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BOOK REVIEW

K. Dauge-Roth and C. Koslofsky (eds.), *Stigma: Marking Skin in the Early Modern World*

(University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023). Pages xii + 294, and there are illustrations. $29.95 paperback.

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These days it seems as if almost everyone has a tattoo, but tattoos are scarcely the only form of dermal marking. Many other techniques have also been used to differentiate people one from another, bring about healing, or work other changes on the body. This interesting collection of essays examines a range of practices that deliberately or inadvertently marked the skins of early modern people. The focus is largely on European practices, and European skins, although a powerful chapter by Katarina Keefer and Matthew Hopper studies the role of branding within the European slave trade, and several others consider skin-marking practices in Taiwan and other places to which Europeans travelled in the early modern era.

The volume is a contribution to the nascent field of 'skin studies', which sees skin as 'an archive of past experience, a cartography of identity, a site of vulnerable pleasures, a carapace of often uncompromising pains, and a dynamic – if often embattled – screen onto which selves, others and societies project feelings of love, hate and everything in between'.[1] Early modern skins were marked in ways that sometimes brought pleasure, sometimes immense pain, and, this volume suggests, invariably shaped identity.

Who undertook the marking is an important factor in shaping the meaning of these marks. Captured Africans and criminals were branded with a hot iron. Keefer and Hopper point out that the same marks of ownership burnt onto the bodies of Africans were also painted onto the crates and cases that carried inanimate merchandise across early modern oceans, in a chilling reminder that from a European perspective these men, women and children were likewise mere commodities. Craig Koslofsky attributes the decline in penal branding in France and England to the increasing demand for productive labouring bodies, and the resultant desire not to remove workers from the labour force by marking them as irredeemably unemployable.

In contrast, God, not man, marked the bodies of legitimate stigmatics, while frauds scratched and painted their own skins in an attempt to simulate these holy wounds. Visitors to Jerusalem paid tattooists to put a special tattoo on their skin to signal that they had undertaken the demanding pilgrimage. As late as

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1912 people might express scepticism if you were unable to substantiate your claim to pilgrim status with the requisite tattoo. Mordechay Lewy points out that prior to the eighteenth century, when Europeans encountered Polynesians with elaborate tattoos, the Jerusalem mark was '*the* fundamental reference point for all European accounts of deliberate, permanent, and decorative marking on the body with ink' (p. 117).

Stigma offers all sorts of other surprising information. It seems that some native Taiwanese people decorated their bodies with tattoos of Dutch script, a practice that Qing officials found barbarous. The seventeenth century was a high point in European stigmatic activity; of all the stigmata-related incidents occurring in France over the last thousand years, the majority took place in that one century; Allison Stedman's chapter charts the changing explanations offered for the mysterious phenomenon over the period. A terrific chapter by Katherine Dauge-Roth on the religious healing rituals used to treat rabies describes the practice of branding victims of animal bites with various sorts of consecrated objects. A fragment of thread from certain relics might also be sewn into the forehead of the patient, in an attempt to effect a cure. We also learn that enslaved Africans might suffer the pain of a branding iron multiple times during their captivity, as they passed from port to port or hand to hand, or merely to indicate that the requisite taxes had been paid.

Not all chapters fit with equal comfort into the category of dermal marking. In one of several chapters studying theatrical representations of one or another sort of marks on skin, Ana Fonseca Conboy make a rather convoluted argument about why baptism ought to be considered a form of invisible marking on the skin. Claire Goldstein offers a lighthearted review of some eighteenth-century debates about 'patches' or artificial beauty marks stuck temporarily on the face, but are these really examples of body modification? If temporary cosmetic practices constitute body modification, then perhaps a chapter on hair dye would have fit slightly better with the overall theme. I also missed a chapter on circumcision, which was surely an important and much-discussed form of (permanent) body marking in early modern Europe.

As is to be expected in an edited collection, the contributors do not always agree among themselves. Some view branding and tattooing as fundamentally different, with the tattoo signalling cultural inclusion and the brand exclusion. Others note, for instance, that Christian pilgrims might be branded with a cross or other symbol prior to embarking on their journey. There is a certain amount of fussing over terminology in ways that didn't to me always seem to reflect period definitions, and not all chapters rest on equally solid or persuasive bodies of evidence. Nor is it really clear to me, at least, that 'signs on the skin took on a *new* prominence in the early modern period' (p. 11, my emphasis). Nonetheless, this collection offers much fascinating information about the varied ways that (mostly) early modern Europeans marked skins, and the diverse meanings that they ascribed to marks on the skin.

Note

1 Marc Lafrance, 'Skin studies: past, present and future', *Body & Society* **24** (2018), 1–2.

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