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### Much More than “Skin Deep”

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Skin is a remarkable feature of the human body, providing every individual with an outer layer of soft tissue that protects internal organs and other tissues. People also rely on sensory aspects of the skin to feel external stimuli, from textures and heat to injuries and disease. In addition to its biological qualities, the outer layer of skin (i.e., the epidermis) is a principal visible aspect of the human body, influencing how others perceive an individual’s identity and presence. As we look at each other and touch each other, we draw conclusions about one another. The visible quality of skin allows people to interpret its features such as color, texture, decorations, blemishes, and diseases to make judgements about a person’s physical well-being and social identity, including age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, and social status. As happens with any material aspect of human life, people interpret the meaning of skin’s physical properties to guide social interactions. Likewise, individuals care for skin, reveal skin, and decorate skin in ways that affect social perceptions. Skin turns out to be a fundamental way humans embody social and cultural experiences in the world.

In an earlier issue of *Open Anthropology*, Sallie Han and Jason Antrosio (2018) reviewed anthropological perspectives on how humans transform body hair to create and express social identities. They note that “hair care demands the time, effort, and knowledge of others as well as one’s self.” Diverse forms of styling hair, removing hair, and covering hair across time and space show how humans use visible aspects of their bodies to exchange ideas.

Inspired by Han and Antrosio, we have curated the work of anthropologists who explore various aspects of human experiences with skin. When we began organizing this issue, we expected to find articles exploring lighthearted aspects of human skin, especially related to playful skin decorations. We found, however, that relatively few articles in *AnthroSource* explored cultural aspects of skin per se, including how people regard “natural” and transformed skin as aspects of everyday life. The ordinariness of skin, in some ways, may pose challenges for exploring how people embody cultural differences. Daniel Miller (2010) calls on anthropologists to interrogate the ordinariness of some dimensions of culture in a globalizing world. He explores the anthropology of blue jeans, noting how the ordinariness of denim allows members of immigrant communities in London to create a shared embodied sense of social belonging. Likewise, our selection of articles on the anthropology of skin reveals how a seemingly

ordinary, visible aspect of the body touches on serious subjects deserving of deeper reflection. Like other material practices for presenting the body in everyday life—styling hair, wearing clothes—skin practices express individual perspectives and social values. The anthropologists in this collection demonstrate that the human experience with skin is much more than a superficial or “skin deep” topic. Rather, skin is an integral, visual aspect of being human, implicating critical questions about individual identity and social belonging.

In all social groups, local cultural and aesthetic values influence how people reveal and conceal skin, thereby influencing social interactions. Because skin is visible to both an individual and others, people interpret the meaning of skin’s natural qualities as well as those altered by injuries or medical procedures. People also intentionally modify their skin’s appearance with cosmetics, tattooing, scarification, and other forms of body ornamentation as “a way to use the body to comment and act on the world” ([Rosenblatt 1997](#), p. 300). The anthropologists in this collection demonstrate how human skin experiences involve an interplay of the malleable qualities of the skin with human perceptions of self and other.

## Biological and cultural malleability of skin

Nina Jablonski explores physical, social, and cultural aspects of human skin in *Skin: A Natural History* (2006) and *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (2012). She assesses the biological properties of skin, which include providing protection from physical injury, radiation, pathogens, chemicals, excessive heat and cold, and dehydration. Skin further acts as a primary sensory organ. In producing melanin to protect individuals from ultraviolet light, it contributes to an individual’s skin, hair, and eye color. Skin color is perhaps the most notable and most visible physical characteristic of skin and is used cross-culturally to classify and characterize people. Jablonski describes how the evolution of human skin coloration has influenced sexual and natural selection. She explains, however, that while variation in human skin color relates to diverse environmental conditions, it cannot be used to justify dividing human into “racial” groups. Indeed, the extensive variation of skin color is part of the human condition and speaks to the malleability of skin. This physiological quality, in turn, offers a potent material aspect of the human body that individuals use to communicate ideas to other people, including ideas about social group boundaries.

