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## J.H. Williams III's *Batwoman* and the depth of the surface: visualizing a new definition of identity as embedded in the skin

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Hillary Chute suggests 'if comics is about mapping, it is also about bodies – about locating them in space and time' ('Comics Form and Narrating Lives,' *Profession* 1, 107–117). If scholars envision comics as body narratives, we must also consider that which covers the body: the skin. This article offers a reading of J.H. Williams III's work on the contemporary DC Comics series *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman*, exploring a new vision of the subject and its mapped presence on the surface of the body. These narratives embedded in the surface avoid the disjuncture between sign and signifier in categorizations of identity as various performances retain a presence on the skin. Thus, without denying the performative nature of identity, this article explores the after-effects of the performance – how its palimpsestic presence maps time and space onto the surface of the material body. Furthermore, by turning to skin, the materiality of the body is brought into focus without reducing our discussion to biology; instead the self is found in the folds of skin, where the biological and the social meet.

**Keywords:** J.H. Williams III; *Batwoman*; identity politics; psychoanalysis; skin

To be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and secondly to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations. (Anzieu, 1989, 51)

Hillary Chute posits in 'Comics form and narrating lives' that 'if comics is about mapping, it is also about bodies—about locating them in space and time' (2011, 112). As scholars, if we envision comics as narratives about the body, we must also consider that which covers it – the skin. Not only do we live through our skin, but we are also recognised by it, as the surface of the body is what others notice. Additionally, in both its literal and metaphorical construction, the skin acts as both the entry point and container for the body, thus making it an ideal space to consider one's lived experience. However, while Chute is explicitly interested in the genre of autobiographical comics in her article, I wish to turn to another area of comics studies: the superhero genre. Specifically in this article, I explore how J.H. Williams III's art on *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* continues to challenge comics and rethink constructions of identity through the skin, ultimately suggesting that there might be more depth to the proverbial tip of the iceberg than we might have previously imagined.

While not overtly interested in comics studies, psychoanalysis has long been invested in understanding the construction of surfaces and skin. Sigmund Freud posits in *The Ego and the Id* that 'the Ego is first and foremost a bodily Ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface' (1976, 26). Freud's claim suggests that surfaces are not only coverings, but are dynamic entities in themselves that structure our psychic

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reality. Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu develops Freud's claim as he suggests that the Ego is the projection of a particular surface: our skin. Anzieu posits that the Ego lies in our very skin, thus redefining the Ego as a 'Skin Ego'. Just as the skin envelops the skeletal and muscular system, the (Skin) Ego envelops the psyche. Therefore, the Skin Ego has both a physical and a psychic presence, suggesting a mind and body connection through the skin. Thus, the Skin Ego is a container, much like the Ego, structuring a sense of self; however, by locating the Ego in the skin, Anzieu points to the embodied nature of identity.

Both Freud and Anzieu's formulations define a shift in the definition of identity, from a purely psychological construction to one that is also expressed on the surface of the body. Furthermore, Anzieu posits that this shift to the surface is in opposition to western society's philosophical obsession wherein 'the acquisition of knowledge is seen as a process of breaking through an outer shell to reach an inner core or nucleus' (1989, 9). Thus, contrary to the belief that surfaces such as skin are merely vessels for bodies and the self, Anzieu proposes that skin might be seen as an envelope: both container and surface (9). By defining skin as an envelope, rather than a one-dimensional container, Anzieu effectively re-evaluates the surface/depth binary as he reconsiders the borders of the body, beginning (not ending) with the skin. In this article, I build upon the works of Freud and Anzieu to suggest it is time to begin to peel back the layers of identity on the surface which have so often been ignored.

