

○ VOLUME 7 NUMBER 2, 2008

## Marked bodies: a corporeal history of colonial Australia [1]

**Anna Haebich**  
Griffith University

*Western imaginings about marked 'primitive' bodies have a long history, yet studies of these practices have remained largely a-historical. Drawing on recent scholarship addressing the history and cultural meanings of the corporeal surface of the Western body this paper presents a preliminary historical analysis of the remaking of Indigenous corporeal surfaces and subjectivities under colonialism in Australia as part of the nineteenth century 'civilising project'.*

*The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Foucault, 1977: 25).*

### Introduction

The Western imagination has long been captivated by representations of marked 'primitive' bodies. This is evident in the popularity of first-hand travellers' accounts and touring exhibitions of decorated 'live specimens' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as more recent lavish publications such as *The Decorated Body* (Brain, 1978) and *The Painted Body* (Thevoz, 1984) with their comparative 'variations-on-a-theme' cultural typologies (Biddle, 2001: 178). The tattoos and scars seen engraved into dark skins add further layers of signification to surfaces already replete with meanings of race and difference. They set out clear corporeal markers of primitive peoples and cultures that provide 'an assured, absolute, even abjected identity against which the "modern" or "civilised" [can] be defined' (Biddle, 2001: 178). They also seem to exist in an endless anthropological present, immune to the dramatic changes wrought by the forces of colonisation and globalisation. This binary a-historical approach continued despite attention to the Western body in history ushered in by Michel Foucault's (1977) classic analysis of the interface of corporeality and power. Alphonso Lingis ignored history in his studies

of primitive tribal marks as sensuous messages whose 'patterns designate a position, a place, binding the subject's body to that of the social collective'. He endorsed the binary perspective by asserting that primitive marks engraved into the body's surface alarmed and offended Western sensibilities based on beliefs that 'we are not so much surfaces as profound depths, subjects of a hidden interiority, and the exhibition of subjectivity on the body's surface is, at least from a certain class and cultural perspective, "puerile"' (Grosz, 1994: 138).

Scholarly attention to the historical and cultural significance of human skin emerged during the mid-1990s with the expanding interdisciplinary study of the human body in feminism, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, anthropology, literature and the arts and the new popularity of body marking in the west. Elizabeth Grosz jettisoned the arbitrary binary of marked primitive and unmarked civilised bodies arguing that:

in our own culture as much as in others, there is a form of body writing and various techniques of social inscription that bind all subjects, often in quite different ways according to sex, class, race, cultural and age codifications, social positions and relations ... the civilised body is [also] marked more or less permanently and impermeably (1994: 140-142).

From early this century the new attention to history produced several publications devoted to the changing perceptions and manipulations of the corporeal surface in western, colonial and postcolonial contexts (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001; Benthien, 2002; Connor, 2004; Thomas, Cole and Douglas, 2005; Cole and Haebich, 2007). These acknowledge the varied constellations of cultural meanings of body modifications and the ways that marks of subjugation grafted new readings onto colonised bodies.

In Australia collaborative research between anthropologists and Aboriginal artists and performers has replaced simplistic Western binary preconceptions with accounts of complex links between corporeal practices, cultural identities and broader social and cultural beliefs and institutions. New understandings have emerged of how skin functions as a transformative medium through which Warlpiri women in Central Australia 'regularly can and do transform into the object world' as they 'become' landscape, country, and other species (Biddle, 2001: 178). As Kutjungka women of the North East Kimberley mark their bodies with signs of initiation, kinship, marriage and grief, they recreate geographies of their bodies and social maps of their world that enfold the corporeal into the spiritual, the individual into the collective and surfaces into the depths (Watson, 2003: 68). However, the historical dimension to these studies of Aboriginal body marking remains largely unexplored. For example, what has been the impact of 70 years of mission and government contact on body marking practices in the Balgo community where the Kutjungka women live, of a dormitory system operating from the 1950s to the 1980s, and of bringing together into one community the diverse language groups of

Kutjungka, Kukatja, Ngardi, Djaru, Warlpiri, Wankatjunga, and Walmajarri?

This paper seeks in a very preliminary way to address this absence by adding an historical dimension that examines the re-marking of corporeal surfaces and subjectivities of Aboriginal bodies under colonialism in Australia as part of the 'civilising project'. Skin, the unstable surface and 'vulnerable and unreliable boundary' between inner and outer conditions, writes Judith Butler (1990 cited in Vaughan, 1991: 12), forms a uniquely important locus for social and political activity. Its manipulation constitutes a significant practice for colonial regimes intent on the discipline and reform of subjugated populations. Colonial practices preventing traditional body marking and creating new wounds through introduced forms of corporal punishment are necessarily distinct from body modification as a traditional expression of social collectivity. They create different men and women. As Elizabeth Scarry observes in *The body in pain*, 'the mutilations, scars, illness, [and] record of war survive in the bodies of those hurt. What is learned in this way penetrates the deepest layers of consciousness' (1985: 108-9).