In reviewing Jablonski’s work, Bernhard Fink ([2009](#)) points out how anthropological studies reveal the importance of the skin’s condition in influencing human communication and social interactions. Fink observes that “the human skin is a bewildering reservoir of information about an individual” (p. 76). The natural history of skin reveals how skin biology allows humans to alter and manipulate a prominent visible aspect of their body, communicating emotional and physiological states. The malleable properties of skin shape cultural practices, from body art to healing. Similarly, Trenton Holliday ([2007](#)) notes that Jablonski’s work demonstrates how skin is a canvas for humans to modify and express themselves. She observes that “our skin provides both our connection to, and protection from, the outside world” (p. 770). Connecting to the external world often includes changing the skin’s appearance to convey impressions to other people. Keisha-Kahn Perry ([2014](#)) notes that Jablonski’s work shows that “how we define the very idea of who and what constitutes the ‘human’ and ‘humanity’ is still treated as a biological fact tied to the physicality of skin color rather than a sociohistorical construction” (p. 196). Because color captures considerable visual attention, an anthropological perspective is useful for understanding how humans interpret the meaning of skin.

## Embodying race and racism

While a wide range of skin colors and tones can be observed within and among human groups, anthropologists and others argue that humans cannot be grouped into biological races based on skin color

and other physical features. Nevertheless, humans learn to identify skin color differences and identify with members of particular skin-color groups that, during contemporary times, people refer to as races. Anthropologists have long grappled with the concept of race. The American Anthropological Association's project [RACE: Are we so different?](#) provides engaging ways to understand the biology of human variation and explores skin color variation as a fundamental aspect of being human and a key factor in creating social group divisions. Most centrally, the perception of skin color as a group marker influences how people identify and perceive of racialized groups and structure racism and anti-racism.

Ana Ramos-Zayas (2011) explores how Brazilian and Puerto Rican youth experience skin color differences and learn to embody new racial identities after moving to urban areas of the East Coast of the United States. The youth identify as individuals with African ancestry and draw on their prior racialized experiences outside the United States to negotiate a new white-black continuum. Ramos-Zayas documents how these newly arrived Latino youth question cultural assumptions about being Black in Newark, New Jersey. In particular, Brazilian and Puerto Rican youth challenge everyday constructions of race and racism in a new context. Ramos-Zayas documents the emotional disjunctures of living in a world organized by context-specific racialized differences, particularly related to perceived skin color differences of Latinos who learn that they are perceived as Black. As a response, the Brazilian and Puerto Rican youth become “street therapists” who counsel other youth on navigating preferred forms of Blackness. “Acting hard” and “acting tough” become strategies for belonging in predominantly Latino neighborhoods in Newark, but the youth turn to other strategies for “making Blackness right” and better aligning with opportunities for upward mobility in the United States. As one youth tells Ramos-Zayas, “I feel like I’m black, even though I’m not very dark-skinned” (p. 93). The Latino youth engage in “racial learning” as they orient responses to racialization to better position themselves to the neoliberalizing economic context. While learning how race operates in particular U.S. contexts, the youth also learn to embody racialized affect that intersects with their preferred gender, sexuality, class, and generational identities. Ramos-Zayas’ work shows that people interpret and feel skin color and other bodily attributes in particular social, emotional, and material contexts.

In a second example of embodying racialized identities, Tathagatan Ravindran (2021) explores pigmentocracy—skin color discrimination—in Bolivia. With great ethnographic detail, Ravindran shows how “pigmentocratic logics” structure anti-Indigenous racism and White-mestizo dominance in a Latin American context. He describes how Indigenous people are racialized for skin color and other phenotypic traits, and how racialized representations influence all dimensions of life, from access to basic resources and socioeconomic mobility to romantic relations, childbearing, education, and public encounters with strangers. For example, getting a job requires an individual to meet standards of “presentability,” meaning to have lighter skin. Ravindran describes how racialization continues in the Andes despite centuries of mixing or *mestizaje*. In fact, as the economic, educational, and language differences in the population narrow, skin color has taken on a more central role in structuring discrimination, particularly for Indigenous women. Related to the skin’s biological malleability, Ravindran shows that “the greater fluidity and ambiguity make the racialization of the Indigenous population on phenotypical grounds more invisible and hence more formidable” (p. 5). In other words, the ambiguity of skin color as a marker of race allows for new forms of racialization and racial discrimination to emerge.

In a visual anthropology essay, Sabra Thorner (2015) reviews the work of Bindi Cole, a photographer who self-identifies as Aboriginal Australian. Thorner reviews how photography has long been a medium through which to think about race and Aboriginality in Australia. In considering how artists use photographic practices to challenge racism in Australia, she shows how Cole and others challenge assumptions that equate Aboriginality with skin color, especially with faces. Some of the artistic strategies Cole uses include inserting her own body into her works, representing notions of family, and combining visual and textual information. The images show the “ridiculousness of policing her own, her

family's, and her community's Aboriginality based on their skin color" (p. 166). Challenging skin-based racializing practices and institutions, Cole and other artists' creative projects stress that race and racism are social constructs. This work also presents alternative understandings of Aboriginality tied to kinship, community, history, and politics. Thorner reveals the importance of indigenous artists and others who challenge the inhumanity of reducing people to the perceived quality of their skin.

