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**Reconsidering Nancy Fraser: Back to the Future 1997-2024**

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**Abstract**

In her accomplished work *Justice Interruptus* (1997), feminist theorist Nancy Fraser identified a critically significant change in the grammar of what she termed ‘political claims making’. Representative of a paradigmatic shift, which, fast forward to the contemporary, now epitomises the arguably superlative triumph of the cultural. Indeed, viewed from our present-day perception of events, the cultural call for recognition has far surpassed the social demand for material justice. The discernibly recognised politics of hyper-visibility has dialogically resulted in the suppression of the social dimension of egalitarian redistribution. Accordingly, the acute insight and farsighted appraisal of both the cultural and social realms - appreciated in the context of her time of writing - were protean developments in these crucial organising domains. The paradigmatic emphasis of the cultural has resulted in the structuring of culturally-defined effects that have reverberated throughout society, acting as determinants impacting the realisation of egalitarian material social justice. Substantive for the lives of selected societal groups in particular, notwithstanding the visible relocating of these groups from the plural margins to the centre.

In this paper, I return to reconsider the arguments of Fraser and investigate to what extent her brilliance in capturing a transformative moment still affords relevance and applicability. This paper provides explicit foreground of how - absent of Fraser being in possession of an omniscient crystal ball - her work foresaw the current climate so vividly and presciently, from an altogether differing perspective of the pre-Millennium period. This paper provides a close reading and retrospective of the central concerns elaborated and mounted in her 1997 publication, reconsidered against what we now recognise as economic maldistribution. Consideration is then given to ongoing concerns about digital-representational politics and the mobilisation of selected ‘skin types’ to resonate meaning. Resonant as part of a systemic meaning-making commodification practice, demanded by late-stage capitalism. In so doing, this paper illustrates the importance of re-engaging the work of Fraser to provide sufficient progression to critically explore where we are currently, in dialogue with increasingly pressing questions of social justice.

**Keywords**: Economics, Nancy Fraser, Neoliberalism, Skin Politics

**Introduction**

In this paper I argue how, in her published book *Justice Interruptus* (1997), philosopher and feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser, identified a fundamentally meaningful transformation in the grammar of what she termed ‘political claims making’. Fraser provided an account at length, elaborating a substantive and yet undertheorised and insufficiently unpacked shift, deterministic for both cultural and social structuring aspects of contemporary society. The work seeks to unpack changes which themselves were formed from earlier broad-based political movements having taken place trans-continentally, dating to the late 1970s and early 1980s. The rigorous philosophical articulation raised in the publication was informed via a long lineage of feminist criticism, notably the contradictions and permeations of justice worked through the public sphere (Fraser, 1985). Correlating volumes of related critical work having been undertaken by her and collaborators in subsequent years (Fraser, & Nicholson, 1989; Fraser, 1994). Fraser’s interlocution compellingly built upon polemics and movements from prior periods, explored circumspective in her earlier essays, which were critically concerned with ‘need-interpretation’ as a function of society (Fraser, 1987; Fraser, 1989). Her analytical force compellingly fusing critical cultural analysis with non-rhizomic political-economy, these two domains of empirical knowledge and practice being central to her overall criticism of socio-cultural/socioeconomic life (Fraser, 2008). Initially much of this work was conducted through the lens of feminism, later moving to encompass adjoining practices of marginalisation. Affording substantive consideration for supplementary groups affected by marginalising structuration practice and concomitant limits to democracy. This earlier interrogative work framed to engage a broad conceptualisation of a Habermasian reading of the public sphere (Fraser, 1985; Calhoun, 1993; Fraser, 1993).