To understand fully these previously misunderstood surfaces such as skin, Anzieu suggests that, with the turn of the twentieth century, there is a 'greater need of people who think in images than of learned scholars, scholiasts and abstract or formalistic thinkers' (1989, 6). Anzieu identifies a necessary turn to the visual in psychoanalysis, yet his argument is equally relevant for scholarship beyond psychoanalysis, such as in the broader study of identity politics. A turn to the visual in identity politics indicates a shift from a focus on identity as internal core to how identities are expressed and written on the surface. Here I build upon Judith Butler's discussion of gender performativity, as she too emphasises surfaces over the interior. Previously, others have problematised Butler's post-structuralist critique of gender by stating that it does not consider the socially and historically located experience of one's own body. For example, Toril Moi (2001) suggests that Butler (1990), who follows Simone de Beauvoir's argument that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' in order to avoid biological determinism, misinterprets it. According to Moi, Butler 'loses touch' with Beauvoir's understanding of 'lived experience' when she considers gender as a category that does not include the body. Rather, Butler locates gender outside of the body, and in order to avoid anatomy as destiny, defines woman simply as gender. Therefore, Moi purports that Butler is 'left with only one way of conceptualizing the body, namely as sex', while the category of gender 'varies freely in relation to a narrowly scientific understanding of sex' (2001, 74). Ultimately, Moi concludes that 'in Butler's picture of sex and gender, sex becomes the inaccessible ground of gender, gender becomes completely disembodied, and the body itself is divorced from all meaning' (74). As an alternative to this model, by turning to the skin, scholars might reconsider the embodied nature of identity and still avoid reducing the discussion to biological essentialism. Without denying the performative nature of gender, I am interested in the after-effects of the performance – how its palimpsestic presence maps time and space onto the surface of the material body. As this process occurs, both the performance and one's history are archived simultaneously. This allows scholars to consider not only how gender performances are documented, but how one's own personal history and trauma are also often mapped out onto the skin.

I turn to comics because it is one of many popular media forms, which reveals a turn towards visual mappings of the self on the surface in contemporary American culture.<sup>1</sup> In

particular, the work of J.H. Williams III on *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* has pushed the boundary of skin and surfaces in comics and contemporary culture, as identity is no longer solely relegated to the interior but is found embedded in the surface.<sup>2</sup> I employ the word 'embed' because one of its early uses, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), was to describe rocks with fossilized imprints. I suggest that this same metaphor might be applied to the subject's identity, which is found embedded in our very skin. This turn towards the surface also suggests an alternative to linguistic classifications of identity, such as masculine or feminine, which are prescriptive rather than descriptive. In fact, visual media such as comics challenge these linguistic categories as the visual signifier breaks down and moves beyond the verbal signifier. As Donna Haraway reminds us, 'vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions' (1988, 581). Therefore, I argue, that scholars should study visual media to revise how identity is being both reinterpreted and reconstructed in these popular narrative forms. Thus, I first look at the politics of the superhero body to establish the historical understanding of the costume and how, through *Batwoman*, Williams ultimately challenges the genre. Next, I offer a brief history of identity politics and examine how a turn towards the visual can revitalise the field. I explore how the study of *Batwoman* suggests that the text's configuration of identity as a surface construction supports scholarly trends epitomised by Anzieu and further challenges modern and postmodern theories of identity. In this article I suggest skin to be palimpsestic,<sup>3</sup> exposing the depth of the surface, and in doing so, exploring the skin as chronicle or map for the self. This, in turn, allows scholars to re-think the boundaries of the body not limited to interiority, but rather expressed on the surface. Ultimately, by expanding cultural definitions of identity through the body's many layers, I argue that skin is not only an entry point to the body but an expression of the performances of the self. This cartography of the self on the previously essentialist surface defines a new emerging period of identity in a post-postmodern world that is about the self, one's own history and its mapped presence.

### **Identity politics of the superhero body**

Superheroes have often been depicted as hyper-sexualized figures defined by their performance. We might think of the famous line 'Look up in the sky! It's a Bird. It's a Plane. It's Superman',<sup>4</sup> or the cover of *Action Comics* issue 1, which depicts Superman picking up a car. Superman is identified by his acts of heroism and feats of strength, defining him as a hyper-masculine male. By contrast, female superheroes have often been defined as hyper-feminine and overly sexualized. Comics scholar Jeffrey A. Brown posits that it is 'near impossible to find a superheroine or villainess that is not defined primarily by her sex appeal' (2011, 77). Scholars agree that the superhero body is a highly sexualized, constructed body that is pure surface performance with no depth. Scott Bukatman even defines Superman as a 'skyscraper', a constructed ideal fantasy of phallic power. Bukatman also notes the lack of surface depth to superheroes such as Superman, who 'appeared with his invulnerable body', which 'retains no marks, on which history cannot be inscribed' (2003, 197). Contrary to this vision of the superhero, Williams challenges the boundaries of the genre with the new *Batwoman*. While *Batwoman* still holds true to what Peter Coogan defines as the definitive characteristics of the superhero, 'Mission, Power and Identity' (2006, 30), Williams reconsiders the boundaries of the superhero genre and costume. Thus, the genre is challenged without becoming unrecognisable.

