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Writing as skin: Negotiating the body in(to) learning about the managed self

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We draw on the notion of 'skin' to discuss the ways in which writing in management and organisation studies wrestles with two drives in its endeavour to represent the reality of our 'organised' lives: the drive to share internal lived experience, and the drive to externalise and abstract. Through exploring skin as a metaphor for a negotiating interface between these forces in our writing, we a) argue that both are critical parts of writing, needed in order to learn about management and organisation; and b) explore different ways in which they might be brought into contact. Reviewing, synthesising, and building on critiques of 'scientific' writing that have been made from within management and organisation studies, and on creative commentary from the arts, we think reflexively about the ways in which writing mediates learning by being both representative of experience and an experience in itself. A collaboration between management scholar and creative writer; the text of this article is a critical-creative experiment that outlines the experiential 'skin-text' whilst simultaneously producing an example of such a text.

Keywords: experiential learning, touch, feminine writing, embodiment, affect

This paper draws on the notion of 'skin' to discuss ways in which writing in management and organisation studies (MOS) wrestles with two drives in its endeavour to represent the reality of our 'organised' lives: sharing internal lived experience, and externalising and abstracting. In the business disciplines these forces are often in opposition, each is at times privileged, but the latter is granted historical dominance. Through exploring skin as a metaphor for a negotiating interface between these forces in our writing, we a) argue that both forces are critical parts of writing about management and organisation, and b) explore ways in which they might be brought into contact. Reviewing, synthesising, and building on critiques of 'scientific' writing that have been made from within MOS, and on creative commentary from the arts, we think reflexively about the ways in which writing mediates learning.

This paper brings academics and artists together (Phillips 2014), as its authors hail from the typically separate disciplines of MOS and creative writing. As we write our critique, our writings collide, interleaf, and sometimes intersect. What emerges is what we conceive of as a critical-creative experiment as we attempt to *produce* a skin-text whilst outlining its framework. A description of how this text was constructed follows rather than precedes it, allowing readers' initial impression to derive from the effect of the piece rather than from an analysis of it. We encourage readers to approach this paper as a series of meditations that create an experiential learning relation through the text (Tomkins and Ulus 2015). We do this by not only communicating particular lines of reasoning but by loosening the reins of the author's control

on the text-reader relation: the piece plays with pace, stimulating embodied responses of (dis)comfort, incrementally shifting thought, and drawing readers' attention to their own skin as both a physical and social interface.

In a special issue of *Body & Society*, Howes summarises the progress of a recent 'dermatological turn' toward recognising the significance of skin for understanding culture: it is both 'an object and means of perception' (2018: 1) that can be regarded in a given socio-cultural context as either 'sentient in its own right' or as subordinated to cognition. Skin is one of the principal organs of perception and the mediator experience; even perhaps the 'parent' of our other senses (Montagu 1978 c.f. Howes 2018). It is also, as something to be perceived, the 'intersensory' organ (Howes, 2018: 3). This focus resists the 'privatisation' of the senses by psychology, a discipline that has monopolised the study of them. It has pathologised skin practices (Le Breton 2018); as has the medicalised view of skin (LaFrance and Carey 2018). Skin's invisibility (Acker 1990, Benschop and Dooreward 1998, Liu 2017), or even denial (Sinclair 2011) in both the physical and theoretical spaces of the workplace belies the humanity of those who constitute the workforce. The vulnerability that skin suggests of the body is hidden through standardised workplace dress (Harding 2002), its leakiness is seen as problematic (Shildrick 2015), even dangerous (Linstead 2000). The skin and its fallibility is disproportionately associated with women because of their social positioning as sexual objects (Kelan 2012, Trethewey 1999), or their reproductive functions (Brewis and Sinclair 2000, Brewis et al 2014, Sayers and Jones 2015).