### **Marked bodies**

From Mungo woman to the present the bodies of Aboriginal people have been smeared with ochre-impregnated oils and fats and decorated with elaborate painted designs and feathers, blossoms, fur and fish scales bound with blood and gum. Scars from battles, individual combat, ritualised ordeals and punishments and self-inflicted wounds of grief have marked designated parts of their bodies, together with deliberately made cuts and keloid cicatrices that engrave social and cultural meaning and brand their bodies as inextricably part of the social collective. Designs painted on their bodies spill out into the landscape and are etched into the earth and surfaces of caves, rocks and man-made objects to link individuals into complex webs of relationship with country, ceremony, ancestral beings and kin. Elisabeth Grosz explains:

Cicatrization and scarification mark the body in modes of inclusion or membership ... The body and its privileged zones of sensation, reception, and projection are coded by objects, categories, affiliations, lineages, which engender and make real the subject's social, sexual, familial, marital, or economic position or identity within a social hierarchy. Unlike messages to be deciphered, they are like a map correlating social positions within corporeal intensities (1994: 3).

Archival and photographic records provide clear evidence that body scarification was a widespread practice across colonial Australia. Archaeologist Bernard Huchet (1993) identified scarification marks on 2,344 individuals in photographs from the collections of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the John Oxley Library (Brisbane) and publications by explorers and

government officials. Huchet's study suggests the use of a limited range of marking styles in Aboriginal Australia. This contrasts with the profusion of spectacular body modification styles practised across the African continent. In Queensland's far north-east coast and interior, a region known for its dramatic linguistic diversity, colonial ethnologist, physician and administrator Walter Edmund Roth (1910: 44-49) documented only examples of linear 'flash cuts', rectangles, circles and small raised dot scars made by burning skin with charcoal. The larger keloid scars were created by rubbing plant sap, blood or charcoal into incisions made with a piece of flint, quartz, shell or glass. These deliberate markings were typically located on the upper torso away from fighting scars and self-inflicted wounds that women mourners cut vertically into their legs and thighs. Observations by anthropologist Stanley Porteus in the Kimberley region in the late 1920s suggest some diversity in terms of scale, intensity and placement of scarring. He photographed 'huge scars of keloid tissue' on men and women. A man at Forrest River Mission (now Oombulgurri), north-west of Wyndham, had 'large scars across his chest, five parallel ones on each upper arm, huge welts across his shoulders and back, his thigh ringed around at every inch, a double belt of inch-long scars around his middle and finally longitudinal weals on the calves of each leg' (1931: 122).

Using colonial records for South-East Queensland, archaeologist M J Morwood constructed a complex set of meanings and functions for scarification, which he concluded was 'an integral part of social complexity' (1987: 341-2). Careful placement of symbols on particular areas of the body encoded and communicated specific information about political, social, religious and territorial group membership and status. Ritual scars were significant in ceremonial activities that manifested spiritual and magical powers through the body to replenish, protect, heal and fertilise and that transformed the body for shamanic and initiatory journeys into the 'unlike beyond'. Body marking also created a corporeal biography celebrating status and feats of valour as well as punishments and, as Alphonso Lingis notes, it enhanced individual beauty and erotic charge. Continuing strong opinions about the practice are evident in the anthropological research by Biddle (2001) and Watson (2003) as well as anecdotal accounts from the Mowanjum Community in the Kimberley town of Derby. There consultation over the use of historical images of scarification in the planned Mowanjum community museum identified deep sensitivities about public representation amongst local Aboriginal groups who continue the practice. Research documenting scar designs and meanings highlighted the traditional significance of maintaining the integrity of the carefully marked surface of the body from the scars of random acts of violence. There were also the complex negotiations today as individuals seek to balance the competing demands of local Aboriginal tradition, prohibitions from a missionary past and contemporary perspectives on gender and the body (Jebb, 2006).

Colonists who encountered marked Aboriginal bodies viewed them through the prism of their own cultural preconceptions about race, primitiveness and body marking. Descriptions left by colonial explorers, anthropologists, officials and missionaries were sometimes admiring, as in the case of botanist Allan Cunningham, who described Aboriginal men he encountered in the Brisbane Valley in 1829 as 'very athletic persons, of unusually muscular limb and with bodies scarified, in exceedingly good taste' (cited Evans, 1992: 12). More often their responses were repulsion and fear mingled with a vein of voyeurism. These feelings were prompted by a mix of popular race theories that associated 'black skin with evil, treachery and barbarity' (Ryan, 1996: 137). George Mosse writes that race discourses of the late Enlightenment and romantic period, which coincided with the early decades of the colonisation of Australia, constituted a 'visual ideology based upon stereotypes' (1985: xii). Norbert Finzsch explains that 'the appearance, the looks of indigenous peoples carried a specific meaning. In the eighteenth century, complexion meant more than just skin colour. It also entailed a moral evaluation'. In this world 'beauty meant virtue and hideousness meant sin' so that the 'inner morality and the ethics of the indigene could be measured by its external beauty or ugliness, by the shape of limbs, flatness of breasts, wooliness or hair and complexion' (2005: 104-105). With the advent of nineteenth-century scientific racism, physiological, somatic and cultural characteristics were amalgamated into all-encompassing evolutionary taxonomies of human evolution that valorised whiteness over the racialised bodies of the colonial and marginalised Other, whose dark bodies marked them indelibly as Stone Age primitives. This provided a convenient rationale for the inhumane processes of colonisation and the civilising project.

