four very particular cultural moments in the twentieth century, each of these black male performers became the setting or stage for certain operations of the gaze that separated the black body from the flesh and fixed it in its racial meanings. With the black male subject’s entrance at midcentury into a global political order, the black male body made legible in discourses of Negritude, sovereignty, and freedom was also prescribed by interracial, intra-racial, and heterosexist cultural discourses that continue to avoid the more relational and sexually open dimen-

sions of the black subject's experience. *Skin Acts* reads these skin acts against the grain in order to resurrect a sense of the black male performer as a body and subject in relation, interacting with his own afterimage in the space of performance between himself and his audience, and interacting with his image of the black and white female subject as "other" in the sexual relation.

Following the careers of the four performers described here, one sees specific ways in which the performer thwarts the gaze and complicates his symbolic and imaginary position by enacting a different sense of the body in the various forms of intimacy and relation made possible in the phenomenological space of performance. The voice and the ear in particular, what neuroscientists describe as the audio-vocal interface, become sites for the reappearance of the flesh as a more haptic, tactile, sensory experience of the embodied black male self beyond the limiting blind spots of the gaze. However, to understand the various dimensions in which the skin operates in black male performance on a continuum from flesh to image, one needs to retrace the varying histories of the skin in colonial discourse, Western epistemology, and modern psychoanalysis. One also needs to engage the work of the first black thinker to link these skin discourses to the psychic formation of the modern black (male) subject, the psychiatrist and theorist of decolonization Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Histories of the Skin and Difference

For Hortense Spillers, an American grammar of race as a history of skin discourse stems all the way back to the era of conquest in the Americas. It originates, as she describes, "with a narrative self, [who] in an apparent unity of feeling . . . uncovers the means by which to subjugate the 'foreign' . . . whose most easily remarkable and irremediable difference is perceived in skin color."⁸ By the mid-fifteenth century, Spillers periodizes, "a century and a half before Shakespeare's 'old black ram' of an Othello 'tups' that 'white ewe' of a Desdemona, the magic of skin color is already installed as a decisive factor in human dealings."⁹ Michael Taussig also ties European attitudes toward color to "a colonially split world in which 'man in a state of nature,' as Goethe would have it, loves vivid color, while the Europeans are fearful of it."¹⁰ In *Europe's Indians*, Vanita Seth adds historical nuance to Taussig's bold assertion that "color is a colonial subject," arguing that the attachment of color and skin to an essentialized notion of human difference is a process that evolves in Western thought as a product of European colonization, culminating in nineteenth-century biological understandings of race.¹¹

Spillers's discussion of the foregrounding of skin color in colonial discourse, Taussig's contextualizing of attitudes toward color itself as deeply tied to colonialism, and Seth's linking of skin color to a deeper investment in seeing, identifying, and classifying difference, all demonstrate a paradigm shift across a number of fields, the move away from a privileging of difference in favor of discourses of relationality and even sameness. In *Flesh of My Flesh*, Kaja Silverman agrees with Seth that "the notion that we cannot be ourselves unless we are different from everyone else is relatively new. From Plato until the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance, not difference, was the organizing principle of the universe."¹² In earlier moments during the European age of discovery, explorers relied on discourses of resemblance and similitude, of relationality rather than difference, to aid in their comprehension of the other.¹³ Silverman, like Morrison, explicitly links this denaturalizing of difference and return to notions of resemblance and relationality to the trope of the flesh, with the notion of resemblance functioning similarly in Silverman's account as the reminder of a premodern order based on similitude does in Seth's. The skin, in other words, becomes the primary signifier of the *meaningfulness* of difference, producing racialized difference as significant, as signifying. And if the skin is the site for a modern desire to see difference, Morrison and others contrast this with a very different set of meanings latent in the trope of the flesh. In all of these accounts, it is the denaturalizing of the givenness of human difference that begins to emerge as centrally at stake in contemporary discussions of the skin, and the flesh emerges as the leading trope for the shift away from difference and toward relationality.¹⁴

While the gaze has received much critical attention in the study of modern knowledge, power, and subjectivity, only more recently has the skin been seen as more than the object of the gaze, as having a form of knowing and interacting with the world that is all its own.¹⁵ While some of this work can be found in an emergent discourse on the history of the senses and affect theory, my interest is in those more psychoanalytically inflected studies that understand the senses as tied to libidinous desires—to the erogenous zones, to the psychic objects and bodily organs crucial to subjective formation and psychic development—and to relational, dyadic interactions. My intention is to foreground the skin's role as a site of both libidinal conflict and intersubjective relationality—a site of drives and objects as well as transference relations—which sets the stage for my discussion of the struggle between affinity and differentiation as a structuring force in the racialization of the human psyche. In other words, to the degree that the skin can function as both an erotogenic zone tied to the individual's conflicts and instincts, and as a site of relation and contact be-

tween the individual and others, it marks subjects' acts of differentiation and of affinity in their interpersonal dealings.

Skin-based or skin-linked knowledges have the capacity to bring the gaze back into relation with other psychic objects related to the drives but also with pre-symbolic, pre-imaginary, but still object-seeking, sensuous forms of knowing. Naomi Segal focuses on the multisensorial dimensions of the skin, using the term "consensuality" to describe the skin's capacity to take in knowledge about the world synesthetically through the utilization of more than one of the senses.¹⁶ The skin links the various senses to each other and facilitates the subject's ability to use this linked sensorium to learn about the world and others. In a separate but related vein, Laura U. Marks identifies films made by Third World artists as harnessing a different perceptual regime, one that uses visual cues to evoke touch beyond sight, what Jennifer Barker calls also the tactile eye.¹⁷ Much of Marks's and Barker's analyses describe how certain photographs and cinematic shots emphasize or foreground the more haptic and bodily dimensions of the image's surface, drawing texture out of the visual with the photo or film still acting as a multisensorial sight. In each instance, all three are working more or less explicitly with a distinction between more haptic, bodily forms of knowing that are prior to our imaginary idealizations of ourselves in our mirror images, and to our symbolic construction of the world of objects and others through language.¹⁸

While Marks's focus on epistemologies of the skin is grounded in contemporary new media, other scholars have shown that the skin as the site of an autonomous mode of knowing the self has a long and deep history in Western thought. Three works—Steven Connor's account of the "poetics of the skin" in art and intellectual thought, Claudia Benthien's sociocultural history of Western perceptions of the skin, and Nina Jablonski's natural history of the skin—take us across the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences, respectively, to provide a history of skin perception.¹⁹ Despite their very different approaches, all three authors concur that a significant shift occurred over the course of modernity in the ways writers and thinkers throughout Europe and the Western hemisphere thought about the skin's interactions with an outside world.

