

## The Annotation of Skin

### Introduction: The Disappointing Skin

Halloween Night, 2012. A slim crowd has gathered outside the Roland Levinsky Theatre on Plymouth University's campus. As we wait for the doors to open, I overhear a couple of people standing nearby saying how excited they are about this Indian classical show that they are about to see. During the post-show talk, those very audience members seemed clearly very disappointed. After all, the experimental devised performance TEN by the British Asian contemporary artist Hetain Patel offered no virtuosic display of Indian classical dance or music. Perhaps the Plymouth University Peninsular Arts programme brochure featuring a close up image of Patel's brown body, and with its reference to the ten-beat rhythmic cycle from Indian classical music that offers a conceptual framework to the performance, had led some to believe that this was going to be a performance of colour. Witnessing the frustration of my fellow audience members reinforced for me the epistemic rupture that has historically accompanied and continues to inform a Euro-American understanding of modernity. As postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakraborty states, if modernity 'is to be a definable, delimited concept, then we must identify some people and practices as non-modern' (2002: xix). The event mentioned above suggests that for some, or perhaps many, brown skin in performance equals non-modern, traditional work. When it offers none, it disappoints.

This article seeks to critically interrogate the role and function of the skin in the annotative performance works of the British Asian artist, Hetain Patel. It examines the ways in which artists like Patel, through deliberately chosen strategies such as the hyper-visualization and hyper-orientalizing of the skin in performance, urge us as audience to confront certain fixed racial and cultural assumptions around the meaning of skin, and force us instead to look closely at skin as a palimpsestic surface of a complex lived experience. Following Susan Manning's argument in Modern Dance, Negro Dance (2004)

that culturally marked bodies of colour derived their meaning from unmarked and meaning-neutral Whiteness through centuries of racial domination, the Asian skin is read here as an already marked surface that is then further marked or annotated in the process of a performance. Patel's skin-work is therefore analysed as annotative practices that write new meanings for orthodox and stereotyped representations of Asianness.

Beginning with an overview of contemporary philosophical thinking around inscription, and recent critical studies on skin as a semiotic and lived surface, this article notices some of the most notable experiments with skin that have emerged in Euro-American performance art since the 1970s, and in European avant-garde dance since the late 1990s. These works are offered as a genealogy of skin-work within which Patel's annotative skin-based performances are then located [note]1. I conclude with a discussion of Patel's 2005 performance/photography series Sacred Bodies, and his 2010 physical theatre work TEN, both of which deploy the skin as a radical annotated surface to expose and interrogate vexing questions around heritage and cultural memory.

### **Skin, Inscription, Annotation**

In post-war European philosophy, the metaphor of inscription as an invisible socio-cultural process that writes upon the body and regulates, disciplines or controls it, has been one of the most significant conceptual paradigms since Michel Foucault, for whom 'the body is the inscribed surface of events' (1991: 8). Foucault's desolate view of a body that can never escape inscription or control is not wholly shared by feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz, who in her seminal work Volatile Bodies (1994), argues that bodies have agency in spite of being inscribed upon, and that they 'function interactively and productively' (xi). Furthermore, Susan Foster also reminds us that the task of the scholar is not simply to notice how history writes upon the body but also 'to uncover how bodies write, to corpo-realize writing' (Foster, 1996: xiv).

Along with academic and feminist attention to inscription as a gateway to discussions on embodiment and subjectivity, the skin has emerged as one of the most valuable sites or surfaces through which debates on inter-embodiment have emerged. In Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey's 2001 edited volume Thinking Through the Skin, the skin becomes the subject of a number of thought-provoking studies that critically reflect on the fleshy and porous boundaries between our bodies and the world: skin 'opens our bodies to other bodies: through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter' (2001: 6).

In recent years, another fascinating study on the skin has been offered by Steven Connor, whose interdisciplinary work, The Book of Skin (2004) privileges the epidermal layers of our bodies as one of the most powerful sites of representation and self-representation. Connor suggests that:

The skin is pervasive not only in critical and cultural theory but also in contemporary life. Everywhere, the skin, normally as little apparent as the page upon which is displayed words we read, is becoming visible on its own account; not only in the obsessive display of its surfaces and forms in cinema and photography, in the massive efforts to control and manipulate its appearance by means of cosmetics and plastic surgery, and the extraordinary investment in the skin in practices and representations associated with fetishism and sadomasochism, but also in the anxious concern with the abject frailty and vulnerability of the skin, and the destructive rage against it exercised in violent fantasies and representations of all kinds. (2004: 9)

The Book of Skin draws upon a range of human practices to reveal 'the powers of the skin, as substance, vehicle and metaphor.' (2004: 9). Connor astutely reminds us that the skin's etymological origins reference our deep-seated dread for the surface of the body:

The horror at the skin survives both in the word 'horror' itself,

which signified in Latin the lifting or horripilation of the skin, and in allusion to the hide which may linger in the word 'hideous' (2004: 12).