In Western societies there has been a long and significant connection between social cleavage and systems of marks that were deliberately inscribed on the body. Guillaumin argues that the characteristics of marks, and their indelibility and 'more or less proximity to/association with the body', reflect relations of power and the permanence of the power relationship. 'The dominating group imposes its fixed inscription on those who are materially subject to them' (1988: 32). British colonists were imbued with ideals of smooth, unmarked skin as an essential marker of Christianity, civilised society and human beauty. Marked bodies were associated with primitive savagery but also with transgressive Western practices that sat uneasily in a culture that typically viewed body marking as stigmatic and punitive (Caplan, 2000). Prohibitions on body marking can be traced back to admonitions in the Old Testament such as Leviticus 19:28 which states:

'Ye shall not make cutting in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks on you'. Smooth undecorated bodies distinguished God's 'chosen people' from the painted pagans and ungodly. The weeping sores and disfigured bodies of lepers were a focus of religious, linguistic and ritual imperatives in Levitical law, which condemned them as signs of moral depravity and divine

punishment. Cutting across these prohibitions and public signifiers was a discontinuous history of body marking that was grounded in religious practice. Although tattooing was banned at the Second Council of Nicaea 787 AD, many early modern European pilgrims returned from the Holy Land tattooed with Christian symbols. In medieval times the bodies of Christian women mystics were marked with para-mystical signs of religious union and ecstasy such as stigmata, eruptions and swellings, which were testimony to their saintly status (Bynum, 1991).

In the late Enlightenment period, also the early years of Australian colonisation, members of polite European society embraced an aesthetic of immaculate beauty, that prized a white flawless complexion and regular features set in an oval face. They insisted that their peers uphold this ideal through elaborate cosmetic subterfuges to avoid offending the sensibilities of others. This imperative was even maintained in death, so that David's painting of *Marat Asssine* (1793) showed Marat's skin as pale and flawless, when in fact he had suffered from skin maladies that made his body a horrifying sight and forced him to soak in the bath for hours to treat and relieve the symptoms. This was an era of rampant communicable disease and infections that often manifested on the skin. At the Musée de L'Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris these 'unnatural tattoos' of disease and poverty were immortalised in wax models of 'every imaginable dermatological affliction'. Created for pedagogical purposes these specimens were viewed by many Parisians as visible proof of divine punishment for sexual licence and criminality (Stafford, 1991: 294, 281).

Europe also had a tradition dating from late antiquity of marking bodies to stigmatise and identify marginalised groups. Slaves, criminals, prisoners and deserters were punished by being tattooed, branded or flogged, leaving irreversible visible signs of wrongdoing and social exclusion. Australian colonists knew well the marks left on convict bodies by the lash. Foucault has documented how corporal punishment left a 'system of clearly legible signs' (1979: 151). These marks were intended to act preventatively by creating terror in would-be offenders and ensuring social exclusion and marginal status for those punished. In Britain during the nineteenth century there was a gradual shift from punishment primarily centred on 'the pain of the body', to 'an economy of suspended rights' (Foucault, 1979: 111), evident in the gradual repeal of the penalty of whipping at home and in the colonies, with the exception in Australia of Aboriginal people. Nineteenth-century criminologist Cesaro Lombroso attempted to systematise a scientific methodology for identifying criminality on distinctive physiognomic and anatomical features 'found in criminals, savages, and apes' (cited in Thevoz, 1984: 71). He added to the list evidence of insensibility to pain and tattooing.

Yet alongside this stigmatising ran a tradition of transgressive use of deliberate marking by groups to express opposition, marking of difference, and contrastive notions of beauty and eroticism. James Bradley and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (1997) found a strong practice

of tattooing amongst cohorts of convicts transported from Scotland to Van Diemen's Land between 1840 and 1853, 26 percent of 1226 male convicts. Tattooing practice was reinvigorated by European sea voyages to the Americas, the Pacific and Asia from the sixteenth century, as some voyagers had their bodies tattooed with new patterns they encountered on the bodies of indigenous peoples (White, 2005; Thomas, Cole and Douglas, 2005). Public fascination was aroused by visitors such as the Tahitian chief and priest Omai, brought to England by Cook in 1774, whose presence 'sparked a tattooing vogue among the English aristocracy' (le Fur, 2001: 38). There were also returned shipwrecked sailors, such as French sailor Joseph Kabris who lived on the Marquesas Islands until he was kidnapped in 1804 and taken back to Europe where he exhibited his tattoos at fairs in France until he died in poverty in 1822. Gell (1993 cited in Caplan, 2000: xii) observes that tattoos could express collective relationships within particular social groupings such as sailors and convicts, and their outsider status, but that in contrast to the socially embedded tattoos of Fijian society, they were largely 'unanchored' and 'historically contingent'.

