Anatomical Identity
Levels of Identity Attached to Preserved Human Remains

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When a human body part is removed and preserved after death, what kinds of identity remain attached to it? There are the extremes of complete anonymity and the named remains of a famous or infamous person, but there are many shades of gray in between. Is the specimen that of a known individual or recognizable only as a race and gender? What reason would someone have to designate the preservation of his remains and ensure that the narrative of his life stays permanently attached? Does a very personal part, like face or skin, commemorate the life of that particular body or can it still be used to represent universal human anatomy? The answers are in part determined by whether the donor wanted his or her identity associated with the specimen.

I examine the gradations of identity as represented by three museum objects in three different time periods. The first is the autobiography of a nineteenth-century criminal bound at his request in
his skin (at the Boston Athenaeum). The second is the facial portion of
a sectioned head from the early twentieth century (at the Mütter
Museum). And the third is a late twentieth-century plastinated body
shown holding his own skin (currently touring in the BodyWorlds III
exhibition). I compare these three examples to understand what
defines the gradations between identity and anonymity, and to explore
the notion of individuality as it relates to the deliberate preservation of
human remains. This includes analysis of the identity as offered by the
donor, as presented by the exhibitor, and as understood by the
viewer. I assess each of the objects in terms of the criteria I have
established: nominal identity, visual identity, individuality, intention,
physical immortality, symbolic immortality, and cultural identity. A
literature review draws out relevant themes within the theory and
history of human anatomy. I describe each specimen in a case study,
then interpret and analyse them individually. In the conclusion, I make
comparisons between them to evaluate the gradations of identity that
reside in anatomical specimens that survive an individual after death
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Untitled photograph by Anne Svenson (2002).
Two sagittal sections of the head, prepared for the Mutter Muacem
by Dr. Joseph P. Tunis (1866-1936), 1910 (www.blastbooks.com).

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# Table of Contents

Abstract iii
Acknowledgments iv
Table of contents vi
Introduction 1
Literature review 6

I
“**A logical if macabre enterprise**”
**Binding the identity to the anatomy**
Case study 21
Interpretation and analysis 23

II
“**Why do you tear me from myself?**”
**The Multiple Identities of the Plastinated Skin Man**
Case study 46
Interpretation and analysis 47

III
“**Sometimes the objects seem to be you**”
**Issues of Identity Raised by Anatomical Specimens**
Case study 72
Interpretation and analysis 73

Conclusion 86
Works cited 92
A book, a museum specimen, or an anatomical model? How best to keep identity attached to the flesh after life has fled? To choose to donate one’s body to be preserved as an authentic anatomical model may satisfy a desire to perpetuate the physique. As it was cultivated during life, so it will be after death if you choose to be plastinated, for instance. Anatomist Gunther von Hagens offers to use this method of plastic impregnation of the tissues to give the body an 800-year afterlife. With this earthly immortality comes little agency. Von Hagens determines whether you will survive in pieces and parts or as a full-body specimen. He will decide how much of the skin and other surface features will be retained and therefore how much individuality your corpse will display. And he will design and direct the positioning of your remains in an often athletic action with little regard for the activities in which you participated during life. Additionally, the pose may allude to an earlier anatomical illustration or model, further fracturing the single identity of the body donor. You will be valued for your physicality, not your personality. You will be anonymous to the millions
who gaze at your naked remains and the name in the captions of the publicity photos will be von Hagens’, not yours.

What about survival as a specimen in a museum vitrine? Perhaps you have a tattoo worth preserving. Maybe you have a physical anomaly that makes part of your anatomy of interest to doctors beyond a temporary posthumous career as a cadaver. It’s possible that part of your donated or unclaimed body is average enough to represent universal human anatomy or of a size and shape to demonstrate permanently a particular dissecting technique. Suppose some of your remains are retained as wet specimens. Unless you are Albert Einstein, your brain is just a brain. If your skull is not conjoined or hydrocephalic, it is merely an average example, distinguished only by age, race, and gender. Without a claim to fame during life, you will most likely be nameless in death. Your jar lined up with others to complete a visual array of an anatomical system—circulatory, neurological, digestive. Your tumor, your organ—even your face—known by the name of the doctor who preserved you. Your story edited down to a brief medical history.

Beyond funerary enshrinement (think Vladimir Lenin), how can the visible physical remains of a person and that person’s life story remain joined? Rather than leaving the preservation to a doctor, the skin could be turned over to a tanner. The leather could be worked into items useful or sentimental, but once the donor no longer exists in living memory, keepsakes become curiosities. Autobiographies become anecdotes. Individual history becomes detached and can no longer be documented. But if the preservation method were a document in itself? A body that becomes a book. Human hide has in fact been used to bind books for centuries. Doctors have used the skin of those who sought treatment to envelop cherished copies of classic texts by Vesalius, but the patients’ identities are often protected and we know them to this day only as “Mary L.” or “a victim
of consumption.” In a few cases, the skin of a criminal was harvested after his execution and used to bind his trial proceedings as part of his sentence. Thus survive the stories of William Corder, John Horwood, and others by name. These murderers’ identities live through the texts, but they live in infamy. The histories told within their bodily covers are criminal histories and they had no choice but to tell them. James Allen, on the other hand, dictated his own story (albeit that of a criminal) and designated his tanned skin as a cover. Bound in his own skin and told in his own words, the book that resulted from his deliberate act preserves the memory of a man, not a medical case or anatomical specimen. He is his own memoir.

Preliminary analysis revealed that James Allen’s posthumous identity was more secure than that of a medical specimen on a shelf, which often takes on the name of the preparator. These two examples seemed to represent the extremes: the well-documented identity of a specimen and its complete anonymity. The third example, that of a plastinate, introduces the idea of displaced identity—historical and allusional identities substituted for the original identity of the body donor. To assess these gradations, I analyze the three specimens in terms of several criteria:

**Symbolic immortality** This is the posterity of an individual after death and the symbolic equivalent of bearing a child in terms of leaving a lasting impression. Does the specimen function as intended and appropriately reflect the donor’s life? Does it have a wider symbolism and does that symbolism overshadow the individual presence of the object?

**Physical immortality** This is the successful preservation of the specimen. Is the specimen well-preserved, so as to maintain a long-term physical presence? Does it have continued social or historical value as a physical object?
Religious immortality This is a spiritual afterlife that is distinct (and unaffected) by the preservation of the remains. Does this mean of secular “life after death” complement a belief in religious immortality?

Intention This asks whether the preservation of the remains was deliberate on the part of the donor. Did the individual direct the preservation, as a general body donation or a specific bequest?

Visual identity This criterion questions whether the specimen has a recognizable humanity. Have the facial features been preserved? Is the individual recognizable by those who knew him or her in life?

Individuality and universality This criterion assesses whether the specimen serves as individual and unique or representative and universal. Is the personality of the donor evident or is the specimen intended to represent universal anatomy?

Nominal identity This is the association of a name with the specimen. Does the individual survive in name? And is that name attached to the object or has it been displaced by the name of the anatomist?

Literary-linguistic identity This alludes to what we know through analysis of the donor’s own words. Does the language used to describe the specimen reflect its preservation as an individual or a universal? Is the specimen accompanied by any text or anecdotes attributed to the donor?

Cultural identity This criterion sees the specimen in the context of its times. Is the specimen representative of the individual’s social and political self or does it allude to something that has a
competing history of its own? Do race, class, and other issues characterize the preservation of the individual specimen?

I use these criteria to analyze and interpret the specimens—a human-bound book, a plastinated body, and a preserved face—and their potential for retaining the original identity of the donor or for displacing that identity with that of the preparator or an anatomical allusion. I focus on several themes throughout the text, including the mutilation of the body that dissection necessarily entails, the importance of the human face and skin in conveying individuality, and the startling liveliness of anatomical specimens. With all of this in mind, I review the literature on the body, its parallels to the book, and the nature of its anatomical preservation. After analyzing each specimen in terms of the criteria, I compare them in the conclusion, and offer a synthesis and extrapolation that explains the way in which identity adheres to human anatomical specimens.
Plastinate known as the “Skin Man” in the BodyWorlds exhibition (www.bodyworlds.com).

**Plastinates**

Mary Bradbury and Mary Douglas lay the groundwork for scholarly thought about the body. Some lucid comments are made about anatomy and mortality by Ludmilla Jordanova and Deanna Petheridge. F. Gonzalez-Cruzz brings a consciousness to medical and museum specimens. Two intelligent scholars José van Dijck and Tony Walter write specifically about plastination and we have the words of plastinator Gunther von Hagens himself.

The closeness the viewer is allowed to plastinates physically is complemented by an emotional distance that bypasses traditional clinical detachment. The figures we see are friendly. Although they now have titles like sculptures, we know they once had names. We just aren’t told what they were. We set aside their identity—but not their humanity—so that we can see their anatomy. Von Hagens is always careful to leave a connection to the human, for example leaving enough of the surface features so that the contour—especially the face—is perceived as the outer body. Despite the fact that he “carves them up,” von Hagens does not want viewers to dwell on the dismantling of the body in front of them except as a means to view
its glorious interior. He uses aesthetic principles and active poses to invite curiosity and offset any repulsion. The craft in the presentation of plastinates leaves little room for horror or disgust because the viewer is drawn in by the spectacle. Visitors become completely immersed in the experience. In his article “Plastination for Display,” Tony Walter expresses amazement at the speed with which plastination is accepted by the majority of BodyWorlds visitors, particularly since the advertisements make it clear that plastinates are corpses. This acceptance may be due, in part, to the detachment of identity, allowing us to say to ourselves, “This is a man” instead of “This is John Smith.” It may be the difference between having the liberty to observe and being forced to confront our mortality (although the plastinates are visually forceful). In other words, we can remain at arm’s length because the plastinate is a stranger instead of a person about whom we know the details, but we are still close enough to shake hands.

The body has traditionally been a problematic object as we relate to it, and this includes visually. It is loaded with symbolism, not least of which is its (and our) mortality. As Ludmilla Jordanova writes in her essay “Happy Marriages”:

Bodies are dangerous terrain, not only because they suffer, endure pain, die and decay, but also because they are the medium through which all experience is apprehended. Everything that is most unsettling about human experience can be directly associated with bodies. Perhaps we should put it the other way round: everything to do with the body is potentially unsettling.

In the end, it is our society that impacts how the body is understood by medical professionals and laypersons alike. “The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived,” as Mary Douglas (69) so succinctly writes. It is the tension between self and society that allows the elaboration
of meanings,” she goes on to say (Douglas 97), and it is this tension that BodyWorlds provokes. The visitor arrives programmed with the idea of the body’s ambivalence as both temple of the soul and unclean site of bodily functions and desires. The body has been long understood to require control: “mind over matter.” But since the Renaissance, the body has moved from fleshy enemy to personal entity—to put it another way, our own bodies have become the individual centers of our world—and the asceticism that was carried out in the church is now carried out in the gym (Synnott 86, 90). It is with these thoughts (whether consciously or unconsciously) that the viewer of plastinates is imbued. And in addition, the thoughts are fluid: “The body means not only different things to different people, but it may also mean many things to the same person at different times or in different spheres” (Synnott 105). Plastinates are certainly catalysts.

The raw material for the plastinates is human remains, so they are obviously authentic. Questions about whether they are “real” center on the fact that their organic liquid contents have been replaced with plastic. So the debate is whether plastinates are true human bodies or models of bodies because of this substitution. Chemical preservation infuses and hardens soft tissue, in addition to enhancing its color. Tony Walter makes the comparison with funerary embalming, in which the injection of formaldehyde makes a corpse presentable, but no less a corpse than before: “The displayed whole body plastinates are aestheticized dead bodies, in the way that embalmed bodies in a funeral home are.” In her paper “BodyWorlds,” Jose van Dijck declines to go that far, making more of the process: “The plastinated cadaver is thus as much an organic artifact as it is the result of technological tooling.” The terminology chosen to describe plastinated bodies captures their authenticity, while at the same time assimilating their role as anatomical models, which are more often not real. Plastinates have been referred to as
“reconfigurations” rather than imitations. They are said to be dissected, preserved, and “recomposed.” Van Dijck calls those whose poses mimic earlier anatomical illustrations “reanimations of representations” (“BodyWorlds” 115). In his essay “Anatomy and Plastination” (28) in the exhibit catalog, Von Hagens explains that the root of his word “plastination” is from the Greek *plassein*, meaning to mold or form. The consensus is that plastinates are *modified* bodies, but bodies nonetheless.

Jordanova writes in “Happy Marriages” that anatomical preparations are more powerful symbolic figures than corpses or skeletons: “figures that are half skeleton and half flesh are—because they evoke the passage from life to death—even more forceful than the iconic skeletal *memento mori*.” The plastinates multiply this effect by remaining in a perpetual state of dissection. The plastinate can be skeletal, muscular—or both: one skeletal plastinate taps his own muscleman figure on the shoulder. The skeleton can be used to show how it structures and protects the organs. Or it can have some carefully carved meat on the bones, which von Hagens often does to create “windows” into various internal structures. If the plastinated bodies weren’t so artful, we would find them very troubling. Mary Bradbury explains: ‘Like the decomposing corpse, the disfigured body is confusing and threatening, human and yet not human” (125). Von Hagens mitigates this by offering anatomy that is less than objective. Because of this, he has been accused of stepping out of the bounds of science. His plastinates are—like cadavers—anonymous, but in clinical practice bodies do not have aesthetic qualities and von Hagens’ plastinates do. “The greater the artistic license in the poses, the less clinical the exhibits become, and the less legitimate they become, for some visitors,” reasons Tony Walter in “BodyWorlds.” And yet it is our inability to classify plastinates—their constant shifts within our defined categories—that make engaging with them
so profound. As Walters puts it, “Modernity generates both a medical depersonalising of the corpse, and a lay personalizing of the corpse” (“BodyWorlds” 466). Plastinates are lifelike dead, they are us and not us.

Portraying the dead human body as lively and making lifelike gestures through plastination follows an old anatomical tradition. While cadavers undergo reductive dissection that leaves them looking undoubtedly dead, representations of cadavers (in drawings, for instance) are depicted as living beings, often participating in their own dissection (Jones 436, Cregan 55). This convention was well-known by Michelangelo, who used it in the figure of St. Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel, a painting that is directly linked to von Hagens’ Skin Man, as I will show below. In her essay “Art and Anatomy,” Deanna Petheridge calls it one of the most persistent visual conventions in anatomical art. Other than curators arranging skeletons in dramatic poses, this tradition has been mainly confined to two-dimensional media, because of the limits of the medically-embalmed corpse. With the advent of plastination, a new level of dynamism of the dead (in terms of coloring, flexibility, etc.) has been achieved. And yet this, too, straddles two formerly distinct categories, because until now the scientific body has been represented by the dead body (Walter, “BodyWorlds” 465). Except that plastinates are not confined to science. The dissected body was once undoubtedly dead, but whole-body plastinated specimens break this mold completely. In “BodyWorlds,” Tony Walter points this out:

So, there is a contradiction: the exhibition shows the human body with clinical, impersonal, scientific detachment, yet at the same time breaks with twentieth-century anatomy not only in showing human remains to the public but in giving them spectacularly individual and playful identities (469).”
With their upright posture, dynamic form, and lifelike positioning, they appear to be alive, participating in the activities of the living. In the words of F. Gonzalez-Crussi in *Suspended Animation*, plastinates—like the cadavers in the classical anatomical illustrations—“forgot to play the role of death.” The lifelike illusion of motion attempts to neutralize thoughts of corpses and puts plastinates in a liminal state between life and death. In the media (“Skinless Wonders”), they have been called “necro-bodies,” in an attempt to describe their in-between status. Plastinates are obviously not living bodies, but neither do they fit well in the category of corpses and cadavers. So they are most often referred to as *bodies*, which doesn’t distinguish between living and dead.