Varying ways of thinking about the skin evolved within the context of changing understandings of the body. Gradually over the course of the Enlightenment, the skin and the body both began to harden, to be seen as less and less permeable. It is this specific history of the skin's growing impermeability, discussed in further detail below, that has the greatest significance for how we think about the skin in terms of questions of race and difference. In

contrast, the notion of the skin's permeability moves it closer to the idea of the flesh as the site for a pure relationality between human subjects. Brian Masumi explicitly defines relationality as a pre-discursive, pre-symbolic mode of the body. In this mode, the body is still social but it is not the naturalized marker of difference. Rather, it is a "pure" sociality enacting social relation as "interaction-in-the-making," and "ontogenetically 'prior to' social construction."²⁰ This mode of the body precedes the "separating out of individuals and the identifiable groupings that they end up boxing themselves into."²¹ In the context of this relational body, movement or continuity is as "elementary" as difference, "relation as primordial as individuation."²² Given the focus of classic psychoanalysis on a libidinal body riven with the conflicts born of hereditary instincts in tension with the demands of others and culture, this turn to a pre-symbolic, relational body also suggests alternative modes of affiliation and attachment between the dyad of self and other.

Relationality has been theorized more extensively in contemporary American psychoanalytic writings that deviate from the Freudian model of drives linked to psychosexual and oedipal development, examining instead the dyadic relation between self and other as constitutive of subject formation and the workings of the unconscious. These more relational and interpersonal schools of psychoanalytic thought branch out in a number of directions, but the work of psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin offers one useful example.²³ Benjamin distinguishes between *intrapsychic* and *intersubjective* ways of knowing the other. The first operates where the subject's objects, fantasies, constitutional drives, and projections reside, turning the other into an object incorporated by the subject, producing *incorporative* forms of identification between self and other.²⁴ Alongside the *intrapsychic object*, however, is a separate awareness of an *intersubjective other* out there in the Real, in the world, one who cannot be fully reduced to object status. Rather than becoming the love object, a creation, a fantasy and projection of another, the *like subject* is that other who can neither be fully assimilated nor eradicated and destroyed in the subject's efforts to individuate and distinguish him or herself. This other, who is a like subject, presents a material limit to the incorporative self at the boundaries of the skin. The skin is thus the marker for a shared resistance to incorporation that runs alongside the intersubjective contact between self and other, especially in the context of sexual and psychosocial desires for intimacy and contact.

The distinction Jessica Benjamin draws between the intrapsychic objects of a desiring subject and the inescapable intersubjectivity of a Real other maps suggestively onto the tension between the skin as an object of the distancing,

racializing gaze, or as the fleshy site for registering relational and reversible aspects of human touch. In *The Skin Ego*, a work of French psychoanalysis translated for an English-speaking audience in 1987, Didier Anzieu describes the skin's "echotactilism," exchanges of meaning facilitated through tactile contact, as the very model for a more reversible understanding of the relationship between self and other, self and world.²⁵ This reversibility — when I touch your skin I also feel your skin touching mine — is what Merleau-Ponty also described as the flesh's "reflectedness," that is, the epidermal body's particular mode of knowing.²⁶ As Anzieu also describes: "It is on the model of tactile reflexivity that the other sensory reflexivities (hearing oneself make sounds, smelling one's own odour, looking at oneself in the mirror), and subsequently the reflexivity of thinking, are constructed."²⁷ The skin, then, serves as the platform for imagining aspects of the self-other relation in more concretely epidermal terms but also reimagining the "interior intersubjectivity" of the black subject as modeled on the materiality, the material reality, of the skin as a medium of chiasmic reversibility.²⁸

In these various studies of the history of the skin, color ties the skin indelibly to the history of colonialism and, in consequence, to the epistemological categorization of difference; the sensorial grounds the skin in its own forms of knowing that subsume the gaze; imagining the skin's permeability moves it closer to ideas of relationality; and on the pivot point of the skin's reversible nature lies the distinction between sameness and difference that so defines the study of race. Overall, it is this focus on the relationship between samenesses and differences in human interaction that is precisely the new terrain in skin studies that would benefit from a dialogue with scholarship on the study of race.

For black subjects, the tension between skin and flesh — the skin that can be seen and represented and the flesh that can be felt and mimetically shared — emerges out of colonialism and slavery.²⁹ This dualistic tension between an experience of oneself as sensational flesh rather than epidermal skin has structured the lived being of black subjects throughout colonial modernity as they struggled to demonstrate their shared humanity in the face of the gaze of the white other. What is performed most acutely in the work of the four performers I discuss here is precisely this tension between these two different ways of knowing blackness and interacting with the other. In one aspect of performance, racial identity is structured as the hard exterior of a symbolic reality created by the epidermalizing gaze. In another, the performance represents an experience of the black body felt as a permeable, interior orifice, as sensational, invaginating, relatable flesh.



FIG 1.1. *Skin*. Digital image and installation. Courtesy of Sandra Stephens.

Orifice versus Phallus (Or, the Permeable versus the Libidinous Black Body)

The converging of affect theory, psychoanalytically inflected discourses of the skin, and postcolonial and black cultural studies has the potential to sharpen our understanding of the knotty relationship between two of modernity's primary modes of difference, the racial and the sexual. This theoretical challenge, one that Kimberlé Crenshaw first named for us as the study of intersectionality, and that Hortense Spillers later challenged black cultural studies to take up as a “psychoanalytics” of blackness, is also the project I engage in here by distinguishing between epidermal skin and sensational flesh as two different but linked modes of understanding, experiencing, and performing the black body.³⁰ By doing this kind of cultural analysis one recognizes that there is a black subject “before race,” that blackness is as much a libidinous site as one of political and cultural consciousness. Having said that, one also must note that, in a libidinal mode, the epidermal also entails an understanding of the skin as phallic versus a very different way of understanding the skinned body as erogenic, permeable flesh.

Any dialogue between studies of racial and sexual formation benefits from engaging psychoanalysis and not eliding sexuality as somehow secondary in the black subject's psychic structure and makeup, subordinate to race rather than intimately intertwined with it. Given that intertwining, *Skin Acts'* larger theoretical stakes include demonstrating precisely how one can think race and

sexuality separately but relationally—intersectionally—through the skin as the organic, material trope for both a libidinal and a racial self. This dialogue between race and sex as modes of bodily and psychic difference also detours through Western histories of the bodily surface. What emerges is the realization that our understanding of the skin as a hardened, impermeable container for difference is tied to our phallic understanding of our libidinal bodies.

