

# Out of Touch

*Skin Tropes and Identities in Woolf,  
Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker*

Maureen F. Curtin

LITERARY CRITICISM AND  
CULTURAL THEORY  
OUTSTANDING DISSERTATIONS

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# Preface

Like the skin I sift through here, I approach this preface as an interface, mediating between, on the one hand, a treatment of skin interventions in canonical literary texts which are central to *Out of Touch*, and, on the other, just a few of the implications of these interventions in contemporary cultural contexts that more recent research suggests. These contexts demand renewed capacities for imagining strategies with which to both collaborate and resist technological reconfigurations of the human that, typically, mean to supersede some forms of messiness while discreetly legitimizing others. The messes against which we defend, when we are not busy with disavowal, are usually those posed by bodies out of order, whose arbitrary boundaries are inculcated and whose excesses stimulated by irrational, global economic arrangements. Our varied engagements with skin in the contemporary moment, meanwhile, reveal a predilection for refusals of precisely those intimate connections that—were they pursued, beset and, found simultaneously fraught and sprung rather than simply liberating—might allow us to: inhabit our losses, notice when excess diminishes, when dilates, this critical capacity, and traverse spaces in the public sphere that are by turns recessive and exposed rather than taking up positions which demand seamless opacity in exchange for the promise of transparency. That is to say, since in the West we disproportionately imagine our skin projects as occasions for insulating self-expression, anaesthetizing self-affliction, and/or simulacra of selflessness that veil privilege, we are in the habit of preempting the dynamic potential of skin and touch in developing agency and community.

We are nevertheless spurred to these habits by the insinuation that our connectedness threatens our intimate boundaries, so, for example, in a recent spate of full-page wireless ads running in national newspapers, the words of my title surface across the skin of a businesswoman well buttoned-up for transit. She is not “out of range,” not lost in “dead space,”

but “out of touch,” perhaps because juggling several overt claims on her attention simultaneously. These claims include a phone, a laptop, an unspecified, but proximate visual incident, and a marriage (signified by the ubiquitous wedding band on the ring finger of her left hand with which she cradles the cell phone). Since she occupies a public space, however, the phrase seems self-referential, signaling her unawareness of the signifiers that seem projected across her skin, or, alternately, painted in black grease on her perfectly unwrinkled forehead, modes that would announce themselves aggressively in both the tactile and spectacular registers. Even as these signifiers materialize on her body, meanwhile, the ad’s text reports: “She just talked to her client. She just talked to her office. What she really has to do is talk to her network. She needs the Sprint PCS Clear Wireless Workplace.” But the network here seems to be doing the talking, marking this woman so she is something both more and less than “clear,” suggesting, indeed, that we take her for a cyborg, the network’s prosthetic; in this case, “out of touch” serves as a warning not unlike the battery alerts that laptops provide users.

The impetus for the warning does not emerge from the interior, of course, since wireless technology means, as Mark Poster reminds us in “Postmodern Virtualities,” citing George Gilder: “the new minicell replaces a rigid structure of giant analog mainframes with a system of wireless local area networks . . . these wide and weak [replacing broadcasting based on ‘long and strong’] . . . radios can handle voice, data and even video at the same time . . . the system fulfills the promise of the computer revolution as a spectrum multiplier.”<sup>1</sup> That Poster goes on to characterize such emergent technologies, in which “the word and the image . . . flit about at the speed of light and procreate with indecent rapidity,” as posing a “problem for capitalism” is peculiar (Poster, 188); the capitalist marketplace would seem both to foster and benefit from an electronic age in which we operate “rhizomically at any decentred location” (Poster, 188), and in which we can assume, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, virtually facilitated, “arbitrary sexual, ethnic, [and] religious, etc., identit[ies].”<sup>2</sup>

Just as I find it difficult to disarticulate emergent technologies from capitalism and postmodern moments from capitalist ones, Mark Poster eventually invokes postcolonial discourse as a crucial riposte to the celebration of virtual ethnicity and to the troubling confluences I here identify; in particular, he cites Rey Chow’s formulation: “‘Ethnicity signifies the social experience which is not completed once and for all but which is constituted by a continual, often conflictual, working-out of its grounds’” (qtd. in Poster, 199). While I do not wish to suggest that the “grounds” to which Chow refers are bodies, her observation nevertheless teaches us to be wary of the utopic strand that surfaces even among those discourses less given to deposing messiness, as when Žižek concedes that “the ‘proper’ body remains the unsurpassable anchor limiting the freedom of virtualization” (Žižek, 286). To the extent that virtual spaces, like wireless connections,

effect social experience, how is it possible that we continue to neglect convention as a powerful corollary of the arbitrary and then translate that arbitrariness as freedom?