## Assessing unhealthy skin

As with any aspect of the physical body, humans interpret skin qualities to assess health and disease and seek treatment. Yet, human health has a subjective dimension that goes beyond simply detecting evidence of disease. For example, people often specify what healthy skin should look like in particular social contexts, with varying tones, textures, and marks indicating different notions of health and illness. For some, achieving what is personally or culturally regarded as "healthy" skin may involve increasing exposure to the sun to achieve a darker tone while others may avoid sun exposure to maintain a lighter tone. Likewise, people may seek specific treatments with substances with perceived healing properties—mineral water, soaps, lotions, creams—to treat the effects of injuries or aging. Others may seek surgical interventions to remove scars or create them. Some people have access to dermatological care, while others live with untreated skin pathologies. Thus, social distinctions are embodied in groups with differential access to valued skin treatments or medical care.

Thomas Arcury and Sara Quandt (2004) examine how skin diseases have become a serious form of occupational injury among farmworkers in North Carolina. The authors note that most farmworkers in North Carolina and elsewhere in the United States are Latino immigrants, the majority being from Mexico. Their research shows how agricultural labor increases risk of skin disorders caused by exposure to sun, plants, infectious agents, and pesticides. The risks are highest for migrant and seasonal farmworkers, whose suffering is exacerbated by limited access to health services as well as language barriers, substandard housing, and lack of control of workplace safety. Arcury and Quandt refer to these patterns as "dermatological health disparities" related to barriers to prevention and treatment (p. 35). The occupational risk factors are well-documented and include the lack of pesticide information in Spanish and lack of access to clean water. As Arcury and Quandt describe, the patterns of unhealthy skin conditions are markers of ethnic and class segregation rather than supposedly natural qualities of the skin or cultural beliefs about skin care. This research on the occupational origins of agricultural workers' skin diseases helps counter false assumptions linking skin features to supposedly racial or ethnic attributes. More broadly, this anthropological perspective reveals that reifying unhealthy skin as a cultural difference reinforces labor segregation and obscures the need for prevention and treatment of health problems among vulnerable populations.

Alexander Edmonds (2013) documents how obstetric surgical procedures in Brazil create skin distinctions that reinforce social hierarchies. In his essay, he examines how elective cosmetic surgeries related to childbirth reveal the interplay between health and beauty. Only women with higher socioeconomic status have the means to access such surgeries. He explores the increasing "aesthetic management of reproduction" that transforms a woman's appearance but also minimizes perceptions of surgical risks (p. 247). These cosmetic surgical procedures aim to improve a woman's skin tone and remove scars from cesarean sections. Patients and doctors justify the erasure of the scars—which are physical indicators of medical treatments—by claiming that their unhealthy appearance has long-lasting negative effects on mental health. As motherhood and childbirth are medicalized, correcting the body for the effects of childbirth includes altering the skin to achieve what is deemed to be a healthier appearance. Aesthetic medicine embedded in obstetrics-gynecology seeks to prevent and treat "aesthetic pathology" associated with childbirth (p. 234). In other words, women may be physically healthy, but they refer to aesthetic values when seeking medical interventions to remove scars and other undesirable features.

As an interesting contrast to removing scars, Elizabeth Roberts (2012) explores the desirability of scars resulting from cesarean sections in Ecuador. A hierarchy of class, race, and sex in labor relations affects how people interpret the meaning of birthing procedures. Roberts argues that “in Ecuador, medical care makes race” (p. 217). Natural births are associated with being “Indian”, and vaginal birth is the norm for public clinics attended by poor urban women, indigenous women, rural *campesinas*, and Black women. By contrast, caesarian sections are exclusively performed in private clinics, which are associated with whiteness, economic self-reliance, and higher worth as an educated, independent citizen. Thus, a lateral scar from a cesarean section indexes a woman’s ability to avoid public medical services and embodies a higher social status. Rarely revealing their scars in public settings, women discuss their scars and surgeries in medical encounters and personal relationships (with husbands, for example). Seeking a surgical procedure resulting in scars also expresses a notion that the body is malleable and that individuals with the means to do so should seek medical interventions to achieve upward mobility. Examining medical practices along an Indian-white continuum in Latin America, Roberts shows how scars express whiteness and reveals the ability of skin to act as a broad canvas that displays socially coded signs and self-identification beyond color variations.