For Fraser, the starting point for her nuanced criticism of justice was elaborated to produce a working schema critical apparatus. Applied subsequently to the analysis of the events of 1989, which she argued, invoked the delegitimation of socialism (Fraser, 1997), analytically conceived as the removal of viable grand political alternatives (Gilbert, & Williams, 2022). This seminal event initiated a pivotal political moment by means of socio-cultural reverberations, which this paper seeks to argue continues to inform the structuring logics of our contemporary moment. The events of the period are not just representative of a denotative collapse in institutions, further, the dissolution was coupled to the connotative belief in the idea of socialism, permeating across geographies to encompass attendant spheres of pan-wide Left politics (Khan, 1991; Gordon, 1993; Hill, 2005). Fostering a crisis in the West of the ‘utopian vision’ of such politics, eschewing a systemic crisis for any viable alternative to the prevailing order of economic arrangements (Fraser, 1997). There are several standpoints that could be taken and further explored when reading and retrospectively examining what is now a historical moment in world affairs. The majority of which adopt a political (see, Courtois, *et al*., 1999), economic (see, Mccauley, 2007) or exhibit a stable combination of the two, advocating a political-economic reading (see, Bunce, 1999). However, a panoply of alternative interpretations are in abundance, their pedagogies, fields, and knowledge epistemics apex in that inflection point of paradigmatic institutional collapse (see, Kalashnikov, 2012).

In her work, Fraser (1997) advocates a less rigidly empiricist position, thereby drawing attention to the ancillary implications of the changes that the collapse of 1989 brought about. Deftly applying a reframing technique to extend the vocabulary of this event. Thus, enabling an exploration of concomitant shifts to socio-cultural/socioeconomic ‘grammar’ of societies in the West. As praxis, Fraser (1997) characterises this event as a critical shift from the socialist political imaginary, with its protean concerns for the redistribution of the economic, to the question of recognition, re-envisioned as the *a priori* structuring factor of social justice. The events of this period are reworked and reconceptualised as a binary split, occupying two ends of a codified formal spectrum. At the anterior end resides class, encompassing its concerns with socioeconomic interests, ‘exploitation’ and ‘material maldistribution’ as substantive for the realisation of justice. For the posterior aspect, resides questions of recognition, concerned with ‘groups’, ‘communities’, their visibility and cultural acknowledgment politics which occupy the other end of this conceptual spectrum.

In continuance, the functionalist locating of justice along a linear dialogic, ensuing the ‘decoupling of cultural politics from social politics’ is foregrounded to be of critical import (Fraser, 1997: 2). Substantively, this is the crux of her considered argument, the rise of the cultural counterbalanced by the dialogic, mechanistic suppression of the social dimension of justice. For Fraser (1997), the now historical political dimension informing this new conjectural position is key to comprehending its genesis, for it is this new position which has consequences for society and ultimately, justice. It being formative in rendering a binary choice offered to society, the cultural *versus* the social, which has led to the suppression of the social/socioeconomic aspect of justice. Fraser (1997: 3) vehemently critiques this binary either/or choice of the cultural and the social, characterising it a ‘false anthesis’ that neglects justice along three identified utilitarian and epistemic points. Constrained by the scope of this paper, of the three of her ‘tasks’ as she admonishes them, I intend to explore her notion of how the cultural and the social ‘both work together to produce injustices’ (Fraser, 1997: 3). In this respect, critical theorists like Fraser provide a viable diagnostic scope to comprehend, analyse and engage with why, despite the movement of time and the growth of epistemic societal engagement in questions of injustice, the interruption of justice persists.

**Socioeconomic & Culturalist Perspectives: Leading to Where?**

In continuance, for the purposes of this paper, I have selected to concentrate on the notional structuring aspects identified by Fraser (1997), that I seek to argue are of acute resonance, implicit in constructing the contemporary period. In so doing, interrogating formative distinctions between culture and the economy to explicate how both domains of society work in synchronicity to perpetuate injustice at conjoined mutually informing practices. Further, considered as causative functions, both enabling and perpetuating the rendering of the cultural from the social, characterised by Fraser as the postsocialist condition (Fraser, 1997). To restate, in this reading, particular sets of circumstances stemmed largely from the 1989 inflection point, decoupled the cultural concern of recognition from the social concern of redistribution (Fraser, 1997). Compellingly argued as a decentring of claims for equality - dependent upon the redistribution of material - and the wholesale replacement of such claims by the *performance of equality*. The latter, manifested and distributed in the form of cultural recognition, scaffolded by an advancement of the politics that underpin it, nurture and define it. This paper argues and adds to this critical reworking to assert that the performance of equality provides a metaphorical conceptual blocking mechanism, preventing the interrogation of the social component of justice. Further, the performance of equality through the culturalist lens acts as a protective discursive ward, inhibiting criticism of the prevailing social sets of arrangements, the overall social order is left intact and unhindered. Thereby, leading to a dialogically informed and politically progressed abeyance of justice, away from those in need of its remedial balancing effects.

