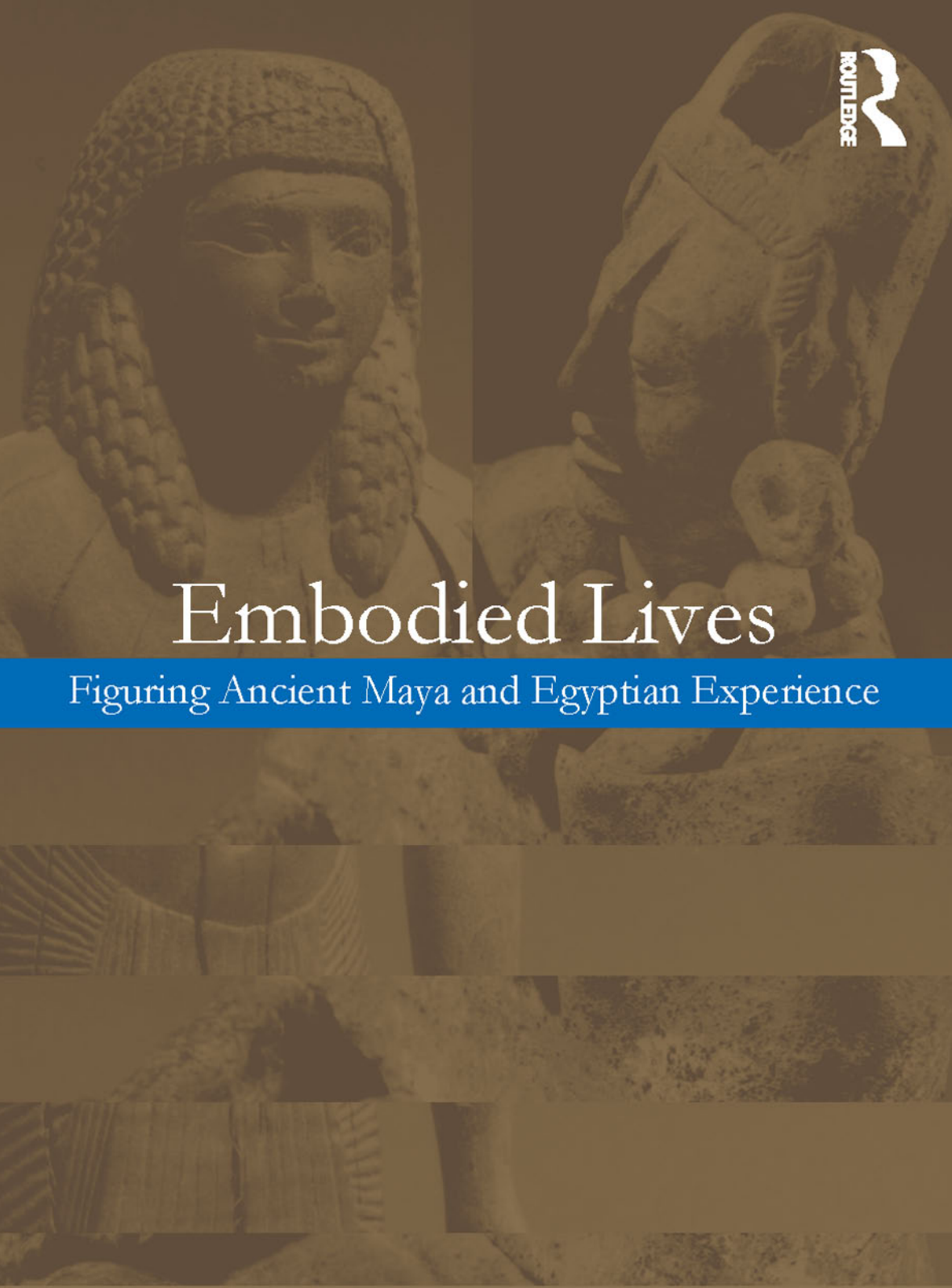

Embodied Lives

Figuring Ancient Maya and Egyptian Experience

Lynn M. Meskell and Rosemary A. Joyce

EMBODIED LIVES

Ancient Maya and Egyptian cultures present evidence of similar concerns with body and self: monumental art depicts complex costume and standards of beauty, and ornaments, cosmetics, and items of dress used by the living are recovered in tombs in which the bodies of the dead were arrayed. Despite the centrality of such practices, these two civilizations had very different ways of treating, understanding and experiencing the body.