Significantly, indigenous scarification did not become similarly fashionable amongst voyagers, traders and later, settler-colonials. Early voyagers may have initially mistaken the marks for scars from fights and assaults. Few witnessed the process of marking so could only speculate on how they were made. The absence of such pre-existing scarification traditions in Europe, aesthetic judgements, associations with perceived extreme primitivism and assumed qualities of primitive skin may have also militated against adoption of the practice (Cole and Haebich, 2007).

Several settler-colonists commented on what they perceived as the peculiar scarring properties of the dark skin of the Aboriginal Other. In the 1830s, following the initiation of young men, probably from the local Turrbul and Jagera landowning groups of the Brisbane area, Tom Petrie observed that 'it is remarkable how the scars become raised after a short time; a white man's skin is not the same' (1993: 56). In North Queensland Walter Roth observed:

I have tried this method on myself without any raised scar resulting and I am more and more convinced that independently of anything septic or not being rubbed into the wound, it is more or less natural amongst natives for the scar to become raised. Similarly, in the case of a half-caste girl in my employ who met with an accidental burn on the wrist and hand, a very elevated scar resulted within the subsequent ten weeks. ... There is ground for believing that some particular idiosyncrasy in the skin itself is responsible for the peculiarity (1894:115).

### **The civilising project**

Colonialism, writes David Arnold, positioned the physical body of the colonized as a 'site for the construction of [colonialism's] authority,

legitimacy and control' (1993: 8-9), and employed a vast array of ideological and administrative mechanisms to achieve this end. Bodies were managed and ordered through shifting combinations of medical, penal, pedagogical and other discursive practices. Traditional corporeal practices that produced physical ideals of beauty, status, gender, and so on and that fulfilled important functions for health and well-being were outlawed, replaced or reconfigured through imposed colonial regimes that remoulded and reshaped bodies into new forms, and remarked their surfaces in different ways or to different ends. In the process Indigenous bodies already engraved with cultural signs that bestowed meaning, identity and belonging were reinscribed with new marks of civilisation.

Fresh wounds on smooth or already marked surfaces created new men and women; as Elizabeth Scarry observes, 'Man can only be created once, but once created he can be endlessly modified' (1985: 183). These new marks and new bodies were visible symbols of colonial progress and punishment that were reproduced in countless photographs of 'civilised' Aboriginal people, or paraded as a warning to others who may transgress colonial authority (Kelm, 1998: 174). For the civilising project these 'signs of the savage' were visual and tactile reminders of cultural practices that were to be stamped out along with other techniques of bodily care and adornment, and replaced by colonial standards of physical appearance, grooming and hygiene.

#### *Smoothing Aboriginal bodies*

One step in the civilising process was to silence Aboriginal bodies. Clothing could render bodies mute. Forcibly separating children from their families would permanently silence young Aboriginal bodies by rupturing the chain of marking down the generations. Another tactic to reinforce the break was for the children's carers to condemn and ridicule marked 'pagan' bodies, drawing on their own cultural ideals of Christian, civilised bodies. Bodies unmarked in this way were acceptable for assimilation into the lower levels of colonial society. Bodies with no marks of Aboriginality at all, forged through ongoing intermarriage with colonists, offered an ultimate site for assimilation. However, abhorrence of race mixing and fears of inherited traits down the generations militated against this outcome. It was not until the 1930s that this briefly became official policy in some jurisdictions.

When it came to the already marked bodies of adults, civilising instruments like the lash scribbled new scars across old wounds and rendered former significations meaningless. Along with the new marks of civilisation wrought by diet, clothing, labour, institutionalisation, diseases such as smallpox and brutal systems of punishment and confinement, these scars branded Aboriginal people as belonging to the shadowy underbelly of colonial society. Their colonised bodies bore testimony to the violence of a civilising project that used the pain



of corporal punishment to discipline and imprint civilised habits (Cole and Haebich, 2007).

Early records from the colony of New South Wales document the horror of officials and missionaries who witnessed the mourning rituals of Aboriginal women who cut gaping wounds into their heads and bodies in their terrible outpourings of grief. They also objected to the unsightly scabs on the bodies of newly initiated boys and the smearing and decorating of bodies for ceremony and the ceremonial letting of blood. One missionary unsympathetically described the 'horrid figure' of the mother of a dead child with 'her face scratched till her temples and cheeks were nearly raw, six burns on each breast, her belly, thigh and legs also burned till she was a perfect cripple ... her head dreadfully plastered with mud or clay' (Mitchell, 2005: 225). Colonists saw these practices as cruel and primitive, evoking fears of an imagined chaotic savagery that lay outside the control and bounds of their civilised world. Those who had some understanding of their ritual significance recognised them as a tangible statement by Aboriginal parents of their continuing control over children's bodies. For missionaries and others involved in the civilising project the marks were in direct opposition to the new corporeal identities they sought to develop in their charges to instil self-surveillance, self-consciousness and shame. A smooth clean body was visible proof of the success of the civilising project in enforcing adherence to new techniques and standards of personal hygiene, grooming, and clothing which produced bodies suited to the patriarchal order of colonial society (Mitchell, 2005). In the long term the most effective strategy was to remove the children from the influence of their elders altogether, and immerse them in the beliefs and practices of colonial society, while at the same time endeavouring to change the adults. Mary Ellen Kelm describes a similar approach in British Columbia where efforts to stamp out body practices were centred on isolating Aboriginal children in residential schools, while missionaries also pressured adults to 'adopt imported clothing styles and non-indigenous housing and village design, and to desist from cranial shaping, tattooing, the use of the labret, and other Aboriginal corporeal practices' (1998: 174).