Intimately aligned to the concerns of justice is the primacy of the rhetorical dogma of neoliberalism within society, which is operative as a structuring trilogic specific set of arrangements. Although notoriously difficult to comprehensively define, critical theorists working in the political domain outline it as ‘a configuration of ideological narratives, governmental techniques, technological adaptations and organisational procedures’ (Gilbert, & Williams, 2022: xi). Which coalesce to combine and hegemonically inform the cultural, economic and politico-social dimensions of contemporary life (Gilbert, & Williams, 2022). This informing logic working from the macro concerns of (in the main) economics, to the micro determinate concerns of the social and the cultural. Indeed, the critique expounded in *Justice Interruptus* encapsulates the various differing interpretations of significance: area of operation, tri-structuring applicability and meaning attached to liberalism and its companion offshoot neoliberalism. Fraser (1993: 119), asserts, ‘Liberal…theory assumes that it is possible to organize a democratic form of political life on the basis of socioeconomic and sociosexual structures that generate…inequalities’. Indeed, inequalities are manifestations of the rendering and decoupling of the cultural from the social. Resulting in the proliferation of a societal-wide cultural politics of recognition, which is increasingly evidential at this stage in late capitalism (Dunstan, *forthcoming*). Critically, she continues her positing assessment of the trilogic framing consequences:

It should be axiomatic that no…project…can simply jettison the commitment to social equality in favour of cultural difference. (Fraser, 1997: 4)

And yet, it could be argued, that this is precisely where society conceivably now resides. Considerably, two decades has elapsed from the Millennium, and over thirty years on the from the pivotal inflection point noted by Fraser in *Justice Interruptus*. In proceeding, as an aside, I would like to consider briefly these changes as attached to language, or more precisely the changing discourses attached to language as it is employed by those seeking remedial justice within neoliberal configured society.

Fraser (1997), wrote of the disparagement discourses surrounding the term ‘identity politics’, equating the vital work of feminism, anti-racism and anti-heterosexism in particular, to an encoded derogatory synonym of the expressed need for, and work towards, justice. Viewed from our contemporary moment, these encoded disparagement discourses have further accelerated, morphed and progressed. Encroaching to encompass and subsume the modern variant of this need for justice onto the words ‘Woke’ and ‘Wokery’. Transforming these - equally vital calls of justice - into contemporaneous examples of disparaged and parodied nouns, attacked vehemently for their implied doctrinaire assumptions and for their opposition to injustice. These interrelated terms now connotatively denote extensions of the earlier disparaged identity politics. The social justice work embedded into such terms has been subsumed under a transformative process that generates divergent meaning, accumulative affective negative value as part of what has been termed as ‘economies of disgust’ (Ahmed, 2004: 92). In specificity, the words, terms and related phrases hitherto marshalled for positive change become disparaged as part of a wider societal ‘transfer of blame’ reemployed to accommodate the crumbling of institutions and low delivery of services within neoliberal society (Monbiot, & Hutchinson, 2024: 52).