“Dead bodies that do not smell do indeed force a shift in how we categorize the world,” points out Tony Walter (“BodyWorlds”), and concedes “BodyWorlds is hard to locate within any conventional history of display.” The exhibition forces visitors to rethink traditional categories. It is not completely objective (a straight anatomy display), but it is not wholly subjective either (it is in fact meant to instruct). Plastinates are art come to life, yet von Hagens (quoted in “Skinless Wonders”) insists, “What I do is not art, nor is it science. It reaches into artistry but the effect goes beyond education because feelings and emotions are involved.” In mentally processing plastinates, the viewer comes to the realization that they *are* what they *represent*. Instead of a generalized model being used to show human anatomy, a specific body is being used to represent the category that it is in. As Mary Bradbury (116) points out, in semiotic terms the body is both signifier (anatomy) and signified (a human’s anatomy). A plastinated body represents both individual anatomy and universal anatomy. Van Dijck (“BodyWorlds”) writes, “Von Hagens’ technique attempts to detach bodies from their living signifieds, yet they are inescapably infused with historical,
local, and cultural meanings.” She states (Van Dijck, “BodyWorlds” 121) that von Hagens’ exhibitions invite viewers “to engage in thanatological voyeurism along with narcissistic identification.” Plastinates can never be completely objective—can never be completely objects—because of the meanings the audience carries to them and because of the meanings—even if unknown—that they held when they were alive, when they were someone instead of anyone and had identity rather than symbolism.

**Book-body metaphor**

![Two anthropodermic books owned by the John Hay Library at Brown University (Lindsay Harrison, www.browndailyherald.com).](image)

We have always had an intimacy with books. Reading is a private shared experience between the body and the written word. Yet there is a historical phenomenon that takes that notion one step further: the binding of books in human skin. Anthropodermic books, as they are known, have been bound from the fourteenth century, and several examples still exist.¹ They fall into three categories: There are trial transcripts bound in the skin of executed felons as part of their punishment. There are what I call “literal translations,” such as medical treatises bound in the skin of cadavers, pornographic novels bound in female breasts, and anthropological works

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¹ Anthropodermic books are housed in the U.S. at the Boston Athenaeum, Brown University, Cleveland Public Library, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Harvard University, Library of Congress, Stanford University, University of California at Berkeley, U.C.L.A., and University of Memphis.
about race bound in African-American skin. And there are bindings designated by the owner of the skin in a bid for immortality. By virtue of the fact that body (in particular its tanned skin) and text both have overt and symbolic associations with death, anthropodermic bindings are a natural location to act out the desire to live past it.

To understand James Allen’s motivations—perhaps better than he did—requires exploring the relationship between textuality and corporeality. First there is the idea of personal representation within diaries and autobiography. By grafting his body onto his words, Allen secures his part in history and raises additional questions about embodiment and insciption. That the book is now a museum object brings up the issue of objectification, but also falls into the Romantic category of bodily keepsake, and defines Allen’s social presence after death. Allen succeeds in immortalizing himself because of the unique combination of tanning, which allows a bodily presence to this day, a unity between the cover and the content of the book, and the wealth of metaphor that lies between book and body.

Several books shed light on the idea of the conflation of the book and the body. Two scholars elucidate the religious origins of the metaphor. In his classic *The Hour of Our Death* (1982), Philippe Ariès discusses the medieval symbol of the book of life (“liber vitae”), in which a book represented the life of an individual whose soul was being assessed for entry into heaven. What was at first an account book of good versus evil became a weighing of the person’s thoughts, words, and deeds—a biography. A Renaissance fresco shows individual booklets “hanging like identification papers” from the necks of risen souls (Ariès 104-5). Francis Barker writes in *The Tremulous Private Body* (62) that Renaissance images of the Passion of Christ reinforced the idea of word becoming flesh, with depictions of the crucifixion asserting the materiality of the body. Corporeality was translated
into the “rarefied body of the text” (Barker 62) and remained in the texts as a vital, full materiality (25). The body is neither wholly present, nor wholly absent—it remains at the edge of visibility and, in Barker’s words, “troubles the space from which it has been banished” (Barker 63). The idea of flesh made word is exemplified in Rembrandt’s painting “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp,” in which three of the surgeons have their eyes focused not on the body, but on the text laid out next to it (Barker 68). The body has become the abstraction.

A reading of Roy Porter reveals some thoughts important to the preservation of human skin. In his essay “Bodies of Thought: Thoughts about the Body in Eighteenth-Century England” (86), he points to the realization during the Enlightenment that in the early history of the human race, people analogized everything in terms of the workings of the human body, thus the body was “good to think with.” In his book *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (126), Porter characterizes the body as a sort of “book jacket” for the soul: “Was not Locke then right? Bodies were contingent and even interchangeable appendages, rather like suits of clothes or disguises.” Without taking too literal an interpretation, binding his story in his own preserved body part, Allen’s anthropodermic bequest was defiant—making his body a book jacket that was not in fact interchangeable.

The idea of originality laid out in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), distinguishes the unique existence of an original from even the most perfect copy. From Benjamin’s thoughts, I extrapolate that the value of anthropodermic books is in their authenticity and irreproducibility. Just as each individual is unique, each artifact containing that human’s remains is one-of-a-kind, with a popular history and a provenance. The *inscription* (to use a term from semiotics) of anthropodermic books ensures their cult value, and the
autobiography contained within the covers in Allen’s case secures his story to his skin. The reproducibility enhanced by posting text and image of The Highwayman on the web does not belie the truth that the aura of the object resides in the original. Allen’s original volume secures his symbolic immortality and he lives through it, but not in the sense of a religious afterlife. In his essay in The Body as a Medium of Expression, John Broadbent (319) concludes that trying to live beyond the body leads to losing it: “If you try to become a god, you become two yards of skin.” In seeking posterity, Allen has left an object that is as much curiosity as commemoration.

In Bookmen’s Bedlam, Walter Hart Blumenthal relates the apocryphal story that James Allen left a note after one of his jailbreaks that he was “master of his own skin.” Few other instances of anthropodermic binding show as much agency on the part of the skin donor. A rare example is that of a tubercular French countess who directed through her doctor that the skin from her shoulders be delivered to astronomer Camille Flammarion as a tribute and used to bind a copy of his next book. The countess demanded anonymity, so her wish was carried out, but her identity was never revealed. The parting of a physical remnant from the associated identity parallels the concept of social death, as examined in Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity. The chapter “Bodies without selves” (Hallam 49) looks at the separation of physical body and self-identity as a person ages. The authors clarify, “…the body is no longer experienced as an authentic representation of the self.” I find this an interesting counterpoint to anthropodermic books in which a person (often named) has a social presence after death. In addition, in the case of those who chose to be memorialized in this way, they found binding in their own skin to be both authentic and representative.
The gruesome aspect of anthropodermically binding a book had an effect on those who took part, and those who chose it for themselves either intended it or felt that the end justified the means. Historian Lawrence S. Thompson quotes Flammarion’s response to the gift of the countess’s skin in the paper “Tanned Human Skin” in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Assoc.*:

It was a matter of carrying out a pious vow…. I remember I had to carry this relic to a tanner in the Rue de la Reine-Blanche, and three months were necessary for the job. Such an idea is assuredly bizarre. However, in point of fact, this fragment of a beautiful body is all that survives of it today and it can endure for centuries in a perfect state of respectful preservation.

As the quote from Mary Douglas’s “The Two Bodies” (69) reads, “The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived.” Douglas points out the continual exchange of meaning between the two kinds of bodies (self and society) and the way they mutually reinforce each other, the social body usually restricting the physical body. To extrapolate (perhaps farther than I should), if we think of anthropodermic books as physical bodies, their bequest as a memorial or manufacture as a keepsake has to be understood within the spirit and mores of the times in which they were created. Douglas (74) hypothesizes that “bodily control is an expression of social control.” The directive that Allen gave to his jailers was a way of exercising not only autonomy over his own incarcerated body but control over their actions as they carried out his wishes.

That he chose to be dissected on his way to becoming a book says something about Allen’s life and his times. In her defined history *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (1987), Ruth Richardson explains that medical dissection came to be associated with punishment because the bodies of executed felons were given over to the anatomists. Julia Kristeva’s abjection
theory, explained in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), sheds light on how we view anthropodermic binding through its associations with the corpse, from which the skin is harvested. She explains that the abject are those things that disturb order and identity, for which we have both a repulsion and fascination. The abject threatens to destroy life, and is therefore expelled, but also helps to define it. The corpse is the ultimate in abjection and, as one of the most basic forms of pollution, is usually excluded by ritual. In the case of human leather used to bind books, tanning removes the possibility of decay, forestalling the object's expulsion. The skin as the border between inside and outside the body has been preserved and bypasses abjection. Kristeva also explains that both art and religion purify the abject, and not only has Allen’s skin been handcrafted into an object, the narrative within is full of religious references—although it falls short of penitance.

Books are singular objects and their authors in a liminal state between life and death. Walter Ong (107) points out the paradoxical close association of writing with death. He references metaphors of books as “monuments” and “epitaphs.” He defines writing as “the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist.” If Allen had not arranged for the transcription of his spoken words, they would have died in the air. They may have been remembered and passed along by those present when they were uttered, but they would not have had the persistence of presence that their transcript continues to have. As Ong (107) makes clear, there is an irony in the fact that the book is simultaneously the death of the spoken word and the life of the written word:

> The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its
endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers.

In the case of “The Highwayman,” its rarity means a smaller physical readership, since the book is protected, but a limitless electronic audience, since the text and a photograph of the cover are available on the web. So, ironically, it is mechanization in the form of computerization that perpetuates Allen’s memory.

Michel Foucault (226) downplays the necessity of linking autobiography and immortality with material culture in our postmodern world:

Our culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, of writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: It is now a voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer’s very existence.

But in the case of the anthropodermic books of earlier centuries, the commissioners of the bindings—especially when they were designating the use of their own skin after death—were linking their immortality to the endurance of the written word in a very physical way. In the case of James Allen, the narrative and the cover that houses it are quite literally his own, before and after death. The fusion of his writing and his named body at death ensures the survival of his identity, a physical contrivance that prevents effacement of his individuality. His skin and his words live on and by merging the two, Allen proves himself to be more than the “ideological product” of the authors of today whom Foucault is addressing. In this way, anthropodermic binding can be a powerful, self-initiated form of secular immortality by playing on the parallels of book and body.
Sectioned Specimen

The primary source about the sectioned head is *Mütter Museum of the Physicians of Philadelphia*, which is where the head is curated. The book includes a small amount of factual information about this specimen, a large number of photographs, and the probing thoughts of long-time director of the museum, Gretchen Worden (now deceased). She was well aware of how emotionally forceful some of the specimens are, particularly those with faces, and writes (Worden 7):

In most museums you go to look at objects. In the Mütter Museum, sometimes the objects seem to be looking at you. And, sometimes, the objects seem to be you.

In the book’s art photographs, the sectioned heads sometimes look hyperreal, and other times look like masks. Worden makes the point that the specimens are received by viewers in very different ways, and that the photographers were no different. Some chose to use the isolation of the body part from the whole as a visual metaphor for the human condition. Others juxtaposed real/unreal or public/private. After twenty-five years at the Mütter Museum, Worden (8) says she looked at the objects with “the
curatorial detachment of long familiarity.” Looking at the collections through photographers’ eyes made her aware of their powerful emotional content.

I consulted *The Face* by Daniel McNeill and found some insights about the components of the face and what they say about the individual. Actually, it’s the other way around: how the face is received by the viewer. As McNeill (8) writes:

> Many mysteries of the face don’t lie in the face at all. They lie in the mind, in the ways we respond to the face, represent it, hide it, adorn it, and try to remake it.

In addition to noting the importance of the receivers’ perceptions, McNeill makes the point about how closely likeness and self are bound in our minds. Our face is the focus of our personality, the external mirror of our internal thoughts. Expression of our being is centered in our face. Conversely, a mask can be an instant persona, an easy and immediate disguise. So one of the issues, when looking at a face, is authenticity. The contradiction about the face is the liveliness that it shows, even in death. McNeill (342) writes, “Every face is alive with the self behind it.” But how much of that self is present when the face is not alive, but in a permanent state of suspended animation?
José van Dijck’s *The Transparent Body* helped make sense of the idea that slicing this head can now be achieved non-invasively with modern imaging technologies like CT-scans and MRIs. Van Dijck explains that transparency has been a constant ideal in Western medicine—that the secrets to life and health lay within the body, so it was probed prior to death and dissected afterward. She reminds readers of medical dissection’s ties to the poor and criminals, since anatomists were allowed to dissect the bodies of the indigent and executed felons. These negative associations, along with the taboo of mutilating the body, make non-invasive imaging or virtual dissection preferable. But van Dijck points out that virtual dissection, in which the cadaver is conceived in slices rather than pieces, must be compared to actual three-dimensional organs to be understood.

“[I]nterpreting cross-sections requires substantial experience,” she writes. As an example of virtual dissection, van Dijck points to the National Library of Medicine’s Digital Human Project in which the remains of a man and woman were sliced and digitized, and made available for adaptations. She points out that the female body donor remained anonymous, but the identity of the Visible Man—which van Dijck considers irrelevant, even harmful—was revealed. So in her opinion, identity is incompatible with the anatomical universal.
I
“A logical if macabre enterprise”
Binding the identity to the anatomy

Narrative of the Life of James Allen,
The Highwayman,
Bound in His Own Skin
1837

CASE STUDY

We don’t have any likenesses of self-described highwayman James Allen, but he is best known for botching a robbery attempt in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1833, because that unsuccessful hold-up led to Allen memorializing himself in the form of a book that he presented to his would-be victim. The bullet he shot was deflected by a buckle or button and
spared the life of John Fenno, Jr. Impressed by Fenno facing him rather than running away, Allen (a.k.a. George Walton, Jonas Pierce, James H. York, Burley Grove) asked that two copies of his memoirs be bound in his own skin upon his death—one presented to his intended victim and the other to Dr. Bigelow, who had attended him in the Massachusetts State Prison. Only two years into his twenty-year prison term, Allen died of consumption at aged 28, in July 1837. Before his death, he declared the narrative he dictated to be true and correct to the best of his recollection. After his death, his wishes were indeed carried out. Although the idea to bind his autobiography in his own leather seems rather gruesome, Allen came by it naturally. His memoirs profess a high regard for books and he had worked as a shoemaker in and out of prison. After Allen’s body was stripped of its skin at Massachusetts General Hospital., local bookbinder Peter Low tanned the hide to resemble gray deerskin and learned only later—and much to his distress—that the skin was that of a man. The copy of the book presented to John Fenno remained in his family for a few decades until donated by his daughter to the Boston Athenaeum, where it can be seen to this day. The whereabouts of the second copy are unknown but unnecessary, as James Allen has succeeded in his bid for physical immortality.
The Narrative of James Allen on display at the Boston Athenaeum.

**INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS**

_Having thus established that human hides have been tanned, and that the hides are usable, it requires no ingenuity to extend its use to other purposes and, having regard, as the lawyers say, to the close relationship between books and men, their humane behavior, etc., I find the application of this sort of leather to books a logical if macabre enterprise._—Jackson, Holbrook, “Books Bound in Human Skin,” (1932)

**Symbolic immortality**

Those who practiced anthropodermic bookbinding merged the book and the body in pursuit of life after death, creating objects that allow identity to outlast the body, that ensure a symbolic continuation of the memory of the deceased rather than a religious immortality of the spirit. When self-designated, the skin is offered by its owner in return for the promulgation of memory and identity. James Allen sought such a secular perpetuity, and by my definition of symbolic immortality has succeeded. His anthropodermic book functions as he had intended, reflecting his life appropriately and carrying his name and story forward in time to continue his presence on earth. His narrative shows that he was not religious, and his deathbed piety as recounted by the warden at the end of the narrative is suspect because of his earlier declarations that he would never live an honest life and would
never repent for his crimes. He realized that creating a book so intimate to his body would result in the presence and persistence of his identity after death, regardless of what happened to his soul.