Both Howes (2018) in cultural studies and Fotaki et al. (2014) in MOS recognise the salience of the senses within the material and affective turns in both disciplines. In what follows, we discuss calls to engage in these hidden bases of knowledge about the managed self through our argument that skin offers a powerful device for bringing the affective, the embodied, and the material into the writing of MOS research. The text is accompanied by images accessible at: <https://organisingdifference.wordpress.com/portfolio/writing-as-skin> We use three properties of skin as a framework for our ruminations: porosity, sense-ability to touch, and its layered palimpsestic construction.

Writing as porous

Make your hand into a fist, if you would like. I have made my hand into a fist between typing these words. Now it is a hand held out in greeting, now a hand with palm facing outwards – to show I am unarmed – or to indicate that something should be halted – now it is a fist again: paused, as if to clobber with clout, and now paused as if to knock on a door, maybe the door of a stanza-room. Make your hand into a fist, if you would like, and look once more at its skin. Where is it roughened, and where is it soft? What unexpected, wonderful flaws are in its argument, or in the structure of its rhetoric?

Writing in MOS has shown how the body is disciplined in its relation to other bodies as demonstration of proficiency and professionalism, both in workplaces (Wolkowitz 2006) and academic spaces (Bell and King 2010). Moore argues that 'the managerial self, who manages both her/his subjectivity and the outer world, reproduces the Cartesian trope of the subordination of (risky) body to (rational) mind' (2018: 115). In writing management research, the body also comes to be disciplined in its relation to itself; to ourselves, to our selves; by its

removal from view. Management of the body is rendered invisible: disappearing the experiences of bodied selves. The body is subjugated to the mind, plugged up, unplugged; obscured, and thusly devalued as a fundamental part of value production within the capitalist labour relation (*ibid*). Do you know the back of your hand as well as you know the back of your hand? All your strength and elasticity.

Scientific writing can be recognised as such through its coherence and cognitivism: knowledge is manifest in narratives cleansed of the unruly; extricated from the body to derive logic. Sensory experience is severed from the notion of making sense of it. Two roots of knowledge intertwine in the writing of management and organisation, each a basis from which learning about organising can be generated: shared lived experiences, which might be thought of as internal knowledge, a ‘muddling through’ (Czarniawska 2003: 355) of ‘knowledge how’; and ideas that are externalised, abstracted, rationalised into ‘knowledge that’. Each side offers a set of ‘representation stuff’ (*ibid*: 358). The latter is privileged (as) knowledge in mainstream management writing, and the former calls from the margins for its recognition as an inextricable part of knowing. A Spinozan challenge to the divisibility of mind/body. The border is fuzzy – writings from practice theory, for example, occupy the borderlands of relational epistemology and recognition of bodies as sites of knowing, but err variously toward or away from the study, and crucially, the representation of turbulent and pre-conscious affective relations (see Gherardi 2017). Truth, deriving from all bases of knowledge, is often subordinated to instrumentality (Moore 2018: 114-115) – we are compelled contain experience, stop it from overflowing, cloak it respectably for others. We short-circuit our learning by excluding the irreducible, masking its discomfort. Instead, to have skin, and to offer or proffer or efface or seek to cover, to cover all the points.

An *écorché* is the name given to figures presented as revealing muscles; a body entirely devoid of skin. Encountered in medical textbooks, a depiction of the body with skin peeled back or absent in order that the inner truths of tissue and bone and other segueing finnickitinesses of anatomy are on full display, yet, recognisably human. Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti wrote that if painters intended to depict a nude figure, they must first arrange the muscles and bones according to correct anatomy: only then over this creation, of porches and dumb-waiters and girders, can one add flesh and skin. *Ecorché* literally means ‘flayed’; these skinless figures communicate, and reveal, even as their outermost protection has been denied them. There is a gentle revulsion. To be without skin, to explicate, is to be vulnerable. The artist-anatomist tugs and pinches to parse the postures and gestures of a body. In some depictions, the figure of the *écorché* is shown pointing to itself, to clarify what is to be explored. The word has two acute accents: their angles lift the dermis.