Despite a pivotal inflection point having been identified, however, overarching questions remain, how and where did this rendering of the cultural from the social begin, and appropriately, why did this come to pass? Therefore, to cite a possible genesis perspective from the academe, longstanding debates concerning the relationship (continually contentious), between culture and political-economy provides a possible solution. A solution conceptualised against the Marxian base-superstructure framework, which fostered new critical methods for examining social life (see, Williams, 1981; Garnham, 1990; Golding, & Murdock, 2000; Murdock, & Golding, 2016). Stemmed in part from related and earlier debates, social theory came to substantively focus on cultural politics (cf. Goldberg, 1993), and the construction of identities (cf. Burr, 1995). However, critical engagement and theorising with its inherent concern for ideology, became - at some point in the intervening period - divorced and disassociated from the political-economic material justice aspect of the equation (Kilroy-Silk, 1972; Williams; 1981; Hennessy, 1999). Political theory approaches had noted this change quite early on and distinguished (what was then) the New Left’s ‘propagating…values...[with]…great emphasis placed upon culture’ (Kilroy-Silk, 1972: 315). In mitigation, the political-economic and the cultural are conjoined and intertwined, it being substantively difficult to separate them entirely (Hennessey, 1999). Furthermore, injustice has embedded into it a distributive and a recognition dimensionality aspect, which is linked at various junctures of this dynamic relationship (Fraser, 1997; Hennessy, 1999). This lineage of debates suggests an inevitability of action, inferring the road of the cultural - that is to say, the recognition aspect of justice was taken up by earlier critical theorists as an achievable component road. Thereby working its way through critical politico-theoretical discussion, to posit the cultural constituent centrally into society at large, offered as a more achievable route to a measure of justice. However, this historical genesis question remains simply conjecture, even within the extensive work of Fraser and is to remain so for this paper.

**Sliding Scale Schema: Spectrum Apparatus & Bivalent Logic**

Using the prior sections as a staging point, the proceeding intention is to test assertions and provide a more precise appreciation of Fraser’s arguments, elaborated via her schema, to accomplish testable relevance in our particular juncture period. Returning briefly to re-sketch out the schema, an unassuming logically based propositional mechanism offered by Fraser can be adopted. Imagine a simple set of scales, the mass balancing type, they symbolise justice, societal justice. On one side of the scale is the domain of the social: the economic and the redistributive. Occupying the other side of the scale is the cultural, the recognition aspect of justice. Or, consider a sliding scale spectrum - on one side demarcated is the material redistribution political-economy model, and at the opposite is the recognition culturalist model – intertwined, both are concerned with dimensions of justice.

Fraser’s initial elaboration of the schema is rhizomic and quintessential: people, groups, communities, and even difference itself can be traversed through it. The assumption being that the schema apparatus can discern what would need to be done vis-à-vis recognition or redistribution to achieve justice. Illustratively, class, gender, race, and sexuality are each in turn fed through the schema affording both fascinating and illuminating results (Fraser, 1997). However, I provide an expository of two examples here, class and sexuality, using these examples to describe the schema and its results. Class and sexuality provide contrast on differing sides of a conceptual spectrum, encompassing differing ‘collectivities’ as Fraser terms related sociological groupings. As two concepts, they prove instructive on what would be required along the path to justice. Indeed, collectivities whose existence is predicated upon the political-economic order - in contrast to the culturalist order - and who are affected by injustices, have their source of the injustices gestated to the economic determinants of that order. Therefore, the remedial source resides primarily within the realm of the socioeconomic. Conversely, collectivities who are predicated on the latter culturalist order, with its codes of culture, and who are also affected by injustices will have their causality of the injustices gestated from signifying (mis)recognition, leading to injustice (Fraser, 1997).

Therefore, continuing the thought/testing experiment, by first plugging class (as a bracketed simplified conception of it) into the model, the results are uncomplicated and simple to discern. The remedial measures required to achieve justice for those affected by exploitation due to the arrangements of class, would achieve a measure of satisfactory justice via the quintessentially redistributive mechanism of the schema. That is to say, a political-economic approach would need to be undertaken to work towards justice. Furthermore, recognition is not a substantive deterministic factor in questions of class. Conversely however, when plugging sexuality into the schema, the question becomes one of cultural misrecognition. The schema affords the ability to discern that differences of sexuality are uniformly stratified across class, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, race and so forth - sexuality, is not a function of class structure or of any other organising determinants. Therefore, the path to justice - for questions of sexuality - reside in the cultural component of the equation as semiotised assemblages of enunciation, not in the political-economic arena. Visibility within society is key to transforming discourses, thereby providing remedial relief from injustice when mapped to sexuality and distributive justice (Fraser, 1997).