Taking bodily materiality as a crucial starting point to the understanding and formation of self in any society, Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce offer a new approach to both civilizations centred on understanding embodiment. They examine a wide range of archaeological data, using it to explore issues such as the sexual body, mind/body dualism, body modification, and magical practices.

Drawing on insights from feminist theory, art history, phenomenology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, the book sheds new light on Ancient Egyptian and Maya cultures. Theorizing the body across two cultures, this book shows how a comparative project can open up new lines of inquiry by raising questions about accepted assumptions. Drawing attention to the long-term histories and specificities of embodiment, it makes the case for the importance of ancient materials for contemporary theorization of the body.

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FOREWORD

The phenomenology of lived experience

The human body has become a topic of intensive study in the last two decades, and its development has challenged and changed the intellectual contours of anthropology and sociology. Scientific and technological advances in medicine and genetics, particularly the new reproductive technologies and cloning techniques, have given the human body a problematic legal and social status. In futuristic visions of health and illness, aging and death no longer appear to be irreducible facts about the human condition. The development of the body as a topic of research in the humanities and social sciences is a response to these technological changes, and to the social movements that are associated with them—such as the women's movement and green politics on the one side and religious fundamentalism and conservative politics on the other. In contemporary sociology the body has been studied in a variety of contexts: in advertising and popular consumerism; in medical and ethical debates about the self and cloning; in research on the social meaning of AIDS/HIV; in postmodern reflections on cybernetics, cyberbodies and cyberpunk; and in the analysis of the trade in body organs between North and South. The body has been a dominant theme in feminist research on the changing social roles of women, female identity and sexuality, but it has gained a new urgency with the development of reproduction outside the womb. The body has been a crucial issue in queer theory in understanding masculinity, trans-sexuality and men's health. The body has thus emerged as a central feature of the sociological imagination, because its vulnerability and plasticity have been exposed by new genetic technologies that have raised questions about the possibility of a posthuman future. The cultural dominance of the body in social and political debate is not difficult to document or to comprehend, but the very complexity of the issues has raised intractable problems about how to study the body. Indeed, our most pressing question is: what is the body?

It is puzzling that, while the study of the body has enjoyed such a rampant growth in anthropology, sociology and history, it has not had much discernible impact on archaeology as a discipline. *Embodied Lives* is thus a remarkable book, because it establishes a new field of inquiry and provides a conceptual

map for re-organizing and redirecting the work of archaeologists. Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce take a decisive stand on how this field should develop through a critical reflection on the legacy of Michel Foucault, and what they call "discourse determinism," namely the tendency to regard the body as merely a cultural effect of discursive formations. Their work is explicitly a contribution to the phenomenology of embodied lives in the immediate, practical, everyday world rather than a reflection on the abstract body as a text or a system of signs. Their book is not a contribution to the deconstruction of the body as a system of archaeological traces, but an inquiry into body matters (blood, semen and tears) and fundamental social processes (reproduction, death and transubstantiation). Their research uncovers the complexity and diversity of the social institutions through which the human body is conveyed and how it is reconstructed through mortuary arts and other funeral technologies. Their bold and imaginative creation of an embodied archaeology explores the everyday world of Ancient Mayan and Egyptian cultures from the perspective of the tasks of embodiment in production and reproduction. The arrival of the lived body is a palpable turning point in contemporary archaeological theory.