It is one of *Skin Acts*' premises that, no matter the cultural period or archival text, black masculinity is a relational identity and, therefore, black male performance occurs in a radically relational and intersubjective context. Black masculinity is always engaged with the sameness and difference of the other as a like subject, whether that other is female or white. Therefore, black masculine performance always holds within it the traces of a performance of femininity, a performance of the gender relation produced by sexual difference, in much the same way racial performance has, already inscribed within it, a set of social relations based on racial difference. Throughout *Skin Acts*, each male's racial performance includes a discussion of gender relations and relevant aspects of the female performer's skin act. These readings aim to provide a model for how to think about race, sex, and gender together in black masculine performance. The relationality or intersectionality of racial and sexual difference is inscribed on the skin literally when the epidermalizing of racial difference is understood more broadly as a phallicizing of the body.

To understand what this means, how epidermalization and phallicization occur simultaneously, requires a theoretically informed history of the skin and the body, a genealogy of the construction of both racial and sexual difference, their shared trajectories in terms of how we think about the modern body and self. As powerfully suggestive as Spillers's reference to the captive black subject as flesh is in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," one finds an equally provocative insight for thinking about the *gendering* of racial and sexual difference, as both relate to the skin and the flesh, in Sylvia Wynter's equally canonical essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings."³¹ For Wynter, a substitution occurs somewhere between the early modern era of colonial encounter and the nineteenth-century development of the racial sciences that attached human difference indelibly to the epidermal surface. Racial difference essentially replaces gender difference as the structuring division understood to define man, and this substitution accompanies an even deeper epistemic shift in understanding the human body in terms of physiognomy rather than anatomy.

With the shift from anatomy to physiognomy, in the intercultural context of colonial modernity the color of the skin becomes more of a marker of an essentialized or naturalized difference between peoples than the sexual organs

had been in a more homogeneous cultural and racial context. Here Wynter challenges the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition to historicize the onset of colonial modernity as precisely the moment when sexual and racial differences were linked together through different understandings of the body and its associations with the skin. While more recent histories of the skin add chronological nuance to this process, they also tend to concur with Wynter's suggestive observation that the shift from anatomy to physiognomy partly situates how Europeans thought about the *difference* of the racialized body within the deeper question of how they thought about the skin.³²

Given the “fabulous freaks” that “roamed the pages of ancient and Renaissance texts,” Vanita Seth argues, it was easy enough for the first European colonial explorers to translate the strangeness of the new peoples of the New World according to the terms of a pervasive discourse of the monstrous and the grotesque that characterized early modern Europe.³³ The world was understood as inhabited by “monstrous species” — “the dog-headed cynocephali, the horse-bodied onocentaurs, or the double-sexed androgynes of Africa” — and “monstrous individuals” — “conjoined twins, a child born with two heads.”³⁴ “Diversity” included an imaginative array of “wild men and women, ghosts, witches, and . . . human monstrosities,” and a defining feature of these monstrous creatures was their anatomical abnormality.³⁵ Both Seth and Benthien concur that the early modern encounter with racial difference occurred at a moment when the European colonizer saw the native other as resembling something grotesque but nonetheless *familiar* in early modern discourses, rather than signifying as something different.

In this premodern epistemological universe, the skin was seen as permeable and malleable to the point of being horrific. Europeans applied these different physical standards and meanings of difference to themselves. The differences between female and male anatomies, for example, did not mark a clear, gendered differentiation between the sexes. Rather, the female gender was seen as merely the male body's grotesque inversion.³⁶ Europeans believed in a “one-sex model” that informed their conceptions of the body “from the ancient Greeks to the eighteenth century.”³⁷ In the writings of a sixth-century commentator, the female genitals were simply “inside the body and not outside it.”³⁸ As another put it, “Turn outward the woman's, and turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find the same in both in every respect.”³⁹ While anatomy preserved a hierarchical distinction between men and women, it “nevertheless did not presume radical differences between male and female anatomy.”⁴⁰ Rather, gendered anatomies and organs folded into each other to create an invaginated understanding of the body: “Medieval physicians re-

garded the body as a series of nested or concentric enclosures, each bounded by its own membrane or tunic.” “The skin bounds the body,” and enfolds the viscera of the lungs, the brain, the heart, the belly, all “thought of as enclosed in several layers of skin.”⁴¹

If we historicize Wynter’s distinction between physiognomy and anatomy, the shift from sexed anatomies to racialized physiognomies not only marks changing understandings of the meaning, or meaningfulness, of difference on the body. It also marks the shift from an anatomical understanding of the body as a site of invaginated layers to a physiognomic understanding of the body as consisting of merely the two layers of a hard, impermeable outside covering a softer organic interior. Gradually over the course of the Enlightenment, as the skin and the body both begin to harden and be seen as less and less permeable, the tying of difference to the epidermal and physiognomic also hardens the bodily surface as an impermeable container of difference. This hardening then contributes to an understanding of physiognomic difference as the marker of fundamental differences within the species. In this world of the body as a hardened container of differences, both the anatomical differences represented in the sexual organs and the physiognomic differences registered in the facial features and bodily skin color of the other become naturalized. The skin is differentiated as belonging to different genders based on the shape of the sexual organs, genital skin; the skin is differentiated as marking different races based on the body’s color, epidermal skin. By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the onset of Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, it is the body with its epidermal skin and hardened physiognomy that is also understood in libidinal terms as fundamentally phallic.

The split modern body with its hardened skin contrasts in dramatic ways with the body of the medieval grotesque. The very word “complexion” that we take to refer naturally to physiognomy, the exterior surface and features of the body and the face, began as a term describing how the exterior expresses a fluid interior, the “humors” or the humorous fluids of the body.⁴² For the early anatomists, “the actuality of the skin may have been invisible” in favor of “the flesh beneath the skin,” the latter the site for a grotesque body that ignores the closed, regular, and smooth regions of the body surface.⁴³ Instead, this grotesque body is made up of its “excrescences and orifices” where what is inside can become outside: “In the grotesque body, the boundaries between body and world and those between individual bodies are much less differentiated and more open than they are in the new body canon: the very boundary of the grotesque body reveals the intermingling with the world in that protruding body parts (the nose or stomach, for example) are understood as projecting into the

world, and the inside of the body comes out and mingles with the world.”⁴⁴ The reverse is also true, as Benthien continues: “In this pre-Enlightenment conceptual world, there are many more body openings than we would recognize: eyes, ears, nose, mouth, breasts, navel, anus, urinary passage, and vulva.”⁴⁵ Orifices were very much a feature of the grotesque body because they emphasized that body’s permeability in contact with an outside world, while also leading back to the interior of the body, the visceral organs.