The book—physical and symbolic representation of his life—is given as a gift to the man whose life Allen almost took. Fenno accepts the physical and intellectual emblem of Allen’s life—which includes the anecdote about nearly killing Fenno. He receives a life, rather than having his taken, so the exchange is “a life for a life.” It seems in a sense to be a remorseful gesture, but on the other hand one that ensures continuity through Fenno family legend and later through institutionalization at the Boston Athenaeum. By giving a second copy to the doctor that treated him in prison, Allen appears to be showing gratitude by way of this gift. With the gift to Fenno, perhaps Allen is grateful for not having killed his victim, since in the narrative he condemns those who kill for reasons other than self-defense. The gift is not a gift of generosity given with the heart. It is instead a reasoned attempt to balance the scales, which serves at the same time to perpetuate Allen’s memory—which may have been the primary motivation.

Allen’s idea for anthropodermically binding his book probably arose while handling animal leather, which we learn he had several opportunities to do as a shoemaker in the prison shops in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The material is both dead and retains a presence, paralleling text, which in scholarly tradition is seen as both dead and alive. Tanning the skin allows this covering of the living body to survive long after the body itself has decomposed. As we learn from Julia Kristeva, leather bypasses our instinct to reject the “abject,” which includes anything related to corpses. As the outer covering of a body that would quickly become corrupt without intervention, the skin in Allen’s case is tanned like an animal hide: harvested from his body shortly after death, tanned and “squared up” so that it
becomes a suitable binding material. But where it parts from taxidermy is the human ability to reunite a remnant of that particular body with the leavings of that person’s thought. In other words, books bound in calf-skin contain the ideas of many men and women of letters, but the cow and the author have no relationship. An anthropodermic book has a direct relationship between exterior and interior, since the covering of the book once covered the author, from whose mind the contents issued. Body and thought remain united for future readers. Allen’s book is autobiography—life-writing—in the true sense of the roots of the word. Allen has written (-graphed) his life (-bio-) with his entire self (auto-), the tangible physicality of his skin and the intangible consciousness of his mind made physical by way of ink and paper, with the two bound together indelibly. Allen was atypical of most nineteenth-century prisoners in leaving a written record. The combination of his words and his flesh give continued life to his thoughts, since the morbid gesture secures a readership in future generations. The act of anthropodermic binding is concretized in the title, which is stamped in black and gold on the cover: Hic Liber Waltonis Cute Compactus Est [“This book by Walton bound in his own skin”]. The book on its own may have been misunderstood or overlooked, since its appearance and feel are no different than animal leather, except for the translation of the Latin title. His physical and intellectual afterlife, in the form of the anthropodermic book, are reunited and reinforce one another. To hold the book is to hold Allen’s life in your hands. It is his liber vitae.

A 1944 Boston Athenaeum publication suggested that “surely there can be few books in the world of an interest so impartially divided between the interior and the exterior.” Several passages in Allen’s text draw attention indirectly to its binding, namely Allen’s respect for the written word in book form and his associations with leather by avocation. In his memoir, James
Allen shows a high regard for books as physical objects that allow the reader to learn and enjoy. Books entertained and edified, often at the same time. While the rest of his narrative is about his unlawful exploits and escape attempts, Allen makes a point of mentioning that in the state prison in Massachusetts, he was “constantly supplied with books of an historical, biographical, moral and miscellaneous character, which entertained and instructed me…” Confined a second time, Allen “enjoyed an opportunity of reading many books principally of a moral and religious character.” Although even scripture clearly did not impress morality on him, Allen enjoyed reading the Holy Bible and other religious works as historical stories, presumably as he intended his own adventuresome tale to become.

At the conclusion of *The Highwayman*, the warden writes that had Allen’s mind been properly cultivated and disciplined, “he would have made a far more useful contribution to the world.”

Allen dissembles and never fully explains his reasoning for compelling the prison warden to honor his last request, so much must be inferred. The willingness of his captors to comply with his gruesome, solemn wishes says more about him than them. It is expressive of his desire to manipulate, to react to his perceived victimhood, to escape his fate like he escaped his prison cell. This escape was not religious, although he adds a few disingenuous declarations at the end of the text to appease those who hoped he would repent. Instead, it is a secular and symbolic immortality. It is a material rather than ethereal presence that he secures with his skin. Backed by metaphor about the book and the body, about which Allen was probably unaware, his gesture has resulted in the conveyance of his personality to the present day.

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Physical immortality

The continued conveyance of Allen’s personality depends on the preservation of the vehicle he has used. Still in good condition more than 150 years after his death, his skin has been well-preserved. By attaching a physical copy of his story, Allen has ensured that it will have a continued social or historical value as a physical object, especially since it has been accessioned by a museum and displayed along with other historically significant objects. Allen’s means of making not only his story but a piece of himself survive his death parallels Romantic ideas of longing for permanence, immortality, and recognition. There may have been in Allen’s mind a sense of a piece of himself being handled after death, a sense of perpetuating the circulation of his body in society. Alive, he travelled in criminal circles and prison populations; dead, he might end up in the hands of family friends of Fenno, perhaps society women or men of influence with whom he would not have interacted otherwise. Little did Fenno know that his defiance of an armed stranger would eventually lead to a permanent token of their intersection in history. Circulation as a measure of a book’s immortality parallels reputation as a measure of a person’s immortality. Based on the braggadocio in his narrative, Allen valued his reputation as a successful highwayman, an outlaw, someone with a reputation for breaking the law. While he did not become a household name as a robber and burglar, within prison he had a reputation as what we would call an “escape risk.” He defied all attempts (bars, fences, shackles) to hold him in confinement. Defying the laws of nature by making part of his body survive death was a way of breaking another set of boundaries. And the second edition of his narrative served as insurance against the possible loss of the first.
When the owner of the skin has written the contents of an anthropodermic book, that increases the odds that the book will survive. Rather than a medical text bound in anonymous cadaver skin, The Highwayman’s skin has not just a title, but a name. When the book contains the life of a person—anthropodermic on the outside, autobiographical on the inside—immortality in the physical sense is almost assured. In the case of James Allen, the book and its creation is an integral part of the story it contains. It is abstract (the language of his life) and physical (the skin of his body). The bodily artifact demands respect and proper curation and the text it protects expresses the original owner in a very direct way by being a transcription of his spoken words. Conflation of body and text therefore allows Allen to communicate with the future, to time travel, to be immortal in a way that surpasses even most authors. “The Highwayman” survives—as a life story, and as an artifact associated with that life. The skin of the book is the skin of the man, so his “body of work” has a more literal meaning than it does for most authors. The physical presence of Allen’s remains lends gravity to the story he left and vice versa. The combination of the two demands dignity. Through this preserved bodily artifact, Allen continues to circulate in society and his story lives on through this dissemination.

**Religious immortality**

Allen’s anthropodermic act is separate from any sense of religious immortality and is not complemented by a belief in the survival of the soul, although there is the idea of redemption in the story of his bound memoirs. By dictating the narrative, he is performing a life review. He sentences himself to a punishment given at the time to more heinous criminals—the prescription that a transcript of the trial be bound in their own tanned skins. Though Allen’s story is not a *trial*, it is a *transcript*—a record of his dictated words, of an oral history. He gives his life, as represented by his skin-
wrapped life story, in exchange for the life he nearly took. That is the view in macrocosm, but in microcosm several contradictions can be found that call into question Allen’s redemption in both word and deed. Within the text, are we to believe that his boasting or his Bible references are more in character? Allen says, “nor do I think that anyone but a coward would take human life, except in self-defense,” and yet he nearly killed the unarmed Fenno while robbing him. He was immoral enough to shoot at Fenno’s head, though he claims he did not intend to kill the man. “The pistol was discharged rather sooner than I intended, and when I had elevated it about as high as his breast,” he admits. He believed he had shot his victim fatally in the chest and was relieved to see him rise up. He shows little regard for his victims, except to ensure that they survive his assault, but is his regard for their welfare or his own guilt? Continuing the narrative after Allen was unable to continue, the warden writes, “He long entertained the dark notion of the eternal annihilation of the soul after death; and it was not until a few days prior to his decease, that brighter and more correct views flashed across his fading vision.” He has on the surface become a believer. But has he convinced his jailers of the sincerity of his religious feelings so that they will authorize this use of his body as Allen’s self-directed form of penance? Or have they been duped?

Allen attended the Sabbath school that was established in the prison, but presumably for the diversion rather than the lessons in morals. He admits to one chaplain that he does not intend to live an honest life. Prison officials confirmed that Allen called himself a disbeliever (“infidel” was the word he used), but believed that due in part to their efforts Allen would lead an honest life if he had it to do over again. They claimed that Allen asked them to communicate a message of repentance to the convicts, and that he exclaimed within days of his death, “O God, forgive me for all the injuries I
have done to my fellow men.” Before he died, Allen was said to have declared the narrative he dictated to be true and correct to the best of his recollection. The warden concludes:

Thus closes the history of a man, who in the short period of his existence, was more deep and bold in crime, than is known to have been the case with any young man of equal age in this part of our country.

The warden was pleased that they had been able to convert such an incorrigible criminal and does not seem to consider than Allen may have been putting on a show of good faith to get what he wanted. The narrative would lead a careful reader to believe that Allen is too clever to convey a story with no subplot, no subterfuge, no double entendre. I suggest that Allen is being two-faced about his remorse. Halfway through the narrative, he confirms, “I do not and will not repine.” He has brushed up on his Bible so that he may pretend piety—his purpose not to repent for his crimes, but to use the situation they have put him in to secure promises to carry out his wishes. He offers up a duplicitous belief in religious immortality in order to gain the symbolic and physical immortality that an anthropodermic book promises.

**Intention**

The idea to bind his memoirs in his skin was conceived by Allen with no outside influence, thus the intent was his alone and he was neither coerced nor discouraged. Allen’s idea for anthropodermically binding his book probably arose while handling animal leather, which we learn he had several opportunities to do. In prison in New Hampshire, he had the opportunity to learn the shoemaker’s trade, which involved the working of leather and the likely wearing of a leather apron. Soon after he took up
highway robbery, one of his first hauls from a wagon included “two good
buffalo robes and a quantity of leather.” They turn out to be another of his
undoings when they were rightly suspected by the police of being stolen
goods and resulted in Allen’s arrest and sentence to two years of hard labor.
During his final incarceration, Allen again took up shoemaking in the prison
shop. This put him in touch, literally, with leather and the patterns used to
craft it into useful objects, from which he may have made the leap to the
possibility of putting his own skin to such a use.

Also of interest in his narrative are the clues Allen provides to his own
personality, clues that shed light on his posthumous directive. Despite any
overt coercion in his life of crime, he paints himself as a victim over and
over in the text, leading me to believe that his directive was at least in part
rebellious. He points out that he was orphaned by his mother and
abandoned by his father, which he claims left him “naturally hasty in my
temper, active and ambitious, and inclined to have my own way in most
respects.” Repeatedly being paid for his labors with counterfeit bills “tended
to sour my mind and cause distrust of the honesty of my fellow men.” He
blames his misfortune even more so on the resulting lack of money:

The want of sufficient capital in the outset, is the principal reason why
so few of those who commence such a course of life do not succeed
in their undertakings. It was the principal cause of my bad luck.

But so were any number of other reasons. Allen experienced headaches
when he attempted a career in shipbuilding, was refused by the Merchant
Marines, and was often short-changed his wages for honest work. The self-
told stories reveal Allen to be a bitter young man, eager to place blame
outside himself, and primed to seek revenge against those who wrong him.
This would have included the prison wardens and guards, based on Allen’s
complaints that they treated him poorly. So even sneakier than his attempts
to escape his cells and shackles was his intent to have those men in authority do his bidding—and to make that bidding as unpleasant as possible, namely the bloody business of stripping his dead body of skin and forming it into the object he has designated. He would be pleased to know that in his final directive, he succeeded at last.

Self-binding in combination with autobiography meet Allen’s purpose and convey his story to the present. He has made his life on earth permanent. The identity he has articulated through word and deed surpass what his mummified body could have accomplished—unless a copy of Allen’s deathbed confession was placed under his arm. Allen was not under a death sentence at the prison, so the officials were not in the position of having to prepare for and carry out an execution. In lieu of that, Allen—knowing that he was consigned to death by his health—compels them to perform certain unsavory actions on his body. His request obligates them to flay his corpse, to soak the raw skin in a tanning solution, and to dry it before it could be used as binding material. Presumably, all but the skin was buried, but it is unknown whether the grave was marked. Did Allen think of these abhorrent particulars of his preservation or only of the end result? With the final product as the goal, he probably got great satisfaction knowing that he was sentencing his captors to perform a disgusting duty.

**Reading the book visually**

More than 150 years after his death, we know James Allen’s thoughts and his character. We do not, however, know what he looked like. In this sense, he fails the criteria of visual identity, which depends on the preservation of facial features and the recognizability of the posthumous object as having come from an individual person, named or unnamed. If he was vain enough to secure his posthumous bodily presence, why did Allen not offer us a look at his face? Photography was just being invented, but a
drawing would have been an option and an engraving might have been produced if his life and death were more newsworthy. There are no images of the living man to associate with the book and his very skin—no longer flesh-colored—provides few clues to his physical makeup. Neither is any part of the leather distinguishable as being from a particular part of his body, since it is uniform in texture. Aside from the physical remnant, it is his chosen words—his personal diction—that survive. The Allen book does not bear his likeness, but retains more identity than the face that Dr. Tunis preserved for medical posterity or the full-body plastinate that Dr. von Hagens has preserved in great detail. The text associated with all three specimens are about them, but only in the Allen case has it been dictated by him. We may learn the medical history of a museum specimen, but rarely may we know a specimen’s personal history—and almost never firsthand. This example of anatomical identity points out that the preservation of the facial features is not essential to achieve a posthumous identity.

**Individuality and universality**

With this criterion, I ask whether the specimen represents the personality of the donor or a general example of human anatomy. There is nothing general about Allen’s anthropodermic book. His story and his means of preserving it are unique to him and him alone. Although dozens of other anthropodermic books have been made over the centuries, Allen’s stands out because of the circumstances of its conception (as a gift to a would-be victim), its creation (a bequest by an imprisoned man), and its curation (on public display with the entire text available on-line). The book is therefore Allen and no one else. His personality is evident in the text and through his decision to seek immortality on earth in this way.
The second copy of the Allen narrative has not surfaced, but this special edition of only two copies may also be a reaction—typical in Romantic times—against standardization and industrialization. Allen’s book (even if it does have a twin copy) is one-of-a-kind, simply because it wears a different swatch of skin. Anatomy books bound in cadaver skin are also individual in the grain of the leather, but share a common anonymity and so don’t share the singularity of the Allen book. Although his anthropodermic leaving begs an explanation of the history of human-bookbinding, it cannot stand in for any other example and is certainly not representative of them all. It is specific to Allen and in no way representative of a universal or referential to a shared anatomical trait. The book alludes only to this particular nineteenth-century man and has no history that is not bound to his. When you examine the cover or read the contents, you are aware that this man was—and book is—unique. Whether James Allen is an authentic or assumed name, the man who used it was and is an individual. His personality is evident once his story is known, either by reading the text of the entire narrative on-line or examining the actual object and reading excerpts from it at the Boston Athenaeum. His life was singular, as we know by his memoirs and by the fact that he chose to leave them to us in this way.

The audiences that the Allen book finds might do so in a Google search of anthropodermic books, but are soon directed to the fact that this is not any book, but Allen’s book. Of all the anthropodermic books I have studied, his has the most individual presence. Some such bindings have been willed by the owners of the skin, but used to bind the work of other authors. Even when bindings were directed by choice, association with someone else’s text often left the skin donor as anonymous as the cadavers whose skin was used to such purpose without consent. In Allen’s case, the
text is a substantial transcript mediated only by the original recorders of his words at his request and the many forms of electronic media that may bring them to today’s interested reader. The words are his and the idea to preserve them in this way was his.