Too often, our corporeality concerns management only as object in optimising labour (Moore 2018: 65); the surveillance of it intensified and quantified through (self)tracking that infiltrates and abstracts – skin, muscle, bone, valves – vivisectioning the self, alienating it from its affectivities (*ibid*: 90), subordinating ‘observed bodies to observing minds’ (*ibid*: 115). Our writing is biopolitical, farthest-reaching, management of life itself (Ahonen et al. 2014). Weightless cognitive units are constructed to be managed unproblematically; entities whose sighs, itches, deep melancholies or vital joys are erased from the page. We dream the rational organisation, we dream up rationality apart from the body. Challenging the separation of emotion from reason, Nussbaum’s emotions are ‘geological upheavals of thought’, turning a ‘flat plane into a mountain range’ (2004: 443, see Brewis 2017). Sensation as feeling, feeling as integral to thought – an integration necessary for survival (Hopfl and Linstead 1997).

I was born, so to speak, in the skin of writing, and I have writing in the skin –
*Hélène Cixous*¹

Writing tends to cleanse the feminine: feminine as proxy for the possibility of not-knowing, feared as castration in a 'masculine libidinal economy' (see Phillips et al. 2014). Even in efforts to introduce the volatile body into research writing (Grosz 1994), discourse contains within it the threat of gendered hierarchy; masculine privilege in the symbolic order (Fotaki et al. 2014). The body, in its recognition, must be written as 'fluid and multiple' (*ibid*: 1241). To write as skin is feminist strategy of receptivity and of resistance. Its reciprocity rather than delineation. These are loops and whorls of engagement, gathered and wrinkled and smooth and firm and pliant: it allows the ligaments. The skin-text posits the material presence *alongside* that which seeks to ab/extract beyond it.

Our experiment feels around the edges of reform rather than rejects; we still craft narrative, locate interest, and communicate in scholarly shorthand. We seek to flesh writing out (Sobchak 2004: 187). Skin is an adaptable, resistant organism that permits absorption, diffusion, permeability and rupture. Include but expose the rhetoric that is written over the poetic (Hopfl 1995). The touch of the skin-text constantly pushes up against the film that holds it from spilling over. Struggle across the skin's pores with clarity and messiness, linearity and circularity, flat/thin and bodied/thick, with the body-mind that that experiences being 'organised'. Confuse rather than replace (Phillips et al. 2014).

In collaborating, we – of skin and of skin seeking skin – must seek to edit and inscribe and thus allow for permeability. This can mean the plumpening or the soothing, but also the rupture – the curvature of a fingerprint and the almighty-hardly violence of a finger on a backspace on the keyboard, the feather plucked. We write the lines, we read strata that exudes even as it absorbs; involuntary and vulnerable and regulated even as it changes and adapts. Outermost and layered, both thin but thick, stratified but even. Skin as clarity of expression, but one that permits transgression. Skin as discomfort, or the unsettled; not gooseflesh but staggered prosody, enjambment of poetry and caesura; skin as the latent meaning; as the lacquered subtext, to staunch the innocuous and stem the unliminal.

Learning is to inspire anew, is to relate, to move. Writing, as skin, must therefore be 'open, processual, relational, and sentient' (Lafrance, 2018: 2); both capacity and containment of affect. Suppressing affect, the self is alienated and the text renounces *puissance*.²

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared, and where that language does not exist it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before... – *Audre Lorde*³

¹ Quoted as an epigraph in Clara Juncker's article 'Writing (with) Cixous', *College English*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, April 1988), pp. 424-436

² In contrast to emotions, that designate reactions to environments and relations of power (*pouvoir*), affect can be expressed as *puissance*, the force that underlies the possibility to act (see Moore 2018: 95).