Contemporary affect theory and discussions of the body as sensational skin have picked up on this inner/outer/interface capacity of the skin as a way of getting back to the materiality of a more relational body. Barker organizes the body visible to a “tactile eye” into three modes, the haptic, the kinesthetic, and the visceral. For Massumi, the *quasi corporeal* or incorporeal body, “the body without an image,” is one that we come to know through the linked modes of the proprioceptive (or muscular), the tactile (or haptic), and the visceral.⁴⁶ “Tactility is the sensibility of the skin as surface of contact between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Proprioception folds tactility into the body, enveloping the skin’s contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera. . . . Proprioception translates [movement] into a muscular memory of relationality. . . . Proprioception effects a double translation of the subject and the object into the body, at a medium depth [that is] one of the strata proper to the corporeal; it is a dimension of the *flesh*.”⁴⁷ Massumi’s use of the trope of the flesh to characterize this body that escapes both the image and the signifier—the body that remains, this material remainder of the symbolic and imaginary body—points not only to the prominence of the trope in current constructions of the sensational body but also to the echoes of Merleau-Ponty’s earlier constructions of the flesh as the residual trace of the grotesque body in continental philosophy and Western thought.

Prior to current accounts, the closest the contemporary body has come to resembling the grotesque medieval body with its permeable relation between the internal and the external is in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of the flesh. Since, as he describes, “every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space,” Merleau-Ponty sees the touch and the gaze as interacting in a reversible, reflecting relationship to each other.⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty also describes a crisscrossing between the touch and the gaze, a “double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible” that we can then use to envision a more interactive, intersubjective, sensorial theory of subjectivity.⁴⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian mind-body relation is less dualistic than circular: “The body sensed and the body sentient are as the ob-

verse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course.”⁵⁰ The Hegelian self-other relation is less dialectical than chiasmic: “One sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases.”⁵¹ The chiasm is not just a metaphor but also a structural analog for intersubjective relations where “there is not only a me-other rivalry, but a co-functioning. We function as one unique body” in a kind of modern analog to the medieval, one-sexed, body.⁵² Chiasm is the structural analog to the flesh because both function in a movement similar to that of a Möbius strip, where the lines of the Möbius strip blur and weave into and around each other in a circular movement that reaches a limit on either end around two clear and definable poles.

Invagination is the other term scholars use to describe this type of circular, reflexive, bodily relationality tied to the skin. Invagination represents the “implicative capacity of the skin—its capacity to be folded in upon itself.”⁵³ It is part of the basic structure of Didier Anzieu’s skin ego that the skin functions psychically as both “shell” and “kernel,” a “matter of relations between surfaces, inserted one inside another.”⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty also characterizes these chiasmic, fleshy relations as an *intercorporeity* involving “reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. . . . There are two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naïvely, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other.”⁵⁵ Invagination thus takes us not only backward in time, to a grotesque conception of the body and its organs as epidermal surfaces and orifices that fold back on each other, the residue of the medieval body—but also forward to the modern twentieth-century body of phenomenology.

Invagination also takes us forward to the modern twentieth-century body of the drives. Jacques Lacan, invoking Merleau-Ponty’s trope of the chiasmic “flesh of the world” to describe the subject’s looping, circular, chiasmic interaction with a world felt on the boundaries of the skin, imagined the movement or “circuit” of the drives in invaginating, chiasmic terms as, “something that emerges from a rim, which redoubles its enclosed structure, following a course that returns.”⁵⁶ Visualizing the movement of desire as a “turning inside-out represented by its pocket, invaginating through the erogenous zone,” which he represents in a diagram of the movement of the drive between aim, rim, and goal, Lacan also describes the circuit of the drive as a circling around a rim or orifice whose erogeneity lies in the fact that it will never close (see figure 1.2).⁵⁷

It is a crucial aspect of the Lacanian theory of the subject that the drive emerges at the very place of the signifying cut, that mark on the body that interpellates all subjects as sexually differentiated members of the social order.

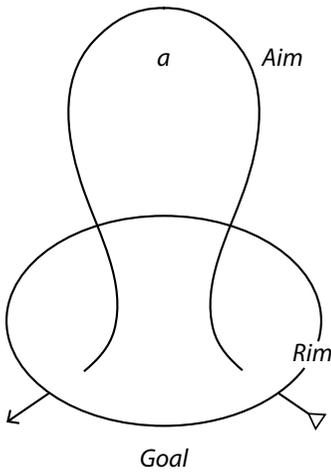
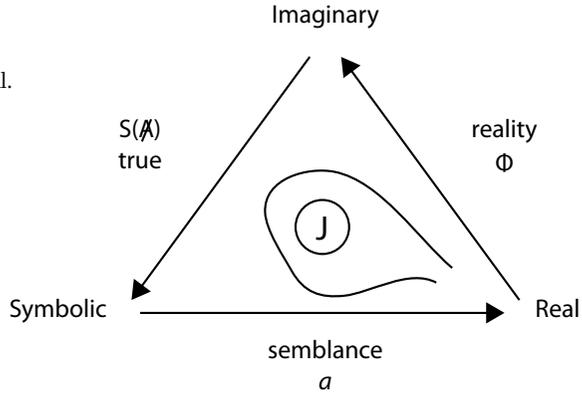


FIG 1.2. Based on Lacan's diagram of the partial drive and its circuit. Illustration.

"It is through sexual reality that the signifier came into the world," Lacan states, by which he means that we emerge into consciousness, social being, and language as sexually differentiated subjects.⁵⁸ Furthermore, in the symbolic order, there is nothing behind the signifying cut but lack, the sexual cut as a hard barrier between a constructed and a pre-discursive or primordial self.⁵⁹ For Lacan, sexuality is phallic precisely because it entails the subject's desire to fill up this split self, to fill up in the subject what is "not-whole."⁶⁰ The body's orifices are not seen as openings that fold unto and into each other, but rather, as holes that need to be filled, made (w)hole by the substitution of phallic objects that temporarily replace and thereby fulfill the subject's desire.

By conceiving of the libidinal body very differently, as an in(vagina)ted orifice rather than a phallic (w)hole, this turning inside out of the body and the skin has implications for how we think about modern sexuality. As Anzieu elaborates: "'Invagination,' the term used in anatomy and physiology for this relation, is a useful reminder that the vagina is not an organ of particular con-texture but a fold of the skin just like the lips, the anus, the nose or the eye-lids. It has no hardened layer or cornea to act as a protective shield; its mucous membrane is exposed, its sensitivity and erogeneity right on the surface."⁶¹ The permeability of invaginating rather than phallic skin, the vagina as skin without a "hardened layer or cornea" — these associative metaphors of invagination point us neither to the hardened bodies of the Imaginary (the body as its mirror image) nor to the Symbolic body of discourse. Rather, the body as invaginated orifice(s) points us to the integration of the sensory and the consensual into the realm of the libido and the sexual drives. Erogenicity and permeability, as

FIG 1.3. Based on Lacan's diagram of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Illustration.



intensified sensation residing on the rim of the body-with-skin (on erotogenic genital skin in particular), lie alongside the instinctual conflict, deferral, and lack that characterize the phallic subject's relation to his or her drives.