Although one can, in the social sciences, trace this debate about the body and society back to the early writings of Karl Marx in the notion of *praxis*, its contemporary inspiration has come from a diversity of sources: the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the cultural anthropology of Mary Douglas, the feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, and the history of systems of knowledge of Michel Foucault. In more specific terms, the cultural study of the body began to surface in the late 1970s. For example, the American Anthropological Association held a conference on the anthropology of the body to reconsider the conventional debate about nature and cultural practice. Modern anthropology has attempted to avoid treating the body as a given or natural fact, and has, following Marcel Mauss, emphasized the notion of "bodily practices" that human beings must acquire and develop if they are to cope successfully with their world. Eating and walking, sleeping and copulating are body practices that express our place in society and constitute our individuality. These notions have in recent anthropological scholarship been expressed by Pierre Bourdieu in terms of the concepts of *hexis* and *habitus* in which our dispositions and tastes are organized. For example, within the everyday habitus of social classes, the body is a site of endless practices by which we invest symbolic capital with the result that the body is a living testament to hierarchies of social power. The body is permanently shaped and represented by the different aesthetics of social classes.

In part, the recovery of the body for contemporary research has depended on philosophical anthropology. For example, the controversial work of Arnold Gehlen has been important for the research of Hans Joas, Alex Honneth and Wolf Lepenies in Germany, and in the United States for Peter

Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Gehlen argued that in order to cope with their "world openness," human beings have to create a cultural sphere to replace or to supplement their instinctual world. It is their ontological incompleteness that provides an anthropological explanation for the origins of social institutions. Berger and Luckmann adopted this position to argue that, since human beings are biologically underdeveloped, they have to construct a "sacred canopy" around themselves in order to complete or supplement their biology. Institutions are the social bridges between humans and their physical environment, and it is through these institutions that human life becomes coherent, meaningful and continuous. In filling the gap created by instinctual deprivation, institutions provide humans with relief from the tensions generated by undirected, unfocused and abundant instinctual drives. The mortuary and funeral rituals that traditionally surround death are examples of such institutions that provide routine methods to deal with dead bodies and their decay and decomposition.

Despite the richness of these intellectual foundations, the contemporary anthropology and sociology of the body would have remained underdeveloped without feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir's study of the "second sex" in 1949 was a major contribution to the study of the body in society, and in particular to the patriarchal regulation of the female body. Her study was a contribution to the phenomenology of the gendered body, because she showed that women are not born but become women through social and psychological processes that construct them as eternally and essentially female. Her research on human aging also demonstrated the social invisibility and powerlessness of women in old age. Her work inaugurated a tradition of research on the socially constructed character of sexuality, but the paradox of this legacy has often been that the emphasis on the socially constructed quality of women's bodies in cultural studies has led to the disappearance of the lived body and embodiment as themes in feminist research. It is important to recapture the intellectual importance of the phenomenology of human embodiment in order to avoid the reduction of bodies to cultural texts. *Embodied Lives* thus has a double significance: it seeks to explore the phenomenology of the body in archaeology with an acute sensitivity to how gender was a dominant principle of the organization of the life-world of Mayan and Egyptian civilization.

There are many strands to the anthropological and sociological analysis of the body, but one unifying theme has been a profound distrust of the legacy of Cartesian dualism. In philosophical terms, the discovery of the importance of the body is connected with an implicit, and occasionally explicit, rejection of the Cartesian division between mind and body, in which the human body was merely a mechanical extension of the mind. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* had the effect of exorcising the body from the rational apprehension of the world. The body was interpreted as merely a contingent vehicle for the consciousness of the mind, and the imperial subject,