³ 'Poetry is not a luxury' in Lorde, Audre (1989) *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*, Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, Chapter Nine, pp. 36-39

Skin, mediating the social and constructed by it – both ‘interface’ and ‘envelope’ (Howes 2018: 6). Gherardi (2017) makes porous the contact between practice studies and affective turn – the reader immerses into vignettes: one, an architectural ‘atmosphere’ built richly of small details and self-reflections accompanied by visual images; another, non-representational strategies for knowing organised life: artistic and hybrid-media texts. We pierce the skin-text with images/ery, disrupt its representationalism, pinch and play. The separate bodies that author this text fade in and out of view. They join and jostle. Our a/effect contrasts the illusory unified voice seen in the scientific genre. *Aeffect*: denoting movement, bringing about, or influence by way of both action and feeling. ‘Small circular holes punched on the skin may widen or close into ellipses, or shrink and remain circular, depending on pre-existing stresses’: write porously but closely: define well, but allow for slough. To digress and sustain, and to texture and worry. Skin can withstand it.

Writing as sense-able

To learn is to touch, to be touched by the text. Perhaps you are reading this on a touchscreen phone or tablet. The minute ridges and contours of a finger smoothing the margins of this article. Read aloud, words might jangle and tessellate, might skitter like swifts in the air. The words, my words, then are able to find the porches of your ear. The spoken words are only possible because of vocal folds, also known as vocal cords or voice reeds, lodged in the throat beneath the skin. Composed of twin infoldings of tissue stretched horizontally, from back to front, across the larynx. In birds, the vocal organ is called the syrinx. I am not a bird, my skin is not made mazy or crosshatched with feathers; it is tougher. I think of it as softer. Experience and learning are infolded as ideal in management pedagogy: we posit an experiential writing, a skin-text that is touched/ing.

Skin is our communicative interface with the world, it is how we register experience and display its impact on us. A mediator of sense. It absorbs, resists and is transformed by that with which it comes into contact; ‘other bodies and things’ (Sobchak 2004: 4). Knowledge can bruise, threatening values and beliefs held deep (Gilmore and Anderson 2011, Hopfl and Linstead 1997); *pathos* and *logos* inseparable parts of learning (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel 2001). You are ears, and fingertips, and new recognitions: touch in order to become familiar, or to be surprised. The pain and delight in a reality affirmed, or altered.

We find reality in poetry and in fiction, as in scientific writing. We seek it there for its astute critique (Rhodes 2007). Feminist and decolonial writers provide alternative realities, of those who have lacked representation. These texts vocalise subjugated knowledges (Anderson 2000), the narrowness of academic theory (Katrak 1989), the impossibility of dualisms and an alienation to one’s own skin as home (Asher 2009).

...at school learning is based on whether or not we understand what we are reading. In fact, it is the story, or the poem, that is understanding us. Books read us back to ourselves – *Jeanette Winterson*⁴

As readers, we peer inside the worlds of others and in doing so read ourselves in refraction. Our writing is ‘of you’, as much as it is ‘of us’ and exists in the way it touches you, reader, or

⁴ Winterson, Jeanette (1985) *Oranges are not the only fruit*, Grove Press, New York, Introduction

fails to do so. The scientific genre is reductive of such fleshiness of knowledge exchange, wherein 'bodies [are] not merely objectively beheld but also subjectively lived' (Sobchak 2004: 187). As relational ontology, touch is world-making (De la Bellacasa 2009: 309), is experiment; theory (Barad 2012).

Loren Fetterman and Stefanie Elrick's performance work *Written in Skin*⁵ requested passages of text or epigrams from members of the public, which were then semi-permanently tattooed onto the artist's body.⁶ Literalising the shared embodied experience, it manifested the marking, pain and healing involved in communication. Skin and flesh figured not simply as a gendered material or vessel for expression, but valuable agent that that is engaged, relationally, in any creative or wrought expression. A form of *écriture féminine* (Cixous 2014), it challenged phallogocentric discourse of literary critique and production: 'Listen to a woman speak [...] she doesn't "speak", she throws her trembling body forward; [...] she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true.' (Cixous 1980: 251) The text must offer participation in the body to be *sensa/sible*. It must invite in as it turns itself out.