The Sprint PCS network seems to have an investment in just such a project, characterizing the female figure as “out of touch” and thus implying that, under optimal circumstances, she retains the body “proper”; when the network fails to get a fix on her, the female wireless client is marked with lettering across the forehead, a gesture and a site that resonate in certain religious traditions with penitential rites. The spectre of ash or dust reiterated in flat, unappealing newspaper grays—promoting a corporation whose icon is a diamond logo—is all the more remarkable in an era of glossy visuals that, according to Steven Connor in his contribution to *Thinking Through the Skin*, borrow from the skin’s glow to feed our twin appetites for sumptuous luster and crystalline referent.<sup>3</sup> Though one might read the ashy residue as signifying the obsolescence of previous technological modes, generally, or of the “wired” condition more particularly, it is tempting to conjecture that the stigma also speaks to “the fetishized undervaluation of human labor,” which, in the nineteenth century, according to Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*, saw the uncanny emergence of dirt—that which “is left over after exchange value has been extracted . . .”—as “unseemly” testimony that “the fundamental production of industrial and imperial wealth lay in the hands and bodies of the working class, women and the colonized.”<sup>4</sup> If, on the one hand, the “historical contradictions internal to imperial liberalism . . . were contained by displacement [from the first two of these terms] onto a third term: the term of race” (McClintock, 154), and if, as Eric Lott suggests in *Love and Theft*, “Blackface minstrelsy . . . reinstitute[d] with ridicule the gap between black and white working class even as it reveled in their (sometimes liberatory) identification,” one is compelled to wonder to what extent the Sprint client’s stigma works as a kind of an uncanny, involuntary blackface.<sup>5</sup>

Blackface here would articulate a link between female and racial “Others” that does not belong exclusively to the domain of nineteenth-century phrenology but has ongoing medical implications, “expressed” as recently as 20 March 2002, in one of my favorite popular culture resources. Specifically, *USA Today* reports on a study, conducted by University of Pittsburgh psychologist, Stephen Manuck, and Duke University cardiologist, Redford Williams, indicating 1) that the genetic combination that “affects how vulnerable a person is to heart attacks and strokes influences the sexes in opposite ways,” and 2) that “risk profiles of blacks may be more similar to white women’s than to white men’s.”<sup>6</sup> In this sequence in which males and females are “opposites,” and in which risks for “blacks” approximate those for “women,” we see that whites remain the first “race” and that black women are out of category, thus staging again the “contradictory visions of nature” formalized in the nineteenth century, according to Londa Schiebinger.<sup>7</sup> In her essay “Taxonomy for Human Beings,” Schiebinger re-

minds us that now, as then, “neither the dominant theory of race nor of sex . . . applie[s] to women of non-European descent, particularly black women” because “Scientific racism depend[s] on a chain of being or hierarchy of species in nature that [is] inherently unilinear and absolute. Scientific sexism, by contrast, depend[s] on radical biological divergence” (Schiebinger, 25).

Under such conditions, Jennifer Gonzalez suggests in her essay, “Envisioning Cyborg Bodies,” “a hybrid model of existence is required to encompass a new, complex and contradictory lived experience,” and the “image of the cyborg body functions as a site of condensation and displacement. It contains on its surface and in its fundamental structure the multiple fears and desires of a culture caught in the process of transformation.”<sup>8</sup> Although women of color figure prominently as cyborgs in a span of emergent fantasy and science fiction, they are less discernible in most popular culture contexts and in the literary canon; nevertheless, in *The Black Unicorn Poems*, Audre Lorde features “Death Dance for a Poet” whose subject’s skin presents with the paradoxes that characterize the cyborg: metal but “transparent,” “sinuous” and exposed, her “shining body” corroded by the sun, and, finally, gone “soft and opaque.”<sup>9</sup> Paradoxes notwithstanding, the poet’s skin charts a shift away from values we ascribe to modernity and toward a condition that makes her vulnerable to the global “eye” even as her own visual range diminishes in relation to the increased receptivity of her skin. In addition to sacrificing the lucidity her contemporary Nicole Brossard privileges in *Picture Theory*, a text that similarly foregrounds skin only to sacrifice it ecstatically in the hologram—loosely, a laser penetration of the skin for the blissful generation of a white scene—Lorde’s poet eschews transparency and its corollary, instrumentality, in her metamorphosis. This may not be the kind of cyborg Gonzalez anticipates, but she may be the kind of cyborg we have to continue to develop if we are to avoid the fate posed by the white businessman who appears in counterpoint to the “out of touch” client in a parallel set of Sprint PCS wireless ads.