The original *Batwoman* was created in 1956, and her first appearance in *Detective Comics* #233 was written by Edmond Hamilton and drawn by Sheldon Moldoff. In his

*Batman: The Complete History*, Les Daniels states that the creation of the character was probably made at the behest of Irwin Donenfeld, DC's 'de facto editor in chief', and because Batman editor Jack Schiff 'believed new characters would bump up sales' in addition to giving Batman a female partner (2004, 91–92). Chris York posits that after the creation of the Comic Code Authority, due to Frederic Wertham's critique of the comics industry, the greatest change to Batman was 'the introduction of female counterparts for both Batman and Robin, which directly countered homosexual allegations by creating romantic heterosexual possibilities for both characters' (2000, 104). Katherine Kane, the original Batwoman, became an object of Batman's heterosexual gaze and had no other purpose than to prove that Batman was in fact not in a paedophilic relationship with Robin. As Paul Petrovic (2011, 67) notes, she was 'an accessory which Batman could then properly and heterosexually desire', proceeding the 'homophobic fallout from Frederic Wertham's controversial *Seduction of the Innocent*'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Batwoman's body was nothing more than a projection of a heterosexual ideal, lacking any particular depth.

Owing to the homophobic history that led to the creation of the original Batwoman, the 2006 incarnation of Batwoman gained both popular and scholarly attention.<sup>6</sup> Media outlets such as the BBC News and the *New York Times* published articles titled 'Batwoman hero returns as lesbian' (2006), and 'Straight (and not) out of the comics' (Gustines 2006), respectively. These media outlets focus on the new Batwoman being written as a lesbian, once again reifying a one-dimensional reading of Batwoman. Like the original Batwoman who served as a projection of the heterosexual ideal, these media outlets have defined the new Batwoman simply as a lesbian, ignoring the depth to her character. Comics scholar Paul Petrovic also falls victim to this one-dimensional reading of Kate Kane and her alter ego, Batwoman, because he focuses solely on her gay identity. Petrovic identifies the 'fluid approach to page layout and artistic style' which expresses the 'multiple identities that Kate Kane as both Batwoman and a lesbian performs and represents' (2011, 69). However, while Petrovic recognises the multiplicity of her identities suggested by both the content and the form of the comic, he ultimately posits 'she cannot be read as a woman without the foregrounding that she is a gay woman' (73). Petrovic notes the presence of multiplicity on the surface; however, he undermines the power of the text by focusing on an interior identity based on the linguistic category of lesbian, when in truth the comic lends itself to discussion of a new identity politics not based solely on an inner self but on surface-depth. This discourse has limited the perception of the new Batwoman as it suggests that her lesbian identity is integrally related to her heroism and somehow this expands readers' understanding of her character. Once again, sex and sexuality become of primary concern.

Contrary to these other sources, Kate/Batwoman is not defined by one easily categorized identity when she is first introduced in the narrative. Kate's sexuality is only one facet of her identity, not a defining category. Thus, I read Williams's Batwoman as challenging the reading of sex and sexuality as a wholly enveloping identity. Batwoman's long, feminine hair is in fact only a wig, and her gender is simply a performance that, like skin, can be shed (Figure 1). For example, according to Butler's theory of gender, performativity can be defined as 'acts, gestures, enactments generally construed, [which] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications' (1990, 185). Thus, Batwoman's wig is suggested to be an expression of her femininity, an essential part of her being a woman; however, the reader learns with the removal of the wig that this performance of femininity is simply a fabricated act. Moreover, she insistently breaks away from

familiar lesbian stereotypes such as masculine clothing; in the following pages her girlfriend remarks on her femininity, saying, ‘...and you don’t think fabrics begin and end with flannel’ (Rucka and Williams 2009a, 10–11). Williams’s narrative in these panels indicates a more complex vision of identity than the previous belief in essentialist surface identifications, as Batwoman demonstrates how identities such as performed heroism and femininity can be shed. While it is typical to see the costume as a secure container for the performance of heroism, flannel as a signifier for the performance of lesbian sexuality, or long hair for women, Batwoman/Kate Kane demonstrates that these secure containers are in fact only the beginning of identity rather than an end. Thus, identity performance does not guarantee easy categorisation such as femininity or masculinity; but we might see beyond these categories that act to contain identity, as our skin expresses many facets of our identity on the surface, some that are often contradictory. As will become clear, while skin can be shed, these performances retain presence beyond the act, suggesting a depth to the surface.

The turn to a surface with depth, one that is not easily categorised, seen in Williams’s art on *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman*, is a representative example of what might be defined as a ‘counter-linguistic’ turn in identity politics. Historically, identity politics has long been premised upon the belief that understanding a particular group’s experience would allow for a more just society (Nicholson 2008, 17). The emergence of identity politics in the 1960s suggested a turn towards the interior of each individual group and the self. However, by the early 2000s it seems that identity politics had been exhausted. Terry



Figure 1. From *Detective Comics* #854, pp. 8–9 (Rucka and Williams 2009a). © DC Comics.