Notwithstanding the above two examples, when questions of gender and race are plugged into the apparatus, the problem of locating justice becomes exponentially more complex. In order to work through this complexity, Fraser (1997: 16) has extended the conceptual vocabulary to offer the concept of ‘bivalent collectivities’ encompassing the politics of recognition *and* the politics of redistribution models offered. Provided in the schema, this bivalent concept is employed throughout her work enabling further clarity to comprehend why justice has indeed been interrupted for some collectivities and less so for others (Hennessy, 1999). Fraser draws upon the classical notion of bivalence (see, Michael, 2002) and its principle inference, to reapply it from philosophical logic to the application of the social and the cultural as consequential to the wider argument of justice. Bivalent collectivities, is the idea of a shared mutually informing cultural *and* socio-political-economic deterministic praxis, factoring into the achievement of justice. In this more complex qualification of the model, mutually joined redistributive and recognition aspects are cogent determinants that must be addressed *together* upon justice being realised for questions of gender and race, *sans* interrupted. This conjoined notion represents a crucial qualification for justice, set against this higher dimensionality of need - enduring multidimensional need. In presenting a number of challenges to theorists, this being the site where the genius of Fraser’s work, her schema, invigorates the field, engaging an extremely complex, enduring and protracted non-rhizomic problem (Ibrahim, 2015). Affording the generative potentiality to take forward and explicate the presence of cultural phenomena. Thus, providing a mechanism to discern and know why ineffable attempts to address a singular aspect of the bivalent dependent calls for justice remain unheeded.

**Attaching the Elusive Body: Exponential Recognition & Skin Politics**

There remain important practical concerns involved in taking the framework apparatus constructed by Fraser, when specifically applied to arguments elaborated in the bivalent conceptual construct. I seek to build upon the work of Fraser and continue her argument from 1997 to the present juncture of societal circumstances. Thereby, making the case for the cogency of her position in its regard to the separation/cleaving of the cultural and the social. This resultantly, having led to the contemporary hyper-visibility of the body and in particular skin. With deliberative, highly selective pigmentations[[1]](#footnote-1) of skin being mass communicated as a perturbable logical extension of the culturalist project. The culturalist aspect of skin is to be addressed in the proceeding sections. The present configuration of where society is now, being a key problematic pivot, a logical progression of what was analytically theorised by Fraser, retaining to the polemical deconstruction of 1970s socialism, as tentatively and circumspectly observed by Kilroy-Silk (1972).

In starting with the body, the culturalist politics of recognition places the body as the site of interpretation, thereby contextualising its corporality in a wider struggle for justice in placing society into the body (Schilling, 1993). Social theorists have postulated that the body - as an entity, is not considered ‘stable’ as we counterintuitively would imagine. Bodies are ‘open’ and defined by their ability to be amongst other things, they are thus affected (Blackman, 2012). Thus, placing the corporeal body in the context of materiality, logically territorialised as sociality, to denote:

Everyday life is…fundamentally about the production and reproduction of bodies. (Nettleton, & Watson, 1998: 2).

Previous studies have noted the various material and physical aspects of the body - spatiality placed amongst registers of experience, emphasising the body’s embodied communicative signification potentiality (Radley, 1995). Further, composed of mutual ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ workings, in this capacity, the body is shaped by social structures and by discourse (Radley, 1995). Thus shaped, the body is thereby situated as the causative source of ‘metaphors or natural symbols through which society marks significant differences’ (Radley, 1995: 3). As a consequence, in society, the body as a site of signification is thus monitored (Lash, & Urry, 1994), with monitoring and signifying processes extending to skin, the largest visually apparent aspect of the physical body (Turner, 1996; Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018; Lafrance, 2018).