Daubed “oblivious,” the white businessman’s condition is registered as an index of an informational deficit rather than as a failure to maintain sufficient embodiment. On him, ironically, the signifiers are inarticulate, translated instead as pure materiality, so that viewers read his body as they do other bodies that feature black grease paint, including especially soldiers and athletes. Like theirs, in other words, the male wireless client’s relation to his body is understood to be one of instrumentality, so that even though he might not be said to have the luxury of role-playing in this instance, he is nevertheless protected from reification and, in his oblivion or delusion, experiences plenitude. Even were his body damaged as soldiers’ and athletes’ bodies often are, oblivion is the order of the day as another of Sprint’s marketing campaigns dramatizes, articulating the paradox of “profound joy and peril” that belongs to masculine dissociation; I am

thinking particularly of Sprint's IP Networking ads—dated 20 June 2001 for circulation in Europe and Asia—both of which feature a man wearing a giddy smile despite also wearing bandages around the eyes and temples as well as matching gashes across the left nostril. The damage is testimony to their having been “Blindsided by success on [their] way to [the] water cooler.” Indeed, the text of the ads note that it is precisely under ideal circumstances, when “everything is up and running smoothly,” that “wham—you’re knocked senseless from behind by your own unbridled success.” Such is the price of consenting to a “single point of contact to access one of the world’s largest, most reliable networks” which, incidentally, also offers a hedge against “globalization” by invoking “the idea of a localised staff who understands” clients’ “specific needs,” including apparently a comparable degree of masochism.

To the extent that these two men portray masochistic desire, they perform what Steven Connor, following Klaus Theweleit, characterizes as a “bizarre co-operation of male assault upon the skin, with the puncturing effects of the phallic stylus, and female repair of that surface, the restoration of the skin as web, veil, or text. Such practices seem to make it clear that the desire to tear the skin is inseparable from the need to darn it, or make it whole.”<sup>10</sup> The variations in the “damage” and repair to each of the men, however, may indicate divergent ethnic negotiations of a phenomenon Connor understands as “the growing fluidity of relations between the self and its contexts and secondary instruments, a condition in which the skin is no longer primarily a membrane of separation, but a medium of connection or greatly intensified semiotic permeability, of codes, signs, images, forms, desires” (Connor, “Integuments,” 52). If, as Connor suggests, preoccupation with acquiring a shiny skin indicates a familiar resistance to penetration, “absorb[ing] nothing, not even light,” then the European’s spectacular, undressed black-eye or “shiner” may reveal a more intense fear about permeability than appears in the Asian’s face, which features a spectacular bandage over a scrape that, while apparently a lesser wound, risks infection if left open. To ascribe reflectivity to a black eye which, by virtue of its bruising, would seem precisely a site of light absorption may seem implausible, except that in other discourses and particularly in the area of textiles we similarly link “stain” to “glaze” and “sheen”; thus, it is critical to understand the “shiner” as symptomatic of the “fantasy of toughened skin, whether in the form of scales, leather or metal,” a list to which I would add “contusions.” Registered in the Asian man’s face, on the other hand, is “the complex form of . . . interchange between the injury and the mark,” a “rending of the [skin,] the imaginary fabric or envelope of the self” (Connor, “Integuments,” 41, 52); his skin, at least, manifests a greater degree of receptivity than the European’s, which is remarkable when we consider that the threat is “unbridled” and posed “from behind,” that the threat is, in the vernacular, “getting fucked.”