Note: Art by J.H. Williams III.

Eagleton suggests that critical theory ‘cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race and gender, indispensable as these topics are. It needs to chance its arm, break out of a rather stifling orthodoxy and explore new topics’ (2004, 222). Not only does Eagleton question identity politics, but other scholars also question this same belief as ‘both the philosophical viability and political utility of traditional categories of identity have come into question’ (Albertini et al. 2000, 622). I argue that the previously exhausted field of identity politics might otherwise be revitalised by the new concept of an emerging identity based on a visually mapped presence of the self rather than these entirely linguistic models of identity based on defining one by their actions.

If Foucault is correct in his assertion that the emergence of the category of homosexual signalled a shift in formations of identity in the nineteenth century, then I suggest that we are witnessing a shift to a new vision of identity in the twenty-first century and a revision of identity politics based on the turn to the marked presence of the self. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes,

the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. *Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.* (1990, 43, emphasis added)

Foucault posits that the identity category of homosexual emerged in the nineteenth century and was imagined as pervasive. A person was classified by their actions, which ultimately served to control and contain an individual. A similar phenomenon occurred with the introduction of Batwoman in the popular and scholarly fields: her categorised identity of lesbian permeated and even foregrounded any discussion of her experiences and aimed to define her. However, as I have suggested, this reading of the character only acts to contain her identity and the power granted to the individual who is not controlled by this archaic model of identity politics.

Contrary to a belief in discursive identities as all-encompassing and pervasive, as a visual media form, comics illustrates a ‘counter-linguistic’ turn in formations of identity because of its ability ‘to escape the seemingly inescapable difference between sign and object’ (Singer 2008, 287). Such embedded narratives avoid the disjuncture between sign and signifier in categorisations of identity as various performances retain a presence on the surface. Marc Singer also refers to Slavoj Žižek’s (1992) statement that ‘the real is thus not an inaccessible kernel hidden beneath layers of symbolization, it is *on the surface*’ (172, emphasis in original). These mappings of the self state their very being on the surface, which is contrary to the purpose of the costume or skin as container that hides vulnerable identities as the space of the skin is covered. But as Žižek posits, the real is not inaccessible – it is just hidden on the surface. Thus, scholars must uncover the covering the skin has become. Similarly, psychoanalyst and literary scholar Vera J. Camden, in her article on the Skin Ego, points to the power of the affective lines in comics which transcend the symbolic order of language. Camden (2013) points to McCloud’s discussion of lines in *Understanding Comics*, which she suggests ‘carry an expressive potential’. Camden argues that

[s]uch shapes enact the range of core affects that McCloud illustratively duplicates in the lines of his sequential panels: these lines he explains make up the fundamental elements of graphic art even as they mirror the fundamental elements of our affective attitudes, a place before speech, on the surface. (2013, 594)

Camden further illustrates the power of comics through her assertion that the surface might be understood as a place before speech, which underscores the power of visual media and its location outside of the symbolic order. Finally, by focusing on the skin as a place for the mapped presence of the self, embodied narratives ask scholars to rethink the place of skin in identity politics as we are no longer limited to an easily categorised surface or identity. Ultimately, by doing so as scholars we might rethink the nature of the skin as a space of narrative and exploration rather than as a container for the body. Thus, we forego the categories of classification that emerged as Foucault suggests in the nineteenth century.

The embedded presence of the self is exemplified in two key scenes with Batwoman in the comic-book series *Detective Comics*. The following two scenes represent Batwoman's documentation of her own psychic trauma on the surface of her skin as well as her body's scarring and remembering of a physical trauma. In these two scenes the reader is guided through two different ways that temporal events are embedded into the surface and thus spatially mapped onto the skin. In the first scene, Kate consciously chooses to get a tattoo after a traumatic event with the army. In the second scene, Batwoman is scarred by a battle wound. Batwoman/Kate consciously chooses to express her own psychic trauma on the skin through the tattoo in the first scene, and in the second scene a villain has acted on her body in a way that marks her skin. In these two scenes, the reader sees how the skin simultaneously maps interior and exterior events, retaining both physical and psychic presence.