Benjamin Hegarty (2022) examines skin experiences related to HIV treatment in Indonesia. HIV peer outreach workers who counsel men who have sex with men (MSM) discuss how to manage the appearance of an HIV-positive body, which includes maintaining a clear skin tone. Hegarty uses the concept of biosociality to refer to the shared social identities that emerge from having similar biomedical experiences, including, in this case, interpreting and managing the appearance of skin. Skincare is a central focus of outreach workers who use various local terms about skin to counsel HIV-positive men to follow the correct treatment procedures to achieve “healthy” and “clean” skin that appears “white and clear.” In this way, HIV becomes less visible as a chronic illness. By contrast, skin tone that appears “dark,” is associated with weight loss, or is otherwise deemed unhealthy increases the risk of exposing one’s diagnosis. This, in turn, generates stigma and criticism of the clinic as ineffectual and undermines outreach efforts. Thus, having what is deemed to be unhealthy-looking skin—even in the absence of specific skin disease—paradoxically, can act as a barrier to access further testing and treatment. As with the other anthropologists in this collection, Hegarty shows how biomedical interventions may produce new cultural meanings about what counts as healthy skin, resulting in new social identities and hierarchies.

## Skin ornamentation as “art”

Given the importance that all societies place on skin as an indicator of the character of the person in encloses, it is not surprising that so many people enhance or ornament their skin, seek to modify it, or alternatively, revile some forms of skin enhancement as a signal of concealment or outright rebellion against cultural norms or values. Particularly in Japan and Oceania, skin ornamentation in the form of tattooing is considered a venerated art form. Yet despite its deep history and global occurrence, skin modification as a form of art has only been the subject of museum exhibitions in the West since the mid-1990s. Body art is challenging to exhibit in a static, museum setting, because the “canvas” is the human body, which in real life cannot be displayed in the way museums present inanimate objects. Therefore, most exhibits use other works of art such as drawings, statues, and carvings as well as photographs and the tools used in the various forms of ornamentation to convey information about these practices. Museum exhibits—especially those sited in places with an “anthropological” focus—generally emphasize the widespread nature of intentional skin modification, such as piercing, scarification, tattooing, and body painting (including the use of cosmetics).

William Peace (2000) explores the customariness and significance of skin ornamentation in his review of the exhibit, *Body Art: Marks of Identity*, mounted at the American Museum of Natural History in New

York. He makes a fundamental point that “human appearance is culturally based ... culture is in a very real sense inscribed on our bodies” through practices such as tattooing and scarification (p. 589). Peace further notes that “body art can be considered a universal mode of social communication and worldwide medium of expression” (p. 592). Indeed, skin modifications are such important elements of people’s identity and are so culturally significant that the patterns and motifs are included as integral elements of anthropomorphic objects such as figurines, puppets, and masks, which, like tattoos, also can serve as a “second skin.” Overall, the exhibit and Peace’s review demonstrate that “body art crosses social, economic, and cultural barriers” and in doing so reveal information that might be surprising to some, including that King Alfonso of Spain, King Frederick of Denmark, and King George V of England were all tattooed.

Carrie Hertz (2006) reviews an online exhibit produced by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.<sup>[1]</sup> Like *Body Art*, this exhibition relied on representations of body art in other media to illustrate its global prevalence. Advertised as a “*World Tour*” of body art, this exhibit illustrated the geographic breadth and temporal depth of various forms of body art by juxtaposing ancient images and objects with photographs of contemporary American individuals. This juxtaposition was also intended to counter prevailing ideas in much of Anglo-American society that tattooing and other forms of body modification are somehow deviant or anti-social. Hertz emphasizes the variety of functions and cultural contexts of body art practices, which range from adornments intended to enhance natural features (“beauty routines”) to representations of spiritual practices. She commends the exhibit for its “revelation that individuals are able to differentiate themselves within society through cultural practices” (p. 72). This emphasis on the individual within a cultural system included an opportunity for viewers of the exhibit to post comments and photographs, a feature that revealed individuals’ reasons for modifying their bodies, insights not obtainable through study of the silent objects included in the exhibit. As Hertz notes, “body modification is not only designed for the social gaze of others, but can serve very private functions of self-identification” (p. 72).