The Australian archives record varied responses to the combined onslaughts of disease, death and missionary interference through Christian conversions, shaming and ridicule, and efforts to win over Aboriginal children. For example, missionary Reverend L E Threlkeld noted in 1836 that Aborigines in the vicinity of his mission near Newcastle had stopped the practice of tooth evulsions and scarring was now rare. But in 1840 a missionary in the Wellington Valley recorded how he had reproved a young man for continuing the practice (Mitchell, 2005). Tom Petrie's (1993) reminiscences of colonial Brisbane in the 1830s suggest that outside the missions scarring through initiation and ritualised fights continued uninterrupted. Since Aboriginal voices are largely absent from the records their views can only be discerned with care. How do we interpret the comment by an early missionary in New South Wales that Aboriginal elders had deemed young men influenced by colonial

change to be unworthy of being marked? (Mitchell, 2005) Is this mission propaganda or an example of Aboriginal leaders negotiating colonial change? What do we make of Petrie's bizarre claim that his Aboriginal workers had asked him to cut his brand, which was a P in a circle, into their arms so that when they went to Brisbane 'everyone will know that we belong to you'? Overcoming his initial resistance Petrie carved the brand using a piece of glass into 25 arms whereupon the workers rubbed fine charcoal into the wounds and within a week they had healed leaving a 'splendid' raised mark (Petrie, 1993: 194).

### *Taming Aboriginal bodies*

For the civilising project skin provided a 'uniquely important locus for social and political activity' (Butler, 1990, cited in Vaughan, 1991: 12). As Elaine Scarry explains, 'what is remembered in the body is well-remembered' (1985: 108-9). The power of wounding the body was well understood by Australian colonists, familiar with the practice of breaking the human spirit and branding wrongdoers as outcasts at the end of a lash. It was a tragic irony that Western notions of savagery, difference and white superiority drove many to impart 'civilisation' to Aboriginal people in the same way. Indelible traces of the colonial lash, which was the preferred method for disciplining and reforming Aboriginal people, cut into surfaces already engraved with meaningful cultural signs. While there was no simple connection between pre-colonial methods of scarification and colonial discipline there was nevertheless a visual similarity in the marks left by both (Cole and Haebich, 2007). How did the layers of marks left by the lash interface with the socially inscribed meanings of traditional scarification? If traditional marks were carefully located in specific parts of the body did their lines and contours become scrambled by its scribbling? As work on cicatrisation, scarification and tattooing shows, permanent marks to the body are intrinsically linked to the social environment in which an individual receives them. What new lessons did the pain and scars of the colonial lash inscribe into Aboriginal bodies? Contemporary body marker and cultural historian John Rush contrasts the impact of maliciously inflicted pain and pain that is consented to as part of a social ritual:

Pain alters awareness; it is a focal point that turns us inward, into the psyche. A physical beating can profoundly change one's attitude, one's beliefs about 'self' and the world, and any marks left can be a continual reminder. With a malicious beating or torture it is difficult to predict the outcome. However, pain and/or punishment within a specific ritual process, and especially with the consent of the initiate, directs awareness so as to impart a specific symbol or cluster of symbols (for example, how people should think or behave), with an emphasis on or amplification of his or her relationship to the group and the spiritual world (2005: 178).

Page duBois writes that the 'infliction of pain through such practices as bodily torture is calculated to reduce opponents to pure materiality,

to the status of animals and is then used to justify their treatment on the grounds that this is their natural state' (1991: 39).

Despite missionary and official disdain for indigenous techniques of scarification most colonists believed that Aborigines could only learn 'through their skins', through harsh physical punishment. This reflected popular race theories that the black races generally, and Aboriginal people in particular, were 'nearer to the animal, to the savage, to the criminal' and had the 'character of children with the passions and strength of men' and should be treated accordingly (cited in Reynolds, 1997: 118-119). For colonists the scarred surfaces of Aboriginal bodies were visible proof of these theories. Tom Petrie recorded his amazement at the terrible wounds sustained by Aboriginal men in combat: they 'would stab and hack at each other, cutting great gashes in the shoulders and back or thighs of the opponent. They dared not cut the breast, nor indeed any front part of the body; if those looking on saw this done they would interfere immediately and kill the offender. ... They fought very fiercely, these men; some of the gashes were terrible' (1993: 47). He was equally astounded by their capacity to survive severe wounds that healed quickly, noting that 'a white man so doctored would not have lived' and the comments from an Aboriginal man slashed in a razor fight that 'the wound did not pain him much' (226-227). Yet he acknowledged in a side comment concerning the pain inflicted during initiation scarification, that the rituals were carried out in 'dull, damp weather if possible, the idea being that it would not hurt so much then' (48). In the early 1900s the Protector of Aborigines for Southern Queensland, Archibald Meston, claimed authoritatively that Aborigines 'had a much less highly developed nervous system [and felt] pain to a much less extent than we do', and therefore required 'strict and even harsh treatment' (Meston cited in Markus, 1999: 115). He advised that men who treated them humanely would never earn their respect. This perception reinforced colonial beliefs about savagery, race and white superiority that were projected onto Aboriginal bodies and that encouraged unremitting harsh discipline and correction throughout their lives.