Lacan literalizes this libidinous body, engaged in a constant, chiasmic search for wholeness, as itself an organ, the libido-body, with erogenous zones composed of orifices and rims, protrusions and surfaces, much like the invaginating skin.⁶² “The unconscious is more like a bladder,” Lacan also states, imaging the partial circuit of desire as a volume enfolding onto and into, out of and back to, the edge or rim of a bladder-like, invaginating space.⁶³ In one of his more famous diagrams of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, desire presses in between them (as J for jouissance, Lacan's term for desire) in the empty space that the phallic signifier and the epidermal mirror image seek to fill in and cover up (see figure 1.3).⁶⁴ One can also think of this “libido-body” as the flesh. Elsewhere Lacan renames it the “man-let” or *lamella*, an entity he describes much like the blob or flap of skin floating between the three psychosomatic orders, on the bodily edge of the Real.

This “unreal” organ, the lamella—a physical manifestation of the libido, of the fleshiness of living being itself—is thrown off from the symbolic body, the body of symbolic capture.⁶⁵ The lamella is “an organ without body, the incorporeal and for that very reason indestructible life-substance that persists beyond the circuit of generation and corruption.”⁶⁶ What is most fascinating about the lamella is the way it mimics the properties of the skin as flesh. “Extra-flat” like a “large crêpe,” it “moves like the amoeba, so utterly flat that it can slip under doors.”⁶⁷ Like racialized skin, it is something “that would not feel good dripping down your face” even as it “comes and envelops your face.”⁶⁸ The lamella is the flap of skin, the body-skin, left behind like the “afterbirth” as the subject

separates from the skin ego to become an individuated self.⁶⁹ It flies off the body rather than assimilating into word or image. It is, therefore, everything about the living being of the subject that cannot be captured by word or image and symbolized as difference.

Lacan's orifice-filled, rather than phallic, libido-body is invested with the irrepressible force of the sensational. The lamella, then, is the figure for the sensational body in Lacan's tripartite schema. Despite the fact that Lacan typically embeds the body almost fully within the symbolic order, he also conceptualized a libido-body of remainders, excesses, and surpluses that exceed the signifier, the fleshy aspects of a bodily reality that exceed the realms of discursive construction and social meaning and point to a Real outside the text.

In deference to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh as a site for a different relation between the sensational self and the world of the other, in *Skin Acts* this orifice or erogenous point of contact on the skin is the site of an *intercorporeal* drive, where the skin retains a sense of the chiasmic relationship between mind and body, the gaze and the touch, the need for differentiation and attachment, encompassing both intrapsychic objects and the other as a like subject, self versus other, the field of the Other and the field of the Real. The intercorporeal drive seeks to touch (upon) the sensational body rather than the body constructed by the signifier. Linking invagination and intercorporeity, the skin becomes the reflexive site where bodies can touch each other, can be touched by the other, and can make themselves feel touched or touch themselves.⁷⁰

Where does racial difference, the construction of both self and other as different, fit in this return to the grotesque libidinal body with its intercorporeal drives and invaginating orifices? If, as Massumi describes, the "skin is faster than the word," and if there is a body that escapes the signifier, does the sensational, fleshy black body then become androgynous, unmarked by race but also prior to the body marked by sexual difference?⁷¹ The erogenous orifices of the libidinous body, that residual remainder of the body as its orifices that figured so largely in the medieval grotesque body and reappears in the Lacanian libido-body of the modern subject of the drive, are precisely the place in which one also finds a racialized body, embedded within the libidinal, pressing in rather than standing outside of the Symbolic or Imaginary orders. The libidinous black body moves chiasmically between body and flesh, the sexual and the consensual, phallic closure and invaginated openness, but also between phallic signifier and epidermal image, flowing in and around the discourse, visual codes, and languages of race.⁷²

Thinking about race and sex together requires a retracing of the histori-

cal relationship between discourses of racial and sexual difference and the ways in which those intertwined discourses reveal varying modes of understanding the body. Over the course of modernity, the epistemic move from anatomy to physiognomy marks also epic shifts from medieval conceptions of the grotesque body as permeable, reversible, and invaginated to Enlightenment understandings of the body as a hardened container of both racial and sexual differences, inscribed onto epidermal and genital skin. Since the latter is the body Freud inherits at the end of the nineteenth century, the hardened epidermal body also becomes the stage for psychoanalytic understandings of the libidinal body as phallic. However, latent traces of an alternative, orifice-filled body with antecedents in the medieval grotesque find their way into the trope of the “flesh of the world” in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, into the idea of the body-without-an-image in Massumi’s affect theory, and even into the modern libido-body of the drives theorized in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In *Skin Acts*, this body becomes the source of an intercorporeal drive that profoundly shapes the interracial and intercultural space of racialized masculine performance.

Whereas contemporary scholarship on the skin remains somewhat blind to the intertwinings of racial and sexual identities in intercultural New World modernity, in the archive of black diasporan and postcolonial writings there is one figure who undertook precisely this kind of study of the role of the skin amidst the intersectionality of colonial desire and the historical materiality of race. Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist, anticolonial thinker, activist, and phenomenologist situated at the crossroads of multiple disciplines well before the notion of interdisciplinarity took hold. His efforts in *Black Skin, White Masks* to think blackness through the concrete metaphor of the skin provide us with a further set of conceptual tools, now originating in black studies of the psyche, for exploring how the epidermalized schema of a black racial unconscious shapes not only certain signature performances of black masculinity in interaction with a racializing white gaze but also the black male performer’s intercorporeal relationship with his audience and with his own fleshy, desiring, orifice-filled, relational self. Reengaging Fanon in this context, in relation to a psychoanalytically inflected discussion of the skin and the flesh, also reveals the productivity of thinking about the phenomenology of race relations not only as it impacts contemporary performance (as one site for the working through of the self-other relation) but also as it has effects within the intraracial and the interracial sexual relation.

Epidermalization (and the Desire for Difference)

In the oft-cited, opening phrase of Fanon's fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the white French child's cry—"“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’”—performs the gaze's other reality as unseen speech, as the “‘un-apprehensible’ agency through which we are socially ratified or negated as spectacle.”⁷³ With this opening, Fanon wants his readers to experience the power of this call as an interpellating speech act. The gaze takes notice of, touches upon, the skin of the black subject, and this sight is given discursive meaning by and in the child's cry.⁷⁴ While Fanon seems concerned here primarily with the appearance of blackness, how the raced subject looks and becomes visible in a racist world, I would argue that what Fanon also demonstrates powerfully in this chapter, and throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*, is the ways this epidermalizing call interpellates both the white child and the black man in a symbolic order of difference filled with racial meanings.