'Haptic visuality' describes filmmaking's transcendence of the visual sense, extending the representation of sensation within the bodies of characters on screen, toward evocation of experience within the viewer. Referring to Jennifer Fisher (1997), Laura U. Marks speaks of haptic techniques as means of communicating a 'combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies' (1998: 332). The image is regarded as a skin (Marks, 2000); not a 'neutral foil' that simply conducts meaning contained within the medium to an observer outside, but instead a 'bio-psychic' surface touched by the viewer (Scholz and Surma 2008). It invites the viewer to participate, creating a 'dynamic subjectivity between looker and image' (Marks 1998: 332). Quinlivan (2014) explores the aural dimension in film, citing examples where the breath is felt and touched, as well as heard. To touch is to assert the feminine (see Marks , engage the body, challenge the gaze onto the object-body image (see Mulvey 1989). To wrought the text from the self, is as parchment: processed material made of skin that is limed, scraped, put under tension. In the British Library, the oldest parchment in the country may be touched only with gloves.

'Synaesthetic modes of vision' (Jung 2016) rely on memory of sensation, it is an invitation to recall from within oneself, and the achievement of touch is dependent on the susceptibility of the reader to such an invitation (Sobchak 1992: 23). The skin remembers (Prosser, 2001); the skin-text invites the reader to engage a sensory log of the world, of time, place, texture. And yet, it is a fantasmic autobiography, the skin an organ that is written by both memory and imagination, a 'canvas for what we wish were true – and what we cannot acknowledge to be true' (Prosser 2001: 52). The touch of skin-text both arises from and appeals to the local and to the subjective. It seeks what we might call *teleo-portation*: a transportation into the 'marked inner world' (Grosz 1994) not only of author, but a negotiation of author and reader. The 'cinesthetic subject' (Sobchak 2004: 66) 'situate[s] subjectivity in the lived body [which] jeopardizes dualistic metaphysics altogether. There remains no basis for preserving the mutual exclusivity of the categories subject and object, inner and outer, I and the world'

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TrlxZc5d3k> Accessed 25/08/2017

⁶ <https://writteninskin.com/> Accessed 25/08/2017

(Sobchak 1990: 161). *Skinesthetic* writing invites and sustains the unsettling touch between inner and outer, knowledges of I and the world.

We are housed, even skinless voices; as 'stanza' means 'room', so too can the surface of our body leap and bounded in unboundliness. To talk at cross purposes and to feel the tear or nip of estrangement or in meaning is to credit skin as both the touched and the touching. Perhaps we both remove and assume a new skin every time that we frame any thesis. Perhaps the written word allows this re-skinning: just as an effective argument is often pared down by a reader as they consume it, deconstructing a proposition by peeling it or filleting to uncover its simplest construction, so too the author of the argument reveals their tenderest parts even as they callous their surfaces to appear tough, durable, impervious. Probyn urges us to 'eat skin' – to engage in the intimate intensity of recognising the other (2001: 89).

Perhaps words, like ought and might and perhaps show where the skin not only permits but welcomes and responds to touch. To write as skin is to negotiate the possibility of enveloping, extracting outwards and upwards; and the possibility of peeling back to reveal, revel in the 'in', in resistance to the logocentrism of print (Howes, 2018: 8). Drawing on the notion of 'mind' beyond the cognitive, Rigg (2018) argues that in management pedagogy, emphasis on the somatic may allow critical reflection to build upon aesthetic, sensory, emotional and political learning. Through attentiveness to sensation, emotion, experiences that arise; discerning what we notice, and do not notice, before translation into words (Rigg, 2018: 158). If you take your hand from this page or screen and turn it in the light, you can see its tiny indentations and notches and em-dashes and en-dashes and exclamation marks and hyphens and small glyphic intimations, punctuation marks that accompany a life. You can do this as I type, as you take a break from scrolling or turning the page, right now. Keep track of rhetoric and grammar as the skin of your fingers tracks the course of this page, sensing the metaphor and testing its coarseness. The words are tripping over the runnels and frissons and punctuation marks of your skin as if they – the runnels and frissons and punctuation marks – are the grooves on vinyl; words as needle, skin as gramophone record. Your skin is smooth and rugged. Metaphors glide one over the other just as often as find nicks and burrs or a crackling static.