Following Connor, we could read skin as one of the most significant players in colonial encounters, the horror at the sight of which so profoundly shaped our world and our world view, and the hideousness of which continues to infect the way we construct versions of our own identity in relation to those of others. If feminist theory offers inscription as a useful metaphor for understanding the ways in which bodies are produced or produce themselves, then annotation can also be understood as a valuable metaphor for understanding skin and bodies that are marked and further marked by colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial processes of identity construction.

### **The Epidermalization of Performance**

My fascination with skin led me to research how its structure or composition and its functions are described and defined in both western and non-western medicinal studies. In European mainstream medicine, the skin is believed to fulfil a number of functions: it insulates, regulates, senses, synthesises, protects, acts as a barrier, excretes, absorbs, heals and repairs. In non-western medicinal practices such as Ayurveda, the skin is believed to be comprised of not three but seven layers. It acts as a mirror, reflects the body's interiority, balances, nurtures, transforms sensations, regenerates. I was struck by how the functions of the skin in both western and Ayurvedic medicine are similar to the many functions of performance: to synthesise, absorb, excrete, balance, nurture, transform, repair and regenerate ideas and lived experience.

While researching the potency of skin as a radical surface for annotation in performance, my thoughts first turned to the obvious problem of colour politics surrounding the skin, and how the skin as a value-laden

signifier is received and read during the act of a performance (as indeed it was during Patel's performance in Plymouth mentioned earlier). In his celebrated work Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon referred to the 'epidermalization of inferiority' inherent in race relations (2008 [1952]: xv). In Fanon's work, skin has a profound impact, physically and psychically, in what he calls the 'epidermal racial schema' (2008 [1952]: 92): the skin plays a crucial role in constructing difference. But reading culturally marked or coloured skin and the semiotic problems it poses in performance is not the only place where I want to locate this discussion. Let us move on from pigment to movement. The first area of critical enquiry is to see how the skin may serve as a useful conceptual metaphor for us to respond to at least two queries that have become important in discussions around representation in contemporary dance: firstly, what constitutes movement? And secondly, what is movement constitutive of? [note]2

The skin is paradox embodied. It is the heaviest human organ, but we never feel or sense its weight. As the largest organ of the human body, the skin, which appears to our visual field as a seemingly stable and static surface, is produced through and comprised of dynamic movement. Cells move up through its various strata (the epidermis, the dermis and the hypodermis), changing their shape and composition all the time. There is constant movement in skin. Mike Pearson, in his keynote speech at the 2014 International Federation for Theatre Research conference at the University of Warwick (UK), drew conceptual metaphors from geology and archaeology to respond to the idea of stratification in theatre. In geological rock formations, Pearson noted, the deeper you go, the older it gets (Pearson, 2014). But if we use skin as a metaphor to think through performance, or movement, then we encounter the very opposite phenomena: the older layer of reduced movement or non-movement is at the top, on the surface which is visible, whilst the youngest, the newest or the fastest movement in skin lies underneath, completely hidden and unmanifest to the eye. In skin, therefore, movement offers an accumulative and generative function (i.e. cells accumulate and are also generated through movement), but movement is essentially reductive in nature.