Fanon's observations both here and throughout the text rest on the subtlety of distinctions between seeing blackness and seeing blackness as *difference*. This latter phenomenon, the *desire for difference*, is less an inherent feature of the self than a feature of the desire of the Other, a structural aspect of the social symbolic order. It determines the psyches of modern subjects on multiple sides of the chiasmic color line, shaping the sexual relation as a site of interaction between self and other, and informing the racialized parameters of social conflict in New World political histories.

It is striking how much Fanon uses metaphors of the skin and sensation to capture the black subject's phenomenological and physiological experience of his racialization, by the Other, as different. The desire for difference is a fundamentally intersubjective formation felt on the body of the black subject as a touch. In other words, the black subject experiences symbolic capture in bodily, sensational, haptic terms. Fanon's discovery that he is seen as nothing more than a thing feels like he is being “sealed” into a “crushing objecthood,” as if encased within his own skin. He apprehends the gaze as a sensation “running over” the surface of his body, first burning and then leaving him “shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones.” He trembles, feels slapped, slashed, walled in. He wears his epidermal skin like an ugly “uniform,” but is so sensitized by this skin that he becomes insect-like, “slip[ping] into corners” with his “long antennae pick[ing] up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things.” As his antennae pick up the racial meanings written onto the skin, “catch-phrases strewn over the surface,” their lexicon is physiological: “nigger underwear smells of nigger — nigger teeth are white — nigger feet are big — the

nigger's barrel chest." These smells, sights, impressions of the body's volume and size are not just scopic; they are tactile and multisensorial, synesthetically fusing the racialized body and the skin on the symbolic grid.⁷⁵

The alienating irony for Fanon is that the very gaze that objectifies him also liberates him. It acknowledges him, gives him his meaning, his location, in the signifying order. Massumi describes this order as a grid, "an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: male versus female, black versus white, gay versus straight, and so on. A body correspond[s] to a 'site' on the grid defined by an overlapping of one term from each pair. The body came to be defined by its pinning to the grid."⁷⁶ In the context of this grid, Fanon experiences interpellation as a physical sensation of location and belonging: "I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it."⁷⁷ In reality, this gaze distances him from his body. The gaze is a freeze frame, visually arresting his motion, fixing him into a socially determined position marked by his race. It then inserts this frozen body, the black body held captive on the representational grid, hardened and symbolic, as a surrogate body-image or substitute.

The gaze that places you on the grid in the first place, locating and interpellating you, is also the one that limits and constrains you, as Fanon also describes: "The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye."⁷⁸ In the language of skin color, he relates his sensation of being pinned into the social frame by the epidermalizing, staining, gaze of the other. He "stumble[s]" when he realizes that in this scopic encounter between the gaze and the skin, it is the gaze that frames his movement out into the world, giving it meaning. The gaze endows as it abrades—scraping away the material flesh of the black body it puts something else in its place.

When Fanon has to "meet the white man's eyes," he feels it literally as the burden of an "unfamiliar weight." The weight (of race) is imposed so that the ideological work of privileging its removal can begin. Fanon describes researchers struggling to produce "a serum for 'denegrification'" that would allow the black subject to throw off the "corporeal malediction" of his skin. This malediction is not so much a bodily schema as a "historico-racial schema," not so much corporeal as discursive. It is a mantle, written or placed on the black body symbolically by "the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories." Denegrification is actually the creation of a second skin of racializing words that splits the black subject from himself.⁷⁹

We are used to reading *Black Skin, White Masks* as a genealogy of racial discourse, race as ideology, myth, social construction, as a form of signification and language. However, what has been written on black skin is a surface effect of an even deeper narrative of the skin as a thing woven out of “details, anecdotes, stories” in European thought. As scholars recount how “the integument of the body has become a rigid boundary,”⁸⁰ this same history of corporeal malediction that creates the skin as a mantle or epidermal casing shapes the geo-historical space of the colony where: “identity ceases to be an ongoing process of self-making and social interaction. It becomes instead a thing to be possessed and displayed. It is a silent sign that closes down the possibility of communication. . . . Identity refers to an indelible mark or code somehow written into the bodies of its carriers [and] otherness can only be a threat.”⁸¹ This is Gilroy’s description of a discursively racialized black self who is the subject most exposed to processes of epidermalization and denegritification whereby the hardened skin becomes nothing but a sign. Epidermalization repeats and reinforces the writing of a symbolic discourse of impermeability on the body.

Gilroy accurately describes racial epidermalization as an effect in the field of vision. The skin becomes a specular object, a shadowy “afterimage—a lingering effect of looking too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts at home and abroad.”⁸² When we extend the metaphor of the lens of the eye across the cultural field to the screen, the gaze is the invisible social agency—ideology, discourse, cultural norms—that places us in the picture, on the image-screen, as nothing but this afterimage, as nothing beyond our symbolic status as “*photo-graphed*” subjects.⁸³ For Silverman, the cultural screen is a chiasmic extension of the mirror of the self into the symbolic realm.⁸⁴ However, the skin-as-subject is not just the visual artifact of colonial imaginations, powerful as that visual legacy may be in the construction of blackness. The “subject of representation” is simultaneously a spectacle and a look, an object and a subject, and neither is in the place of the gaze as the social agency with imprinting and interpellating power. The black subject racialized on the grid as a sign is not so much silent as articulating himself as he is seen, making himself seen as he is spoken (about), flesh conveying word.

The skin, in other words, is more than an afterimage; it is also a synesthetic projection into the present that involves all of the senses. Agreeing with Gilroy’s critique of race as a product of the visual regime of the sign, Benthien states: “Culturally, the perception of the skin was increasingly turned into a perception of distance . . . only as the observed skin of the other with whom I come face to face does skin become a sign, only through this separation can the other truly become a recognizable and classifiable object. . . . The

discourse about race is based on an outdated semiotic model constructed on the physiognomic ideas of the eighteenth century.”⁸⁵ However, the skin as *only* the shadowy afterimage of a distancing, othering, colonial gaze from the past, as Gilroy describes it, keeps us confined to, naturalized within, the skin’s symbolic and semiotic meanings. It limits our ability to see the skin as also expressive of the self’s effort to subjectify itself, to speak and articulate itself, to make itself (as the) spoken (about). If on the *subjectifying* cultural screen the image is a form of speech, then also “speech about one’s own skin is speech about oneself as body.”⁸⁶ Benthien states further: “If the repeated, strenuous efforts at fashioning a visual semiotics of the skin are one side of the coin, the other side is the tactile experience of one’s own skin and that of others, which largely escapes external categorization and attribution. The body is not only a cultural sign but also an entity with sensation and perception.”⁸⁷ For the performing black subject, in other words, the *skin acts*.

