

michelle ann stephens

Skin *Acts*

RACE, PSYCHOANALYSIS,

AND THE BLACK MALE PERFORMER

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Let the trace left behind by the It-Effect be called the *afterimage*. This does not exist as an object, but rather as a sensation that persists even after the external stimulation that caused it has disappeared, like the shape of a flame that lingers in the eye after the candle has gone out.

—JOSEPH ROACH, *It*

What makes some black men icons in American society? Is it something about the men themselves, their individual talent or charisma, that makes them so appealing? Or is it a fascination not with the man himself but with some performance of difference that acts in his place? Joseph Roach describes charisma as a “sensation” created in the gazing other by a projection of the performing self. “It” or “it-ness” is not the thing in the performer himself but this sensation that “lingers in the eye[s]” of the audience long after its source has disappeared. In *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*, I argue that the “It-effect,” the “it-ness” of the celebrity black male performer’s effect on a multiracialized audience, also exists as a haunting afterimage in the eye of the gazer, an image of the skin. What Frantz Fanon called the “fact” of blackness, race as a form of charismatic self-display, is experienced phenomenologically as a “sensation” of the “it-ness” of race, its facticity seemingly confirmed visually, prior to the black male performer’s actual appearance.¹ It lingers after the performer’s disappearance, ultimately contributing to his presentation of self.

This book is about men partly because we are used to thinking about masculinity as somehow able to transcend inscriptions of the skin as flesh. *Skin Acts* aims to show that when we watch and listen to charismatic black male performers, their acts perform a difference that is not just socially inscribed but also literally and materially marks their skin as no longer flesh. In *Skin Acts* I examine the vocal and cinematic performances of four black male actors and singers: Bert Williams, a turn-of-the-century blackface minstrel; Paul Robe-

son, a screen and stage actor and singer in the 1930s; Harry Belafonte, a matinee idol and calypso performer in the 1950s; and Bob Marley, a reggae performer and Third World superstar in the 1970s. In the different instances and genres of their performances described here—lyrical, filmic, textual, sonic, onstage and on-screen, live and technologically mediated—the epidermal text mediates between the performing black subject and his spectating other. We are intrigued by who these men were and are because of *how they appear*, how they make themselves visible to us in the skin.

These four case studies of acts of racialized masculinity display in distinctive ways the powerful relationship between the skin and the gaze in twentieth-century American popular culture. Using a range of concepts from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, performance theory and semiotics, black feminism and the study of black consciousness, *Skin Acts* explores what it means to listen and watch, retrospectively, as black men perform the inescapably intercultural meanings of blackness as a difference embodied in black skin, continually reconstructed and redefined in interaction with a white gaze. I privilege performance as the framework within which to explore deeper questions concerning race relations and the constitution of the black male subject because intercultural performances bring into view the unconscious scenes and relations of fantasy constructed between racialized performers and spectators as interactive embodied agencies.

I engage with psychoanalytic theory to foreground the ways in which the black male body, as an active, sensory, intercorporeal site, is the ground of a performative but also profoundly epidermalized psyche. Thus, the “skin act” is a performance in both a concrete and a conceptual sense. It represents first and foremost the performance itself, the performer’s artistic and embodied relationship with his appreciative, watching, listening, and equally embodied audience. Second, in terms of performativity, it enacts the more subjective and subjectivizing dimensions of racialized performance, the black performer’s racial, sexual, and gendered interpellation by the audience’s gaze. In each of the readings that follow, the black male performer inter-acts with a subjectifying, racializing, sexualizing gaze while simultaneously reclaiming his body, re-signifying black skin, (re-)marking (upon) himself a place of unconscious speech that runs alongside but is not exclusive to his race.

In his time, the blackface minstrel comedian Bert Williams was described by the silent screen star W. C. Fields as both the “funniest man I ever saw—and the saddest man I ever knew.”² Williams was originally born in the Caribbean and immigrated permanently to the United States in the 1880s. In 1893, he met the African American actor and comedian George Walker and the two went

on to create and perform in at least three all-black minstrel musicals. After Walker's death in 1911, Williams became the first black performer in the Ziegfeld Follies, where he met W. C. Fields and earned the latter's rueful comment.

Chapter 1 focuses on Bert Williams's turn-of-the-century blackface minstrel act as represented by his very first show, *In Dahomey*, which opened in 1903. As the "first full-length musical written and played by blacks to be performed at a major Broadway house," *In Dahomey* represents an important starting point in this story of intercultural black male performances in the United States during the twentieth century.³ The blackface minstrel's comedic act provides a narrative record of the visual fetishization of race as epidermal difference at the very moment when the New Negro movement privileged a visual politics of portraiture as a positive medium for representing the race. The visual and recording technologies of the early twentieth century facilitated the scopic act of turning a word, an element of discourse, into a thing, a material object. For American audiences of the early twentieth century, the blackface mask reinforced visual perceptions of blackness as signified by physiognomy, *faciality*, turning the colors of the flesh into a thicker, purer sign for the black subject hidden somewhere beneath. The sight of the colored, chalked, corked facial mask represented a paradigmatic instance of what Hortense Spillers describes as the skin's "concealment under the brush of discourse,"⁴ and the public interaction between the white audience's gaze and the blackface minstrel's performance had an impact on the cultural representation of black, intimate, heterosexual relations that one would think lay outside of, or operated in excess of, the gaze.