**Nominal identity**

As part of his textual preservation, “The Highwayman” does survive in name. It is *James Allen* who lived a life of crime, *James Allen* who was arrested, *James Allen* who died in prison. His name has not been displaced by the name of the warden who transcribed his story or the tanner who prepared his skin, so his method of perpetuating his nominal identity was effective. But Allen was a man of many aliases and he apparently felt it necessary to include them all in the title of his book. He was not always James Allen. Sometimes he was George Walton, other times he was Burley Grove, and still others Jonas Pierce. He was careful to provide the list of aliases, maybe to collect his splintered self and attach it to his affidavit, but neglected to provide a date of birth by which his “real” name could be authenticated. So his identity is not as certain as it first appears, and is less attached to a first and last name than to the act of anthropodermic binding that defines him, the story he dictated, and what joining the two reveal about his character: everything from egotistical to sublime.

Allen is concerned with selfhood and projecting his personality into the future. And yet he seems to have several selves, some of them conflicting. Are the multiple aliases symptoms of instability? Is his “confession” a therapeutic way of uniting his fractured identity through the narrative? Though the author has many names, he has only a single skin, and he anchors his memories to this sensory link to them. He creates a book that then has an identity of its own as “that morbid keepsake of the Fenno family” or later “the anthropodermic book in Boston.” The name *James Allen*
appears on the title page, and yet stamped on the cover is the Latinized version of one of his aliases, Waltonis. Was the Latin stamping Allen’s directive, and if so was it intended to attract only well-educated readers? It could have been another way of hiding, another layer of alias. Maybe it was another means of metaphorical escape, just as each of the names in his list must have served as a window of opportunity to have deserved remembrance. Allen escaped identities, he escaped prison, and he was in many ways escaping his past. He rids himself of the burden of his orphaned childhood and his adult mistakes by “putting them away” on the page and at the same time taking full responsibility for them by attaching not one, but all his names.

Aside from one of his fellow prisoners, whose name he protects, Allen names many of the men he met at the Massachusetts State prison and after he was released. An inmate named Purchase is mentioned for having set his grandmother on fire. An associate named William Ross was later executed for robbing a priest, but not before explaining the pros and cons of highway robbery to Allen. The highwayman knew each bank he robbed by name, but hedged his bets when it came to the names of the numerous stores Allen broke into, which he always qualified in the narrative: “kept I think by Bennet & Brown,” “Deblois & Tremelet, I think,” “I believe, a firm under the name Brown & Train.” Allen remembered the names of all the convicts he associated with and none of the men who employed him. But he wants everyone to remember him, by whatever name they knew him, so he includes them all.

**Cultural identity**

The story of James Allen and the perpetuation of both his skin and his personality must be seen within the context of his cultural identity. His anthropodermic book withstands the demands of this criteria by evidencing
Allen’s social and political self, rather than offering a general sense of the circumstances of the times in which he lived or using his story to make a larger historical point. Issues of race and class are defined not by the object itself, but how they impact his particular autobiography. In addition to being an outlaw, Allen was a racial minority. He may have had a deepset need as a person of mixed race to establish his identity, since it was neither fully white nor African-American. It is possible that his need to be known was heightened by the negative perception that his second class status may have conveyed during life. He may have wanted those of future generations to see beyond his mixed parentage and to understand that he was more than a criminal who had been caught. Without an illustration of Allen, and in the absence of any corroboration, it is impossible to speculate on the color of his skin and whether he appeared to be one race of the other. The tanner decided on grey to preserve the skin and was quite unaware of later implications. Allen’s and our concentration on the skin should not be surprising. It signifies the importance of racial identity, since the skin is where race is played out for each of us.

The racial identity that Allen was born with was compounded by the bad circumstances of his life and the choices he made as a result. As mentioned, he was orphaned by his mother and abandoned by his father. He ran away from his guardian at the age of twelve. His naïve agreement to help move what turned out to be stolen property was his first unlawful act and was, he writes, “the precursor of my future destiny.” Allen was led into a life of crime far more serious than any earlier instances “of taking fruit or some trifling thing.” It was a slippery slope, as he describes: “Thinking, as I had committed one crime, I might as well go in that way, and get money more readily than labor.” He embarked on a career of robbery rather than burglary at the advice of a convict named Stephen Symms. He professed not
to drink, and so blames none of his exploits on alcohol. But he does blame the influence of others, as discussed in the section about intention. Allen considers his jail time to be penance for his crimes, but then blames incarceration for perpetuating his criminal life. Of being jailed for the first time in 1824, he writes:

I verily believe that if I had been discharged after the first week of confinement, I should have been honest and steady ever after. In a short time, however, jail scenes and the society of he depraved and vicious became familiar, and I lost, in a good degree, the tender feeling which influenced me on being first committed.

Later he describes how he fell in with bad company, namely Irishman William Ross who was later executed in Canada. Allen called himself a novice compared to Ross and learned from him that although highway robbery was the most dangerous means of obtaining ill-gotten gains, it yielded the most of them. All the acquaintances Allen mentions are fellow inmates or ex-convicts. Within the narrative, his anecdotes characterize him as a sly and incorrigible prisoner, but he prefers to be remembered as an outlaw—the semi-successful highwayman he was during his brief life outside prison walls.

Allen claims he attempted to find honest employment upon his first release from prison, but soon found himself fencing stolen watches. Then he was the one to recruit an accomplice to take up Ross’s advice to pursue highway robbery (and additionally, never to be without weapons). “Your money or your life” became the words of the day. Finding that it was “hard to leave off old tricks,” Allen declared that he had no intention of leading an honest life and instead was “determined to take any course that would most easily and readily fill my pockets.” Allen was by then incorrigible, and
purchased a pair of pistols immediately upon release from his next prison sentence which he then used in his subsequent hold-ups.

It was the use of one of his guns that led to Allen’s idea to self-bind his memoirs. The robbery that in effect sealed Allen’s fate was that of John Fenno, Jr., who sprang toward him from the wagon and siezed his shoulders. Allen writes:

…I endeavored to fire my pistol near his ear, not intending, however, to kill him; but did not much care whether I shot off a part of his ear or not.

Allen says he fired too soon, striking Fenno in the chest and causing him to fall to the ground. After seeing him rise up, Allen was gratified that he had not killed the man. After a hundred-dollar reward was offered, Allen was captured attempting to leave town by ship. He was convicted and sentenced to twenty years of hard labor. Allen’s claims he did not attempt to escape betray a deflation in his self-confidence that was confirmed by an attempt to hang himself in his cell with his suspenders. At the same time, suicide shows agency on Allen’s part, willfulness about determining his own fate, a rejection of being under anyone else’s control. His ruminations after surviving the suicide attempt led him to believe he could escape the prison after all. He managed to slip out, supported himself by home invasions and store break-ins, and thereafter, in his words, “commenced active operations.” Allen is in control of himself, but also as suggested below, in control of the warden in a sense.

**A literary reading of the book**

What we have, beyond the physical remnant, are Allen’s words. Through them his identity has been preserved, even though his likeness has not. He has established a solid literary and linguistic identity through his style, even apart from the fact that his name itself is part of the story. That
the story issued from Allen himself, relating the anecdotes firsthand, qualifies this anthropodermic book as very strong in this criterion. Recognition of his life is through his act and not through preservation—even on paper—of his facial features. By authoring his autobiography, Allen has instead defined his identity through language. During one interlude between prison sentences, Allen heard the town clock that had sounded in his ears as a boy:

Many incidents and associations of that interesting period of life were brought to mind as I lay ruminating on the past, reflecting on the present and speculating on the future.

He then embodies the writing in death, just as he inhabited the story in life. He relives the events while reciting them, and returns to life every time the book is read. The voice is his and Allen takes full ownership of the story by telling it in the first person. Was this memoir an attempt to leave evidence that not all criminals are illiterate?

One thing that stands out in his narrative is Allen’s tendency to look back on the foreshadowing of future events. He writes, “While at the shipyard, I was often sent into the front yard of the State Prison for water. Little did I think at the time of being confined a prisoner within its dreary walls.” He confides the story of his first association with stolen property and calls it “the precursor of my future destiny.” With the benefit of hindsight, he sees threads and themes running through his life and attempts to make sense of them, for his own satisfaction and to create a sort of morality tale for his readers.
Allen examines his life for clues to its course, but makes no obvious references to anthropodermic books. Having read the Bible and other literature in prison, it is possible that Allen was familiar with the theme of gaining immortality through the written word, but it is just as likely that he did so instinctually. It is unknown whether he knew of other books bound in human skin, though he may have been familiar with the contemporary cases of William Corder in England and John Horwood in the U.S. and the ordered use of their skin to bind their trial transcripts in 1833 and 1821 respectively. But for Allen, anthropodermic binding was not a punishment (except to his jailers). It was a unique way of making his very words live on by attaching them to a relic whose preservation is dictated by the respect shown to all human remains.

The style of Allen’s narrative is consistent and reveals quite a bit about his personality. He has established a solid literary and linguistic identity that cannot be separated from the story of his life as he tells it. The story contains no generalities, so it does not work as a universal. Within this accusatory confessional narrative is substantial amount of braggadocio. Allen mentions with pride every attempt, successful or not, to escape from prison.
He recounts break-ins of stores made starting on the very night of his release from jail. He brags how he smuggled twenty dollars into prison in his mouth despite a body search and being in leg irons when he was arrested for attempting to break into and burn down a bank. For those crimes he was sentenced to fifteen years in the New Hampshire State Prison, in which he sustained a gunshot wound for trying to scale the wall, survived time in solitary confinement, and escaped successively heavier and more secure iron blocks and chains attached to his leg. Again, he complains that circumstances made him do what he did. His formal requests that the leg irons be removed were denied, even when a new warden took charge of the prison:

If at this time my irons had been taken off, and I had been set to work in the yard, I should have behaved well; but as they showed me no favor, I was determined to give them all necessary employment to make me secure….I remarked that it was his duty to keep me in confinement, but that I should escape if possible—and would not promise to desist from making an attempt.

Blaming his actions on the refusal of the prison guards to acquiesce to his civil request, he went on to test them by repeated escape attempts, including by tunneling, that required continued attention. Allen makes a special point of relaying that the officers kept a special eye on him after hearing “I was a hard character to deal with.”

Allen seems to subscribe to a “Robin Hood” ethic and admired partner in crime William Ross because he had never taken a life. Allen himself remains recalcitrant and unrepentant until the end of his life. Of his release from his fifteen-year prison-sentence in 1830, he writes:

I suffer nothing, if possible, to trouble my mind. As much as I dislike a prison, and irksome as it is to me to be under confinement and
restraint, I do not and will not repine—hoping for better days or looking for some lucky time to effect an escape. So little feeling do I have in this respect, that I do not recollect ever shedding a tear over my misfortunes.

Allen’s criminal career was a series of arrests for breaking into banks, prison sentences, prison break-outs, recaptures, and resentencing. He boasts that after his first arrest, “I never, in my life, was committed to jail when I had not tools secreted in my clothing or in some other perfectly safe place, which were sufficient to insure escape by sawing off bars, grates or in some other way…” He took advantage of his jailers’ every inattention and remained contrary about their treatment of him, accusing them of treating him more severely than other inmates and remarking that since they showed him no favor, he had no incentive to behave well. He stood up to the armed prison guards on more than one occasion, just as Fenno had stood up to him. He modelled himself on one of his victims, at the same time exhibiting the influence of other outlaws on his behavior. For instance, he networked among the prison population, recruiting future partners in crime from within its ranks, just as had been done to him.

In *The Hummingbird Cabinet*, Judith Pascoe (23) points out the nineteenth-century fascination with collecting, coupled with a preoccupation with authenticity:

The collectors and purveyors of these relics, intent on establishing these objects’ credentials, sometimes went so far as to create authenticating stories for entirely inauthentic relics.

The idea of a piece of himself becoming a collectible may have appealed to Allen. But his pride in himself, as evidenced in his boastfulness, would not allow his relic to go nameless into the future. He attached his memoir and thereby secured a future of safekeeping.
Pascoe also reminds us that the Romantic era was a time when this notion that objects kept in a box or encased behind glass—secular relics—are imbued with a lasting sediment of their owners, and often characterize the public commemoration of fallen heroes. Though Allen can’t be considered a hero, his autobiography characterizes him as a combination anti-hero and victim. He was dealt a set of bad circumstances and tried to rise above them only to be tripped up by his fellow men. Suffering the death of his mother at the age of three and being abandoned by his father left him defiant:

I was naturally hasty in my temper, active and ambitious, and inclined to have my own way in most respects. Being short-changed and double-crossed by later employers “tended to sour my mind and cause distrust of the honesty of my fellow men.” Still, throughout the narrative he makes a point of telling self-congratulatory anecdotes, such as returning a stolen watch to its owner. Even though he has wronged his victims, Allen characterizes himself as victimized. He elevates himself in the perceived eyes of his readers by pointing out his few instances of compassion. By doing so, he shows that he still exhibited good qualities long after they should have been eradicated by the bad luck and bad treatment he has received. Allen wants to be remembered as the bad man with a good heart. His book is a monument to that sentiment. Whether readers believe his reminiscences or his deathbed repentance, they come to know him through the text and find the author—as Allen had hoped—more unfortunate than hateful.

Accusations of unfair treatment by prison staff and blame placed on others for his own misfortune end toward the conclusion of the narrative, when a severe cough impels him to allow the prison officials to continue his story. They offer up the facts: Trials in 1835 and 1846 resulted in hung juries.
He made another desperate attempt to escape by rushing his guards, but was afterwards held without chains and allowed to work and go into the yard, and so was obedient. But as much as he tried the patience of the guards, he commanded the respect of the successive wardens, with the one who completed his narrative referring to his “determined character and daring courage.” Although the warden states that Allen declares the narrative to be true in its entirety, including the section written when Allen was no longer able to dictate, the prisoner may have allowed his captor to paint a more convincing picture of his conversion and redemption than may have actually been the case. Allen may have allowed this in exchange for the promise to posthumously bind the book in his skin.

**Conclusions**

Why did Allen concretize his existence in this way? Much of the answer lies in Allen’s agency. Not only confined, but often chained and placed in solitary confinement, the prisoner demonstrated what little freedom he had through this posthumous directive. In *Bookmen’s Bedlam: An Olio of Literary Oddities*, Walter Hart Blumenthal claims that Allen left a note after one of his escapes from jail that read that he was “master of his own skin.” Allen proved the statement true each time he sought his freedom and when he directed that his memoirs be bound in his skin after his death. Escape and self-binding were both a means of breaking out of boundaries. His anthropodermic binding was not only an example of his agency, but an act of defiance, causing others to perform the rude act of flaying his body and tanning his skin. The messy process literally and figuratively objectified him, but by preparing *his* binding to enclose *his* story—of which *he*, of course, was the protagonist—the procedure secures Allen’s status as subject, never object. The book that Allen has become is static, but his subjectivity lives on. To paraphrase what he dictated in his memoir, he now
“commenced passive operations.” And although he only exists as a book, his presence still demands attention—a respectful means of storage or display, an obligation to keep the story and the object intact.

Like those whose skin was used to bind their trial transcripts, Allen was an imprisoned felon, but his book is commemorative rather than punitive because he chose to memorialize himself. Allen, probably one of the worst-behaved inmates at the Massachusetts State Prison, had his story transcribed by the prison warden himself. So his exertion of control began with the warden, to whom he told his story and convinced of his redemption, possibly duplicitously. His control operated on the men who flayed, tanned, and bound his skin, whether they knew him or—as in the case of the binder—were unaware that the remains were Allen’s. And his control extended to the intended recipients of the book, attaching his identity to Fenno and Dr. Bigelow by bestowing this very personal gift on them. His control even extends to the unintended recipients of the book, Fenno family members and Boston Athenaeum visitors, for whom the book has become an heirloom or a memento mori. Allen may or may not have envisioned a future in which his anthropodermic book moved from Fenno family curio to the curated museum object it is today, but because it was never destined to be given a “proper burial” and is now exhibited in a public venue, more of us know him, and that was his intention.

So The Highwayman survives because the narrator had a chip on his shoulder, a good imagination, and a keen sense of irony. He has compelled lawmen to perpetuate the memory of a lawbreaker. The physical act of this perpetuation was both gruesome (which punished his punishers) and effective (which served his own egotistic need). Although we have no face to associate with the narrator, we do have an authentic bodily presence. Allen comes across as an individual in word and deed, and this individuality
is complemented by a named identity. The resultant anthropodermic book has a symbolism that surpasses the life of a single person, but has no social or political history that is not directly associated with James Allen. The man, who lived from 1809 to 1837, directed and achieved his own posterity with more mastery than he carried out any of his crimes.
“Why do you tear me from myself?”

