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Fantasies of Forgetting Our Mother Tongue

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ABSTRACT: From Augustine's drive toward an imaginary time before speech to Marx's drive toward an imaginary time after speech as we know it, we learn that we are always already bound by our mother tongue. When Derrida turns to both Augustine and Marx to repeat the fantasy of escaping the mother tongue, he makes explicit the intertwined fantasy of escaping the mother's touch. I explore the theological and political underpinnings of twentieth-century psychoanalytic framings of *the touch of language upon our skin*, leading to Derrida's specific fantasy of *the lick of the mother tongue*.

KEYWORDS: Derrida, Augustine, language, touch, Mother

In the *Confessions*, Augustine speculates that before we are aware of language, we learn our mother tongue through our mother's touch. These early lessons in language are first taught through a gentle touch: the nipple of the mother in the mouth of the infant. Language is later reinforced by a violent touch: the schoolmaster's switch. Augustine suggests that any memory of a time before *the touch of language* is purely imaginary. Nevertheless, his autobiography attempts to return to a time before the touch of the mother, which, for Augustine, is at once the touch of the mother tongue.[1] Since our relationship to our own infancy is imaginary, our infancy neither properly belongs to our memory nor can it be properly forgotten or left behind.

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The fantasy of ourselves before language thus haunts us. As Augustine puts it, "Infancy did not leave me, for where could it go? And yet it no longer existed."[2]

Augustine confesses the personal fantasy of returning to an imaginary *time before* language. Marx later reiterates this desire as the communal fantasy of *a time to come* when we will forget our mother tongue. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx famously illustrates the vision of the revolution-to-come through the extended metaphor of forgetting one's mother tongue.[3] The fantasy of forgetting the mother tongue is the fantasy of rearticulating ourselves as individuals and as a society: the fantasy of self-expression in the creation of a new common tongue.[4] Yet, as Marx confesses, this fantasy of forgetting the tongue that determines us is a failed fantasy. Actual proletariat revolutions tend to interrupt themselves midsentence, resulting in glitches within the mother tongue, as Marx describes it, instances of scrambled syntax or stuttered speech.[5] We try to define ourselves in a single new utterance, but the mother tongue wraps itself around our ankles and pulls us back into itself. We find ourselves bound by the mother tongue, trapped between two imaginary temporalities: the time before and the time after the touch of language.[6]

From Augustine's drive toward an imaginary time before speech to Marx's drive toward an imaginary time after speech as we know it, we learn that we are always already bound by our mother tongue. In the late twentieth century, Derrida turns to both Augustine and Marx to repeat the fantasy of escaping the touch of the mother (tongue). Although his lectures on the *Specters of Marx* and his autobiography "Circumfession," both published in the early 1990s, don't explicitly speak to each other,[7] both works are possessed by the shared dream of a time before and after the mother tongue: a failed political fantasy, confessed also as an unrealized personal dream. My reflections on Augustine, Marx, and Derrida lead me to the claim that in order to sustain the dream of achieving self-expression beyond the mother tongue, one must sustain the fantasy of an imaginary time before the touch of language. An attempt to forget the violent touch of language must take the form of "remembering" a time before.[8] In Western philosophy, the fantasy of this time before our determination in language—a time before the violent touch of another—is often represented through the image of an original skin that was shed with one's infancy. The Platonic tradition of the "lost skin" becomes especially thematic

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in twentieth-century psychoanalytic framings of *the touch of language*, leading to Derrida's specific fantasy of *the lick of the mother tongue*.[9]