Sprint thus taps into the gender codes through which ethnicity is routinely mapped, implying the asymmetry in these men's risks. Western Europeans adopting a high degree of masculine dissociation continue to operate as though under a modernist regime, living in their skins as "screen[s]" or mirrors that ensure their irreducibility to objects (Connor, "Integuments," 52), whereas, at least in Sprint's imaginary, Asians adopting a lesser degree of masculine dissociation inhabit more precariously secured skins, vulnerable to (recuperable) rupture. Indeed, Sprint's marketing tactics specify the various skin conditions that facilitate and confound how we interface electronically, shaping as well the fantasies that will inform, among other developments, the continuous reorganization of those modes that constitute the sites of our collective mediation. For instance, though Steven Connor expresses some certainty that the pervasiveness of the "screen" in the "consciousness of [Windows'] users" for whom "its function as separating membrane . . . marking the point of defining interface between the user and his or her object" is "yielding to a much more complex interimplication of the user and the used" (Connor, "Integuments," 53), the fantasy of transparency evident in Sprint PCS' wireless ads has exerted an extraordinary influence on the Internet where, as Mark Poster puts it, the "'interface,' the face between the faces . . . must somehow appear to be 'transparent' . . . appear[ing] not to be an interface" (Poster, 197). Perhaps, on the other hand, the fragmentation and layering of the screen resulting from "pop-up" screens exhibit some of the "'revolutionary potential'" to which N. Katherine Hayles alludes when she proposes interfaces that will "'expose the presuppositions underlying the social formations of late capitalism'" (qtd. in Poster, 197). Perhaps not surprisingly, to the extent that these "pop-ups" work on the same principle as the temporary tattoo, which is gaining popularity as a comparably cheap way of purchasing advertising time, they elicit a similar degree of contempt; in the latter case, though, the sentiment is framed in terms of anxiety about reinscribing America's racial history so, for instance, the director of consumer watchdog group, Commercial Alert, Gary Ruskin exclaims, "It's frightening that advertisers would literally brand people."<sup>11</sup> What is remarkable is that these ads, worn primarily on the backs of athletes and in this particular case, boxers, are dramatically less intrusive than, say, the Botox incursions promoted two days earlier in the same newspaper; moreover, the temporary tattoos have been prone to wash away with sweat, making a mess of signifiers, whereas the muscle paralyzer, Botox, is delivered via multiple injections to reduce wrinkling and thereby preempt involuntary signification, indeed arresting signification altogether.<sup>12</sup> Though our female Sprint lead exhibits a smooth forehead that suggests she might be a regular at the Botox parties, the simultaneous emergence and dissipation of "out of touch" on her skin reveals the extent to which signification remains in play and presumes an engagement with history that is the condition of this inscription.

While her Sprint precursors include Candice Bergen, notorious for the reactions elicited by her performance of the working mother, and Sela Ward, famous as the hippest member of her sexy, maternal sorority, the “out of touch” Sprint client’s more controversial contemporaries include the outraged mother who, after phoning—via a competitor—to inquire of her babysitter, “How are the children?” returns home to find them dusted with flour. Sprint’s anecdote insinuates that in their cellular service resides the power to stabilize signs so that never again will any one, at least anyone who chooses to buy, suffer the indignities of a signifying chain promising identity while always already in the midst of fissure. The scenario poses more than indignity of course since flouring would seem a precursor to cooking or baking and thus a cannibalistic gesture made possible, we are led to believe, by the mother’s inadequate connection to her children. More than warding off this horror, more, indeed, than suturing mother and children together in an effort to recuperate the very distance thought crucial to making her such a conspicuous consumer, Sprint offers services that preempt the racial confusion typically embedded in and occasioned by whitening techniques. In other words, Sprint campaigns to make the babysitter a redundancy, that is, an iteration of the mother, rather than a proxy who dangerously translates the question about the children’s “being” into an ontological challenge, constituting the children’s surfaces for inscription. But the mother’s proxy succeeds in producing an act of inscription that finds a helpful parallel in the remarkable projects Jennifer Biddle discusses in “Skin as Country in the Central Desert,” an astonishing consideration of the Warlpiri Aboriginals whose “attention. . . to surface suggest a profound sensitivity to the conditions of the productivity of writing in its properly semiotic sense,” a sensitivity that requires “a prior act of producing a ‘surface’—and a very particular kind of ‘surface’—is first enacted.”<sup>13</sup>