The frisson of imperfection, the learnt texture, the teaching of taut or pliant surface-reading. Etymologically, the word frisson is derived from the French for 'shiver'. It is a sensation akin to trembling or quivering, and is generally caused by stimuli. 'Frisson' is the name typically given to what we know as goosebumps. The bird again, the metaphors mixing against the skin. Skin as palette; bruises as Impressionists' dawns made taut with birdsong. The texture of goosebumps, the letter m and the letter o and the shivered stimulus or recognition. The skin can be overwhelmed and instinctive just as it may present a barrier and contain our not-surfaces, our depths. Frisson might be caused by music, the excellent jostle. The tussle of music in our ears, and across our whole body as skin rises in clefs and breves and startled key signatures. An involuntary skin, that yields as much as it resists. Flashed flushed flesh, hair follicles raising as if to beg a question of the stirred air. One makes a braille of our hide, and attempt to interpret its textures and scry its haptic mimicry and pantomime of feeling. 'Skin' as 'feeling' writ large, and encompassing. It contains me, for a moment, as only a metaphor. The pricking of my thumbs, the prickling of my defensive gestures, the smoothing-over of an argument and my rash communication. To get under your skin, and write within, and without, and without, and without.

Loosening of the reins on our writing; to work in the boundary between pinning down and release; to allow for the half-thought kernel that will, somewhere, be carried and seeded. Sara Ahmed's writing engenders by spore; has life, is rhythmic with resonance; nourishes. Her cycling modifications shift thinking across and across. Seeds in pleasure and fear and disgust at the unknown, at the leaky. Shildrick reveals, through the lens of the conjoined twins, the normativity of the sealed body that gives rise to monstrosity where the skin's integrity has been breached in a simultaneous perceived breaching of subjecthood (2001, 164). In order to learn about the human body and its anatomy, for hundreds of years doctors relied on cadavers, inert flesh. 'Body snatching', an illegal trade in dead bodies disinterred from the graves was connected with for-the-slab learning material. The most famous bodysnatchers, Williams Burke and Hare, worked in the early 19th century. Skim-read, skin-red, the word 'morbidity' meaning 'diseased state'. Following his execution for the crime, a book was said to have been made from William Burke's tanned skin. Now at the Surgeons' Hall Museum in Edinburgh.⁷ A calling-card case made from skin taken from the back of his left hand fetched £1050 at auction in 1988. Skin as kitsch, as memorabilia, as distasteful, as a simile run away with itself, as something unspooling and laid bare just as it contains every thought and every digression I might have. Return to all those grammatical marks on your hands, and the new colours to be found there, its gold leaf appearing in sunlight or under strip-lights; the skin as something strained, and harboured, and – yes, superficial – but stark.

Writing as palimpsest

Skin as my trivia, as my thought-bubble and speech-bubble made manifest, or stark in the attempt to tether it. I keep layering writing. I keep typing 'skin' as 'akin'. To present the idea as vellumed, and to be of vellum; The word "vellum" is normally reserved for calfskin, while any other skin is called "parchment". I read on peaches-and-cream soft paper that 'the British Standards Institution defines parchment as being made from the split skin of several species, and vellum from the unsplit skin.' Words as birds, skin as unspoilt, unspoilt, full-tilt, helter skelter, at full pelt.

We scar as we come into contact with the world: inscriptions added to, written over-top. Damaged as grooves on a scratched record (Connor 2001: 37) or simultaneously toughened (Probyn 2001: 87). We are subject(ed) through relation upon relation, the congealed discursive (Brewis 2018a). To acknowledge skin, and have skin acknowledged, marks; beats a tattoo; it is the first line of defence from external factors. You may escape by the skin of your most marvellous, impressive feats of endurance. Your skin is not only a sliding scale, your skin is not only an indicator. Metaphor within metaphor, layer upon layer: the term 'goldbeater's skin' describes a parchment traditionally used in the process of making gold leaf. The mechanisms of mechanisms or craft: 'due to its transparency, strength, and fairly uniform thickness, goldbeater's skin is also used to repair holes and tears in manuscripts written on vellum.' King Midas failed because his skin grew golden sterility; the hotch and the weft of a palm on some new texture, some myth by the skin of its teeth. Where we observe skin that has been subject to artifice – flattened of its contours, botoxed of the marks of experience – its smoothness is