The formulation of the touch of language can already be found in Augustine, who reconstructs the memory of first becoming entrapped by what he identifies as "the bonds of [his] human tongue."[10] Augustine opens the *Confessions* by inviting God to enter him. The invitation prompts a series of questions: If I am able to call on the name of God it must already exist within me in some way. But when and how did God first enter me? And in what way does God continue to dwell in me?[11] Augustine is quick to mock the idea of the soul as a small room where God dwells in each of us.[12] He turns instead to consider the parents of his flesh and the flesh of his parents. As he meditates on being breastfed by his mother, he prays, "I couldn't have known it at the time, but you were crying out to me while I was at my mother's breast."[13] Augustine identifies the intermingling of his body with the body of the mother through her milk as being filled with God, more specifically the word of God.[14] The *Confessions* is a story about Augustine's struggle to access God outside of language. But each attempt to grasp God beyond the name of God leads him back to the body of his mother. Augustine rejects the traditional metaphor of God as the male lover: the bridegroom who penetrates the soul. The soul is not a vessel for God. The body is a vessel for the word. Logos is not represented by semen but by milk. The word of God is transmitted into the infant's body through the body of the mother—not the figure of the mother, not the metaphor of the mother—but through Monica's touch.

The questions, when did God first enter me and in what way does God exist in me, immediately become replaced by the question of language. Augustine conjures the impossible memory of the moment when language enters him: the first time gently, without his awareness, and thus without the possibility of his consent or resistance; the second time by force. The infant's desire is articulated in its first experience of skin-to-skin contact, in which the toucher and touched are indistinguishable. As the infant takes in nourishment from the mother's breast, it also takes in "the word." Augustine emphasizes that it is through this very same touch that we learn our mother tongue. While we are yet unaware of its existence, we absorb our mother tongue through the caress of the caregiver, through jokes exchanged between adults that submerge us in a bath of laughter, through the murmuring of words over our skin.[15]

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The child becomes further articulated by its first experience of a harsh touch at the hands of authority figures: a touch by which it passively becomes subject through the language of the other. Augustine's quest for God beyond language becomes a quest to grasp himself outside of the way society has articulated his desire. He reflects on the marks that were left on his back from when his teachers punished him for neglecting his language studies. For Augustine, language is something that is quite literally beaten into our skins:

> Having tamed my mouth, I learned to articulate my desires using these signs. In this way, I communicated to those around me . . . and plunged deeper into the stormy society of human life. . . . As a boy it was impressed upon me to obey those who punished me so that I might succeed in this world and excel in the arts of using my tongue to gain human honor and deceitful riches. Thus, I was sent to school to learn language although I was ignorant of the purpose of this education. And when I was slow in learning, I was beaten. This practice was approved by adults and many who came long before us.[16]

The second touch of language forcefully rearticulates our desire through our failed struggle to resist it. We are licked by the mother tongue as we are licked by a switch. And yet, Augustine also questions whether the first touch—the language that articulates our desire before we are conscious of it—is not another kind of violence.

Derrida's own autobiography lingers on this moment in Augustine, teasing out all the senses of being licked (by a switch, by a tongue, by fire):[17] "My tongue . . . the one that has always been running after me, turning circles around me, a circumference licking me with a flame and that I try in turn to circumvent, having never loved anything but the impossible."[18] In Derrida's engagement with Augustine, we find an indirect response to Marx: the revolutionary goal of shattering all that has been articulated fails, because our first tongue is licked upon our skin. We cannot forget the mother tongue without shedding our skin. Or to put this differently, even if we could displace one symbolic order in the creation of something completely new, our body would still retain the echo of our first touch. Perhaps this is also what Marx has in mind when he rejects the metaphor of critique as a surgeon's scalpel.[19] Lifting a graft of skin will not destroy the cancer. We must completely rip off our skin.