Historian Ann McGrath (1993) has documented how the 'Otherness' projected onto Aborigines in this way shaped a discourse justifying the need for different formal punishments, and also justified the cruel treatment of Aboriginal people generally at the hands of settler colonists. What emerged in the colonies were separate discriminatory systems of criminal justice and punishment for Aboriginal people with their own specific laws, policies, practices, confinements and punishments that persisted into the twentieth century. In practice during the nineteenth century this meant regimes of corporal punishment (which was phased out for non-Aboriginal people over the century) inflicted in a summary fashion by local justices. The spirit of this ad hoc system was captured by a pastoralist's comment in 1884 that 'a sharp lesson, administered while their hands are yet red with the blood of our plucky fellow colonists will do more to ensure the future safety of the European than all ... the provisions of the law'

(cited in Markus, 1994: 53). Russell Hogg explains in his analysis of frontier penal practices that forms of disciplinary control deemed suitable for Aboriginal people were 'physical punishments that could be promptly administered. Measures of lesser severity, directness and immediacy – including imprisonment – were inappropriate, unintelligible to the "native" mentality and liable to be interpreted as weakness' (2001: 361). He goes on to suggest that the brutality of colonial punishment also ensured colonial order by preserving 'a sharp boundary between settler and native' that marked the 'cultural limits of membership of a civilised community and the entitlements of civic recognition, citizenship and rights ... It is a cultural and symbolic practice as much as a legal and political one' (361).

The colony of Western Australia provides a telling case study of colonial 'justice'. Treat them like 'naughty children', advised the West Australian Attorney-General in 1892, 'whip them ... give them a little stick when they really deserve it, and it does them a power of good' (cited in Finnane, 1997: 116). A pastoralist told a public meeting in 1883 that the whip 'only wiped the dust off a native. It should be remembered a native had a hide, not an ordinary skin like ordinary human beings' (cited in Markus, 1999: 78). Some colonists went further, claiming that violence and terror were the only way to control Aborigines' 'darkened minds' and that they had to be 'kept in a state of bodily dread' (cited in Markus, 1999: 51). In the climate of brutality and anxiety of frontier life this dangerous belief could push men to commit acts of extreme cruelty that bordered on madness.

While imprisonment replaced corporal punishment in sentencing for Aboriginal offenders in the other colonies, in Western Australia the incidence of whipping increased during the 1890s. The justice system there had from early times provided ample opportunity for corporal punishment of Aboriginal people both outside the law and through the courts. In remote settled areas and along the frontiers, white attitudes and codes of silence, as well as official indifference and a lack of opportunity to respond, ensured that acts of violence against Aborigines could continue virtually unchecked. The colony's system of summary justice gave local justices, usually prominent local residents who were rarely disinterested in the matters before them, the powers to carry this out through the courts. Aborigines who attacked settlers, killed stock, absconded from work or failed to comply with settler demands could expect swift harsh punishment. Initially colonial authorities had opposed colonists' demands for summary corporal punishment rather than imprisonment, claiming that it had little deterrent value.

The colony was unique in establishing a central Aboriginal prison on the Island of Rottnest off the Perth coast in 1841. However colonists insisted that punishment close to the time of the offence in a public spectacle would teach the whole group a sharp lesson in the power of the law. Finally in 1849 authorities gave in to argument that summary justice would prevent Aborigines languishing in jail without bail, and

stop colonists from taking matters into their own hands. As settlement moved north between 1859 and 1875 the range of penalties that could be imposed summarily for Aboriginal offenders increased. In 1883 flogging was abolished to bring the laws in line with those for non-Aboriginal offenders. However, in 1892 following the granting of responsible government and with pastoralists in control, the punishment of whipping was restored for Aboriginal male offenders and local justices were granted even greater punitive powers. This would ensure that settlement and economic development progressed unimpeded by Aboriginal resistance or absconding Aboriginal workers (Haebich, 2000: 1-4).

### Conclusion

This paper is a preliminary study of Aboriginal scarification and colonisation and forms part of a broader emerging project that addresses the cultural history of skin. Obviously, there is much more to be explored in the context of the colonial period. Preliminary research from the first decades of the twentieth century provides tantalising evidence of continuities and gradual shifts in discourse about Aboriginal corporeal surfaces that continued to influence policy and practice.