The Multiple Identities of the Plastinated Skin Man

CASE STUDY

He is known as “The Skin Man” and is considered to be at the forefront of preservative art and science. The body belonged to a late twentieth century man who donated it to Gunther von Hagens for display in his BodyWorlds exhibit (www.bodyworlds.com). The man’s permanent preservation has been achieved through a technique called plastination, developed and patented by von Hagens in the late twentieth century. The German anatomist replaces the liquids of the body with a polymer, posing
and gas-curing the result, to create an entirely stable cadaver that highlights aspects of human anatomy. With his plastinates, von Hagens often brings classic anatomical images to life—in this case a sixteenth-century medical illustration in a text by Juan de Valverde. The Skin Man is one of dozens of full-body plastinates touring in the three BodyWorlds\(^3\) exhibits, which have been seen by 20 million people worldwide. Plastinates affect us strongly because they are our dead counterparts, given an everlasting presence that includes a personality. Plastinates confuse us by being *individuals* without a specific *identity*. The reason for their preservation and presentation is to represent general human anatomy, so they achieve physical immortality, but only at the price of anonymity.

**INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS**

**Immortalities**

As I have defined it, symbolic immortality questions whether an anatomical specimen appropriately reflects the donor’s particular life or has a broader meaning that overshadows individual presence. The preservation and display of the Skin Man plastinate follow the wishes of the donor of the body, but do not reflect the life he lived, as I will show. Even if he were a fit and healthy individual eager to have his body serve as a physical exemplar, we have no way of knowing whether this was the primary reason for the donation of his body. Perhaps he merely wanted to spare his family the burden of burial costs. With nothing revealed about the donor, his body is an extension instead of Gunther von Hagens’ persona. The donor is preserved and posed at the whim of the anatomist, and his trust in von Hagens is all we can infer. The man who eventually became the Skin Man would have been aware—because he signed an explicit consent form

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\(^3\)I have taken the liberty of making the capitalization and spacing of “von Hagens” and “BodyWorlds” consistent, even when they occur within direct quotes.
designating his body for use in BodyWorlds—that it would be part of a traveling exhibit intended to demonstrate human anatomy visually. He would also know that his body would not be identified by name. And he most likely knew that the exhibit stirred controversy and drew in crowds by the millions. But did this play a part in his decision? Was he egotistical, with a desire to be stared at posthumously by men, women, and children for years to come? Did he want his body made into a statue? Von Hagens knows from the donor consent form whether the decision was altruistic, economical, or egotistical, but doesn’t share this information.

Gunther von Hagens has his own agenda: designing aesthetically creative and publicly appealing shows that offer laypeople a look inside real human bodies. Visitors to the BodyWorlds exhibits have unmediated access to dissected cadavers, a privilege usually restricted to medical students and professionals. Whether or not they have set foot in a gross anatomy laboratory or observed an autopsy, they are allowed to get inches away from the interior of a corpse. And another. And another. Each has been designated to focus on a particular part of the anatomy: the nervous system, the musculature, the skeleton. The Skin Man had no way of knowing that his body would become a permanent display highlighting the largest human organ—the skin, so this decision has no relation to the donor’s personality. He would have realized there were many possibilities for the fate of his remains in von Hagen’s hands, but was secure in the fact that plastination would render his remains odorless and stable. He would have been well-aware that his corpse would become a member of an exclusive group, and he may even have signed the donor form upon exiting one of the BodyWorlds exhibits. Perhaps he desired that exclusivity or perhaps his anatomical gift was merely made to further anatomical knowledge. We don’t know because we don’t know the donor’s identity.
We can speculate that he understood that his body would become a symbol, not of his life but of life in general, not of his anatomy but everyone’s anatomy. He would become one of the singular “muscle men” in the anatomy texts of Vesalius and others, brought to life, as I will discuss below. On an intellectual level, he would represent our anatomical interior. On an emotional level, he would become a memento mori, a reminder of our mortality. The donor’s body would serve, along with many others, to provoke self-awareness of life and death, not just as concepts, but as physical reality for each of us. He probably knew that his plastinated body would be less than objective. His preparation would be artfully conceived and carried out by an anatomist whose creativity was the cause of much controversy. This controversy would have informed his decision and also affect his reception by viewers, who also bring along their own perceptual and emotional differences. Most of the viewers would be fascinated and peer closely at his body and the skin he held. A small minority might be shocked, disgusted, or offended. But the donor would have no control over this and no way to convey his own thoughts on the matter. With his body donation, the Skin Man demonstrated his willingness to forgo the posterity of his own personality in favor of an individual—although not identifiable—future presence. His body would be specific in appearance, but general in meaning.

The Skin Man’s designated future presence is dependent on his physical immortality, the means by which he is permanently preserved. This chemical preservation determines whether the physical object will survive to exhibit its social or historical value. Gunther von Hagens claims that plastinates will remain stable for at least 800 years. Since he replaces the liquids with a polymer, he turns bodies into vinyl, which guarantees that they will not decay. The more delicately dissected bodies are displayed
inside vitrines, but the majority that remain outside display cases are subject only to dust and accidental or deliberate damage. Now in BodyWorlds III, the Skin Man stands inside a vitrine but is visible from all angles, thus allowing full visibility while securing safe curation.

Plastinates prolong the dissecting process indefinitely because unlike traditional cadavers, they remain intact and permanent even though they have been anatomized. In other words, plastinates remain in a perpetual state of dissection, something we already have a taboo about—namely violating the bodies of the dead (Arnold 4, Bradbury 127). But von Hagens’ plastinates can remain dismantled indefinitely without fear that the embalming will fail. Thus the potential is there to attach the identity to a person’s remains permanently, but von Hagens offers no means by which identity may be conveyed, either biographically by him or autobiographically by the donor. Like cadavers, donors’ remains are representative of the human body, but they are not all average: they have individual physical features and characteristics. Some are old, some are young; some are male, some female; some short, some tall. They are unnamed, but are visibly unique. These anonymous bodies may be singled out by a distinct medical history, such as darkened lungs or a tumor, but the viewer is told nothing more than the donor was a smoker or suffered a brain tumor. We have no insight into the reasons the plastinate smoked during life or how the brain tumor made the person act, so there is no link to personal identity. In addition to his many other meanings, the Skin Man has an exemplary physique, worthy of representing a full-body specimen of an ideal human male. The plastinates have an ongoing social value in promoting good health and a lasting historical value as premier postmodern specimens of anatomical art. But this value obliterates identity in two ways. Not only are
they *symbols* of universal anatomy, they are *examples* of the remarkable plastination technique by which this is accomplished.

The BodyWorlds exhibits are framed in museum settings, giving them a neutral context that is separate from religious belief. Museums have been called secular temples, but in the case of the plastinates, it is the human body that is worshiped. The BodyWorld exhibits make no pretense of being about anything but the flesh. When we look at the Skin Man, we are meant to admire his healthy body in its statuesque pose. We do not necessarily think of the body’s donor, nor do we think of the body’s divine creator. The plastinates have symbolic meanings, like treating one’s body as a temple, but von Hagens is promoting health, not preaching religious values. Looking at a plastinate like the Skin Man causes us to consider what it means to be human, but on a mechanical rather than a spiritual level. The immortality of the soul, which the donor may or may not believe in, is quite separate from the physical preservation of the human remains. The criteria of religious immortality is therefore not a factor in the identity of plastinates.

As befits the *physical*, as opposed to *religious*, immortality of the plastinates, Von Hagens calls plastination a kind of “secularized burial” (Walter, “BodyWorlds”) and offers it as another method of disposition of the body, an alternative to burial or cremation, yet without the individual commemoration. Plastinates are incorruptible anatomical specimens, not memorialized lives. Von Hagens is careful to separate the two in his essay “On Gruesome Corpses” in the exhibit catalog: “…plastinates are not objects of mourning; they are instructional specimens. Mourning would interfere with learning, our thoughts would digress.” Like funerealized corpses, the facial features of plastinated bodies are adjusted, but by excluding identity from the preservation of the physical remains, von Hagens preempts any attempt to consider them relics or to show them religious reverence. So
regardless of how religious the living donor was—and we will never know, the plastinated Skin Man has an entirely secular immortality. His remains are sacred to science and don’t require a remembrance card bearing the donor’s name.

**Consent to plastinate**

Did the donor of this particular body intend to become the Skin Man? He surely had confidence that plastination was an effective preservation technique, rendering his remains odorless and stable. He was aware that donating his body would secure membership in the exclusive group of BodyWorlds plastinates. He understood—intellectually if not emotionally—that his body would be an example of *universal anatomy*, which I will discuss in the section on Individuality and Universality. On an emotional level, he may have imagined his plastinated body as a *memento mori*, a reminder of the viewer’s own mortality. The donor could not have known what organ or system his body would be represent, but he would almost surely have been aware of the lively positioning of the plastinates and the controversy this provoked about treating the dead with dignity. With much of this in mind, the living Skin Man made the decision to sign away his remains to von Hagens, knowing that his identity would not publicly accompany them.

Plastination donors who complete the consent form offered after touring the exhibit are well aware of the *general* use to which their bodies will be put. They know that their physical immortality is ensured—von Hagens claims that they will remain intact for at least 800 years—but that their bodies will be stripped of both skin and identity. By this choice, the donor is sending a mixed message. Is he vain enough to want his muscular body preserved as a showpiece, and yet modest enough to do so without claim to his own name? He will be preserved as a statue and yet that statue
will have no identity attached. Worse than a sculpture which the artist merely declined to name, the lack of vital statistics associated with these authentic human remains makes it seem in some way as if the name has been lost rather than deliberately suppressed, even though von Hagens follows scientific precedent. The anatomist has always dissociated the cadaver from the living individual to maintain the objectivity and emotional detachment necessary to dissect it. Von Hagens withholds the names of the plastinates, but reintroduces subjectivity and emotion into the exhibit with the active and allusive poses in which he places the donors.

People put their trust in von Hagens to preserve them and he claims to have no shortage of donor bodies. But bodies are also obtained from other sources, which the public are led by the media to question. The Institut für Plastination has a policy against accepting the bodies of victims of execution, but von Hagens still has to counter such accusations that some of his plastinates are the bodies of prisoners, homeless people, and the mentally ill whose bodies were unclaimed after they died. The uncertainty that continues to circulate in public forums has further implications for identity. Viewers may harbor some doubt that the imagined identity of the Skin Man, for instance, was a man who wanted his body used in this way and not the corpse of an unclaimed individual or executed prisoner who was unaware (and may have strongly objected) to the preservation of his remains, even though von Hagens has sucessfully defended himself in court. In our imaginations, we may impose a sense of unfairness between the anatomist who is now a multi-millionaire and the man whose donation may have been merely a selfless act of charity. What we want to believe is that the donor consented willingly to this long-term public exposure of his denuded body and detached skin to further anatomical knowledge and interest. That he wanted to be “remembered” anonymously. That he wanted to be dissected
and posed at von Hagen’s direction—to serve a higher purpose than individual commemoration.

So where James Allen attached his many names to his remains, the Skin Man was willing to be parted from his. We know Allen’s life story from his earliest recollections, but we only know the Skin Man’s history since his death, and even then only vaguely. He was transported after death to one of Dr. von Hagens’ plastination laboratories to undergo the plastination process over the next two or three years. His figure was then displayed in a number of exhibitions, currently appearing in BodyWorlds I. The BodyWorlds donor may or may not have foreseen that his body would tour the world. James Allen may or may not have imagined that his relic, willed to one man, would be exposed to the public. And yet the man who wanted his name promoted—the Highwayman, James Allen—has a much smaller audience than the man who was willing to go unidentified. So the need to be known by future generations is not tied to ambitious circulation of the remains.

**Visual identity and the importance of skin**

I have chosen visual identity as a criteria by which to assess whether the facial features of the preserved individual would be recognized by those who knew her or him in life. In the case of von Hagens’ plastinates, most of their skin has been removed, so recognition would have to be based mainly on bone structure and not external characteristics (birthmarks, scars). It is interesting to compare this to face transplants, in which the skin of the donor is draped over the recipient’s bone and cartilage. The result is not the recognition of the face of the deceased on a living body, so it precludes the idea of keeping one’s visage alive. Similarly, the potential plastinate cannot be assured of visual recognition of his or her face or body because the layer with which we identify—the skin—has been peeled away.
In the caption for the Skin Man figure, von Hagens and Whalley (120) describe in rather pedestrian prose why such a pose, showing the skin as a separate object, was chosen:

The whole body plastinate demonstrates on the one hand how vulnerable man looks without the skin to protect him, and on the other hand the nature of the skin as an independent organ when there is no longer a body inside…The skin is the organ that is noticed the least, and yet it is the largest and heaviest of our organs, without which we would not be able to exist. The skin lends individuality to our exteriors…

This last point is made obvious in BodyWorlds and in this particular plastinate by the removal of the skin and resulting “sameness” to the interiors—now exteriors—of the full-body figures, which he then poses actively to restore some of the individuality.

In addition to following scientific precedent and enabling von Hagens to dissociate the plastinate nominally from the corpse, the physical anonymity that results from the removal of the skin “eliminates any legal problems that might result from the survivors’ permanent rights of disposition” (von Hagens, “Anatomy and Plastination” 32). By distancing the plastinates from their own identities, he makes it nearly impossible for those who knew a plastinate in life to recognize her or him in BodyWorlds. But by removing the skin of the plastinates, especially from the face, von Hagens eliminates the unique identity of this person for all of us—whether we knew him or her or not. The face is what we look to when approaching a friend or a stranger, it is the focus of our attention. Without that surface within which all the sensory organs are situated, the muscle-faced Skin Man is not the sum of his parts—he is those parts. Instead of the face of a stranger, the
viewer sees the components: eyes, ears, mouth. We see the anatomical body, as von Hagens intends.

Because BodyWorlds trades on the authenticity of the bodies—the fact that they are “real,” authentic corpses—von Hagens puts us eye to eye with them, so we can verify this for ourselves. We recognize the plastinate as a person, but even if we had known or had seen photographs of the individual, our visual examination will not confirm the identity: Nor, in the case of the Skin Man, does the skin the figure is holding offer any opportunities for recognition. By removing the skin and replacing the eyes, both markers of individuality, Von Hagens advances anonymity even further than merely withholding the donor’s name. And by posing the Skin Man proffering his skin, von Hagens almost seems to mock anonymity because his plastination technique even preserves the unique finger-, hand-, and footprints.

“Ringman” plastinate with bands of skin (www.bodyworlds.com), compared to M.C. Escher, Bond of Union, 1956, (artsci.wustl.edu).

Understanding the plastinate as an authentic human is partly a function of von Hagens’ deliberate employment of gestalt psychology, basically the tendency of our minds to perceive things as wholes. Von Hagens suggests:
As such bodies are placed in a particular pose, I call them gestalt plastinates. The nature of the pose must be strategically planned; here the theme determines the pose as form follows function. In planning such poses, I distinguish between anatomically correct positioning, motion posing and fragmentation of a body.

When von Hagens fragments a plastinate, he knows that our minds will fill in gaps and discontinuities, making a whole out of the pieces. His fragmented or so-called “exploded” plastinates will compel the viewer to put the pieces back in place, to reconstruct the body in the imagination. And by leaving a ribbon of flesh around one of his plastinates, for instance, he makes it simultaneously appear to us as a skeleton and the more personalized body with skin. It reminds us of the print by M.C. Escher, in which two faces are made up of illustrated ribbons, encouraging us to “fill in the blanks.” To take advantage of the completion that our minds do, von Hagens leaves raised areas on the surface of the plastinates containing hair, nipples, and other personal physical details. The viewer restores the missing areas, giving the plastinate a sort of skin surface in the mind’s eye that unites the emphasized features of mouth, ears, and eyes. This allows us to imagine the plastinate as an individual, even without that marker of individuality, the skin. The BodyWorlds visitor who attempts to view the show objectively is often thwarted by a patch of pubic hair or an eyebrow.