## **Skin modification as social expression**

As explored elsewhere in this essay, the characteristics of skin communicate important information about the individual who lives in and with it. Unlike clothing—another form of body adornment universally used to signal identity—tattoos and scarification are (near) permanent and thus are often seen as “authentic” representations of self. They remain when clothing is shed. As Daniel Rosenblatt (1997) notes, “tattoos are able to carry the symbolic weight they do only because by modifying the skin they become a culturally recognized vehicle for talking about the self. It is because they are ‘ancient’ and emblematically human rather than a peculiarity of our own culture and because they involve a permanent commitment that tattoos are able to be differentiated from these other phenomena (e.g., clothing).”

The effort to normalize and universalize tattoos, scarification, and other body adornments put forth in museum exhibits contrasts sharply with the transgressive view of these practices in the United States until recently. Rosenblatt (1997) analyzes attitudes about various forms of body adornment among “alternative communities” in the San Francisco area in the 1980s and early 1990s. His goal is to understand what skin modification means to individuals and “what they hope to achieve or express by their acts” (p. 290). The subversiveness of these practices was used to communicate critique if not outright rejection of dominant social norms and a desire for personal or social change. Similar to Hertz, Rosenblatt stresses that skin ornamentation is both a private and a public act: “on the one hand, it is something private, asocial, and individual, and on the other hand it is something public, a matter of other people’s perceptions, and of a place in a collectivity” (p. 306). Tattoos, he notes, express two forms of identity: membership in a group (e.g., a tattoo that represents the insignia of a branch of the military or a biker’s skull with wings) versus custom or tailored designs that are meant to represent something “essential” about the person

Rosenblatt equates the adoption of skin-modification practices such as tattooing and piercing among “counter-cultural” communities with the appropriation of “tribal” art by earlier European modernist artists. He argues that both the earlier artists and late twentieth-century body adorners use an imagined, romanticized construction of “primitive” cultures as a way to critique or reject industrial, capitalist rationalism and asks, “What are the cultural roots of this connection between social criticism and an identification with the primitive?” (p. 295).<sup>[2]</sup> These “modern primitives” resist the routinization associated with modernity, choosing tattooing generally and specific motifs in particular as an expression of their nostalgia for an “earlier, less homogenized social order” (p. 305). He argues that tattoo recipients choose “particular features that contrast favorably with what are taken to be negatively valued aspects of our own society” thus “the primitive is perfectly suited to function as an alternative vision of the world ... because it has been constructed in opposition to our conceptions of ourselves” (pp. 295-96).

As a symbol of the rejection of Western capitalist society, the appeal of tattoos, scarification, and other skin adornments is twofold. First, the antiquity and global prevalence of tattooing, piercing, and scarification is a key part of their transgressive character, because it is the connection with larger history and alternative ways of thinking that cast them as creating “anti-social skin,” that is, as a rejection of Western Judeo-Christian traditions, which view body ornamentation as defilement. Second, Rosenblatt notes that some of the transgressive power of tattoos and other forms of skin modification derives from their history in the West, specifically their early association with “disreputable” folk such as sailors, bikers, underworld figures, and participants in carnival sideshows. Thus, “the previous disreputability of tattoo is what allows it to be an enactment of resistance to the cultural mainstream” (p. 305). While tattooing was viewed as transgressive vis-à-vis normative Anglo-American culture, at the same time the adoption of tattoo designs connected to non-Western cultures led to a perception of body decoration as “an ancient and thus essentially human practice” (p. 302).

Maureen Trudelle Schwarz (2006) also explores why people consciously alter their skin. Writing a decade later than Rosenblatt, she notes that attitudes about tattooing among Anglo-Americans have undergone a significant transformation, largely influenced by familiarity with global traditions as well as the mainstream assimilation of formerly “countercultural” practices. Schwarz draws on Irmas (1992, p. 62) who argues that tattooing has become “coopted by a marketplace that makes no distinction between high and low culture [as they become] part of the same fashion statement” (p. 224). While noting that people choose to become tattooed for a wide variety of reasons, Schwarz emphasizes that “people who get tattooed in North America frequently experience this act as a means by which to forge a connection to the rest of humanity; they see themselves as participating in a timeless spiritual quest in common with people from cultures around the globe” (p. 225).