Half a century after Du Bois described the black subject’s double consciousness as a second sight, Fanon added in *Black Skin, White Masks* a third mode of black self-consciousness, a triple or “third-person consciousness,” which he described as “a slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world.”⁸⁸ This is where Fanon’s more radical interventions in thinking about the skin begin, as the site of a black body that is more, experiences more, signifies more, than the gaze can see. This “corporeal schema” is that of the subject-as-body, the bodily ego, the body-without-an-image that knows itself instead through “residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character.”⁸⁹ Like any good phenomenologist, Fanon wanted to hold on to a sense of his own bodily experience in the world. His lament is precisely that it is this “corporeal schema” that crumbles once he discovers his black body as it is constructed from Symbolic material, from language, from the discourse of the Other.⁹⁰ The gaze hides behind difference what it cannot see of the subject, of the like subjectivity of the other, as the latter exists out there in the Real.

In reading closely Fanon’s discussion of the body and the skin throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*, we need to make the crucial distinction between *epidermal* and *corporeal* blackness in parsing the multiple relationships to black skin he describes throughout the text. The bodily ego or sensational ego is tied to the skin ego, to those erogenous locations on the skin of the body around which the drive circles in search of a living being, beyond a signifying consciousness. It is this intercorporeal body, subject as it is to desire and the circuit of the drive, that sits at the intersection between the sensational body relating to the other in cultural performances and the libidinal body desiring, and being

desired, and desiring to be desired, as a sexual subject-object in private relations between self and other. When the mental image of the body hardens into one's idealized mirror image, that original apprehension, an afterimage of the self as its skin, is repressed.⁹¹

A trace of the skin ego remains, however, in the cutaneous, sensational sense of self accessible through touch. This trace also remains in one's genitally fixed desires, and in the generalized erogeneity or sensitivity of the body as felt on the surface of the skin in contact with the world. As Freud links individual erogenous zones with the skin overall: "The erogenous zones . . . these skin regions merely show the special exaggeration of a form of sensitiveness which is, to a certain degree, found over the whole surface of the skin."⁹² For Freud, the wayward desires of the consensual, multisensorial, erogenous body, if left unchecked, could fix the subject in seeking unnatural oral, anal, or genital pleasures and perverse pleasures in "touching and looking":

At least a certain amount of touching is indispensable for a person in order to attain the normal sexual aim. . . . The same holds true in the end with looking, which is analogous to touching. . . . Covering of the body . . . continuously arouses sexual curiosity and serves to supplement the sexual object by uncovering the hidden parts. This can be turned into the artistic ("sublimation") if the interest is turned from the genitals to the form of the body. . . . On the other hand, the desire for looking becomes a perversion (a) when it is exclusively limited to the genitals.⁹³

"Normal" sexuality, the transference of erogenous desires into normative heterosexual relations, depends on their sublimation from an "autoerotic" mode to an approved sexual object. The "erogenous zones subordinate themselves to the primacy of the genital zone," and the drive to seek pleasure "enters into the service of propagation"; that is, erogeneity is sublimated into, given primary social meaning as, fulfilling one's reproductive instincts.⁹⁴ Nonreproductive acts (for example, homoerotic desire but also autoerotic touching) or acts of "abnormal" desire and reproduction (for example, miscegenation but also cross-racial looking) then become perverse.

We are unaware of this apparition, the erogenous skin ego, precisely because of its twofold repression by, first, a prohibition against touch that is as powerful as the oedipal taboo is against incest, and second, a sublimation of looking "from the genitals to the form of the body," that is, from the body as its fleshy, erogenous organs to the image of the body as its idealized overall form.⁹⁵ Sealed away in prohibitions against contact with that body through touch, the skin-ego and its fleshy organs and bodily aspects are cut away; separated off

they become remainders left behind in erotogenic traces on the body, and in scopical and symbolic representations of the fleshy, erogenous body as hideous.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon theorizes a form of white psychopathology in which the (white) subject, separating from and leaving behind the skin of his own erogenous body, suddenly sees in the image of the black subject an apparition of that residual, leftover body shadowing his or her mirror image. This then becomes sublimated as a black *imago*:

It would be interesting, on the basis of Lacan's theory of the *mirror period*, to investigate the extent to which the *imago* of his fellow built up in the young white at the usual age would undergo an imaginary aggression with the appearance of the Negro. When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable.⁹⁶

This black *imago*, the “black man” that appears in the mirror of the white ego as phobic fantasy and racial stereotype, as the evil shadow of whiteness, is nothing but the afterimage of a foreclosed otherness that is “perceived on the level of the body image,” that is, in the terrifying gap between the (white) subject's own felt body and his body-image. The utopian resolution of this condition, this scotoma, would be what Lacan describes as the “Jouissance of the Other,” that is, an apprehension “of the body of the Other who symbolizes the Other” whereby the appreciation of the (body of the) other is linked to an appreciation of the body (the other) in the self.⁹⁷ In the dystopian colonial setting, however, the “appearance of the Negro” in the mirror has the potential to disrupt the process by which the (white) ego closes up his experience of himself as not-whole with his ideal vision of an Imaginary self.⁹⁸

Fanon goes one step further. The black *imago* that appears as a shadowy apparition in the mirror of the white psyche translates onto the cultural screen as the *imago* of the black phallus.⁹⁹ The Negro as penis is the cultural *imago* that reminds us of the shadowy remainder of the body, the bodiliness of the human subject. When these “Negrophobias” get faithfully reproduced on-screen, the black phallus is not simply a hypersexualized penis. Rather, the black phallus is also, potentially, an image of the sensational body, even if now characterized negatively as biologically determined. “The Negro is fixated at the genital,” “the Negro symbolizes the biological,” “the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state)” — Fanon tells us this repeatedly not in order to point to the black

phallic subject as a fetish arousing desire, but rather, to point to his status as a frightening, anxiety-producing figure for everything the white man uses the black phallus “to defend himself” against.¹⁰⁰ “The Negro . . . gives off no aura of sensuality either through his skin or through his hair. It is just that over a series of long days and long nights the image of the biological-sexual-sensual-genital-nigger has imposed itself on you and you do not know how to get free of it.”¹⁰¹ In Freud’s oedipal narrative, sexual desire is foundationally masculine—“the libido is regularly and lawfully of a masculine nature”—and the phallus represents what one cannot have, for example, the father’s sexual relationship with the mother.¹⁰² In a Freudian world in which all genital desire is seen as fundamentally phallic, the phallus as a site of erogenous desire is transformed or sublimated into something more socially appropriate, into “normal,” reproductive, heteronormative sex acts. Taboo acts, of incest, autoeroticism, with love objects of the same sex, or with those of another race, represent phallic or genital desires that are replaced with normative oedipal ones. Men are assured that they can have their sexual desires, the phallus, as it applies to other women (not the Mother). And women are assured that rather than having their own desires, they can derive their pleasure from being the phallus, that is, from being the sensual object of desire for men.¹⁰³