The first event is told through Batwoman's origin story – a convention of the superhero genre.<sup>7</sup> Before becoming Batwoman, Kate Kane had been a cadet in the army. While in training at West Point she violated 'article 125 of the uniform code of military justice', better known to the American public as 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'. Kate is decommissioned from the army for being gay. Her commanding officer asks her to deny the accusations; however, she will not deny her homosexuality, tells the commanding officer 'I'm gay', and is consequently sent home (Rucka and Williams 2009b, 7). Soon after, Kate returns home to her father, a former officer himself (Figure 2). Her father asks her 'What are you going to do now?', and the reader sees images of time passing: Kate's hair grows longer over time and she slowly becomes more feminine. She is not wearing a wig in this particular scene so the length of her hair is used to demonstrate the passage of time. The wedding pictured in this scene is her father marrying his new wife. The reader also sees Kate continue on with her life by going to school and partying. The most prominent image in this scene, though, is that of Kate being tattooed. The reader is led to believe that the tattoo is a direct response to the trauma she experienced after being discharged from the army. In fact, she says pages earlier, 'All I've ever wanted since my mother and sister were murdered is to serve' (2009b, 6). The decommissioning is nothing short of traumatic and the tattoo maps this traumatic event onto the body. The interior depth of trauma is challenged because it is marked on Kate's flesh. Through Kate, Williams challenges the previously accepted split between depth and surface (or mind and body) as Kate Kane's skin becomes a space of narrative, a cartography of the self on the surface of the body. The traumatic event is forever documented on Kate Kane's skin, marking her body. Furthermore, the tattoo spatialises the event of the trauma as it takes up space on the surface of her body. The tattoo palimpsests time and space onto the body as the childhood trauma of her mother and sister being murdered is conflated with her failure to become an officer in the army. The two events are then linked to one another on her body at the site of the tattoo.

Although Kate Kane voluntarily chooses to mark her body in the previous scene, there are other markings on her body seen throughout the text that, while revealing her history,



Figure 2. From *Detective Comics* #859, pp. 14–15 (Rucka and Williams 2009b). © DC Comics. Note: Art by J.H. Williams III.

were not her own choice. In the following scene (Figure 3), once again Kate is seen speaking to her father. She is remembering a previous event with an enemy group that had captured her and stabbed her through the heart. While she survived, she still has the mark of that event on her chest, which she shows to her father (and, more importantly, the reader). Even though she shows her father and the reader the scar on her chest, Kate Kane is also remembering another event: the kidnapping and murder of her mother and sister during her childhood. She states how she continues to remember the event and how it is impossible to forget what it was like to hear the kidnappers' voices. The central image on the page is a palimpsest of Kate Kane remembering the two events lain over one another: being stabbed through the heart and the memory of her mother and sister's kidnapping. Here these two events are layered not only psychically in her memory but also physically through the scar. As I have suggested previously, time becomes space through the use of the image. Thus, Kate's decommissioning from the army is marked on the body as a tattoo, while the two memories of her kidnapping and years later being stabbed is signified through the scar. These two events show how a psychic event such as being decommissioned is marked on the body and the physical stabbing can affect and reanimate memories in the psyche. These two scenes suggest that the surface/depth binary is not so much an either/or but a both/and relationship. Williams demonstrates through *Batwoman* that trauma is not a purely physical nor psychic construction but retains presence on both planes through our very skin.

### Modern surfaces

Visualising the surface/depth binary as a both/and relationship directly contrasts western society's obsession with interior depth and surface shallowness. For example, Anne Cheng explains that blank walls (2011, 14), sleek or undistracted surfaces (25) and



Figure 3. From *Detective Comics* #854, pp. 15–16 (Rucka and Williams 2009a). © DC Comics. Note: Art by J.H. Williams III.

simultaneity (32) are components of the aesthetics of modernism, which Cheng says is characterised by the 'lure of the surface' (23). Modernist blank walls and surfaces act as containers for identity as they 'reconfirm surface-depth binary (by, for instance reproducing the surface as essence)' (11). This belief in surface as essence sustained through the sleek, pure, blank surfaces of modernism 'aligns skin with the corporeal and the intractable' (13). Skin is not separate but fantasised as one with the body. However, historically there have been challenges to this construction of surface as container, or surface as essentialist. Cheng uses as an example the dancer/performer Josephine Baker, who defied the belief in skin as container because she succeeded in 'wearing her nakedness like a sheath' (1). Baker demonstrates that even nakedness is a mapped identity as the body's previous performances are worn. These identities that can be shed signify that performances have more depth beyond the act of the performance because they have material consequences. Furthermore, the ability to shed skin challenges our understanding of the borders of the body. If skin is not just a container, the borders of the body are no longer stable. However, under the modernist aesthetic, the skin acts as a container which suggests an ideological control of the body by policing its borders. The body is imagined as closed and secure rather than porous.