Skin is substantive for its communicative signification potentiality - to a certain degree due to its total volume - when discursively employed as a vehicle for interpersonal communications (Chia, *et al.,* 2012). Notwithstanding its interpersonal dimensionality, skin also operates as a medium of communicability via its employment in mass communications (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Evidence suggests that skin occupies a delineation point of modern consumption, being an intrinsic feature of commodified mass communications goods and services (Falk, 1994), acutely resonant in media modes related to consumption (Lury, 2003). As a site of meaning, the marketplace employs skin in perturbable campaigns, not just for those who witness and/or consume the products, notionally extending to those who embody the skin through which the communication takes place (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). In this capacity, socio-cultural performative potentiality is also embodied upon it, rendering it charged with discursive significance (Radley, 1995; Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018).

However, as a totemic signifying system, skin is not simply confined to this exchange mechanism of capital. Further, it has been thrust into an urgent higher-order signifying paradigm of existential import for contemporary neoliberal society in late capitalism. Skin, as a vehicle to communicate, has taken on a vastly expanded meaning matrix in conjunction with the exponential rise of communications over the preceding decades (Reif, Miller, & Taddicken, 2023). Indeed, contemporary iterations of mass communications politics place a ‘premium’ on skin through the deliberative deployment and usage of its signifying qualities (Dunstan, *forthcoming*). Alongside skin, hair accompanies its materiality as an interplay bodily vehicle used to communicate, coupled often to particular physical adornments to and of the body (Lafrance, 2018). This extension of vehicular signifying communication to encompass hair and certain *types* of hair, accompanying certain *types* of skin - the scope of which reside outside the limits of this paper (see, Wilder, 2010).

In returning, the concern here is with skin, as a signifier, of not just products or goods and services in the ‘marketplace’ of consumer culture, but to consider the embodied latency of skin. The immutability of its surface, affording the commandeering of it as a signifying vehicle to communicate: connote inclusion and de-problematisation. Including its co-option to foster for society, via culturalist politics, the removal of society bound problematics. Skin is thus reworked as an appendage tool for use by both the creator of the marketplace offering being communicated and, for its deployment to wider society. In this latter capacity, skin embeds the signifying communication of a societal wide invocation of ‘justice’. Thus, it takes on the aforementioned higher-order communicative meaning beyond the body which forms it and to which it appears to be attached.[[2]](#footnote-2) Non-white skin, as a particular function of culturalist politics has become the prime vehicle of communicative potentiality at this current juncture (Saha, 2018; Saha, & van Lente, 2022). Harnessed, and employed spatially to communicate both in, and of itself in a neoliberal political framework. Communicating to the user, employer and disseminator of the skin a modality of application in the wider cultural aspect of society. Skin inhabits and is inhabited by this new cultural modality, its potency, discursively communicating far beyond its concomitant capacity as a material aspect of the body alone. Reiteratively, in summary of this section, skin is not simply a site of commodity distribution, it also functions to communicate the culturalist aspect of recognition politics. This is achieved at an increasingly exponential rate when measured against the vantage point of the critical interrogation of recognition politics discussed by Fraser from the perspective of 1997.

**The Failure of Fulfilment: Bivalent Justice Logic, Skin as Signifying Sign System**

The purpose of the proceeding sections is to discuss dimensions of the new fervent politics of recognition (Saha, 2018; Titley, 2019; Saha, & van Lente, 2022), specifically, how this politics intersects skin along two aspects. First, as skins ontological and explicative marker of difference, both constructed and employed in mass communications. Second, in so doing, to explore and highlight the inadequacy of the mass deployment of skin to provide redress to dominant stratifying assumptions. Conversely, such assumptions merely providing racialised homogeneity based upon the syncretism and commutability of skins embodied materiality. These two positions are adopted as postulates, which adjoin causally to Nancy Fraser’s critical concept, mapping to the logics of her 1997 schema. Furthermore, the following sections discusses how key aspects of the substantive and salient bivalent ‘litmus test’ - indicative of the fulfilment of justice - continues to be interrupted despite the exponential cultural deployment of skin and skin politics.