**Aesthetic anatomy**

Von Hagens responds to the personalizing of the bodies by explaining in “Anatomy and Plastination,” “The aesthetic pose, which is occasionally criticized, is what helps dispel revulsion; because it is so powerful, it also promotes emotional awareness.” We are not afraid to get close physically and not as afraid to approach emotionally. We can learn and think about
our corporeality without having to dissociate or deny our mortality. We can identify with the plastinates, which makes them more than objective scientific specimens. In fact, it is the modification of the bodies of the plastinates that makes them presentable, and many of von Hagens’ critics call this art. If the anatomist is indeed seen as “sculpting” the plastinates, this adds another layer of identity between the bodies he has received and the finished product.

Plastination has been considered an art because it does not maintain the objectivity that “straight science” requires. Anatomical illustration is universal, while art is particular and original; but plastinates are both universal and particular. They alternate in the viewer’s mind as cadavers (real) and as sculptures (unreal). When asked if they are artworks or educational tools, von Hagens answers, “Something in between” (Knipfel 34-5). The discourse about plastination falls short of calling it art. But von Hagens’ technique does revive anatomy’s ties to art—including the depiction of anatomical bodies as alive. Ludmilla Jordanova points out that anatomical art long permitted more free play than anatomy. Artful preparation and display of the plastinates can thus be done with more creativity than is typically the case in an anatomy exhibition. It may not be an art form, write journalists, but it has a visual flourish. The visuality of plastinates is not only defined by the fact that they are anatomical specimens, even though the stated purpose of the exhibit is scientific, but by the fact that they have been not only prepared but designed. What this means to the identity of plastinates—and to the Skin Man in particular—is that they may be even less recognizable than a traditionally anatomized corpse because by borrowing principles of art, von Hagens allows himself the liberty of even more manipulation of the “raw material” of the flesh.
The anatomist sees himself as the postmodern counterpart of the classic anatomists. In the exhibition catalog ("Anatomy and Plastinates" 11), von Hagens explains that in the sixteenth century, anatomist Andreas Vesalius “pulled the dead out of their graves and put them back in society” by assembling human bones into upright structures he called skeletons, a revolutionary idea at the time which is now ubiquitous to us. Vesalius’ audience was only newly familiar with images of articulated skeletons illustrated in activities of the living. Skeletons are anonymous because the flesh has been removed, but they are given an individuality by being depicted as if alive. In the intervening centuries, anatomical illustration became objective, more scientific and far less artistic. Von Hagens laments ("Anatomy and Plastinates” 11) that “dissection has lost its creative components” and defends the idea that plastinates can be playful within the constraints of instructional anatomy.

Objects of anatomical study have not had an imposed individuality until now. The plastinates are given new postmortem identities. “The Swimmer” may not have done so in life, the “Chess Player” may not have known the rules of the game. Anonymity downplays what the unique poses bring up, and this creativity with the bodies of plastinates lends them more universality. So does the replication of classic poses like the “flayed man.” This multiplies certain personalities, like the traditional Venus pose, while suppressing the true personality of the body donor. And it seems the identity can be multiplied exponentially, with illustrations, engravings, photographs, paintings, and sculptures of an individual, each representing the same identity, but each unique. The Skin Man, for instance, is a plastinate arranged by Gunther von Hagens. He is also a figure included in more than one anatomical text. And as I will show in the next section, he is also a
transubstantiation of figures from both Greek legend and early Christian lore.
Individuality and universality

In terms of individuality and universality, plastinates are representative of universal anatomy. They do not offer their life histories. They may offer some details about their medical histories when von Hagens wants to explain a disease or a tumor. But we see no evidence of living personalities. In “Plastination for Display,” Tony Walters clarifies that “…the body’s surface produces personal identity but the body’s interior produces anatomical identity.” In the case of the Skin Man, we can convince ourselves of the individuality of his body by observing the fingerprints on the skin he holds. We also respond to the artfulness of his presentation. But his pose layers both a historical and a religious identity on his figure (which will be discussed in detail below). Von Hagens consciously recreates the anatomical art of earlier centuries to show what the early anatomists showed—that is, an idealized or referential bodily interior—in an improved way. For instance, von Hagens can show a muscle-man in three dimensions, who when illustrated had only been depicted in front and back views. A reclining man whose muscles are highlighted is the plastic incarnation of the classic sculptural pose of the “flayed man,” a standard figure traditionally translated by art students to paper, plaster, bronze (see Roberts and Tomlinson)—and now translated by von Hagens to posterity. The anatomist also draws heavily on the wax figures prepared in Italy at the height of this anatomical tradition in the early nineteenth century. Figures like the reclining pregnant woman owe their creation and reception in part to the way the famous anatomical waxes shown with exposed wombs were patterned on classic Venus sculptures in beauty and gesture.

Von Hagens is well aware of the earlier anatomical art he reproduces in the third dimension. The BodyWorlds website (www.bodyworlds.com) pays homage to the sources he draws upon:
Dr. von Hagens’ debut exhibit [BodyWorlds I] features such plastinates as The Skin Man, its precedent, a 16\textsuperscript{th} century copper engraving of a figure in a similar pose from Renaissance anatomist Juan Valverde de Amusco’s volume on anatomy. The engraver is believed to have been Gaspar Becerra, himself an anatomist who assisted Michelangelo in painting the Sistine Chapel. BodyWorlds stands at the intersection of science, medicine, and art as a towering achievement in the field of anatomical science.

The self-congratulation at the end of the quotation can be forgiven because von Hagens has in fact eclipsed all other anatomical methods with his combination of art and science. He can be creative with the knowledge that the preservation of his figures is assured. This leaves room to explore the history of anatomical art and to draw inspiration from earlier interpretations of legends and themes.

Flayed man holding his own skin, after copperplate engraving in Anatomia del Corpo Humano (Rome, 1559) by Juan Valverde de Amusco (ca. 1525-ca. 1588) thought to have been done by anatomist Gaspar Becerra, who assisted Michelangelo in painting the Sistine Chapel (www.nih.nlm.gov). The figure on the right, the “Skin Man” in the BodyWorlds exhibition, is based on this sixteenth-century anatomical illustration by Juan Valverde de Amusco (www.bodyworlds.com).

\textbf{Allusions}
The plastinated Skin Man is—minus the knife—a direct incarnation of a sixteenth-century anatomical illustration showing a man as if he has just survived skinning himself. The copperplate engraving appears in the book *Anatomia del Corpo Humano* by Juan de Valverde de Amusco, published in Rome in 1559. Valverde was an anatomist credited with bringing the work of Vesalius to Spain, but faulted by Vesalius for copying his work. This accused plagiarism can be seen in a metaphorical sense as Valverde stealing Vesalius’ identity—which would mean that von Hagens is usurping or perpetuating both identities to give shape and meaning to his sculptural figure. He is using an image from the past to inform his positioning of the body, and the vying identities of the artist/anatomists cannot be separated from that image. The viewing experience is richer when the allusions are understood.

Many of the illustrations in Valverde’s book are attributed to Spanish artist Gasparo Becerra, whose name is now reattached to the work he had done without credit. Becerra was in turn a student of artist and anatomist

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4 Still, the Skin Man image was said to be original to Valverde.
Michelangelo and worked with him in the Sistine Chapel. One of the murals they worked on together was “The Last Judgment,” painted on the altar wall. A detail in that painting depicts the martyr and apostle St. Bartholomew, who is said to have been skinned alive and crucified upside down in Armenia. True to his traditional iconography, St. Bartholomew is holding up his own skin in one hand and the knife in the other. The skin he holds in the mural has a face, and tradition holds that this face is a self-portrait by Michelangelo (Szladits 422). The face on the skin is not visible in the plastinated version, but the plastinate incorporates Michelangelo’s identity, along with those of Becerra, Valverde, and Vesalius.

The allusionary identities of the plastinates are *intellectual* and depend on viewer awareness of these precedents in the BodyWorlds exhibit literature. The identities that the Skin Man hosts make his figure more powerful when we fully understand them. St. Bartholomew, for instance, became the patron saint of tanners and bookbinders. His patronage incorporates the idea of skin that has been removed from the body. Von Hagens has depicted this flaying of the body *by flaying a body*. He makes a
reality out of these representations. Although in the painting, Bartholomew has received a new skin before being resurrected into heaven, von Hagens shows the result of the removal of the skin to reveal the musculature underneath. All of the plastinates have been flayed to become exhibits of what lies beneath the skin. In this sense, he departs from the religious to be faithful to anatomical illustration. But he calls up an even earlier pagan legend---that of Marsyas, who was also skinned. The sixteenth-century viewer would have been as familiar with the visual reference to Masyras as they were to St. Bartholomew.5


According to Greek myth, as recorded in Ovid’s Metamorphosis, the presumptuous Marsyas challenged the god Apollo to a musical duel. Apollo defeated Marsyas and had the skin stripped from his body, a punishment that caused Marsyas to cry out, “Why do you tear me from myself?” With this quote, Marsyas establishes the idea that peeling the skin from the body splits the identity in two—that the skin alone can in some cases be just as effective as the corpse in conveying an identity. In the examples, though—the paintings by Meier (above) and Michelangelo (page 61), and now the

5 There is also a more obscure flayed figure, the Aztec god Xipe Totec, lord of springtime, but von Hagens does not refer to it as a source of inspiration.
plastinated figure by von Hagens—the relationship of skin to body is emphasized by retaining both within the image. Along similar lines, the flayer and the flayed merged to become a single self-dissecting figure. This creates a self-reflexivity in which the anatomist and cadaver are one and the same, the merging of identities. The liveliness in such a depiction followed a Renaissance trend in anatomical art, which von Hagens has continued. In BodyWorlds, much of the religious meaning is lost, making the plastinates more personal by being less saintly. Whereas a Renaissance viewer would have seen St. Bartholomew offering his skin to God, the postmodern woman or man interprets the stance of the Skin Man as proferring his skin to the viewer. He offers up this insignia of his identity to his living counterparts.

With his particular reinterpretation of classic anatomical artworks, von Hagens has his name mentioned in the same sentence as Valverde and Vesalius. He does so through the medium of another human being: he promotes his own identity by suppressing the identity of the original occupant of the body. The Skin Man is therefore suffused with identities not his own. He is the “work” of Gunther von Hagens and the many references to the history of anatomy that this entails, including the artists and anatomists like Becerra and Michelangelo, whose illustrations von Hagens borrows from. Skin men were prototypes for the classic ecorché (“flayed man”) figures. Von Hagens’ Skin Man is the embodiment of figures in Western culture known for having been flayed, notably Marsyas and St. Bartholomew, and therefore a symbol of flaying in general. He is a vehicle for metaphor (flaying as punishment, flaying as an act of purification, skin as protection, skin as the site of sin, and—most important to this study—skin as representative of the self) and an artistic convention (the “flayed man” or “ecorché”). As a symbol and an assemblage of historical personalities and subjects, the Skin Man is a universal, a stand-in for an average human male,
represented in dramatic von Hagens fashion, but still faithful to the past. The Skin Man is everyone but himself.

This substituted identity is complicated by the possibility of further splitting the identity of the Skin Man by including a Skin Man in more than one simultaneous exhibition, but I have confirmed that the plastinated Skin Man is unique, so at least the allusionary identities are centered on a single body. But with plastination, even this cannot be taken for granted, since a single body can be split in two: for instance, a skeletal figure tapping on the shoulder of a separate muscular figure—both from the same body. Nevertheless, each individual body is intended to represent a universal anatomy—a shared anatomical identity—quite apart from the characters he creates. To do so requires that the plastinates be stripped of their individual identities, and yet each plastinate is—and is billed as being—entirely unique. Each therefore has an anatomic identity (an individuality of his or her bodily makeup), if not a personhood (an individuality of her or his history). Plastinates are said by D.G. Jones (437) to be between the cadaver, which is known by its vital statistics and medical history, and the anonymous (skinless) skeleton on an identity continuum:

Hence, plastinated specimens take further the anonymity of the dissecting-room cadaver, but do not go as far as the anonymity of the skeleton. They represent a half-way house between the two, being far removed from either the living person or the recently deceased, or the readily identifiable cadaver of the known individual... Each whole-body plastinated specimen is unique even though in educational contexts it may be used to throw light on generalized human anatomy. What plastination is doing is transforming particular bodies into idealized bodies.
But as medicine depersonalizes the corpse (that is, objectifies it so it can be dissected), the layperson personalizes it (restores the humanity of the plastinates). This is moderated by von Hagens, who gives each body its own posthumous identity, yet grounds the show in the classic anatomy of the unnamed cadaver. “BodyWorlds aims to establish a medical view, but visitors obstinately connect bodies with persons, their relationship to the exhibits being communicative [emotionally interactive] rather than detached,” writes Walters in “BodyWorlds” (478). We look beyond the physique in search of a life story. Since the average visitor does not have the clinical detachment of the medically educated, he or she wants to read personality in the pose. The viewer may gravitate to a particular plastinate because of a sensible, sympathetic, or even sentimental attachment. Whether we know him or not, we want to see the Skin Man as the individual he was, not necessarily to know his life story, but to honor the gift of his body. Even if viewers cannot identify the figures in the exhibition, they may be able to identify with them.

**Names and words**

In assessing the Skin Man’s nominal identity, I come to the conclusion that it is completely lacking. The body is anonymous. In keeping with medical tradition, von Hagens keeps the names of the donors confidential. His essay “On Gruesome Corpses” explains, “Anonymity neutralizes the individual, emotional bonds to the deceased and underscores the change in meaning of a corpse from an object of mourning to one of study.” The name is presumably buried deeply in Gunther von Hagens’ files, but not even essential data like age at death is revealed about the man who became the Skin Man. His name has been displaced by the name of anatomist Gunther von Hagens, who is always mentioned in connection with the Skin Man.
along with the occasional nickname of “Dr. Death” or “Frankenstein.” So the Skin Man does have an identity but it is not his own—his body has become an extension of von Hagens’ personality and celebrity. Von Hagens is known to be a self-promoter. He performed a live dissection on British TV and made a cameo appearance on the reality TV series “Regency House Party.” And BodyWorlds is featured in the most recent James Bond movie “Casino Royale.” Rumors swirl around the anatomist: his plans to be plastinated and shown dissecting his father, his intention to film the death and plastination of a terminally ill patient, his idea to show a plastinate realistically crucified on a cross. “It is an honour to cause this controversy,” says von Hagens (quoted in Jeffries) as he promotes both himself and his technique.

We do not have the firsthand words of the plastinates as we do with the anthropodermic book left by James Allen. In fact, we do not have any of their words at all. We have the inflammatory words of the media and the explanatory words of the exhibit’s promotional materials. And we have the sometimes self-serving words of anatomist Gunther von Hagens in interviews and in articles in the exhibit catalog.

In his rhetoric, von Hagens makes clear that plastination and individual identity are incompatible. The root of the word he coined to describe his preservation method—plastination—is, he explains, from the Greek _plassein_, meaning to mold or form (von Hagens, “Anatomy and Plastination” 28), and makes clear that he is shaping corpses into something other than themselves. They are dissociated from their identities and assigned new ones. For von Hagens, bodies are first donors and then plastinates. He is the one who oversees their transition from unique named body to representative specimen of his design. The names under which they donated their bodies have been replaced with nicknames inspired by their
poses. They were people, but plastination takes some of that away (for instance, by making them look unreal) and adds something else (namely, the universalizing of that particular body). The plastinates are unique bodies, in that they are genetically different from one another, even though they are no longer specific named individuals.

Donors give up their own posthumous identity to become, in von Hagens’ words, “anatomical cultural heritage” (“Anatomy and Plastinates”). In other words they are transformed into both specimens and symbols for all of us. If plastinates were named—in the language of this thesis, if they had a nominal identity—they would be grieved over as losses. They are incorruptible anatomical specimens, public museum specimens, not memorialized lives. By removing signs of individual identity (for instance, intact faces, which have an importance to individuality that will be discussed in the next chapter) and replacing them with attributes that may be easily shared by visitors. The donors’ names remains secret; displaced by the name of the anatomist who uses the donated body after stripping it of name and skin.

