

Scarifications, the Self-Skin's architecture

Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.
Cormack McCarthy (*All The Pretty Horses* , 1992)

The word “injury” has a different meaning from one culture to another, but it is always expressed through a semantic parabola that oscillates from the physical to the immaterial and vice versa. This complementary model is what characterizes the complexity of injuries in the human psyche. They provoke both fascination and/or repulsion, from intellect or affect, but never indifference; injury exercises an infinite power, from the conscious to the subconscious.

It may be that non-intentional, physical injuries, and the pain the intellect associates with them, are the origin of what one thinks of as the fundamental instincts of self-preservation, much like the human instinct for companionship. Throughout the centuries, the observation of animal and vegetal injuries has most likely sustained the evolution of the human species, from agriculture to medicine. The nature of injury, however, has transformed over the years from being unexpected, suffered, and uncontrolled, to being intentional and cultural. Transformations of body parts or mutilations—like sub-incision, or circumcision and scarifications—have become rituals, in which the subject becomes a member of the group through a physical trauma—sometimes in relation to sexual organs, and other times in relation to the skin. Despite the obvious possible repercussions—infection—the ultimate goal of these practices is for the wound to heal.

I personally became subject to this phenomenon when the local barber improvised my circumcision at home with his inappropriate tools and with no anesthesia, the memory of which is still in my mind. The pains caused by the wound, as well as the healing, lasted for several weeks that seemed like an eternity to me.

The repair of every intentional injury embodies the subject's triumph over pain and fear, and celebrates the subject's peculiarity, to which nature compels each individual. Each injury sustained is imbued with the greater symbolism of belonging to a particular group, and over time, these symbols have become increasingly sophisticated. The iconographical vocabularies of certain societies are ripped with patterns of scarification, and are echoed by other emblematic scarifications on wood, earth, and buildings—such as façades.

The violence of physical mutilations and scarifications shocked the first European colonists, and particularly the missionaries, who saw these practices as barbarous, under-evolved, and devoted to non-Christian, perhaps even Satanic, cults. As such, the modern Western world, particularly the Christian world, worked as rapidly as possible to ban such intentional mutilations. Untainted flesh, without marks or signs of injury, became the standard of beauty and purifying modernity. Conversely, in the traditional world, scarifications heralded the celebration of injuries and the aesthetics of their own repair. The modern era, through colonization, erased the past through the progressive implementation of the disappearance's

dogma: the repaired injury must be devoid of any scars. This mindset is based on the tenet that the beauty of the act of repair is represented by the disappearance of scars altogether.

One thing that seems to have always been at the core of the struggle between tradition and modernity, and between notions of the conscious and the unconscious bodily injury, is the skin. As an intermediary membrane between interior and exterior, the skin is the surface that stigmatizes psychic interactions from the very first moments of the creation of the self. The French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu explored this psychic interaction in his essay entitled *The Ego Skin*.

The essay analyzes the human psyche from the birth to adulthood, when neuroses and psychosis express themselves the most actively. In order to survive, the newborn can only count, as far as his own resources are concerned, on the sensations he feels on his skin. Usually, one's first physical contact is with one's mother. During the first weeks of life, the interactions between a baby and its mother act as an external support, and support the child's progression through its life. These interactions happen both through the skin and through sound.

During childhood, the psychic structure of the Self-Skin is developed, a mental representation in which the surface of the body is imagined as a vessel for mental activity. This progressive construction is based on past sensorial experiences, including the nascent epidermal perceptions and sensations shared between the baby and mother. The notion of the Self-Skin then reveals itself as a paradigm describing the psychic construction and the foundational mechanisms of the self.

How in traditional societies, be they be non-occidental or not, that do rituals of intentional mutilations like scarification, could the subconscious be understood using the analysis of a modern Western thought coming from Freudian psychoanalysis, like that of Didier Anzieu, and particularly through this important stake that is the skin in philosophy?

Long before Freud's theoretical discovery, the idea of the subconscious already existed in African traditional societies. In the light of the obscure immateriality of traditional extra-occidental beliefs, healers/witches have always known about the subconscious and used it to cure mentally ill people, while being at the same time convinced they were possessed by evil forces. Those attributes that the modern, white Occident categorizes as madness are considered as part of the magical world in traditional, extra-occidental cultures. But this difference in paradigm does not change the symptoms of mental illness. In Burkina Faso, schizophrenia is still regarded as the possession of a sick individual by an evil spirit, or *Fâa*. In these circumstances, healers typically use symbols that are believed to alleviate the psyche and influence the subconscious, such as music, words, dance, objects, etc.

What characterizes the link between mutilations like scarifications and the ramifications they have on the subconscious is, without a doubt, the communal nature of these practices, and the fact that these rituals are absorbed by the psyche of each individual throughout maturation, protecting them against future mental illness. The absence of such rituals has the capability of creating a psychological void so vast that the individual may even develop physical symptoms of illness. A child that is not circumcized could think he will not become a man because he won't be part of the adult world. During adolescence he will be then melancholic

and depressed. And yet, these shortcomings will be attributed to the possession of a bad spirit.