Chapter 2 focuses on Paul Robeson, probably the most famous African American male actor and performer of the 1920s and 1930s. Born in 1898 as the son of an escaped slave, by the 1920s Robeson was well known in multiple venues of popular entertainment, as an accomplished athlete, a popularizer of the spirituals on the concert stage, and a stage actor playing famous lead roles in such dramas as Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and the stage version of DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy*. Robeson's fame was later tarnished by scandals surrounding his involvement with the Communist Party and his radical commitments to Russia and the Bolshevik revolutionary project. During his brief film career in the 1930s, however, the actor's use of his body and the language of dramatic gesture in relation to a modernist gaze turned the medium of the film screen into an intercorporeal site for the audience's haptic, as much as scopic, encounter with the subjectified black male body.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, prescriptions concerning what was visually appropriate in representing blackness evolved, offering new

ways of conceptualizing the scopic interactions between a desiring white gaze and the black male body. The very surface of the black male body became an object of desire and a stage for desiring acts. The bodily interaction between an actor and his audience, his *intercorporeity*, framed Robeson's role in the paradigmatic avant-garde modernist film *Borderline*, and shaped the film's portrayal of the black heterosexual relation on-screen. Reading Robeson's filmic body engaged in the physicality of acting itself moves us away from the image of the objectified black body and fetishized black actor to a closer assessment of the power of physical gesture to evoke visually ineffable aspects of the actor's subjective reality as a *body without an image*, always in motion.

In the mid- to late 1950s, the specter of a different kind of heterosexual relation, involving physical and emotional intimacies between black men and white women, shaped the popular reception of the part-Caribbean singer and actor Harry Belafonte. Belafonte was the American-born son of a West Indian immigrant to the United States who moved her son back to Jamaica in the 1920s and 1930s for the formative years of his childhood. Upon his return to the United States, Belafonte's radical leanings placed him on the path of popular political appeal first trod by his friend and mentor Paul Robeson. When Robeson advised him to "get them to sing your song. And then they'll have to come to know who you are," Belafonte took him at his word and went on to chart a singular path in the early 1950s as both the "calypso king" and the first "Negro matinee idol."⁵

Belafonte's rise to fame as a film star, his iconic status as "negro manhood at its finest . . . the perfect hybrid of popular culture and political conscience," reflected a new phase in the visual fetishization of black masculinity at mid-century.⁶ In the context of a decolonizing world, Belafonte's skin act represents the very moment when a North American cultural grid integrates the black male performer as a lead character in a twentieth-century political narrative of national self-determination and freedom. Claiming the master(s) signifier for the skin, *color*, Harry Belafonte's on-screen performances in the 1950s translate the skin act into the politics of race shaping the civil rights and decolonization eras. In Belafonte's filmic performances, the visibility of race as a color technique, an increasingly political, politicized, and politicizing field of knowledge and culture with its own rules, is mediated on-screen through the representation of miscegenation, specifically, the black male–white female sexual relation.

The commercialization and popularization of black masculinity continues to be a global site for representing new black political identities in the wake of decolonization, as evidenced in the life and career of Bob Marley, the Jamaican-

born musician and songwriter who internationalized reggae music during the 1970s after the national independence movements of the Anglophone Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s. In his rise to success, Marley introduced American audiences to the figure of the Rastafarian, a new black social identity in the Third World. As his music spread outward from Jamaica and into markets in England and the United States, his persona was adapted and incorporated to fit the mold of other American rock idols during the years he was alive.

In the decades after Marley's death of cancer in 1981, his image, music, and lyrics have become immortalized, evoking the powerful ideologies of national liberation and black power that gained momentum in the black and postcolonial world during the latter decades of the twentieth century. The uncanny, persistent representation of the black male performer's "aliveness" in death, his symbolic *life between two deaths*, avoids treating Marley as a relational, corporeal black subject whose dread performance in the 1970s was a libidinous act, representing the political, social, and cultural desires of a larger Afro-Jamaican community intent on emancipating itself from mental slavery. Marley's skin act thus allows us to think more fully about the evolution of the skin from being merely the object of the audience's desire and the performing subject's manipulation to being the very site of personal and cultural interrelation itself. Tracing in Marley's skin act his mortal relations, rather than his immortal iconicity, helps us to reconstruct the black sexual relation as it was constituted in Jamaica in the 1970s and inscribed in reggae's soundscape of black liberation and Jamaican independence.

Throughout *Skin Acts* I use a number of visual texts—album covers, book covers, song sheets, cartoons and drawings, photographs, movie and concert posters, film stills, and explanatory diagrams—to demonstrate the ways in which the field of the gaze continues to impose a difference on the black male celebrity's vocal, rhetorical, comic, and dramatic performances, turning that difference into a thing, the skin as a partial object that ultimately stands in for, covers for, the performer.⁷ It is my contention here that no matter the media, the visual superimposes our desire to see difference over the physiognomy or appearance of the black male performer and his performance material so that we always see the difference in his act. The album cover, for example, as a material object, enacts mimetically the epidermal relations this book seeks to trace—it is both a cover and an afterimage of the face as a cover, blackness as a covering and the skin as the metonymic face of race.

Post-decolonization, contemporary mass and popular cultural representations of decolonial black masculinities continue to settle for a phallic investment in faciality and the symbolic power of the skin over and above the

affective vulnerabilities of black skin stripped and deconstructed of its epidermalized and fetishized meanings. In relational terms, phallic skin acts of blackness offer the compensations and rewards of heterosexual and patriarchal masculinity rather than striving for full *relationality* and *consensuality* as the goal of black gendered and sexual relations, and intercultural relations between the races. *Skin Acts* asks us to consider not only the various scripts of the skin that we have inherited from this cultural history of race as epidermalization but also how they shape contemporary performances of masculinity and blackness in the age of Obama and the post-racial, post-black subject. Only those performances that take us closer to the fleshy materiality of the black body, in all its tactile color and texture, can offer pathways through and away from the skin of race as a product of colonial and biopolitical discourse.

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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 transferential 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 Massumi 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 "excrecences 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-