**Book and Body**

In addition to textual characterizations, there is a metaphor in which the plastinates and their anatomist both participate: the idea of the body as a book. In the pre-Renaissance dissecting theater, the anatomist read from a medical text while the assistant demonstrated on the cadaver: the corpse was the recipient and exemplar of the authorial word. In the subsequent dissecting theater of Andreas Vesalius, the anatomist replaced the demonstrator next to the cadaver: “The opened body has replaced the opened book as the source of anatomical knowledge, suggesting that responsibility for knowledge now lies within its exposed interiority,” writes
Maria Angel (35). In *The Body Emblazoned* (131), Jonathan Sawday also notes the lasting influence of sixteenth-century Vesalius:

…the body, once it had been transported into the theatre, became the blank canvas upon which the dissector mapped complex interlaced structures. The body was the anatomist’s stage, upon which he outlined a complete text.

In the Renaissance, the metaphor continued, as the body was conceived as the *liber corporum*, the book of the body written by God, so that the anatomist was reading from two bodily texts: one consisting of the observations of his predecessors and the other composed by God and revealed in detail as the dissection progressed (Sawday 135). Angel goes on to explain the modern Foucauldian idea that as the primary canonical text disappears into the flesh, *word* is made *thing* and words and visibilities are merged, mapping representation back onto being. Backed by these concepts, von Hagens locates all anatomical knowledge within the peeled and posed bodies of his plastinates, making the following quote from Maria Angel (35) particularly appropriate:

The body, then, comprises a set of folded surfaces that can be opened like a book, and the process of inscription or engraving retheorized in terms of a process similar to flaying—the description of the incision *drawn* on the body in this case can refer to a process of writing as unsheathing.

As the body is dissected it both becomes an “anatomy” (an early word for “cadaver”) and reveals anatomy. Through dissection, the body becomes both the site and the meaning of this *corpus* of knowledge, but part of that meaning is inscribed on the “passive authority” of the cadaver not only by the dissector, but by the audience viewing and describing it (Cregan 35).
Von Hagens makes it possible for the museum-goer to learn from the body directly. With the visual access visitors are given to authentic bodies comes the satisfaction of confirming the facts ourselves. We are reading the book that von Hagens offers.

**Cultural identity of Gunther's plastinates**

As extensions of Gunther von Hagens, plastinates represent *bis* political, social, and historic views. As a student of anatomical history, von Hagens draws on the past to inform his transformation of anatomical art. Modern technology—which he developed—allows him to carry out his ideas in three dimensions using authentic bodies. With their identities and vital statistics kept anonymous, we know nothing of the social classes of the plastinates. Their gender is obvious, but with their skin removed, visitors remain uninformed of their race. The plastinates therefore do not have a cultural identity of their own. And in addition to adopting the political persona of their creator, the plastinates are at the mercy of the media, which tend to sensationalize them. The factuality and neutrality of traditional medical images gives way to the drama and sensation that a soccer goalie corpse or a flayed archer lend themselves to. It is the *assembly* of such dramatic and provocative figures that BodyWorlds promotes and the “choreography” of the exhibits that draws the crowds. The portrayal of the show as “something to see” is done with photographs that capture the liveliness and originality of the plastinates and the character of their anatomist Gunther von Hagens. All of this overshadows the original donors—and even the controversy about other sources of bodies. So not only is the unique contribution of the Skin Man eclipsed by his associations with St. Bartholomew and Michelangelo, he is less an individual specimen than part of a collection—a cast of anatomical corpses in a heavily promoted show with von Hagens as ringmaster.
Conclusions

Jordanova and others make clear that the corpse is a problematic object to begin with, because of our many (often contradictory) associations with it. In “Plastination for Display,” Walters lists dead bodies as generating “repulsion, awe, symbolism, and ritual.” We are especially bothered when the body remains, but the identity does not—as with plastinates. The status of the unburied corpse is on uncertain ground, as Kylie Rachel Message (127) clarifies: “The corpse is an absence, yet it remains visible as a very present and disturbing absence.” The body is there, but the person is not. This is in part obscured by the active positioning of the plastinates, which gives them a liveliness and gestural quality. We want to see them as models, to imagine them as alive. We may make an association with a plastination’s gender or the sport he or she is engaged in. One plastinate may have many different meanings to each of us. There is strong symbolic component to our relationship with plastinates. Whether they are a symbol to the viewer of individual mortality or universal anatomy, they represent things other than the life of the person whose body we see before us.

In the final analysis plastination and the perpetuation of identity are at odds with each other. The specimen, if properly curated, will remain intact for centuries, making it a viable vehicle for commemoration. The owner of the body specifically designated it for von Hagens’ use, for reasons we can only speculate about.6 But associating identity with a specimen requires naming it or publicly documenting it, and the plastinate donors are anonymous. This medical standard is adhered to on purpose by von Hagens to avoid any individual memorialization or enshrinement. We do see them as

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6 Reason for donation is one of the questions on the BodyWorlds Donor’s Consent form, but the answers are not made public. Possible answers include: serving a good cause, wanting to be preserved forever, being fascinated by public exhibition, finding traditional disposal methods distasteful, saving burial expenses, having no relatives to tend the grave, and finding plastination fascinating.
individuals, but only anatomically. Activities have been imposed by the anatomist. He wants the plastinates to represent a shared humanity, so he arranges them in poses like bicycling and dancing that the public can relate to and conditions like fetal development and pregnancy that they have read about, but may not have seen in three dimensions. “Though arranged ostensible to display certain anatomical features, the whole-body plastinates are given a social identity,” writes Tony Walters (“Body Worlds” 469). In addition to being a generalized individual, a single plastinate is part of a group. One of the figures in one of the BodyWorlds exhibitions. So we do not just see each of them—and certainly not their living personalities, we see ourself in one of them. A plastinate is not who he was, he is who he is to me. She is not the woman she was in life, she is someone charitable (or egotistical, or shameless) enough to direct her preservation by plastination so that von Hagens can use it to convey an activity sculpturally. In the end, plastinates are the bow, not the who.
III
“Sometimes the objects seem to be you”

Issues of Identity Raised by Anatomical Specimens

CASE STUDY

Dr. Joseph P. Tunis (1866-1936) prepared two sectioned heads in 1910 that are now in the collection of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and on exhibit at the College’s Mütter Museum, founded in 1858. The objects were originally intended as teaching specimens, though medical instruction in the U.S. today rarely relies on such anatomical preparations, so their value now is historic. They are also valued as subjects by contemporary art photographers like Arne Svenson, Richard Ross, Steven E. Katzman, Max Aguilera-Hellweg, Ariel Ruiz i Altalba, Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig, and
others who have been welcomed at the museum. A similar sectioned head in the Mütter Museum collection, prepared by Dr. Oscar V. Batson (1874-1979) of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, was photographed by Rosamond Purcell. These art photographs, much different than the clinical medical photographs in the museum’s archives, highlight the impact and import that a preserved human head—and in particular, a face—has on the viewer.

One of the heads is sectioned sagittally (vertically sliced from side to side). The other, which I will focus on, is sectioned coronally (from front to back), beginning with a striking slice containing the facial features. Unlike some of the other specimens at the museum—the bladder stones of Chief Justice John Marshall; the tumor removed from the jaw of President Grover Cleveland; the livers of Chang and Eng Bunker, the “Original Siamese Twins”—these heads are anonymous. If the names were well-known, they would certainly be featured on the placard, since identity trumps anatomy when it can. This holds true of the famous, the infamous, and the anomalous (those known for their bodies). These heads were presumably from unremarkable unclaimed bodies or patients of Dr. Tunis, although there is no evidence for this. We can assume Tunis was a Fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, since he contributed these specimens from his private practice to the museum. The slices in the two series are displayed suspended in liquid in rectangular glass containers.

**INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS**

**Symbolic and religious immortality**

If one measure of identity is whether the surviving specimen appropriately reflects the person’s life, the sectioned head fails miserably. How are we to know, when we know nothing about what that life was like?
We can infer—but with no certainty—that the individual was indigent and the body was unclaimed until Dr. Tunis made use of it. We can assume—although not unequivocally—that the person was a patient of Dr. Tunis. He would have known whether the patient would have approved of body donation. If the body was in fact unclaimed, the patient was therefore anonymous to almost everyone during life. After death, that very real face becomes anyone. And after the doctor dies, the patient dies in living memory. So the name may exist in a long-forgotten file or museum accession record, but the identity has vanished even though some of the flesh remains.

Those remaining slices of the mortal remains are dignified by being carefully curated. They symbolize the gift that the body donation may have been, but more than that they are secular relics. Anthony Synnott (84-5), dates this idea of reverence for the body to the early Christians, for whom the incarnation of God in the body of his son divinized it, made the Word flesh, made the body holy. Because we do not know the donor’s personality, we cannot make any informed guesses concerning religious belief. But we can assume that preserving part of the body would not interfere with any beliefs about bodily resurrection. If the individual were religious but purposely donated his or her body pre-mortem (although the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act was not enacted until 1968), the reason would have been altruism, since an attempt to immortalize one’s presence on earth would have been seen in Judeo-Christian tradition as a sin of vanity or excessive pride.

The religious context contrasts with the pragmatic drive of science to categorize and curate, to maintain the collection intact for future generations. In both the sacred and the secular, the remains are “enshrined”—the finger of St. Theresa of Avila, the vertebra of John Wilkes Booth—but unlike most
religious and many secular relics, the name in this case is not venerated along with the preserved flesh. This puts the emphasis on the anatomy, rather than the life that it served. The name of the specimen becomes the name of the part it exemplifies. It is intended to be looked at as that specific structure of the anatomy, rather than the person whose life was embodied in that flesh. And yet it is the most personal part—the face—that has been preserved in this case. Still, it is treated objectively, rather than sentimentally or emotionally. The face is the first of a series of uniform slices through the head, each of which is placed in a vitrine and angled for best viewing of the anatomical structures.

Synnott (90) points out that the body became privatized in the Renaissance, so anatomical specimens are also imbued with the idea that they belonged to their owners and that whether or not that ownership was willingly shared, the viewer is in a sense a voyeur. So regardless of whether the patient wanted to be remembered in this way, the face is the revelation of secrets. Here we are privy to the interior of a person’s head. Not to the thoughts, but to the flesh in microscopic detail. It is individual, particular to that person. Those are his or her cells. The pattern of the sinuses is unique. But even so, this specific head which once held a specific personality is meant to be representative of all humans. It has become a universal to signify the anatomy of which we are each made up. The person that the face belonged to has less symbolic immortality than anatomical presence, a window into the viewer’s head. Individuality is deemphasized and commonality is highlighted. The person remains anonymous to the viewer, which restricts the relationship to the visual.

The view of the head is disturbing in one sense because of its disembodiment, which provokes thoughts of beheading and brings up the taboo of mutilation of the body. This physical violence, along with the
violence that sectioning the specimen would entail may be remotely tied to
the ascetic idea of the mortification of the flesh, that furthering the mind
requires taming the body—and this medical specimen is nothing more than
evidence that the human body is being tamed by being understood. This
stands apart from any religious component that would elevate the soul. This
purely secular relic is being retained to continue to serve as an educational
exhibit. But with the Cartesian idea that body and soul are separate, the
preservation of the flesh does not preclude an afterlife for the soul. So we
know neither the identity of this preserved face, nor the religious status
beyond the specimen’s physical presence. What remains are the uniform
slices that offer what is to be learned about the head’s physical interior, not
what is to be remembered about the person.

**Physical immortality**

Photographs of Dr. Tunis’ preparations appear in the book *Mütter Museum* by its late director Gretchen Worden, who begins her preface as
follows:

In most museums you go to look at objects. In the Mütter Museum,
sometimes the objects seem to be looking at you. And sometimes the
objects seem to be you.

Almost one hundred years after these eyes had sight, the lids look like they
could open to reveal blue or brown irises that would give focus to the clear
and calm face. The lips remain slightly parted to reveal some of the teeth in
the upper jaw. The specimen has a presence, but has remained static for
decades. The face and head slices fulfill the criterion of physical immortality
by demonstrating excellent preservation over the long term. The specimen
of the face is the first in a series and while they have needed maintenance
over the years (replacement of preservative fluid), they remain stable and in
a condition fit to exhibit. Its continued exhibit underscores this face’s value
as a physical object—anatomically (as a continued educational specimen) and historically (as an example of analog anatomy that has been superceded by digital anatomy). It is evidence of the efficacy of Dr. Tunis’s preservation technique, which allows the specimen to function as a three-dimensional anatomical illustration. The specimen remains a now rather rare example of authentic human anatomy, since the preservation of actual body parts has given way to models, and most recently to virtual reality.

German soldier injured in World War I, from Ernst Friedrich’s WAR against WAR!, Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1987 (Orig. published in German in 1924). Dissected head in soup bowl, c. 1905 (The Burns Archive).

But the specimen has added value as a face. Faces are central to the person and the locus of the skin that covers the body. Consider Jordanova’s quote in “Happy Marriages”: “Bodies are dangerous terrain, not only because they suffer, endure pain, die and decay, but also because they are the medium through which all experience is apprehended.” This can be narrowed to the skin and mostly to the face. Faces are associated with names and personalities. They are where we meet others—eye to eye—and how we remember each other. The face and the identity have a close relationship. To have a face = to have an identity = to have life. As the photographs above demonstrate, we want to equate having a face with being alive, even when that is not the case. We are mortified by the idea of
the soldier alive with so much of the face missing, and equally shocked by such an expressive human face obviously dead.

The importance of faces can be demonstrated by the concern over face transplants. Many are afraid that the identity of the donor will be transferred to the recipient, even though surgeons insist that the appearance will be affected by underlying bone structure so that the donor's face will not be recognizable. The face is a challenging area to perform transplant surgery because of its physical and psychological complexities. The recipient is already vulnerable because of disfigurement, and yet may experience distress over the new appearance, even if it is more pleasing. And then there is the further danger of graft failure, that could leave the recipient worse off. The transplant area is thought of as a "mask," with openings for the eyes, nostrils area, and mouth, but it must be absorbed into the identity of the recipient. And this new hybrid identity is at risk as the media clamor for information about this new surgery (Strong 13).

Sandeep Kaur at age 9 before the accident in which her face and scalp were torn off when one of her braids was caught in a grass-cutting machine. Sandeep arrived at the hospital unconscious with her face in a bag. The face was reattached by Indian microsurgeons and she is shown after the surgery. The case is considered the first successful full-face replant and inspired face transplants (www.discovery.com).

The face in the case of the sectioned head is obviously less dramatic and animated, but also confusing. The eyes look like they may open at any moment, yet the individual is dead. The face is that of an individual, but that
unique person is a stranger to us. So we are free to make a symbol of it. We may treat it as Dr. Tunis intends, as an instructional specimen, or we may respond more emotionally and consider it an example of human mortality, our deceased counterpart. The specimen is not a typical *memento mori*, but can serve as a death’s-head just as plastinates serve as a symbol of mortality on one level. But many of us may respond on a more pedestrian level, wondering who this person was. We do not know this face in the sense that we do not know the name to which it once responded, we know nothing of the personality, we do not know what kind of patient this was—and we are not even certain of the gender! It is a face both specific and general, suspended in a timeless context. The physical vehicle of the identity has survived for a century, but anonymity replaced personality when the patient died and Dr. Tunis prepared the specimens.