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The mother tongue envelops us like a skin. But is the touch of language only a metaphor or can it be treated literally as we find in Augustine? Can we make the stronger claim that the mother tongue is retained in our skin through our first experiences of touch? Derridaredirects Augustine's prayers to God toward the mother (tongue) and translator: "You knew me before I could know you." But Derrida's "twist" on the *Confessions* only reiterates the linguistic and haptic dimension within Augustine's original prayer. Language touches us before we are aware of its existence. The autobiographies of Augustine and Derrida are testimonies about how given names cling to our skin. Augustine's conversion to the God of Christianity is paralleled in Derrida's "de-conversion." Augustine is drawn into the faith of his mother; Derrida seemingly falls away from the Jewish faith of his mother. Both narratives are about a decisive turning point: a personal revolution in the creation of the new self, which is articulated by a new symbolic economy in the destruction of inherited economies. However, both narratives are equally about the failure to completely forget one's first tongue, the affects of which linger like a shiver over one's skin.

The two conversion narratives, like Marx's reflection on failed revolutions, speak to failed attempts to articulate a new self. The narratives are told from the point of view of the disjunction between our explicit declarations about who we are and what we stand for, and the persistent itch, tickle, sting or twitch of that which is first articulated on our skin. After his conversion, Augustine is touched in his dreams by women from his past life. After Derrida abandons his Jewish practice—what he calls his cut with Kippur—he is touched by the God of his childhood: not by the hand of God but by the word. As he sits by the bedside of his dying mother, he recalls his mother at his bedside when he was a young child: "Well I'm remembering God this morning, the name . . . as I heard it perhaps the first time, no doubt in my mother's mouth when she was praying, each time she saw me ill . . . I hear her say, 'thanks to God, thank you God,' when the temperature goes down, weeping in pronouncing your name."[20] The word 'God' enters the child when he is too young to comprehend its meaning. His mother leans over her feverish son who is barely aware of her touches and utterances over his body. Our skin absorbs and retains words even when we are barely conscious. The memory of God for Derrida, who often passes as an atheist, is a bodily sensation. For a moment, the bodily echo of the touch of that name upon his skin is as powerful as any profession of disbelief. As Derrida puts it, the first experience of words through

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the mother's touch is "the first event to write itself on my body . . . we have to learn to read without seeing."[21] Both the names that we are given and the names that are spoken over us inform the way we are touched. Our skin clings to the memory of these names. When we are older we try to rearticulate ourselves by claiming these words as our own or denouncing our given names. However, our skin replays the affects of the words that have been touched upon us. The affects may fade as we are retouched by new names, but our first touch and first names are not erased from our skin.

Derrida further mimics the double-touch of language with his second impossible memory of the first violent touch of the mother (tongue), which he represents through the event of his circumcision:

> that cutting of the surround . . . instituted by the mother, for her, the cruelty basically being hers, and sometimes the very act of cutting off [the] ring . . . even the remains would belong to the mother whom it is said that in the past, in my ancestors' country . . . had to eat the still bloody foreskin, I imagine by first sucking it, my first beloved cannibal, initiator at the sublime gate of fellatio.[22]

Derrida reconstructs the event of his own circumcision by self-consciously drawing on the history of the ritual naming ceremony that is accompanied by the cut. With the image of the mother sucking the severed skin off her son, an alliance is drawn between the mother tongue and the mother's touch, by which the infant is interpellated as subject.[23]

The fantasy of escaping the mother tongue, which haunts the history of philosophy, is developed in late twentieth-century psychoanalysis as the fantasy of a layer of skin that is untouched by language. The lost skin is the shadow of what appears in society as subject: that which both resists and conditions our determination in language. As Derrida lectures on Marx's specters, the ghost of his own autobiography takes the rather bizarre form of his severed foreskin. The missing foreskin, which Derrida admits he has never seen (but apparently often imagines), visits him as he contemplates his scarred sex. As odd as this narrative may seem, Derrida is not the first philosopher to situate his subjectivity against the background of a missing first skin. Didier Anzieu develops the fantasy—and a theory of the fantasy—in his 1974 essay on the skin-ego, which lays the foundation for his 1995 book by the same title. Anzieu speculates that the development of