It is necessary to raise two points at this juncture prior to proceeding. First, aside from the biologically vital role that skin performs in covering the body to protect its inner workings, it functions also as a co-constitutive adjunct of the intersubjective self, being embedded in identity construction (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Second, briefly, in returning to the body as composite to include skin, Turner (1996: 232) notes the ability of the body to ‘exercise agency, but we do so in the context of massive structural constraints’, presenting a paradox. Importantly, the body as a composite of appendages, is cited in a paradoxical matrix which extends to skin.

In consideration of the above points, sociologists of the body and adjoined critical theorists have investigated the ability of skin to encourage a ‘recognition of differences, of hierarchies, and other clues to meaning in strategic communications’ (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018: 110). The reading of skin communicates a host of aspects of the being, including the revealing of ‘race’ (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Notwithstanding, dominant discursive communications invoking and deploying skin, reflect socio-cultural values about people and being, and are intimately tied to questions of value (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). In this instance, skin acts as a physical marker, affording the attachment of discourses - resonating meaning (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Furthermore, classifications are created and actualised mutually for and within society, based upon skin as a surface of the body, which semiologically communicates through the communicative system of signs. Thus, reducing the complexity of being human down to the level of the ‘epidermal schema’ which is essentially, the lessening of the human being to skin and the embedded pigmentation of it (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018: 105). Discourses and meaning, as attached to the skin of the body, therefore work to obscure the ‘inner’ human, the being enveloped behind their signifying presence. The underlying epidermal schema - in being the differences signalled by the ontological - intrinsic to the reading of skin, is a formative process which informs both the commodification and the representation of skin (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Deterministic for skins functionality in the socio-cultural imagining of society. This ontological functionality is vital to society, in its communication of (amongst other functions) justice. Concomitantly, the implied discourse of meritocracy, a permeation of the neoliberal political discourse operative within society works its way through the communicability of skin.

Representations of the skin, consisting of its vectors, planes and trajectories, often presents the viewer an alluring boundary understood by theorists as a communal, well utilised device in mass communicative depictions of the body encapsulated in skin (Mellor, & Schilling, 1997). However, this notion of the alluring boundary tends to collapse in terms of the aspect of allure, to simply present an intentionally deployed fixed boundary. The boundary thus created, fixes the skin, which presents the viewer a formal ‘Other’, dialogically positioning both the viewer and the depicted. The semiotic resource embedded in skin creates the ‘Other’, limiting the possibilities of deployment of resource, the pigmentation of the skin coexists simultaneously as both the *de facto* and the *de jour* purpose and being. Thus, fixed as a signifier, existing as a vehicle to communicate across limited vectors of the possible, being encoded and decoded by this framing (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Skin is thus rendered mere surface, devoid of the complexities of depth as would be inherently necessary for the full formation of the human being to be acknowledged, accorded, recognised and understood in its complexity of being. In fixing skin in time and space, the body is thus rendered fixed too, calling into question limits to its movement in space including its ability to attain redistributive justice.

**Communicating ‘Justice’ Through the Deployment of Skin**

Substantive work has been undertaken exploring the liminal zones of skin and the representational fetishization of certain skin types (Mercer, 1993). Particularly in relation to commodification and the exchange/capital needs of an economy, dependent upon consumer attention (Amariglio, & Callari, 1993; Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018). Indeed, mass communications, when employed in the service of markets and consumption is intimately connected to the encouragement of consumers to engage the goods and service through a given communication (Wernick, 1991).