The libidinal body of psychoanalysis is one in which the phallus has been symbolically separated away from the erogenous body and sublimated as a signifier for cultural authority, power, and the legitimacy that the social order can provide, including the authority of language.¹⁰⁴ For Fanon, the black male’s dilemma is that he becomes nothing more in the symbolic order than his phallic skin, the latter seen as a meaty organ cut away from all notions of the interior intersubjectivity of the black male himself. As Silverman summarizes: “To confer a mythically large penis on the black man is not to associate him with the phallus, but to stress the distance which separates him from it,” as a figure for symbolic, linguistic, and cultural authority.¹⁰⁵ The black male’s problem is precisely that all he has, all he is, is an erogenous body whose sign is the penis rather than the phallus. However, Fanon’s “phobogenic object,” the Negro “penis symbol” that is also “a stimulus to anxiety,” has an uncanny dimension that goes well beyond the eroticized black penis, the stereotyped, pornotroped, hypersexualized image of blackness we are used to analyzing critically in popular cultural discourse.¹⁰⁶ The black penis is the metonymic figure for the lost sensational and erogenous body when it reappears on the cultural screen as the phallic signifier’s ugly, meaty underside.

The (black) penis is a shadow-image of the phallic signifier not because it is its opposite, but rather, because it portrays the phallus stripped down to its

corporeal presence and desexualized function in a bodily Real. The desexualized Real is what Lacan calls a sexual and bodily reality that falls outside of symbolization, outside of the heteronormative, oedipal terms of phallicization. “Desexualization” is the moment when reality intrudes and the myths and fantasies governing love, sex, and other forms of social relation fall apart.¹⁰⁷ This desexualized Real is the hidden underbelly of the sexual relation, the moment when the like subjectivity of the other impinges upon the self’s constructions and fantasies in a horrific way: “In that fall-out zone that I call desexualization and function of reality . . . the sexual object moves towards the side of reality and presents itself as a parcel of meat [and] there emerges that form of desexualization that is so obvious that it is called in the case of the hysteric a reaction of disgust.”¹⁰⁸ Fanon’s Negro fixed purely in the association of his desires with the genital is the very symbol of this meaty, desexualized Real. It is the symbolic discomfort with or negation of the Real that shapes our reactions, for example, to Robert Mapplethorpe’s famous photograph *Man in Polyester Suit*, the image of a black male dressed in a three-piece polyester suit, cropped from just above the waist to just above the knee in order to emphasize and frame his exposed, uncircumcised phallus as it protrudes from the opening in his pants.¹⁰⁹ What disturbs the gaze in Mapplethorpe’s photograph is precisely the visibility of the fleshy skin of the phallic signifier—or the phallic signifier as a *fleshy black foreskin* covering over what is frightening about the erogenous body. In the exposure of the black phallus, this erogenous body, despite being clothed, presses into the picture from the Real. The “hyperbolic black penis” is the phallus shorn of “the clothing of the self-image that envelops the object cause of desire” and on the basis of which “the object relationship is most often sustained.”¹¹⁰ One could go so far as to say that this is the phallus shorn of whiteness, where it is whiteness that stands as the racial dressing, the clothing of the signifier, draped over (black and other) flesh. The black-and-white photograph’s high definition reproduces the leathery skin of the penis, drawing our attention as much to the phallus as to its tactile covering foreskin, and the black veiny hand posed nearby serves as a reminder of all the dangerous possibilities of touch. The overdressing of the black male body in his synthetic polyester suit only further highlights the photograph’s obscene unclothing of the phallic signifier as mere meat, the bared black phallus as the disgusting, hysteria-producing reality of the sexual organ as mere flesh.

Mapplethorpe’s image manages to capture and expose black genital skin as much more than just a fetish. The blatantly exposed phallus poking through the crack or orifice of the Real is stripped of its symbolic skin, providing instead a glimmer of its other form as the separated, shed, foreclosed and disavowed

erogenous body, the stripped or skinned body, the fleshy underside of the modern, photo-graphed, black subject. However, Mapplethorpe's spotlight on the black phallus still carries with it some remaining investments in clothing the posed or performing black male body in a phallic suit or foreskin. Both here and throughout his oeuvre, his images fluctuate between desexualizing the black phallus as meat and re-symbolizing or re-eroticizing phallic meat as signifiers for the desired, black male object. In *Skin Acts*, through the analysis of performances of black masculinity that never fully escape the grid of a variety of visual texts, that is, embodied performance represented here not simply as lived experience, but rather, as the body without an image simultaneously, or in the process of being, captured and reified by the cultural screen, I seek to offer a different option. In the chapters that follow, I propose an understanding of black male performance as an invaginated phallic experience layered over by and situated within dyadic and relational, performance and performative contexts. The goal is to offer a more complex image of the phallic black body that reveals its symbolic inscription in the very moment of enacting its "motive desire and active will" as flesh.

If the captive body, the black-body-with-skin, is the object of an exterior gaze, the fleshy body, the body-without-an-image, keeps in tension the psychoanalytic truth that the black subject experiences his or her own skin and re-creates it as a partial object in play with the gaze of the other. In the creative imagination, experience, and performance of one's own blackness, the skin is a fleshy site of relation between self and other, a liminal space of inter-action in which the body left behind, the body as flesh without an image, can appear briefly in various specters, shapes, and forms—as the throaty, glottal, vocal lining of the word in Bert Williams's minstrel act; as the shadowy, blurred, gestural outline of a body in motion in Paul Robeson's physical acting on-screen; as the cracked underside of a smooth, symbolic mask of color in the Technicolor optics of Harry Belafonte's films; as the meaty phallus desexualized, that is, made real and stripped of its symbolic skin, in the sexual politics of Bob Marley's performances of liveness. Each of these specters of the flesh appears in the cultural scripts of the skin left behind, and read anew, in the four performers' stage and screen acts.

In *Skin Acts* I introduce another set of meanings to blackness by understanding its most material signifier, the skin, as the site of sensory, interpersonal contact and racial, intersubjective knowing. Blackness is lived and performed in the flesh, this flesh serving as a threshold or meeting point of human contact, a contact zone in which black subjects negotiate the relations of sameness and difference they share with each other, and with those against whom they

have been defined as Other. As in Morrison's scene in *Beloved*, so too in the history of blacks in the New World, racialized skin has signified as both a despised object and as an object of love and desire. The skin act, the circularity of the act of objectifying and subjectifying one's skin, is a process of simultaneously witnessing and performing, seeing and being seen. By fleshing out the performance of black subjectivity as a skin act I am asking us to think about black skin not just in terms of the gaze—skin color, epidermalization, racialization—but also in terms of the flesh, as flesh circulating and performing in a multisensory and interpersonal world.