Schwarz particularly explores why people living in North America choose to acquire tattoos that reference Native Americans, comparing the motivations of people of Euro-American descent with those of Native Americans. For all her consultants, the act of acquiring a tattoo was seen as one of “personal expression and self-fulfillment,” although, as Rosenblatt also noted, participants often chose images they felt connected them to other cultures or societies. Like Rosenblatt’s subjects, Schwarz writes that tattoo recipients often seek personal growth or change, and that a tattoo is a part of the process. Synthesizing the perspective of the people she interviewed, she notes “inscription of tattoos engraves a new identity onto the surface of the skin” (p. 228). In particular, she found that Euro-Americans often acquire tattoos as a way of marking pivotal points in their existences, either as reminders of lives they were leaving behind or in anticipation of changes to come, such as a new job. In contrast, she found that people of Native American descent—especially those “raised outside their cultural traditions”—seek tattoos as a way of reconnecting with and expressing their ancestry. Further, while Native Americans aim for connection to their own heritage, Euro-Americans often view the acquisition of a tattoo as a way to connect to or associate with some other cultural tradition.

Additionally, Schwarz notes difference in the images and motifs chosen by Native- and non-native individuals. Euro-American participants, she writes, tend to favor images of Native Americans found in mass popular culture. She writes, “Ignorant of life in contemporary Native American communities, these individuals naively select images from the repertoire of representations available in the discursive formation of Indianness—‘spiritual warriors,’ ‘stewards of the earth,’ or other time-worn stereotypes of noble savages, which are promulgated by popular culture or the New Age spirituality movement” (p. 251). In contrast, Schwarz notes, individuals of Native American descent often choose specific patterns derived from ancestral tattooing traditions or from other traditional art forms (such as beadwork)—rather than the nostalgic, romanticized designs favored by Anglos—as a way of signaling the survival of their people. Often, the choices made by Native Americans are based on careful research “in order to ensure cultural appropriateness.” Therefore, she concludes, in contrast to the stereotypic and sentimentalized designs chosen by Euro-Americans, Native Americans’ tattoos “convey a spirituality firmly grounded in the established religious cosmology of the Native Nation from which they descend, resulting in increasingly complex and systematic epistemologies” (p. 251). In contrasting the tattooing practices, Schwarz shows how transforming skin with tattoos supports a search for identity, for some one that is envisioned as more closely connected to fictive kin, nature or the supernatural and for others one that is connected to real—not imagined—ancestors and cultural practices.

Susan Phillips’ (2011) brief essay gives us a very different perspective on tattoos, although she underscores the fundamental point that tattoos mark a person in a fundamental way, usually for good, but sometimes borne from violence and abuse. Her essay focuses on three women patients at a tattoo removal clinic who acquired their tattoos (somewhat) against their will. The tattoos reminded these women of abusive lovers, uncontrollable anger, and stillborn children, and so they chose to remove their tattoos—a long, painful process—to free themselves from former lives and to reclaim their sovereignty. As they suffer through the pain of removing tattoos associated with abusers and addictions, they are, as Phillips describes them, “women who seek bodily and social transformation” (p. 117). Thus, for these women, the unmarked, “untattooed” skin represents new identities.

Just as tattoos and other forms of skin ornamentation can transform a person’s sense of self and the ways in which they are judged by the society around them, so too can some styles of makeup transform perceptions—public and private—of self, gender, age, and race. Unlike tattoos and scarification, cosmetics only temporarily alter the skin. Yet, as Samuel Elliot Novacich (2021) shows in their essay on makeup and racial identity in Brazil, attitudes about makeup reinforce the idea that the surface of the body is often connected to the person underneath, although how and why varies. Makeup can both conceal—for example by covering blemishes and smoothing wrinkles—as well as reveal hidden qualities or transform the individual altogether. As with tattoos and scarification, cosmetics have the power to point to the process of identity transformation. Just as tattoo recipients associate their tattoos with rites of passage and transformation from one state of being to another, a Brazilian makeup artist notes, “‘makeup transformed my life, and it can transform the lives of everyone’” (p. 682). Some makeup artists in Brazil emphasize the affective power of cosmetics, for example by stressing the idea that when “properly” applied, they can build self-esteem.