The flouring drama that Sprint would preempt thus serves as a kind of surfacing that makes inscription possible, not altogether unlike the rituals of the Warlpiri women’s ceremonial Dreaming ritual, during which “The skin ‘surface’ is covered, coated in its entirety, by hands dipped in oil, once, twice and again, prior to any application of ochre designs. . . . *Kuruwarri* signs are put and re-put. The thick indelible lines—half circle, line, shape—will be painted and re-painted. Ochre will be dragged and re-dragged on breast; paint will be applied, thick and dark on canvas, once, twice, again” (Biddle, 181-3). The signs are “manifest only in, through, and by the trace that surrounds it,” a phenomenon that prompts Biddle to invoke Roland Barthes’ notion of “‘appearance-as-disappearance’” to account for a shimmering effect, especially in Central Desert acrylics, that we likewise see, albeit less powerfully rendered, in the face of the out of touch (qtd. in Biddle, 183). That is, attention to the female subscriber in the newspaper ad reveals a fragmentation in her attention which gets embodied as a distracted look. The value of Sprint’s female client has been deferred elsewhere, and, consequently, we, the wired but ironically unsubscribed, are likewise in



danger of being out of “touch”—quite literally, as the final two letters, “ch,” seem on the verge of disappearing from over her left eye. That is to say, while some might contend that the signifier is in the midst of materializing, I wish to suggest that “touch” vacillates between being written and unwritten, that, while frequently taken to pose contamination if not outright obliteration, “touch” evokes both contact and deferral, a shifting exchange, which, famously, Jacques Derrida figures as the hymen, and, Luce Irigaray, as a woman’s two lips.

Clearly, I am seduced by the pleasures and pains of working out of touch, going so far as to have tattooed on my own back the pages and binding of a book, open and flat with little sense of perspective, not unlike the computer screen, but also featuring in juxtaposition two iterations of “touch,” composed of blackwork traces. Rather than try to suggest either the referent or the intent, I will report only how these iterations have signified to those who can see what I cannot; this is, after all, a book! Typically, people exclaim, “barbed-wire boobs!?” and then with less delight and greater uncertainty, “and a woman?” For my part, I have seen the tattoo most clearly in a dream in which the myriad razor cuts I discover lead me to look in a mirror, and I felt not a remarkable capacity for controlling my response to pain, nor an epiphany about formerly unnegotiable trauma, but a history of the messy work that comprises connection across differences, a partial record of skin’s value in this writing, a powerful sense that our social arrangements are best organized according to receptivity, and a desire for receptivity born out of touch.

# OUT OF TOUCH

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# Introduction

Amid the unremitting flow of speculation about the body in late twentieth-century discourse, skin gets short shrift, despite sustained critical efforts to scour the margins. When I began this project several years ago, skin had received scant attention in this critical discourse on the body, though in the very recent past this has changed, particularly with the publication of *Thinking Through the Skin*, a superb collection of essays that advances exciting interdisciplinary thinking certain to energize and shift some of the political, aesthetic, and psychoanalytic impasses we cannot afford. *Out of Touch* supplements this inquiry with attention to canonical literary interventions into skin tropes that, surprisingly, engage the technologies of the twentieth century and, in turn, inform our changing sense of identity and desire. If skin has been neglected because implicitly taken to be literally and thus appropriately marginal, or, alternately, because explicitly disavowed as a sometimes dangerous accident, skin in literary theory has been troublesome in the welter of concern about the relation between the textual and the material. For instance, perhaps it is because poststructuralism “marks . . . the dissolution of [matter] as a contemporary category,” as Judith Butler asserts in *Bodies that Matter*, that skin has gone so long unexamined textually, for even despite a title that suggests she has revised her arguments to incorporate notions of embodiment, Butler has seemed much more invested in exploring materiality in relation to the notion of discourse featured in her subtitle: “The Discursive Limits of Sex.”<sup>1</sup> In her gloss on Freud’s argument in *The Ego and the Id* about the role of the body in ego development, specifically, Butler asserts that the psychologist “inadvertently establish[es] the conditions for the articulation of the body as morphology.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Freud would be more accurately taken to mean that the skin is the primary mode of sensation through which the ego develops itself as projection.<sup>3</sup> But for Butler, Freud’s interest in the body and in the skin specifically is subordinate to the development of a symbolic