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the ego relies on the construction of three skin-fantasies: (1) the fantasy of an originary "shared skin," a pre-linguistic gentle experience of touching in which touched and toucher are indistinguishable, (2) the fantasy of a secondary "skin-ego," representing what becomes perceived as the distinct boundaries that separate the self from the (m)other, (3) the fantasy of a cut that separates the infant from the caretaker, rending the shared-skin into two, producing the skin-ego.[24] The narrative of the development of the ego takes the form of a conversion story, which is always the narrative of an imagined cut by which one (imagined) layer of skin is shed for another. The model of the shared skin follows Freud who also speculates that the infant does not initially distinguish itself from the mother. For Freud, the ego develops through the infant's realization that the breast may be taken away from it by the mother. The desiring ego is formed through the erotic structure of longing for an object that can never be fully possessed. In contrast, Anzieu's skin-ego emerges through the infant's desire for a barrier. The experience of a painful touch or a lack of caring touch requires the infant to "use" its skin as a shield between itself and another. In the Freudian model, the ego emerges when the infant (figuratively) cries "mine!" identifying with the mother's breast that is taken from it. In Anzieu's model, the ego emerges when the infant cries "mine!" identifying with its own skin: the dividing barrier between itself and other. The possibility of being touched—as opposed to the fantasy of sharing skin—occurs only through the image of a first "violent" touch that divides, defines, and binds the self and (M)other.

For Anzieu, the skin-ego is not only prior to linguistic thought but a prerequisite for language. Although Anzieu marks the fantasy of the skin-ego as occurring before the infant has access to language, he also notes that the experience of a shared skin is already submerged in a bath of words. The skin-ego is the imagined container in which one later stores linguistic thought. However, the "pre-linguistic" skin-ego is itself already enveloped in "a skin of words": "a bath of speech surrounding the infant with people talking to it and it babbling back."[25] Anzieu positions his haptic emphasis of the skin-ego as opposed to the linguistic emphasis of Lacanian psychoanalysis.[26]However, we see that for Anzieu, words are already etched onto the skin through touch even before the child can understand or utilize speech. As he puts it, echoing Freud, "The skin-ego is the original parchment, which, like a palimpsest, preserves the crossed-out, overwritten drafts of an 'original' pre-verbal script made up of traces on the skin."[27]

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Touch and the touch of words continue to layer themselves upon our skin. We therefore long for a missing, untouched skin that we imagine was taken from us with our infancy. As Anzieu explains, we are marked by the loss of our imagined shared skin: an imagined traumatic event that nevertheless profoundly affects us and is necessary for the development of the speaking subject.

One year before Anzieu's formulation of a layer of shared skin that is "lost" with our infancy, Lacan introduced the figure of the lamella in his *Seminar XI*.[28] According to Lacan, we may imagine that when we leave the womb—in which we really do share our mother's skin—we shed a layer of our own skin with the placenta. "What if this *Thing* were to haunt us throughout our life?" he asks. "What if the abandoned skin grew legs and reattached itself to us while we were sleeping, smothering our faces?"[29] Lacan's lamella places the first touch of langue—the first cut of the mother tongue into our skin—at the site of birth. Lyotard offers his own version of pre-linguistic skin in what he refers to as preordained skin in his 1991 essay on Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. In Lyotard's formulation, the law (logos) is jealous of our skin that is "before" its order. In theory, there is a moment when our skin is untouched by logos. In other words, the skin is "initially" oblivious of logos. The skin cannot be held accountable to the law that has not yet touched it. To make itself known, the law inscribes itself onto the skin through violence.

When Derrida steps into the tradition of imagining the first touch of the mother tongue, he also steps into the tradition of mourning, fantasizing, and fearing a layer of lost infantile skin. He recalls his own recurring dream of a

> fascinating Thing, calling for a violent and caressing loving and cruel manipulation [as I begin] to detach a patched-on skin, a second skin which seems to be mine without being mine . . . an extraterrestrial would no longer leave my desire at rest, would paralyze it too, hold it still between two contradictory movements, tear off the hedgehog to make it bleed to the point of orgasm and keep it protect it suck it along its erect fur.[30]

Like Pennywise the Dancing Clown, the shape of the original skin fluctuates between the object of fantasy and object of horror. At times Derrida mimics Lacan, imagining a lamella: a first skin that reattaches itself to his

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face. At times the fantasmatic skin takes the shape of the deflated fetus of his brother who died at birth.[31] At times it even takes the shape of an infant's shriveled foreskin.