⁷ <https://museum.rcsed.ac.uk/the-collection/key-collections/key-object-page/pocketbook-made-from-burkes-skin> See also The John Horwood book (accessed 2/8/18) <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/blog/archives/john-horwood-book/> (accessed 2/8/18)

alien to us, uncanny. It perturbs us since we do not recognise the world in it. Scientific writing is too often scrubbed clean of the dirt and grime that are parts of organisational life (Pullen and Rhodes 2008), perhaps, too, the dirt in the ordering of knowledge.

Hélène Cixous, she whose name contains accents both rising and falling, both lifting and sutured offers:

“And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, beside yourself, and you continue getting lost, when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then, that’s when, where you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenceless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it’s in these breathless times that writings traverse you, songs of an unheard-of purity flow through you, addressed to no one, they well up, surge forth, from the throats of your unknown inhabitants, these are the cries that death and life hurl in their combat.” (Cixous 1991: 38-39)

And yet, research is conversation with past and future, with authors imagined. The text is interleaved with citation-lent legitimacy and cogency of others. Wearing another’s skin, wearing skin away. I paste the knowledge of them onto me, a second skin through which I become legible. Writing as pelt at full pelt, with nothing hidden, nothing to hide. Humans speak of skin rather than ‘hide’. I bristle at conjecture and digression: unskinned thoughts go where they will, a network of images; an *écorché* figure ashamed of its further nakedness and attempting to pull the page on which it is written about its tendoned, tender body.

In recognising our subjects – self, other, discipline – we battle between representation and reflexivity, struggling to bring the political into the text (Swan 2008) without the text being about us (Parker 2000). The skin writer lay(er)s down the self, fleshing the process; the timeline of legibility. Sutured linearity shields from the mess. Time loops, time plays tricks with ideas inextricably webbed. The novella *Story of your Life* (Ted Chiang 1998) and film adaptation *Arrival* (Dennis Villeneuve 2016), explores knowledge and time without sequence: an alien language that communicates all meaning at once.

Skin re-members the text, it relays the fleshiness of the body. The largest organ, we cannot survive with it detached. A man drove his truck for twenty years,⁸ sitting with his head at an angle out of the window. When he came to retire, the side of his face that had always been in the sun nodded to his history: the ruches of it, the good-parchment. The face as an open book, verso page, recto page, the skin as the story. The storied academic text: research participated in, written, edited, reviewed; multi-voiced in layering, foregrounding, backgrounding. Bodied co-authors shadowed in the writing process, writing back to us in creation – liberation or constraint (Brewis 2018b). Wikipedia, that shifting, thin-skinned itch-to-scratch, states that ‘Parchment is affected by its environment and changes in humidity, which can cause buckling.’ Some book-binders and anatomists and editors will find recourse to their individual style-guides, or their bird-watching, their word-watching, the raised and calmed excitable gooseflesh of their research in the field of expertise. When skin is a field of expertise, or an experted field. The lapse of skin into thought. The lapsed thought as skin formed on a cooling drink. The bowed meniscus of appeal.

⁸ Image at: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMicm1104059> (accessed 2/8/18)

The skin as interrogative, the skin as permissive, the skin as heft, the skin as loft, the skin as inscription and site of rupture. Material as active participant; skin as shifting, altered, adaptive tissue. One speaks of toughening up, of being callous, or calloused. We learn to harden to it, to secrete our scars. For some the wounding is untenable: by continual bumping, thumping against organisational walls that were not built to house them, walls to keep them out (Ahmed 2014) – unwilling to flex, unwilling to learn. Or, in learning's re-writing we soften to make staunch. Suffering may lead to learning when accompanied by solidarity: in some feminist communities members seek to raise consciousness of the relations of power, especially patriarchal, within which we, all, are bounded (Fisher, 1987). This challenge to the self – incision, inscription – a remaking, is humbly invited. The tension of skin, and the fraught meaning of the skin of your hand, touched by your hand, in a new or familiar way. Work up layers, peel some back, to feel at home in your own skin.