At the close of the nineteenth century the enterprise of scientific anthropology was adding new descriptions of Aboriginal scarification to whole clusters of traits that positioned Aboriginal people and cultures at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder. Convinced of Aborigines' imminent extinction, ethnologists busily collected detailed descriptions of how the marks were made and forwarded them to researchers in Britain and Europe, but provided no rational explanation for the practice. In Western Australia allegations of cruelty and slavery in the pastoral industry forced the government to begin to phase out corporal punishment of Aboriginal offenders incarcerated in mainstream prisons. The civilising project was also institutionalised within new government settlements and missions. Corporal punishment continued to be used as a method of discipline and control. Some government officers continued to believe in the distinctive racial features of Aboriginal skin. In 1911 the Protector of Aborigines for the Northern Territory, Herbert Basedow, drew on the view that Aboriginal skin had an 'abnormal' capacity for scarification when he proposed to the Minister for External Affairs a system for 'quick and easy identification' of his charges. He rejected tattooing or injecting paraffin under the skin, which were practices recently adopted in Germany to mark criminals, and proposed instead to draw on this 'natural property of the aboriginal's skin' to assign to each native his new 'mark of recognition'. 'A slight lesion of the superficial skin will be all that is necessary', Basedow explained. 'This can be done in an absolutely painless way and without disfigurement. The space occupied by the mark need not exceed one or two square inches and would be chosen in quite an inconspicuous position'. In concluding, he stated that without these identifying marks his work

would be 'very considerably handicapped if not impossible'. To Basedow's chagrin the Minister responded to his proposal with only a curt note of refusal (National Archives of Australia A1 1911/8705).

It was only in the 1930s that anthropologist Stanley Porteus challenged colonial perceptions of Aboriginal responses to pain on the basis of fieldwork conducted in central and northern Australia. After observing the process of scarification he concluded that there was 'no doubt of the severity of this practice of gashing the body to form "ornamental" scars' (1931: 122). He also asserted that although the 'habit of submitting themselves to what must be extreme torture' might suggest 'comparative insensitivity to pain' this was not a 'racial characteristic'. Rather, it was the product of the particular social environment. The 'readiness' to submit to the pain of ritual scarring, he claimed, was driven by the 'need of social approbation' and 'if hardihood is estimable, then the young man will go to extremes to gain that esteem. Similarly, since it is proper to mourn the dead, the women will go to undue lengths to conform to custom and will cut and gash themselves most terribly to mark their grief at the death of even a distant relative' (122).

At the same time colonial views on what constituted appropriate punishment of Aboriginal people survived even amongst senior government officers. This was evident in debate at the 1937 inaugural meeting of commonwealth and state authorities on the 'infliction of corporal punishment on natives', and whether special ordinances should be reintroduced to allow immediate whipping of Aborigines for some offences (Commonwealth of Australia, 1937: 35). In opening debate on corporal punishment the Acting Administrator for the Northern Territory, J. A. Carrodus, insisted that 'a native is capable of understanding the meaning of punishment given on the spot; and if it is given in the presence of other natives, and he is made to appear ridiculous, it is much more effective than putting him in gaol where he gets a taste of the white man's food and probably causes more trouble later' (35). The stumbling block to his argument was that neither the Covenant of the League of Nations or Australian federal legislation permitted the punishment of whipping. On the question of who should inflict corporal punishment South Australian public health specialist John Cleland advocated that it should be the right of the 'old men of the tribe, not white men' (35). Chief Protector A. O. Neville from Western Australia expressed his opposition to corporal punishment of tribal adults who were 'just as likely to misunderstand a whipping as detention in gaol', but agreed that 'minors living in settlements should be punishable' (35). From the Northern Territory Dr Cecil Cook warned that since 'natives' could tolerate 'excruciating agony ... without complaint' corporal punishment by a government officer would 'defeat its own object, in that, while not really hurting the offender, it may cause him to regard the white man with contempt, and himself as a hero' (35). Instead punishment should be designed to make 'the offender look ridiculous in the eyes of other natives'.

These preliminary findings point to rich new fields for historical research and theoretical analysis, as well as fresh perspectives on existing studies. For example, what were the resonances between debate on corporal punishment at the Commonwealth 1937 meeting and the endorsement in another session of the radical policy of assimilation that advocated the 'breeding out' of Aboriginal characteristics altogether as a solution to the seemingly intractable issue of race in Australia? Research extending our understanding of settler colonial discourses about the Aboriginal body and corporeal processes in the Australian context will also provide significant insights into the legacies for Aboriginal people into the present.

**Anna Haebich is a Research Professor at Griffith University. She is a multi-award winning historian who is known for her cross-disciplinary approaches to historical research.**

### **Note**

[1] Some material in this paper appeared in an earlier article. Cole, A and Haebich, A 2007, 'Corporeal colonialism and corporal punishment: a cross-cultural perspective on body modification', *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 17, Issue 3, September, pp. 293-311.

### **Bibliography**

Ahmed, S & Stacey, J (eds.) 2001, *Thinking through the skin*, Routledge, London.

Arnold, D 1993, *Colonizing the body: state medicine and epidemic disease in nineteenth-century India*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Benthien, C 2002, *Skin. On the cultural border between self and the world*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Biddle, J 2001, 'Skin as country in the Central Desert', in S Ahmed and J Stacey (eds.), *Thinking through the skin*, Routledge, London.

Bradley, J and Maxwell-Stewart, H 1997, 'Embodied explorations: investigating convict tattoos and the transportation system, in *Representing convicts: new perspectives on convict forced labour migration*, I Duffield and J Bradley (eds.), Leicester University Press, London, pp. 183-204.