An important point in Novacich’s essay is that, in Brazil, the connection between surface appearance and essential identity is complex and fluid. For example, makeup artists and their clients manipulate skin color in a way that often disassociates aspects of bodily aesthetics (such as skin color) from constructions of race, racial identity, and the experience of living as a member of a racialized category. In Brazil, makeup “may foster ambiguity and even apparent contradiction when it comes to local constructions of race” (p. 686). At times and for some makeup professionals and their clients, characteristics such as skin tone and the width of the nose (which can be visually modified by manipulating shades and tones of foundation) point to race, and there are times when they do not. Interestingly, unlike the ethnic and racial



naiveté conveyed by some Euro-Americans regarding their choice of tattoo motifs, Brazilian makeup specialists and their clients are hyperaware of the “racial politics” associated with certain cosmetic techniques, particularly those that visually transform the perceived shape of the nose or eyes, and how racial politics shape bodily aesthetics. Novacich concludes that “makeup, though frequently untethered from considerations of race, nevertheless shapes constructions of race—not by pointing to insides, but by adding layers to the surface of the body [because] the surface of the body, where color and phenotype reside, is both linked to and independent from ideas about our bodily interiors” (p. 700).

#### New social boundaries on the skin

As an external tissue, skin reacts to environmental conditions, including industrial pollution and toxic work settings. These economic and social conditions materially alter skin in ways that people may perceive as marking new group boundaries. In contrast to medical treatment and body ornamentation, some environmental threats and the resulting social hierarchies are beyond an individual’s control.

Mara Benadusi (2018) describes how oil culture in southeastern Sicily seeps deep into the skin of people who live, work, and die with petrochemical industrialization. Oil refineries that pollute air, water, and soil also increase the risk of skin disorders, such skin cancer as well as cause sickly-looking skin associated with other cancers, lung disease, bone and blood disorders, and birth defects. The long-term environmental and health catastrophe has an invisible, everyday quality that becomes especially visible on the skin of local inhabitants living near the refineries. People from outside the area often regard these conditions as evidence for unsanitary practices rather than the effects of pollution and exposure to toxins. In this way, skin becomes a visible marker of new chemical realities, but class segregation based on jobs and neighborhoods creates an uneven distribution of people affected by unhealthy environmental conditions. The materiality of a slow chemical disaster constructs “new subjectivities” through new material conditions of the body (p. 51). People interpret skin transformations and disease patterns as class differences, which associates a visible pathology with the quality of local people and their hygiene and personal lifestyle, further obscuring the political-economy origins of skin pathology. The toxicity of petroculturalism transpires as a slow, continuous process that normalizes unhealthy social conditions that people embody as seemingly ordinary material conditions.

In another Italian context, Noelle Molé (2008) documents how work-place harassment leads to various illnesses, especially skin rashes. Italians have adopted the term “mobbing” (*il mobbing*) to refer to a form of organizational coercion pathology (OCP), specifically the result of maltreatment by superiors. As neoliberal reforms erode work-place protections, workers report skin rashes and other emerging illnesses, such as headaches, depression, anxiety, and sleeplessness. Molé explores how “the notion of ‘living on the skin’ reflects Italians’ cultural beliefs in the deep permeability of the skin and of the interconnectedness of bodies” (p. 196). Italian workers draw on a tradition of humoral medicine to represent the skin as highly permeable, which requires drying and covering skin to protect an individual from the shock of sudden exposure to cold air. Harassment at work is another type of shock that people “live on the skin.” Workers describe skin rashes as trauma that marks them as different kinds of people, especially as people suffering from mobbing. As one person recounts, “I’ve lived mobbing on this skin! On this skin!” (p. 195). Nevertheless, skin rashes are a general physical reaction to stress, so victims of mobbing encounter great difficulty using their individual skin problems to establish evidence of intentional harassment, including work-place isolation, marginalization, and inappropriate criticism. Medical providers lack physical evidence directly linking skin rashes to unjust work conditions, so skin rashes tend not to be identified as work-related illnesses. In this way, the medicalization of skin transforms the work-place injustices into the personal distress of individual workers, thereby reducing the possibility of recognizing and modifying violent work-place structures.

## Conclusions

Skin is both public and private. Short of full-body clothing, it is the most visible aspect of a person and thus a potential signboard for their identity (which may be why some societies insist that some people—usually females—be fully covered). It is almost universally deemed to reveal—or in some instances hide—something about the person within. Other people “read” something about a person from the qualities and conditions of their skin, while individuals might choose to use their skin as a medium for communicating something essential to themselves or to others. In pulling together this collection of studies for *Open Anthropology*, we were struck by the myriad ways that skin’s seemingly ordinary and malleable qualities allow powerful, cultural perceptions to influence social interactions. The authors call attention to the ways skin—“natural” or transformed—shapes social arrangements. Skin is not simply a wrapping for the “real” body. Rather, the skin is a fundamental factor in the ways that bodies act and are acted upon in the world. Taking a skin-deep perspective of body practices is anything but a superficial exercise; rather, it provides profound insights into cultural diversity and our shared humanity.