The modernist fantasy of the skin as secure container is reified in the figure of the superhero who wears a costume to hide his or her history. This sleek and pure aesthetic is best demonstrated by the fact that, even though the ongoing stories of the superhero depict intense physical stress inflicted upon the body, the surface remains pure and clean. The sleekness of the surface and uniformity among superheroes displace the power of the material body by imposing the costume as a secure container. The costume emphasises the performance of heroism and gender, which then divorces the body from all meaning beside what is seen on the surface. The actor is entirely enveloped by the action and is understood as nothing beyond the performance. Thus, the 'lure of the surface', or the modernist aesthetic, has found itself reified in contemporary culture through the figure of the superhero. For example, while aspects of Superman's costume have changed over the past seventy years, such as the shape of the 'S' and his hairstyle, this modernist aesthetic is still present in superhero comics through the sleek and suffocating costume that Superman wears.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the modernist aesthetic that has been sustained through figures such as Superman, Williams's *Batwoman* poses a challenge to the surface as container. Thus, the ideologies reproduced by imagining the surface as a container that patrols and controls the body are ultimately challenged as the borders of the body become porous rather than suffocating.

While the new *Batwoman* challenges the modernist aesthetic, it would be incorrect to describe her simply as postmodern. While rejecting the modernist claustrophobia of skin as container, these palimpsestic maps – the tattoos and scars on the skin – also challenge Frederic Jameson's definition of postmodernism as the 'death of the subject'. Jameson continues and suggests that the 'death of the subject' is 'to say it in more conventional language, the end of individualism as such' (2001, 1964). Indeed, this new vision of the self and its mapped presence suggests a challenge to postmodernism in which the subject is not dead, but rather exists on the surface in its own unique fashion, documenting its own personal history. Furthermore, Jameson articulates postmodernism by suggesting that it 'has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world' (1971). Ultimately, what separates *Batwoman* from Jameson's definition of postmodernism is that the purpose of this new vision of identity is not to transcend the human body or result in the death of the subject, but rather to re-assert the presence of the subject on the surface in a visually embodied palimpsest.

For Jameson, postmodernism represents the ‘fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents’ (1974). Instead, I suggest that the human subject lies embedded in the folds of the skin, where experience is collected and expressed through flesh. Rather than a perpetual present, these histories are archived or palimpsested on the surface: they are located in space and time. These visual mappings of the self on the surface problematise Jameson’s definition of postmodernism as a cognitive mapping because identity and experience do not solely occur in the brain, nor is it possible to transcend the individual human body. Rather, as Katherine Hayles notes in her book *How We Think*, ‘all cognition is embodied, which is to say that for humans, it exists throughout the body, not only in the neocortex’ (2012, 17). If Hayles is correct, then the body and the mind are equally active agents in the production of identity and it is not possible to forego body for a purely cognitive mapping. Rather, neither body nor mind is given privilege over the other as in a dualistic model. Instead, through the skin the mind and the body are contained and expressed simultaneously, mapping the human self.

Thus, in this post-postmodern vision of identity, the self is not solely an interior construction, as modernism would suggest; neither is it lost in its being mapped onto the external world. It is instead mapped onto the skin, which is both part of the body and part of the external world. Skin is in this sense multiple and layered rather than essentialist and flat. In fact, a focus on skin as having depth and not constructed solely as container challenges the belief in a perpetual present and fragmentation of identity that postmodernism suggests. Comics such as *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* purport that bodies are not simply vessels for identity, but are located in space and time through skin, challenging the postmodern belief in fragmentation of identity which posits a perpetual present. This is why Didier Anzieu writes that skin – the body’s largest organ – ‘can judge time (less well than the ear) and space (less well than the eye), but it alone combines the spatial and temporal dimensions’ (1989, 14). I return now to Chute’s claim, with which I began the essay, wherein she echoes Anzieu as she states that comics is about locating bodies ‘in space and time’ (2011, 112). Both Anzieu and Chute articulate a challenge to postmodernism’s purporting of a perpetual present and death of the subject because a turn to the surface uncovers how skin palimpsests temporal events on the surface, redefining the limits of the subject and their body.