This function and nature of movement in skin finds a startling echo in Andre Lepecki's suggestion at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that 'the contemporary European dance scene can be qualified by one term: "reduction" -- of expansiveness, of the spectacular, of the unessential.' (1999:129). Speaking of the pronounced interest in bare skin in the late 1990s European contemporary dance works of Vera Mantero (Portugal), Boris Charmatz and Jerome Bel (France) and La Ribot (Spain), Lepecki asks:

What can be inferred from this increasing display of the bare body in contemporary dance, of this eruption of the body as matter, the body in its epidermal strength, in its massive presence? (1999:129)

Lepecki's response to this question notices a fruitful alliance between performance art and dance in 1990s Europe, in which

the simultaneous reduction of "theatrics" and the emergence of the body's naked presence in contemporary European avant-garde dance complicates what has been, until recently, unproblematically called "dance". (1999:129)

Nearly two decades on, bare skin in European avant-garde dance seems to have lost some of its earlier urgency and bite, but the partnership between performance or live art and choreography continues in the risk-taking and experimental interventions of artists such as Hetain Patel. Moreover, revealed and annotated skin, if not the nude body, has featured prominently in Patel's interdisciplinary works, which move through the permeable boundaries of a number of artistic disciplines including fine art, performance art, sculpture, theatre and choreography.

Before moving on to examine Patel's embodied interdisciplinarity, it is necessary to reflect on some of the most memorable moments in performance art that involves skin-work. The attraction for human skin, its

potency as a living surface for self-inscription and transformation and its potential for producing affect through a performer-audience inter-subjective experience has had a solid presence in the history of performance. In the Anglo-American world, the skin, along with the body, has received intense attention from performance and live artists from the 1970s onwards. The list of artists who have used the body's surface as a site of resistance and a source of identity politics is exhaustive. Three examples help elucidate this point. In the 1975 piece The Lips of Thomas, Marina Abramovic used a razor blade to etch a five-pointed star on the skin of her stomach, then lay down on an ice cross, her bleeding skin becoming a potent and radical site for an incisive critique of communism and cultural orthodoxy. In Stelarc's Suspensions, a series of installations that have been performed since 1988, the artist's body was suspended and wired by hooking the skin in several places, exposing the vulnerability of the human subject and yet also the body and skin's phenomenal tensile strength. As Steven Connor notices in Stelarc's work,

The hung person is of course reduced to an object, a mere carcass. They are wholly vulnerable and available. But they are also supported, borne up by the mortification they elect to have to bear. Suspension gives a curious compensatory sense of protection. Language gives us another literalisation here; of the person in this appalling condition, it must be said that they literally depend upon their own skin. (2001: 44)

Ron Athey's performance art works often involve 'eking out a volatile space for scores in the skin, spilled blood, ritual pain, and the sensate orifices of his body' (Johnson, 2013: 10). In these well-known works of Abramovic, Stelarc and Athey, and in the practices of performance artists such as Vito Acconci, Orlan, Bob Flanagan and many others, the brutalised skin is called upon to reveal a complex subject-object relationship, one in which the exterior skin lays bare the interiority of human experience.

Kathy O'Dell, in her book Contract with the Skin, suggests that in most performance art works of the kind mentioned above, it is the performer's

contract with the audience that is carefully examined and brought under scrutiny: the real power of the agreement between the audience and the performer lies in the structure of the contract, and skin helps to redefine the terms of that engagement. Performance art, according to O'Dell, is interested in dramatizing the importance of a transaction between audience and performer that is often overlooked or taken for granted (O'Dell, 1998: 2). It is with these notions of a subject-object divide and the performer-audience pact that I turn to the work of the British Asian Hetain Patel. Here the skin also plays a crucial role in making visible that invisible contract between doer and onlooker, although in ways and methods very different from the aforementioned performance art works.

### **Punctured by the Gaze: Skin in Patel's Sacred Bodies (2005) and TEN (2010)**

Like many other performance artists, Hetain Patel's practice demands that his audience attend to the taken-for-grantedness of the unwritten pact between the performing body and the gazing eye. Since his early days studying Fine Art as an undergraduate student, Patel had always been interested in writing and inscribing as cathartic processes (Patel 2012), which were documented through a range of formats including photography and film. Patel's earliest forays into writing on different media were spurred by his interest in creating sculptural forms out of written texts, but his engagement with a more bodily encounter with inscribing and writing transpired accidentally when he noticed how rich the visual signifier of his framed and inscribed brown body became to the eye of the photographic lens. As a young artist whose concerns predominantly centred on making sense of his dual identity as British and Asian, Patel found the surface of his body to be a valuable site for experiments in self-portraiture. For a period, 'the different skins' as he calls them (Patel 2012) in photography, live work and video co-existed in parallel, until he began to be centrally engaged in the live body.