However, the contention for this paper is that this process of deployment of certain skin types extends beyond the limitation of the market and the consumerist need to garner attention, expressed in the vernacular as the need to ‘grab eyeballs’ (Lury, 2003). Returning to reconsider Fraser, society itself now requires skin and, in particular, certain types of non-white skin, deployed as signifying epidermal schema. Driven to communicate tri-logically, to the consumer, the employer/deployer of the skin and most substantively, to society itself. Arguably utilitarian within a neoliberal socio-political environment, in which, ‘social disparities have become more visible’ (Moody-Ramirez, Byerly, Mishra, & Waisbord, 2023: 829). In this reworking, skin has migrated beyond the localised link to consumption and consumptive practice, with its concerns for emotional satisfaction, physical satisfaction, emotional and psychological potentialised fulfilment (Wernick, 1991). Indeed, skin and certain pigmentations of skin have transcended the once counter rewarding ‘cultural images valorizing whiteness’ (Hunter, 2007: 248). Higher-orders of use of the politics of skin is now in play at this present juncture in time. In moving from the stratifications of the consumerist body to be employed and deployed in wider questions of the culturalist. The culturalist operates at the societal level and this is where the communicability of skin in the later iteration of representational ‘justice’ is deployed as a vehicle to communicate and thus infer the meritocracy of society. Thus, skin, pigmented skin, is tasked to hide societal deficiencies and disparities. It now occupies a position akin to valorisation as it is employed/deployed to communicate *en masse* societal adherence to justice and its implicit/explicit coding of sans *interruptus* of justice.

**Conclusion**

The mass communications deployment of skin and, in particular, pigmented skin, offers into society the culturalist non-bivalent promised fulfilment of justice. Achieved via attributional performativity by way of mathematical frequency and its increased communicative deployment within society. Those depicted with the desired skin tones perform a role of standing in for the respective communicated simulacra of ‘racial identity’, performing a perceptual framing of identity that has been fixed. Bodies deployed through this modality ‘become their race’, simplified and objectified to communicate on a singular plane of complexity alone. Notwithstanding, the skin that ‘they are in’ and the bodies, enveloped by the skin, become vehicles to communicate along the culturalist mode of recognition politics and the attached aspect of recognition justice.

Returning to the logic of recognition politics acknowledged and appraised by Fraser many decades ago, it can be considered that her critique of how society is advancing, has been copiously fulfilled. The body enveloped in skin is reduced downwards to its epidermal schema, ripe for attaching discourses, codes, narratives and conventions. Invariably, those signifying apparatus attached to skin are regressive, limiting and circumscribing the ‘totality of their identities to their skin colour’ (Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2018: 125). Therefore, foreclosing the complexities of being to a totemic portentous system of signifiers - the vast majority of which are regressive and deeply problematical for the persons and communities that they come to represent and, in turn, are represented by them (see, van Dijk, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Malik, 2002; Titley, 2019; Saha, 2021; Saha, & van Lente, 2022). The quintessential logic here being: if the pigmented skin is deployed in greater and higher numbers, including with increased frequency, then a measure of mass communicated uninterrupted justice can be showcased to the society. A society which is politically configured to both create and have need of such mass communications of ‘justice’ which is deeply intertwined with the politics of recognition.

Resultantly, a void is therefore left to remain, despite the proliferation, urgency and insistence, the bivalent aspect of justice; with it politics of redistribution, is not addressed. There are two considerations of note here in this conclusion. First, potentially, there are implications for those skins and the bodies that inhabit them, which will call into question their deployment in the communication of justice (Dunstan, *forthcoming*). Second, and in finality, the enduringly complex work of the social - the redistribute component that must be addressed - an incumbent of the difficult and sacrifice laden work, entailed for us all, remains for society at this juncture *justice interruptus*.

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1. See the work of Margaret L. Hunter (2005) *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone.* Abingdon: Routledge, for a sociological and historical research-based contextualising of colour stratification. Worked through the hierarchies, ideologies and subsequent societal justifications predicated on the politics of skin. In this work, Hunter uncovers and frames this complex painful history to rework it through the experiences, social practices and feminist praxis of U.S. based women of colour. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I deliberately have used the words ‘appears to be attached’ to make aware the fact that a vast proportion of the mass communications that we engage with use fractals of bodies, which are Computer Generated Images (CGI). What appears to be embodied is actually enhanced, doctored, created, (re)formed and increasingly CGI generated. Posing a further ethical question, where does the body, the attached skin and the person from whom it presumably originates, begin and end in this lifecycle of production? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)