Drawing on Augustine and Derrida on the topic of touch and language, I have argued that although the bond of the mother tongue is inescapable, the very real grip of words upon our skin is enveloped by a number of fantasies: the fantasy of *the Mother*, of a cut with the Mother by the Mother, which separates us from an original shared skin and binds us to the Mother tongue; the fantasy of self-articulation in the death of the Mother. The twentieth-century psychoanalytic formulation of a lost original skin continues to employ a temporal structure found in Augustine. This is especially apparent in the revelation that the "time before" the touch of language is not a literal period in one's chronological narrative. The very real inscription of language on our skin is framed as occurring between two imaginary temporalities: the time "before" and the time "after" language. The touch of language is grasped through the myth of not one but two conversion narratives: the tale of two symbolic cuts. The imaginary space before language requires the myth of a first cut: the invented memory of the first time we are simultaneously separated from, violated by, and overpowered by the mother's touch/tongue. The imaginary space after language (as we know it) also requires a cut: the revolutionary vision of the death of the mother (tongue), and the death of the self that is fully articulated by the mother tongue. The fantasy of forgetting the mother tongue is joined by the fantasy of ripping off our contaminated skin. The fantasy of ripping off our contaminated skin to expose an untouched layer circles back into the fantasy-nightmare of our original severed skin—the shriveled remains of a foreskin—coming back to reattach itself. The desire and the terror of being beyond recognition (which is to say, beyond and before the recognition of the Mother) is represented both in the fantasy-nightmare of ripping off the skin and in the fantasy-nightmare of an imaginary first skin that reattaches itself. The two imaginary temporalities—Augustine's *before* and Marx's *after*—circle back onto each other. In the disorientation of desire, it becomes impossible to distinguish which cut marks the beginning of the subject as we know it and which cut marks the end.[32]

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NOTES

1. The concept of "the mother tongue" [*moder tonge*] emerges in the thirteenth century in reference to the Holy Mother. Yet, Augustine already directly connects the figure of the mother with the tongue of his society.

Die Muttersprache is a direct theme for Marx who employs the term both in reference to the general concept and in reference to German in particular. The proletariat must articulate themselves in a tongue that overwrites them from the beginning. To give testimony to oneself is to confess oneself as nothing. In voicing this negativity, the proletariat is the internal disturbance within the German language itself. A true revolution must be born from this paradox and must aim "to annihilate the chains of our tongue"—a phrase I borrow, not from Marx, but Augustine: *rumpere nodos linguae meae. Conf.* I.ix.14.

La langue maternelle likewise becomes a main concept of critique for Derrida, who highlights the paradox of being a French speaking Algerian Jew (Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre: ou la prothèse d'origine*). Although "Circumfession" (1990; 1993) does not directly engage the phrase "mother tongue," the motif of the mother's tongue—as the site of touch and language—the tongue as the touching of touch and language—is repeated throughout the text, especially in connection to given names and first words.

All three thinkers critique the real violence that is permitted not only through the power structures embedded in the concept of the mother tongue but also by their native languages in particular. Nevertheless, all three thinkers cannot, as each openly confesses, escape the logic of the tongue in which they express their thought and have their being. In Derrida's words, "j'y reste et je l'habite. Il m'habite" (Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre,* 13).

2. Augustine, *Conf.* I.viii.13; my translation.

3. On the image of failed revolutions as translating new ideas back into the mother tongue, see Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, 115; on the vision of a revolution that will draw its poetry from the future, see ibid., 117.