The authors in this collection present a diversity of ways in which humans derive meaning from skin color, texture, scars, scratches, tattooing, painting, piercing, bleeding, bruising, freckles, and wrinkles. Some are characteristics we are born with and will live with throughout our lives. Some may be perceived as physical indicators of common biological processes that individuals experience over a life course. Some people choose to intentionally modify or ornament their skin. On the other hand, some skin transformations result involuntarily from disease, inadequate medical services, or unsafe work conditions. People may use skin differences to reify subjective social boundaries, differentiating, in effect, “social skin” from “anti-social skin” as described above with some tattooing practices. Although people perceive of skin as primarily a “natural” feature of the human body, the anthropologists in this collection show that skin-based social divisions related to beauty, age, class, ethnicity, race, and work are not natural phenomena but rather are social and cultural constructions.

While skin color-based social segregation is an old, pernicious problem, the anthropologists in this collection challenge readers to go beyond preexisting skin-color divisions to understand new racialization processes. The studies of race-class continua show how humans shift their interpretations of skin color differences to justify discrimination and violence. Furthermore, by juxtaposing studies of skin color with the studies of skin transformations, this collection of articles underscores the central role skin plays in how humans perceive bodily differences and thereby produce social hierarchies. These studies also describe how people challenge new racialization processes with new forms of resistance—as discussed, for example, in the cases of some Latino youth in the United States and Aboriginal Australian artists. Indeed, based on this anthropological research, we can expect that shifting perceptions of skin-color differences in conjunction with new occupational hazards and new biotechnologies will affect outward appearance and will likely produce novel cultural patterns of perceiving human groups and identities.

The characteristics of skin can be altered both intentionally and unintentionally. In some cases, people seek deliberate skin transformations with cosmetics, surgery, and ornamentation to achieve higher standards of health, hygiene, and beauty. Dermatological and cosmetic processes can result in the devaluation of unmarked “natural-looking” skin, creating new forms of social exclusion based on gender, ethnic, or class differences. Marked skin with surgical scars from childbirth or intricate tattoos become ways to display higher social status that have little to do with biomedical measures of health and illness. Likewise, the malleability of skin may lead to patterns of involuntary transformations of physical appearances, as happens in occupational exposure to pesticides, chemicals, physical trauma, and social violence. Even as anthropologists debunk racialized categories, humans identify new skin conditions to categorize and evaluate groups of people. Skin characteristics can become naturalized in ways that obscure harmful social processes and associate innate features, culturally defined aesthetic qualities, or

pathology with perceived group traits. Given skin's omnipresence, the anthropological perspectives in this collection suggest the possibility that emerging social, economic, and technological transformations will lead to new pigmentocracies or other forms of skin-based discrimination.

Skin is the most visible aspect of the human body, and skin differences are recognized in all societies. As the anthropologists in this collection show, the physical qualities of skin do not separate an individual from the external world. Rather, humans use the flexible materiality of skin to mediate cultural experiences and social interactions. As Bernard Fink (2009) notes, these qualities allow skin to be “regarded as an individual canvas of human life history” (p. 76). Humans draw on their interpretations of skin regarding color, texture, and ornamentation to communicate complex ideas about social identities, group interactions, and social hierarchies. In short, an individual's skin experiences deeply influence perceptions of self and other.

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## NOTES

[1] Although the exhibit was not accessible online as of the writing of this essay (June 2022), the materials in the exhibit derive from the permanent collection of the museum. Therefore, the objects discussed and many others can be accessed through their online catalog (<https://www.penn.museum/collections/>). Use search terms such as “tattoo” and “scarification.”

[2] Authors often put the word “primitive” in quotation marks to emphasize that the word is not being used pejoratively. Colloquially, the term is used to indicate something basic to human nature, usually disapproved of by Western, capitalist society.

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### [Much More than “Skin Deep”](#)

Michael C. Ennis-McMillan and Cathy Lynne Costin – *Open Anthropology*.

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Thomas A. Arcury and Sara A. Quandt – *Anthropology News*. 45 (6): 34-35 (2004)

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Mara Benadusi – *Economic Anthropology*. 5 (1):45-58 (2018)

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Alexander Edmonds – *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 27 (2):233-252 (2013)

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Benjamin Hegarty – *Ethos*. 49 (4):460-475 (2022)

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