Please look again once more at the skin of your hands. Know it like the back of your hands. Look at each colour, try to name them, the kaleidoscope of you.

Reaching the extremity

We have touched upon writing as a weathered, lined, fragile, vital, enveloping organ; productive and protective. Our collaboration has been the same. By layering our critical and creative writing together, we have lingered upon the skin of us; attempted show how writing as skin might affect as both authoring process and communicative text. We started with the problematic of two opposing forces: the drive to share internal lived experience, and the drive to externalise and abstract. Forces that emanate from within and without. Forces of knowledge. We asked what a negotiation of these forces might look like, feel like; its pains and pleasures. In writing together, in our efforts to both bring our selves to the text whilst locating that which exists between us, beyond us, we enacted skin: we built up a palimpsest of imagery, art, analysis, and feeling; pierced attempts to hide from each other and from you; and release the text to be touched, handled, (re)moulded. To describe the 'tools' with which we have attempted to write as skin – let us swell the metaphor to its absurdity – three manipulations were alternated, struggled with, and healed from: grafts, bleeds and sutures.

In the initial stages we wrote separately in our own spaces and within our own practices (Fotaki et al, 2014). As our writings touched we spliced them together, connections of politics and poetics emerging between the grafts. The physicality of skin, grotesque, compels. The extraordinary complex hidden hydraulics or mechanisms that shift and cause the skin of my neck to stiffen and relax infinitesimally as I type. Images and evocations circling and registering each other. Just as a voice may speak over another voice, just as a hand may hold a hand and find frisson and/or friction, just as a meaning must be snatched from a book through the interface of damp eye and hot ink and treated parchment. Through skin, we recognise self and other, the grammar of each; that there is no self without other (Ahmed 2014). Dialogue breeds proximity: our reflections, flights of thought, analysis, citation and rhythm begin to echo, ventriloquise, bleed into one another. Inoculation as interruption and editing, bespeaking vulnerability. Iterations, drafts and drafts were knitted over time to respond to reviewers, editors, new publications. Erring toward and away from convention we sutured together the wants of the reader concurrently for feelers into our world, and matter to carry out into theirs. In so doing, the bumps and edges where we have stitched our writings may fade in places but

make visible its multivocality (Helin 2014). Skin becomes inter-dialogical as well as intra-dialogical since within the text, too, half-thoughts, travelling metaphors, and contrasting images are sewn together grammatically and through punctuation, 'formal means that seek to contain the volatility of semiotic operations' (Hernandi 1989: 215). The link out to accompanying photographs hint at future possibilities of skin-writing, where haptic text may be layered with further sensation. The metaphor itself is difficult to contain, so close it is to human experience. Some dialogues not undertaken: sensemaking, shame, digital skin, birth, nerve-endings, further interrogation of what skin means for *écriture féminine*.

To be wound, as I am, unwounded for the main part and tense with the plashiness of skin untreated, the skin across my knuckles is an alphabet; the skin across my palm is an invitation; the paper cut on my thumb is an invitation, too, and a digression, and a chaired debate; it will knit and bind together with an involuntary recontouring; the notch – the tally – entirely solved and bartered and commissioned by a tactility of dermal commerce and consequence. In her essay 'Laugh of the Medusa', Cisoux writes: 'Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.' (1980: 250). There is a taxidermists' shop in North London near Angel station. Its name is 'Get Stuffed'. The uncanniness of puns, the uncanniness of the undressed *écorché* pointing at their monstrosity.

In proposing a writing as skin, we explore a reconfiguration in the way that writing can be used to negotiate the drives on which the production of knowledge in MOS relies: neither/nor, both/and; increasing the surface at which the inward and outward touch. Skin offers tolerance of the uncertainty inherent in the struggle of these forces; the volatility, vulnerability, of learning.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.