4. Many movements that seek to radically reconstruct a stage of history take Marx's metaphor quite literally. In order to reshape the character of a nation or group, for example, the people must learn to articulate themselves and their desire in a new tongue. The foreign tongue of an oppressor is given as one's only mother tongue. The mother tongue is not one's own, is not even one's mother's own (Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*). The prayer that Derrida's mother speaks over his body is not in Hebrew but French (Derrida, "Circumfession," 23.120).

5. Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, 118–20.

6. In a companion piece to this article, "The Lick of the Mother Tongue: Derrida, Augustine and Marx on the Touch of Language," I elaborate on Marx's philosophy of the mother tongue (Aumiller, "The Lick of the Mother Tongue").

7. Derrida 1993; 1990.

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8. Before and after mirror each other. Forgetting/escaping/deconstructing/shattering and remembering/returning/retrieving/restoring are the same fantasy placed in different temporal directions or regions—temporal imaginaries. It is not until we experience the violent touch of language against our body that we begin to become aware *that* we are interpellated as subjects by touch. Often a violent touch carries with it a name whether this name is spoken or not. It is the name that makes the violence replay itself on our body. When we are violated, we begin to search (through our memory) for the first touch of language and thus a time when we were pure, still undetermined by the hand, by the word of the other. If we can remember a time before, then there is a possibility of an escape (of healing) in the future.

9. Plato, *Symposium* 189c–193e (the myth of the origin of the human being in the cut); *Theatetus* (the motif of the stillborn; twin birth; phantom birth). I write about the theme of Plato's original skins in Aumiller, "The Aborted Object of Comedy."

10. *Confessions* I.ix.14.

11. *Confessions* I.i.1.

12. *Confessions,* I.v.6.

13. *Confessions,* I.xi.7; my translation.

14. Augustine's analysis of the infant's pleasure during breastfeeding (a reference to Psalm 22:9) is echoed in Freud's analysis of the oral phase that he connects not only to the pleasure of sucking but the sensation of being filled. I was directed to the theme of breast milk in Augustine's philosophy and sermons by the work of Patricia Grosse (Grosse, "Love and the Patriarch").

15. *Confessions,* I.xiv.23.

16. *Confessions,* I.viii.13–ix.14; my translation: (1) tamed [*edomito*], also to dominate, (2) stormy [*procellosam*] also boisterous, (3) the arts of using my tongue [*linguosis artibus*], I copy Chadwick here.

17. Turning to Nietzsche, we may add lightning: "Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue?" (Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra,* 5).

18. Derrida, "Circumfession," 1.3. As Derrida admits to first falling in love with the *Confessions* in French translation, I also first fell in love with "Circumfession" in my mother tongue through Bennington's translation, which I would not wish to alter.

19. Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie," 380.

20. Derrida, "Circumfession," 23.117–18.

21. Derrida, "Circumfession," 23.120.

22. Derrida, "Circumfession," 13.65–66.

23. The image of the nipple of the mother in the mouth of the infant is inverted in the image of the infant's penis in the mouth of the mother. Touch interpellates both the one who is touched and the toucher. The mother's touch calls her up into the role of Mother.

24. Anzieu is sometimes praised for advancing the science of child development beyond the Freudian emphasis on the phallus. However, we may also question

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whether the narrative of a cut with the mother by the mother (tongue) is not another reiteration of the fantasy-horror story of castration.

25. Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau*, 231; my translation.
26. Anzieu, "Contre Lacan."
27. Freud, "Notiz über den 'Wunderblock'"; Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau*, 128; my translation.
28. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, 220–23.
29. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, 221.
30. Derrida, "Circumfession," 44.234–35.
31. Derrida, "Circumfession," 27.139, 52.278.
32. Donna Haraway argues in reference to Marx and poststructuralism that the dream of a common language to come is at once the dream of a shared experience "before" our individuation (and alienation) in language: "the myth of an original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate" (Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," 292).

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