**Intention**

As mentioned above, the use of this body preceded the drafting of the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act. It is possible that the body of an impoverished patient was unclaimed at death and Dr. Tunis used the body (or at least the head) to perform a dissection—not just to satisfy his own curiosity and to advance his professional development, but to educate budding medical students by offering his private specimens for public display. We know nothing of any intent on the part of the owner of the face, but we know by his actions that Dr. Tunis acted with intent. In conceiving of his preparation, Dr. Tunis probably hoped for a specimen with a common, unextraordinary face, a face that could stand in for the infinite variety of others. Although he may not have had too many cadavers to choose from, he would have selected the one with what has been called an “iconic face”—a face that is average enough to be representative, but individual enough to be believable. Dr. Tunis also shows intent through the thickness of the slices, the method
of preparation, and the donation of the specimen to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Dr. Tunis has assumed the intent of his patient without permission, as distinct from Dr. von Hagens, who confirms intent and carries out mutual wishes. The result in each instance, though, is a specimen that takes on the identity of its creator.

**Putting a name with a face**

We do not know the name associated with this face. We can assume that Dr. Tunis knew it and that it was recorded in his records, which may or may not be extant. It is by medical tradition that the name of a cadaver (and by extension an anatomical preservation) is kept anonymous. There are obvious exceptions—secular relics like presidential specimens and the remains of those well-known in the media and in their communities like Chang and Eng Bunker—but on the whole, privacy is well-respected, for instance the suppression of the name of the Kentucky Giant, whose skeleton is on prominent display at the Mütter Museum. And again the opposite: the name of the misshapen skeleton of Harry R. Eastlack, Jr. (d. 1973), is respectfully attached to his remains by way of the museum placard and publicity materials because he had bequeathed them to the Mütter Museum. Eastlack’s name is associated with both his skeleton and his painful disease (*myositis ossificans progressiva*, in which the connective tissue turns to bone). The person whose face and interior brain we alternately peer into has no public identity and no name-worthy anomaly, so the specimen takes on the name of the anatomist-embalmer instead. The face has lost its name, which is well within the scientific tradition of respecting patient privacy.

Visually, someone who knew this individual would find the specimen recognizable. So the specimen of the sectioned head would have retained a nominal identity while living on in human memory. But over time, the members of the patient’s generation cohort would also die, and the already
dwindling name recognition would also die out entirely. The specimen would have made the transition from *who* to *what*. No longer recognized by the living, the sectioned head was, in subsequent decades, more objective an anatomical specimen for it. As James Elkins (200) states, “A face, in the end, is the place where the coherent mind becomes an image.” To put it another way, it is the face that reminds us of the mind, that stands for the personality, and that we associate with an individual, which is why there are such close ties to the name. In the case of the sectioned head, the name and nothing of the personality remains attached to this face. Because it is intended to be an objective example, the features of the face have not been manipulated. The face is not funerealized (like traditionally embalmed corpses) or aestheticized (like plastinates) and becomes neutral. Any perceived expression is a consequence of the embalming or the tug of the strings holding the specimen in suspense in the preservative fluid. And with no clues to the *personhood* of the person, the specimen has become a true anatomical universal.

**Names at odds with universal notions**

Dr. Tunis’ patient did not have a renowned name or identity or it would have remained attached to the specimen. José van Dijck and Lisa Cartwright each point out an issue with names that arose during the Visible Human Project (VHP) undertaken by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) in the mid-1990s. Two cadavers, one male and one female, became the first Visible Humans by being sliced and digitized at one-millimeter intervals. Thousands of cross-sections were made available electronically for adaptive uses. Stereotypes, such as his virile status, traced to the release of the male donor’s name became ingrained in the publicity surrounding the project, if not the project itself. Unlike the female donor, who retained her right to privacy and is known only as a “Maryland housewife,” the male cadaver’s
identity was revealed in great detail and he was designated an “Internet Angel” (Cartwright, “A Cultural Anatomy of the Visible Human Project”). In addition to the characterization, the Visible Man became a known identity, which interfered with the objectivity of the project. He was a murderer: Joseph Paul Jernigan, executed by lethal injection in Texas in 1993. Through his body donation, Jernigan assured that his personal narrative of moral corruption in life was followed by redemption in death, a parallel with James Allen and his anthropodermic book.

In giving up not only his life but his body in exchange for his crimes, the Visible Man is authenticated—humanized—by his personal history and his established identity. Though the men heading the Visible Human Project claim that the release of Jernigan’s name had been unintended, Lisa Cartwright (“A Cultural Anatomy” 173) offers a different explanation:

It is precisely because of Jernigan’s status as less than a private citizen, as a subject stripped of certain rights under the auspices of the state, that he qualified as a universal biomedical subject and as a public icon of physical health. The universal biomedical subject is thus a subject stripped of his rights to privacy and bodily integrity, even after death. Assigning one’s body to science means signing away certain rights, of which Jernigan was already deprived. He was a modern (consenting) counterpart to the hanged criminals given over to the nineteenth-century dissectionists (Richardson). And yet, the Visible Man is all about Jernigan’s story rather than what the digital dissection of his body reveals. His identity trumps his anatomy, which would suggest that if we knew the name of this sectioned face specimen, we may be more interested in the individual’s history than the internal structures that Dr. Tunis’ slicing reveals.

**Literary and cultural identity**
The donor of the Tunis specimen has willingly or unknowingly given up his or her remains to become an example of the interior of the human head (and possibly other anatomical structures). The slices are lined up in order on the museum shelf and the specimens are collectively known as coronal sections. The labels with the specimens bear the name of the doctor (Joseph P. Tunis) who preserved them and the year (1910) in which he carried out this anatomical embalming success. As the subject of recent art photographs, the anonymous owner of the sliced head wears another mantle of names, including Rosamond Purcell and others who made art of the flesh. As the subjects of contemporary photographs, the head sections become part of the visual makeup of Gretchen Worden’s book *Mütter Museum*. They are part of the choreography of the exhibit, as it is toured in person, making up a part of the whole. And they are raw material for metaphor about the human condition. Like plastinates, they become more than mere anatomy, but a provocative vehicle for thought.


*Peripheral Space.*

In addition to taking on a cultural identity as subjects of contemporary photographs, these series of sectioned heads preserve the posterity of Dr. Tunis, the man who preserved *them*. The specimen of the face leads the viewer inside the head and back out, to navigate a dissection of the human head in perpetuity. Medical students and doctors made reference to such things decades ago (Worden). They would have been (and still are) of use to medical illustrators. But they are now rarely relied on to prepare for a surgery on the sinus, for instance, or to study for a test on the brain or the eyes. Instead, these specimens serve to mark history. They preserve the idea of their use over the years. In other words, they are not only anatomical exhibits, but examples of how such exhibits have been used in the past. They are history exhibits as much as they are anatomy preparations (Worden). Since such specimens are now digitized and rarely examined in person, what we see in our gaze is an antique. The specimen of the face is more than a lifetime old, so viewers are not as concerned with its identity as they are with the plastinates. The head was sectioned by a doctor who is dead, too. But whether primarily anatomical or historical, the slices of this person’s head are far from biographical. We can deduce very little. The head had no interior or exterior anomalies or Dr. Tunis would have noted this rather than offering the specimen as a typical example. The flesh remains as intact as it was when Dr. Tunis offered it to the museum. The name has long vanished.

**Conclusions**

Centuries of anatomical preservation assure that what I have termed physical immortality can be achieved and maintained. The sectioned head that Dr. Joseph Tunis prepared in 1910 still looks like a face in the crowd from the front, with no signs of death—except perhaps for closed eyes. Yet,
as human and familiar and well-preserved as this specimen is, no personal
data about the individual is divulged, not even the vital statistics that
students in the gross anatomy lab are privileged to know. By virtue of its
preservation, the sectioned head has become a secular relic, a body part
preserved as anatomic, rather than divine. Unlike the sacred relics of the
church, which are carefully authenticated as belonging to a particular saint,
anatomical relics are labelled by body part rather than donor name. The
specimen is from an individual and therefore unique, but its exhibit within
the context of the medical museum codes it as a representative example. If
“Sectioned Head” had a name, it would conflict with the reading of the
anatomical display as an objective sample of the internal organs and
structures of the human head—an atlas of what we each have inside our
skulls. It has become apparent through this study that name and universality
are incompatible. To put it another way, the specimen is either a who or a
what, not both.

Without a nominal identity to focus on, viewers see the display as an
eexample of human anatomy, but they are even more free to make other
associations. For some visitors, the face may serve as a symbol of mortality—
a memento mori, causing them to reflect on the death of the specimen and
by association, their own deaths. Others may be concerned with issues of
consent, whether or not it was simply assumed at that time. Some viewers
may be influenced by the dissection that was necessary to prepare the
specimen because of negative associations with the mutilation of the corpse
in Western culture. Some visitors may know the sectioned head as the
subject of art photographs before they see it in person at the museum. As
objective as a scientific specimen tries to be, it draws associations far
beyond human anatomy when it consists of authentic human remains. When
the specimen includes a face, the associations become that much more
subjective because of the viewer's emotional attachments. Suppressing the specimen's name allows it—through anonymity—to function as a universal. So unless one is famous or has a physical anomaly, an anatomical specimen is an ineffective means of ensuring that one’s identity survives as long as the specimen does.
Conclusion

I entitled the chapter about James Allen’s narrative “A logical if macabre enterprise,” which is how anthropodermic bookbinding was described by a historian. The practice has resulted in posthumous preservation by binding the identity to the anatomy, and is bolstered by centuries of thought equating book and body. Obscure names are remembered from the nineteenth century—William Corder, Antoine LeBlanc, and John Horwood—because the transcripts of their trials were bound in their skin as part of a death sentence for murder. In Allen’s case, it wasn’t his trial transcript, but his autobiography. And it wasn’t his sentence, it was his intention. Allen fulfills the Intention criteria by choosing his own fate. He has left us his name (nominal identity) and his words (literary-linguistic identity); he has distinguished himself as an individual (individuality and universality) and conveyed his personality to future generations (symbolic immortality); and his remains and identity have survived (physical immortality), allowing Allen’s anthropodermic book to assume its place in history (cultural identity). The only criterion that Allen alone fails to meet is visual identity: the leather binding does not attempt a likeness and the text does not contain an illustration. But short of knowing what James Allen looked like, we are better-acquainted with him than either of the other two specimens.
The face that the Allen book lacks is what most characterizes the sectioned head. The title of that chapter is “Sometimes the objects seem to be you.” This was intended to draw attention to the influences on identity and individuality when the face is part of an anatomical specimen. When the identity is withheld, the specimen is universalized. It remains on the shelf of the medical museum for years demonstrating both the interior of the head and the analog techniques of the turn of the twentieth century. The face—because it is “nobody’s” face—can be the anatomical specimen that Dr. Tunis originally intended, it can be a text in the anatomical record now that the images can be achieved non-invasively, and it can even remind us of our own deaths by being so physically defiant in its own by remaining in this perpetual state of preservation. The sectioned head fulfills the criteria of physical immortality and visual identity, but little else. It can be placed at one extreme of a continuum. The anonymity of the face leaves room for substitute identities, but no others take residence, leaving the haunting early twentieth-century face suspended in time and providing an authentic counterpart to the anatomical atlas.

The graphic title “Why do you tear me from myself?” is what the Greek God Marsyas was said to have exclaimed when he was flayed. I used it for the chapter on the Skin Man because not only has his skin been removed,
so has his identity. Von Hagens has torn him from himself both literally and figuratively. Where the sectioned head remains identitiless, the Skin Man does the opposite by layering the figure with rich allusions to everything from the history of anatomical illustration to the painting of the Sistine Chapel to figures from Greek myth. Where the sectioned head becomes a specimen of universal human anatomy, the plastinate does so equally effectively, while at the same time offering creative dissections and multiple identities. Von Hagens insists—and I must agree—that allowing his plastinates to retain their original names would turn them into relics.

The plastinates stand out for a number of reasons, not least because they alone are a spectacle. They are larger than life, sometimes literally. They have a visual flourish, while in comparison the sectioned head has no personalizing details like hair. The plastinates are playful. Their faces are aestheticized, where the sectioned head is not. Both show liveliness even in death, and as universals can be seen as the faces of strangers but also as their anatomical components. The Skin Man and the sectioned head are both anatomical illustrations brought to life. Both are individuals, but the face is stripped of personality whereas plastinates are rich in history and illusion. Only the sectioned head suffers “social death,” in that the original owner of the remains is not known (unlike the Allen book) and the lost identity has not been replaced (as it has in plastinates).

The anthropodermic book is set apart from the other two specimens because it survives as a curiosity rather than an anatomical model. The *Highwayman* offers no likeness and is characterized by a non-traditional preparator, in this case an unsuspecting bookbinder. The book is a finished object, unlike the sectioned head and the plastinate, which are preserved in a perpetual state of dissection. Where the Skin Man appears to be participating in his own dissection, Allen did the same thing by designating
the flaying of his skin after death. Allen succeeded in memorializing himself, which is something von Hagens guards against with the plastinates. Allen remains a specific named individual, as opposed to the sectioned head and the Skin Man, who are universal. But the Skin Man and Allen share the fact that each has several selves, including Allen being “two-faced” with the warden about his remorse.


All three specimens have a distinct relationship to the book-body metaphor. The Allen book is the only specimen to actively merge book and body. But the plastinates have been characterized by von Hagens and in this thesis as books from which anatomical information may read. Both Allen, as he offers his life story, and the Skin Man and the other plastinates, who display any evidence of unhealthy habits like smoking, can be interpreted as morality tales. The more objective sectioned head is made up of slices displayed in order and function almost like the pages of the book, so sectioned specimens, too, are in theory another “book of the body.” If the
body can be considered a “book jacket” of the soul, the face and the plastinated body are interchangeable with others of their kind. The Allen book, on the other hand, is suffused with the highwayman’s personality and identity that it could not be substituted. It was, however, duplicated, with two copies made, and so makes an interesting counterpart to the dual plastinated figures (skeletal and muscular) from a single body.

All three of these specimens—the Skin Man, the sectioned head, and the Allen book—are one-of-a-kind and bypass abjection by being successfully preserved. This preservation perpetuates their presence on earth. As Flammarion explains that the fleshly remains of his countess admirer can be maintained in a respectful state of preservation, the same can be said of the face and the plastinate. The three objects continue to circulate in society by remaining on exhibit. Institutionalized curation plays a part in the preservation of all three. Dignity is shown to the human remains in all three cases, although some criticize plastinates as disrespectful. At the same time, they each suffer in a minor way from dissection’s traditional associations with punishment and poverty and from the strong taboo against the mutilation of the corpse. Less apparent in the Skin Man than the sectioned head and the Allen book is the dismantling required to prepare the specimen: sliced in the case of the head, flayed and tanned in the case of The Highwayman. Each specimen is also necessarily an example of its preservation technique.

Patient confidentiality and traditional medical objectivity dictate that a medical specimen have anonymity if it is to be representative. If a patient gives up that right, as in the case of Harry Eastlack, Jr., whose skeleton is curated at the Mütter Museum, that specimen is no longer universal. A body part is not representative when it belonged to a president. A specimen is about its narrative rather than its anatomy when it is from a presidential
assassin. Eastlack’s skeleton and the joined livers of Chang and Eng Bunker are anomalous body parts attached to famous anomalous bodies. The specimens are about their condition, their lives, their *identities*. In conclusion, it seems that an anatomical specimen can either be an anonymous and objective example of the human form or a named individual with an identity that leads the viewer back to his or her life. Identity and universality appear to be mutually exclusive. In terms of the examples analyzed, the Skin Man is everyone but himself, the book is no one but James Allen. In terms of a continuum, the plastinates are *how*, the face is *what*, and the book is *who*. Allen’s agency and willfullness translate into successful perpetuation of his memory and identity.

**Graphic comparison of identity criteria in three anatomical specimens**

[Graph showing comparison of identity criteria for Skin Man, Plastinate, and James Allen Narrative]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic immortality</th>
<th>Physical immortality</th>
<th>Intention</th>
<th>Visual identity</th>
<th>Individuality and universality</th>
<th>Nominal identity</th>
<th>Literary-linguistic identity</th>
<th>Cultural identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skin Man Plastinate</td>
<td>James Allen Narrative</td>
<td>Sectioned Head Specimen</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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Photographic diagram of posterior view of sliced head, prepared for the Mutter Muæum by Dr. Joseph P. Tunis (1866-1936), 1910 (www.blastbooks.com).


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