### **From postmodern aporia to porous presence**

The visual configuration of the panels in the following scene (Figure 4) imagines skin as a narrative space, once again challenging the belief in skin solely as container. Batwoman uses the flashlight to guide the reader through her interactions with the unnamed criminal in this scene. At the same time, the skin of the comic and the second skin of the costume merge to create a transitional space in which the reader is invited into the narrative experience. The normative design of comics’ panels as container is challenged by this merging of the comics’ skin and Batwoman’s skin. By exploding from the page, Batwoman breaks the fourth wall of the traditional comics’ panel suggesting that the costume, the gutter, and even the body are not merely containers but can be surfaces. The trauma that the costume was employed to contain is no longer hidden as the surface of the body becomes a narrative space. Furthermore, the narrative is told on the surface of Batwoman’s cape, visualizing the separation and link between the body’s depth and its surface. Finally, the broken mirror image on the cape harkens back to the fragments that have defined postmodernism. However, the fact that these fragments are held within the folds of the cape defines a collecting of the fragments left behind by postmodernism: a

piecing back together and a step away from the postmodern vision of identity. I do not read this as a rejection of postmodernism, but rather as a collecting of the fragments to posit a post-postmodern definition of identity. A vision of identity that had previously been suggested by an interior fragmentation is now collected on the surface as the skin becomes a chronicle for the self, collecting these broken pieces. Ultimately, skin acts not only as a place to contain these fragments, but also as a place of expression for the human subject.



Figure 4. From *Batwoman* #4, pp. 16–17 (Williams 2012b). © DC Comics.

Note: Art by J.H. Williams III.

Finally, the new mapped presence of the self, embedded in the skin, is perhaps best represented in the following scene in *Batwoman* where Batwoman is contrasted with her protégé, Flamebird (Figure 5). In this scene, Kate Kane returns from patrolling Gotham City while Flamebird puts on her costume. In contrast to the image of Kate Kane, now stripped of her Batwoman skin and looking in the mirror, the reader is presented with the image of Flamebird donning the pure, sleek costume that reflects back. Unlike Kate Kane's layered and marked body, Flamebird reifies the modernist aesthetic of the superhero and thus emphasizes Batwoman as a different kind of superhero. Flamebird does not look at herself but looks forward at the reader. The scene depicts a reflection in Flamebird's glasses, suggesting the skin's metallic purity that cannot be penetrated as it reflects back onto the reader. While the reader sees Flamebird's eye, the eye is protected by the glass, suggesting surfaceness and not actual depth. The exterior must be broken or penetrated in order to reach the interior that is seen under the surface. While Batwoman acknowledges her own body in the mirror, Flamebird once again displaces her physical body and psychic interiority by presenting only pure surfaceness that prohibits liminality or interactivity with the character. Though comics is a medium that welcomes interactivity, the traditional superhero costume prohibits interaction, whereas the new costume and exploration of the surface seen through Batwoman invites the reader into the narrative to explore the depth of the surface.

By envisioning skin with depth, Anne Cheng (2011, 28) suggests that we might see skin as a 'medium of transition and doubleness'. Cheng reconsiders skin as in-betweenness, like Anzieu before her, as she contends that 'the body is always wrapped and protected yet also on the verge of presentation and exposure. We are in essence talking not quite of a "womb" or a theater but a hybrid in between' (31). Like the comics gutter, Cheng describes the skin as 'a vibrant interface between the hidden and visually available' (28). The gutter reveals both the literal in-between of the panels on the page and the figurative in-between of the superhero disappearing into the folds of the narrative. While comics as a narrative form invites readers into the experience through the gutter, as witnessed with the image of Flamebird, the superhero costume has in the past locked the reader out of the experience. Thus, Williams uses not only the unique form of the comic but also re-imagines the superhero costume as a place of experience not only as a container for the hero. Furthermore, Skin as doubleness implies a palimpsestic nature to skin, insisting once again on a layered vision of human flesh or a layered surface wherein marks of history are retained on the surface of the body, as is true of the palimpsest. Additionally, Cheng's formulation of skin as doubleness suggests that while as an organ skin can be theorized, it is still a physical construct attached to the body: simultaneously representing and affecting the body. This surface-depth is visible through the dark circles, the tattoos and nail polish on the surface of Batwoman's body in the previous scene. As I have stressed throughout the article, skin is not simply a secure container, but rather is layered and has depth. The reader thus sees long-term consequences to these performances as the body is forever in a mode of transition and performance yet simultaneously expresses its past history.

### **Bodies that still matter**

By reconsidering skin in both its literal as well as metaphorical sense, I mean not only to rethink the borders of comics but to rethink the ideology of containment. As I have identified, J.H. Williams III's art on *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* interrogates the belief that identity is an entirely interior construction. In fact, the narrative suggests that the previously accepted essentialist surface does have depth and acts as a chronicle for the



Figure 5. From *Batwoman* #3, p. 19 (Williams 2012a). © DC Comics.