In the Occident, intentional mutilations have also been used to anticipate psychological or physical disease. Scarifications have always had a prophylactic function, and they have been utilized as medicinal procedures since antiquity. Physical scarification, that which modernity has striven to erase from society, belongs to our collective unconscious. Despite colonization and modernization, traditional extra-occidental cultures are still in direct contact with these epidermal practices. Didier Anzieu's philosophy is fascinating with regard to traditional extra-occidental cultures, because it confirms how the Self-Skin, or Ego-Skin, can be analyzed from both the modern and rational European point of view, as well as the traditional and magic extra-occidental point of view. Gerhard Kubik, a notable musicologist and psychoanalyst, wrote that, " Magic exists psychically, because it uses symbols that influence the subconscious." Literally and figuratively, scarifications are the physical manifestations of the symbols that represent an individual's immunity from psychological issues, and one's safeguard from exile inside his own community.

Neither psychoanalysis nor psychiatry can anticipate the prophylactic aspect of these mutilations, because they come before the psychotic fault. Moreover, psychoanalysis and psychiatry work together a posteriori, whereas mutilation and scarification, being an injury originally, exist a priori.

The dialectic used by the healer to influence the unconscious of his patients, through symbols that belong to the grammar of the group psyche in which he practices, is a virtual vocabulary. This language is incomprehensible under the past and/or present modern, colonial ways of thinking. When Jean-Pierre Coudray, a psychiatrist and sociologist, considered rebuilding the psychiatric department of Bamako's hospital in 1989, he acknowledged his inability to analyze his patients in a relevant way because, among other things, he does not speak their language, Bambara. But also because a Malian student of his alerted him to the fact that when the parents of his young patient, Mamadou, speak with him in his office—the white doctor in his white gown—there is a conversational and a symbolical barrier preventing a true analysis. It became clear that the parents and patients were saying what they believed the white doctor wanted to hear.

To understand this, one has to delve deeper into the history of injuries in relation to colonization. The way back and forth between understanding the patient's disease from both sides of the cultural border either as schizophrenia or *Fâa* is a necessary parabola by which to get the troubles of the unconscious.

When Franz Fanon used to analyze the dreams of his patients, he was in the middle of this cultural conflict. He was struck by their constant desire for movement, escape. One would dream of running in the street, another one would visualize climbing a wall to escape something, another to run behind a bus, or swim very fast, etc. The dreams of his patients, North African colonial subjects, were dreams of muscles, bodies in motion. The body, a paramount feature of the political stake of modernity as described by Michel Foucault in his essay *Discipline and Punish* always finds itself at the center of the repressive system of all modern, Western societies. And yet, as Anzieu perfectly described, " The skin has a function of retaining structure for the skeleton and muscles, while also covering the whole surface of

the body, in which all the organs of the external senses are inserted. ” Cultural, economical, and political injuries of the Self-Skin, caused by colonization and slavery, are the unconscious inheritance of colonization to the descendants of both the colonized and colonials. The surface of virtual data that is the Self-Skin, upon which psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and healers work, is a cognitive net of information created by humankind, who is nonetheless unaware of the part it plays in the continuous renewal of the Self-Skin. To understand this, one must first comprehend that the Self-Skin is founded on the infliction of a physical and subconscious injury, repaired by the self-preservation instinct: the brutal and physical separation with the mother’s body after the birth. Outside of the maternal body, the baby will instinctively repair this absence of contentment with effort: the effort to breathe, to feed, to defecate, etc.

Whether it be natural, cultural, physical or immaterial, the “ injury ” is linked to repair, and repair is forever linked to injury. In both nature and culture injuries structure life systems, but what embodies them are repairs. Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace expertly explained that the appearance of injuries in a species’ chain of evolution may result in either the end of the species or the starting point of a new variety that will later evolve into a new species. The appearance of a new vegetal or animal variety embodies a fault that has already repaired itself. A thought that renews itself, such as art, also comes from injuries, the violence of whose break from the established order is sometimes unavoidable. Because they also embody repairs, these breaks are necessary to generate new orientations and to carry on with the continuum of the development of art.

The current political, economical, cultural upheavals that ideological systems such as democracy and capitalism must grapple with are further evidence that we live at the end of an era, and by consequence, are in a state of transition toward another one. This transitional time is similar to a huge, gaping wound that sooner or later will have to repair itself to move on. Such struggles are the result of mistakes committed in eras that preceded us. As Paul Ricoeur stated, “ The injuries of memories can only be repaired by history. ” The outdated history syllabi that teachers follow to instruct younger generations exemplifies the absence of a contemporary, societal project recognizing the importance of the past. The lack of direction given to today’s youth gives them little choice but to look to the Internet and social media to learn history. There, the injuries from the past are stigmatized through vindictive, xenophobic, and, above all, violent discourses, from which the politic of fear coincides with the longing many adolescents feel to belong to a powerful and feared group.

What is the true stake of injury today? How do material and immaterial injuries exist in contemporary society? And why do injuries exist in such a manner at the dawn of the digital world’s reign, under the algorithmic logic that weaves together the web of a new world that seems to yet join the old one?