Patel's Sacred Bodies (2005) explored his skin as a site for discussions on cultural identity to be housed. For Patel, the marking of the exterior skin involved transforming and playing with the visual signifiers of identity (face and body), and self-imposing a second layer of colour onto his own already-coloured and culturally marked skin. Patel used non-permanent stain (mehndi and the red powder kanku), both of which are commonly associated with Hindu religious rituals. Mehndi is also a highly gendered substance, mostly used by women of the South Asian subcontinent to decorate their palms. <sup>3</sup> By marking the skin of his torso in intricate mehndi patterns traditionally associated with female rituals, Patel seemed to offer his body as an emasculated object of colonial power and desire, as flesh that is overwrought, spectacular and unnerving.

Instead of permanent tattooing, Patel was drawn to the idea of reapplying the same substance, annotating, re-annotating and re-defining marks and patterns onto his skin. As he mentions in a personal interview (Patel 2012), his Indian heritage and background was a dislocating concept for him. Patel was born and raised in the United Kingdom to Indian-Gujarati parents, and the stage at which he received or was presented with an Indian 'native' culture was already defined or prescribed for him. Therefore in Sacred Bodies, Patel kept re-defining the marks on his body for himself but the audience received the photographic art of Patel's mehndi-tattooed body as a given, as a finished product to be gazed at; they were not let in to the live process of skin marking and transformation but saw only the final stage, where they were presented with the visual image. In Sacred Bodies, Patel wanted his audience to receive his body as a fetishized object, just as he received his 'Indianness' or 'Asianness' from his Gujarati parents as a highly-fetishized cultural heritage.

If we position Patel's practice within a genealogy of live art works that involve skin transformation, then some crucial questions arise. I realize that the practitioners I mentioned earlier - Abramovic, Stelarc and Athey - offer forms of annotation or self-annotation that are very different from Patel's. In the works of all three practitioners, the skin communicates but it also receives:

it receives pain through a physical opening up of the skin. In Patel's work, one might argue, the skin only communicates and does not receive any pain: it is never cut open, sliced, hooked or punctured. But could we take a moment out from our reverence for bleeding skin, and the hierarchical privileging of physically painful acts in live and performance art, and cast our thoughts to skin that does not bleed but is nevertheless punctured? In other words, what about the pain of inhabiting skin that can never escape being marked Other, that derives its meaning from Whiteness, and which is constantly marked and punctured by the colonial and orientalist gaze?

In bringing up the notion of a gaze that punctures, I am nodding at Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida (1989) here, which offers a fascinating analysis of image and representation as captured by the photograph. Barthes suggests that the photographic image is comprised of two elements, the studium and the punctum. Whereas the studium refers to the constructed elements of the image, and that which the viewer is trained to see, the punctum is the 'gap' or 'hole' or 'wound' in the image that the author suggests 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces' (1989:27). Whereas Barthes suggests that the viewer's gaze is punctured by the image, I propose here a reversal of the same concept: that the gaze itself can puncture and wound the image or the skin and by extension, the body and the person. The photographed and received image in Patel's Sacred Bodies, I would therefore argue, is a deliberately constructed body, composed and framed carefully and intentionally, a studium to invite and seduce the viewer trained to see an exotic Asian body in order to expose the viewer's active act of puncturing through gazing. This act of puncturing the body can also be read as another act of annotating, of marking the body. The viewer, therefore, annotates the skin or body of the performer through the act of gazing.

Sacred Bodies played on the idea of the fetishized and racially objectified brown body, and aimed to deliberately provoke and counter the voyeuristic gaze of Patel's audience by offering a hyper-orientalized skin. In this work, Patel seems to rework the notion of the 'sacred' on to his skin, suggesting that that which is 'sacred' is not necessarily inscribed or bound but

often impermanent, found and re-found, written and over-written. Since Sacred Bodies, Patel has forayed into a number of areas of performance making, which include video work, live art, physical theatre work and installations of sculptures. In 2010, Patel continued his work on and through the skin in the collaborative project TEN. This was his first piece of live performance for the theatre featuring Patel himself, Mark Evans (a Scottish drummer) and Dave 'Stickman' Higgins (a drummer of West Indian, Irish and British-Lancastrian heritage). The piece involves scored, structured and choreographed movement sequences in which the bodies of three men move sometimes in tandem and sometimes against each other as they negotiate race, complex rhythmic cycles and red vermilion powder (or kanku). TEN is part theatre and part choreography, a piece that revolves around the autobiographical narratives of three men who 'cannot quite put a finger' on who they really are (Patel, 2010).