Braun R 1979, *The Decorated Body*, Hutchinson, London.

Burke, T 1996, *Lifebuoy men, Lux women: commodification, consumption, and cleanliness in modern Zimbabwe*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Butler, J 1990, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, Routledge, New York.

Bynum, C 1991, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion*, Zone Books, New York.

Caplan, J (ed.) 2000, *Written on the body. The tattoo in European and American history*, Berg, London.

Cole, A and Haebich, A 2007, 'Corporeal colonialism and corporal punishment: a cross-cultural perspective on body modification', *Social Semiotics*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 293-311.

Commonwealth of Australia 1937, *Aboriginal welfare: report of initial conference of commonwealth and state Aboriginal authorities in Canberra 21-23 April 1937*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra.

Connor, S 2004, *The book of skin*, Reaktion Books, London.

Evans, R 1992, 'The *mogwi* take *mi-an-jin*. Race relations and the Moreton Bay penal settlement 1824-42', in *Brisbane: the Aboriginal presence 1824-1860*, R. Fisher (ed.), AEBIS Publishing, Brisbane, pp. 34-40.

Finnane, M 1997, *Punishment in Australian society*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Foucault, M 1977, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, Vintage Books, New York.

Foucault, M 1979, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, Penguin, Harmondsworth; Vintage Books, New York.

Finzsch, N 2005, 'It is scarcely possible to conceive that human beings could be so hideous and loathsome': discourses of genocide in eighteenth – and nineteenth century America and Australia', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 97-115.

Gell, A 1993, *Wrapping in images: tattooing in Polynesia*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Grosz, E 1994, *Volatile bodies: towards a corporeal feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.



Gribble, J B 1987 [1886], *Dark deeds in a sunny land or blacks and whites in North-west Australia*, UWA Press and IAAS, WACAE, Nedlands.

Guillaumin, C 1988, 'Race and nature the system of marks', *Feminist Issues*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 24-43.

Haebich, A 2000, 'A chronological list of legislation impacting on Aboriginal people in Western Australia 1841–1972', typescript.

Hogg, R 2001, 'Penality and modes of regulating indigenous peoples in Australia', *Punishment and Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp 355-379.

Huchet, B 1993 'Defining post-contact Aboriginal art regions' in *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol.1, pp. 48-54.

Jebb, M. A. 2007, Personal communication, Perth.

Kelm, ME1998, *Colonizing bodies: Aboriginal health and healing in British Columbia 1900-50*, USB Press, Vancouver.

Le Fur, Y 2001, 'How can one be Oceanian? The display of Polynesian 'cannibals' in France', *Body trade, captivity, cannibalism and colonialism in the Pacific*, in B Creed and J Hoorn (eds.), Pluto Press, Annandale, pp. 36-46

Markus, A 1994, *Australian race relations 1788-1993*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW.

McGrath, A 1993, 'Colonialism, crime and civilisation', in *Australian Cultural History* special issue: *Crimes and Trials*, D Walker, S Garton and J Horne (eds.), no. 12, pp. 100-114.

Mitchell, J 2005, 'Flesh, dreams and Spirit: Life on Aboriginal mission stations, 1825-1850', PhD, Australian National University, Canberra.

Morwood, M J 1987, 'The archaeology of social complexity in south-east Queensland', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, vol. 53, pp. 337-350.

Mosse, GL 1985, *Toward a final solution: a history of European racism*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

Petrie, CC 1993 [1904], *Tom Petrie's reminiscences of early Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

Porteus, S 1931, *The psychology of a primitive people: a study of the Australian aboriginal*, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport.

Reynolds, H 1997, *Frontier*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW.

Roth, WE 1910, 'Bulletin no. 15 - Decoration, deformation, clothing', *Records of the Australian Museum Sydney*, reprinted in MacIntyre, K. F. 1984, *The Queensland Aborigines, W E Roth Volume III*, Aboriginal Studies Series No. 4, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, Western Australia.

Rush, JA 2005, *Spiritual tattoo: a cultural history of tattooing, piercing, scarification, branding, and implants*, Frog, Ltd., Berkeley, California.

Ryan, S 1996, *The cartographic eye How explorers saw Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Scarry E 1985, *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York.

Stafford, BM 1991, *Imagining the unseen in enlightenment, art and medicine*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Thevoz, M 1984, *The illusions of reality: the painted body*, Rizzoli, New York.

Thomas, N 2003, *Discoveries: the voyages of Captain Cook*, Allen Lane, London.

Thomas, N, Cole, A & Douglas, B (eds.) 2005, *Tattoo Bodies, art and exchange in the Pacific and the West*, Reaktion Books, London.

Vaughan, M 1991, *Curing their ills: colonial power and African illness*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Watson, C 2003, *Piercing the ground Balgo women's image making and relationship to country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.

White, J 2005, 'Marks of transgression: the tattooing of Europeans in the Pacific Islands', in *Tattoo: bodies, art and exchange in the Pacific and the West*, N Thomas, A Cole, and B Douglas (eds.), Reaktion Books, UK, pp. 72-89.