Note: Art by J.H. Williams III.

self. Thus, these acknowledged mappings embedded in the surface present a ‘counter-linguistic’ turn in identity politics. As previously discussed, a focus on identifying Batwoman as lesbian is not only counter-intuitive to the text, which transcends these linguistic categories, but it is also limiting to define identity based on linguistic categories. In fact, it seems that, whereas previously identity had been defined by one’s actions or performances, it can now be said to be made up of complementary as well as contradictory traces of one’s own personal history mapped on the surface of the body.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993, 1) asks, ‘Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performative nature of gender?’ As I have suggested throughout the article, by turning to skin, the materiality of the body is brought into focus without reducing our discussion to biology. Because as Anzieu suggests, skin has both a psychic and bodily presence, the discussion is not limited to a binary of materiality vs. construction; rather the self is found in the folds of skin, where the biological and the social meet. Instead of suggesting that the body is an ahistorical vessel that carries an interior identity, flesh and skin become expressions of the self, located spatially and temporally in the world. The mapped presence of these identities suggests that gender and other worn identities are not simply defined as performative because these performances leave traces on the material body. The material body is thus a body of experience that is archived on our skin. Ultimately, a turn to the skin is a return to the body and lived experience, which is more complicated than we can ever imagine.

Williams’s art in *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* suggests that the multiple surface layers of identity can be worn and torn like skin. Batwoman’s body presents a clear admonition of the performance of the distracting sleek, metal body as her costume is shed. Williams offers readers a character that reproduces the tenets of the superhero genre by wearing a costume but with a difference. Batwoman’s costume is not confining, nor does it displace the body, but rather embraces the layered surface and the body underneath. The surface is no longer flat and imprisoning; instead Batwoman’s story explodes from the costume as container and the body narrates her story to the reader. Thus, this new vision of identity seen through comics is not simply about containing the body but rather embracing the complexity of the surface of the body. Borders are challenged as the surface is not an end but a beginning. As American culture continues to evolve visually, so does the construction and expression of identity. It is then up to scholars to explore visual media to discuss how the body and the surface expresses the self, contrary to the belief that the self is an entirely interior construction held by the body. Indeed, J.H. Williams III’s art on *Detective Comics* and *Batwoman* is representative of a new definition of identity that expresses the self through the body’s many layers, the folds of skin and flesh. Thus, I reconsider the subject in an evolving visual culture, uncovering the mappings of the self that exist on the surface of the body.

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### Notes

1. Many digital and new media forms represent a similar phenomenon. For example, Facebook recently transitioned from its text-heavy layout view to the ‘timeline’ format. The ‘timeline’

format becomes a type of skin for the self, a visual mapping of the ‘skin (ego)’ on a screen. Similarly, Microsoft’s new format for both the Windows Phone and their new tablet ‘Surface’, also signals a shift to the primarily visual mapping of a self on to a virtual skin. In these examples, visual media suggest a palimpsestic mapping of the self where time becomes visible as space, as in comics.

2. While I do not want to diminish or deny the impact of Greg Rucka’s work on *Detective Comics*, for this essay I have chosen to focus primarily on Williams III’s work on the character in order to spotlight the visual configuration of the comics page.
3. A palimpsest according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) is ‘a parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second’. Much like the palimpsest, I imagine we might see identity as palimpsestic because, as different identities are worn, others are erased to make room for the new one. However, as with the parchment, an imprint of what had been written before retains an underlying presence. Therefore, it is difficult to classify these identities as the surface is multifaceted and layered, which suggests a multiplicity to identity rather than the previous belief in a singular identity or even as fragmented, purported by much of contemporary critical theory.
4. These now famous lines first originated in the Superman radio serial of the 1940s.
5. Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham published his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. In his book, Wertham identified comics as a plague upon United States culture. His book led to court hearings, banning of comic books in many cities and burnings of thousands of comic books. His main arguments were that comic books led to child suicide, and violence, and he suggests that Batman and Robin promote the fulfillment of a homosexual dream. For further discussion of Wertham’s attack on comics and what occurred after, see Hajdu (2008) and Schott (2011).
6. We might also think of Batwoman as palimpsestic because of the re-appropriation of the original Katherine Kane whose performance is essentially written over by this new Batwoman, Kate Kane.
7. Batwoman’s origin story is particularly interesting because here J.H. Williams III mimics the art of David Mazzucchelli. Williams III here palimpsests artistic styles by appropriating another artist’s style used as the definitive origin story art for Batman.
8. The use of costumes or surfaces to cover the trauma inflicted upon the body is also seen in literature of the modernist period. Gaston Leroux’s 1910 *Phantom of the Opera* is a perfect example of the modernist obsession with containing and producing clean surfaces. The phantom wears a mask to hide his trauma rather than allowing his skin to map his history; the reader is presented with a dissimulation rather than the self.

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