As the performance progresses Patel, Evans and Higgins begin to unfold their personal stories of confused belonging, hyphenated identities and colliding cultures. Their bodies begin to move in a scored rhythmic pattern, their voices overlap in a layered structure of polyphonic syllables and their hands begin to explore the red kanku, which is placed on a plate on stage. Soon, their pristine white shirts are taken off, and their bare torsos begin to get marked in dark red powder as the scored movements of their red-smeared hands slicing the air impacts on their bare flesh. The performers' arms move over their torsos, slicing it vertically and horizontally, until the red powder, mixed with their sweat, marks glistening red crosses on their bodies. As all three men negotiate a complex and repetitive rhythmic score of utterance and movement, the playful quality of the choreography gradually becomes urgent, heavy and desperate. The significance of the red cross of the English national flag, emblazoned on their skin like large gashes, is not lost on the audience. The marking on their bodies solicits the audience's desires, for their bare torsos invite our gaze towards the spectacle of revealed skin, but the violent slicing of the arms and the sharpness with which the three men shout out their rhythms makes any comfortable consumption of revealed skin as spectacle impossible.

Whilst Sacred Bodies involved annotating the skin to mark its irreducibility into heritage object, TEN engages in an annotative practice in which the skin becomes an embodied critique of ossified cultural identity and virile nationalism. The vulnerability of sweating and heavily breathing male bodies, whose displayed flesh is marked in giant and smudgy red crosses, signs of messy and impermanent identity, ultimately seems to ask: can we define or mark ourselves as culturally specific or bounded?

### **Conclusion: Annotated Skin as Performance**

I have focused on the work of the artist Hetain Patel here to locate the ways in which the annotated skin enable conceptual British Asian works such as Sacred Bodies and TEN to reveal not only certain inherent assumptions about ethnicity, race and cultural products, but also expose the audience's voyeuristic tendencies to consume fetishized bodies of colour. I have attempted to read the performance works of artists such as Patel's as embodied materials that place corporeal experience at the centre of discourses on cultural identity, and discussions on the heterogeneity and multiplicity of languages. In Patel's skin work, a historical language of archeology, layers, traces and palimpsest seem to be evoked. His skin-based performances offer a powerful inversion of Mike Pearson's archaeological metaphor, in that the older, given, and culturally marked skin becomes the entry point to a newer invisible skin of infinite new possibilities.

These annotative performances and choreographies reveal how our human skin 'is attributed a meaning and logic of its own' (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 5). The processes of annotating skin in performance also expose the intricate interconnectedness of our lived experience. As Cavanagh et al have suggested, skin has 'a biological life, a social life, a fantasy life, a somatic life, a political life, an aesthetic life, a life in "the lived body", and a cultural life -- all of which inform one another to shape what it means and how it feels to inhabit skin.' (Cavanagh et al. 2013: 3). Skin, like performance, is not simply a surface layer of inscribed culture, but a living, mutating, moving structure of stratified meaning, constantly open to new forms of inscription. It is

semiotically charged with meaning owing to centuries of colour politics, and so often symbolic of identity and difference. Ironically, skin in and as performance, is perhaps also one of the most useful and powerful surfaces to offer us a way in to a de-colonized engagement with bodies.

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Notes:

1. Whilst most references to skin work or skin-based performances that follow are limited to Euro-American performance practices, skin annotation in performance can extend to a wide range of representational or non-representational practices from various cultural contexts. The act and labour of painting the face in vivid colours in the Indian dance-drama form of Kathakali, or layering the face with make-up, ash or paint in the Japanese forms of Kabuki and Butoh for instance, can be read as annotative processes that might precede an act of performance but fundamentally inform the viewer's engagement with performing bodies. Powerful as these may be as instances of impermanent skin transformation, I have chosen to focus on avant-garde Euro-American performances that place the skin as central to questions around representation and difference.

2. Questions around the definition and meaning of movement, or dance, have been asked and explored by several postmodern North American choreographers since the 1960s, such as Trisha Brown in her 1970s architectural pieces or Steve Paxton in his minimalist walking or standing still performances, amongst many others.

3. Although in various parts of South Asia, some men use mehndi or henna as a natural substance to dye their hair or facial hair, and sometimes may also wear mehndi on the palms to mark a ritual, the intricate and decorative mehndi patterns on hands and feet are usually associated with female rituals of beautification.

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