



## LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

# Skin

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Skin mediates the forms of encounter with more-than-human life. It fashions the ontology, alterity, and entanglement of bodies. Skin is thus a frame and a framing.

In Anicka Yi's artwork *Chicken Skins*, picture frames textured with hair, follicles, and bumps display artificial flowers.<sup>1</sup> Featuring animal skin frames patterned with goosebumps—the hypersensitive state of the body to external stimuli—and plant life growing out of them, Yi's work stages skin as sensory infrastructures that mediate the viewer's aesthetic encounter with nonhuman life. Sensory media enfolding the viewer into the aesthetic ecology of skin, Yi's frames dramatize the haptic hub of human and nonhuman entanglement. What is the central subject of *Chicken Skins*: the flowers (content) or the skin (frame)? Which frames which? To whom does skin belong: human or nonhuman, animal or plant, viewer or viewed? Yi's speculative multispecies skin ecology confounds the boundaries of natural and artificial life. Skin figures the aesthetic life of ecology—its sensualities, vitalities, relations.

A sensorium of temperature, texture, pleasure, and pain, skin encounters and embodies environments through sensuality. Touch renders ecology into corporeality: there is no ecology without skin, no ecology with what one piece ironically dubs “Touch Embargo.” As a form of posthuman prosthesis, touch “invents by drawing the other into relation, thereby qualitatively altering the limits of the merging touched-touching bodies” to index “a surplus or excess of the biological organism.”<sup>2</sup> As multiscalar ecology

1. Anicka Yi, *Touch Embargo*, silicone, monofilament, silk flowers, MDF, 2017, Anicka Yi Studio, <https://anickayistudio.biz/series/chicken-skins>; Anicka Yi, *Scale of Value*, silicone on panel, artificial flowers, nylon filament, 2016, Anicka Yi Studio, <https://anickayistudio.biz/series/chicken-skins>.

2. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, xiv, 155–56.

and haptic technology, skin is a heuristic that crafts myriad orders of frames and encounters. It articulates—or sensitizes—the dialectic of scale and value in Anthropocenic life.

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Skin: from early Scandinavian, “hide” or “fur”; from Old High German *scindan*, “to skin, flay, to peel off bark”; traced to the root *sek*, “to cut.”<sup>3</sup> As a form of containment and cutting, skin partitions the body into surface and depth, inside and outside. Both apart from and a part of the body, skin is a slashing (“/”) that makes/unmakes the inside/outside. Composed of three layers—dermis, epidermis, hypodermis—human skin enfolds, protects, regulates, transfers. Strata of infrastructure (immunological, defense, transport, thermoregulatory, and more) supervise the assimilation and obstruction of outer elements, spawning sites of penetration and permeability where manifold more-than-human life—microbial, organismic, elemental—enters and evolves. If skin’s history “forms the centerpiece of the vocabulary of personhood,” its epidermal ecology forms the grammar of its undoing.<sup>4</sup> Skin houses the body’s biological form through a paradox: the fiction of enclosure solidified through the fact of entanglement. Skin is a container that creates, then cuts, the limits of its own containment.

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Skin is a political ontology of difference and power. It illuminates how “one is always with other bodies in a fleshy sociality” through “the social differentiation between bodily others.”<sup>5</sup> In Wangechi Mutu’s “Homeward Bound,” speculative Black feminine bodies materialize as collages of matter, animals, and machines.<sup>6</sup> Skin indexes the kaleidoscopic conjuncture of race, (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, and nature, and the political ontologies of being and freedom within the matrix of domination. Dermal collage, as Mutu’s work shows, registers where the “hieroglyphics of the flesh”<sup>7</sup> and speculative Afrofuturist bodies fuse to forge novel Black feminist ecologies. Skin is an interstitial ecology that produces, and unsettles, the genres of the human, inhuman, and more-than-human that comprise the racial, colonial, and patriarchal Anthropocene. It is a homeward bounding that recomposes the bounds of minoritarian ecological life.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “skin, n.” March 2022. Oxford University Press, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/180922>; Liberman, “Skin of Etymological Teeth.”

4. Jablonski, *Skin*, 3. Donna J. Haraway critiques the “organic holism” of biologically essentialist ontologies through the figure of skin: “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (“Cyborg Manifesto,” 61). This essay examines figurations of skin that articulate alternate modes of ecological knowledge and judgment.

5. Ahmed and Stacey, “Introduction,” 6.

6. Wangechi Mutu, “Homeward Bound,” archival pigment print, 2009, <https://g.co/arts/WXAxvfE4X9QqXcvLA>.

7. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

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Skin is a nonhuman worlding whose alchemy of forms and functions assembles extraordinary *umwelt*. *Metachrosis*. Cephalopod skin belonging to octopuses, squids, and cuttlefish generates rapid color changes through the biochemical alteration of pigment cells to conceal and disguise, sometimes changing color and texture to external environments without vision or central brain cognition. *Autotomy*. The first discovered mammal species capable of skin self-amputation, African spiny mice instantly tear off their skin to avoid predation, and they regrow skin, fur, and cartilage through rapid tissue regeneration. *Kleptoplasty*. Initiating photosynthesis by consuming, or stealing, organelles from algae to generate chlorophyll in its own body via gene swapping, the green sea slug possesses hybridized skins produced out of symbiotic plant-animal life. *Speculation*. The distinctive stripes of the zebra have confounded biologists for decades, creating a host of competing theories that explain their mysterious function: thermoregulation; insect deflection; social interaction functions; predator diversion through dazzle confusion effects. Technologies of wayfinding and world-making, nonhuman skin navigates and crafts novel lifeworlds.

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Skin is time. Through thinning, wrinkling, and loosening, skin etches bodies' intimate cadence with the world. Skin unspools intensities, whose affective immediacy and instantaneity unsettle language, time, and signification: "the skin is faster than the word."<sup>8</sup> Skin emplaces duration into the body across environment and experience, past and present.

Skin is space. Through skin, bodies touch the world. Through touch, skin moves bodies through and between states and worlds. Through movement, skin shows how "sense is not a limit-concept. To sense is to world unlimitedly."<sup>9</sup> Skin is a sensing of, for, and with space—a spatialization of sense. Skin is an ecology that unfurls the domains of the possible.

Skin is earth. Skin animates ecological form, and transforms ecological knowledge into dwelling. Housing worlds across species and scales, "the earth is also skin."<sup>10</sup> Where does skin begin and end? What embedded life forms are we in relation to the earth's skin—its tissues of biomes, its clusters of multiscale life, its strata of atmospheres, biospheres, hydrospheres, geospheres? As inhabitants entangled with more-than-human life, housed together within the epidermis of the planet? We have always been dermal to, with, and through the earth.

8. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 25.

9. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 155.

10. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, ix.

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