inconveniently equipped with its mechanical supports, surveyed and appropriated everything before him. The masculine subject is important here, because the mind was conceptualized as a sort of cognitive Odysseus whose journey through life was a triumph over physical adversity; it was a triumph over nature that prepared the way for the Enlightenment. This Olympian view of the subject has come under attack from a number of angles.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception criticized the Cartesian division of (active) mind and (passive) body by arguing that the world is neither given to us neutrally to examine at our leisure nor is it wholly constructed in a social vacuum by the knowing isolated subject. In this "philosophy of ambiguity," he argued that consciousness can never be understood correctly without paying attention to the embodied existence of conscious individuals. For Merleau-Ponty, all consciousness is perceptual, but philosophers have ignored the phenomenon of perceptual activity, that is the experiences of perception in the life-world are the experiences of an embodied subject, whose perception of their world is always from the point of view of the body. This archaeology of perception of the life-world was rooted in the body in the everyday world, and hence all perceptions of reality are inherently contingent. Merleau-Ponty's view of the contingencies that confront our being in the world gave his work an immediate appeal to French existentialism.

This phenomenological orientation to embodiment contrasts sharply with the legacy of Foucault, whose work owes a great deal to the "anti-humanism" of Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy of time had displaced the conscious subject of traditional Kantian philosophy by developing the concept of *Dasein* ("there-being") to argue that there is no pre-given human essence. Foucault, employing Heidegger against French existentialism, created an archaeological study of systems of knowledge ("discursive formations") that exist and develop independently of human intentions and beliefs, and as a result he rejected the centrality of the subject in the study of changes in knowledge. In his archaeological inquiries into the origins of homosexuality in classical Greece, he was not concerned to understand the phenomenology of sexual experiences, but rather to understand the "truth" of sex in relation to ideologies of masculinity and political power. These were studies, not of the facticity of everyday sexual activity, but rather inquiries into the abstract discursive systems that created the possibility of sex. Although Foucault's archaeology of knowledge was enormously important and creative, his legacy has often resulted in work that is dogmatic, narrow and imitative. Post-structuralist thought has become an orthodoxy in which the study of embodiment in the life-world of men and women is rigidly and blindly rejected in favour of research on systems of knowledge that slavishly imitate Foucault. As a result, Foucault's ethical project to show how the contingency of knowledge falsely pretends to certainty and thus limits our scope for action has often been neglected.

We might say, therefore, that there are two separate traditions in the anthropology and sociological study of the body. There is either the cultural decoding of the *body* as a system of meaning that has a definite structure existing separately from the intentions and conceptions of individuals, or there is the phenomenological study of *embodiment* that attempts to understand human practices that are organized around the life course (of birth, maturation, reproduction and death). *Embodied Lives* is an intellectual project, as the title indicates, that attempts to understand and recreate the lived experiences of human beings through archaeological investigation of the cultural artefacts of ancient Mayan and Egyptian civilizations. The authors uncover an astonishing world of embodiment where the complexity of bodies, hybrid creatures, sexual identities, and persons presents a constant challenge to our own post-industrial world, and in particular to our taken-for-granted notions about the individual and the body.

Their perspective on embodiment is also feminist. *Embodied Lives* is an account of phallic cultures in which there is a fluid economy of human and divine secretions that reproduce the world. The tears, sweat and semen of the gods become self-sustaining substances that have dramatic reproductive capacities. Material worlds are conjured up through the masturbatory exuberance of gods, and castration was the ultimate sign of power over the bodies of enemies. Because ancient Egypt was patriarchal, the penis and the act of penetration defined a chain of cultural value and significance in terms of having and not having, of being and not being. Puns on the semantic ambiguities of the phallus and poison created a network of meanings associated with violence, sex and male dominance, and phallic worship was central to Egyptian religion. Rituals and theology both played on the parallel notions of the erect penis and life, and hence the erect phallus defies death and points to life beyond death and the possibility of resurrection. The story of the conflict between Seth and Horus involved violence in which masculinity was threatened and gave rise to a parallel set of symbols: tears and semen; eyes and testicles. Because sexuality is defined by the presence of the penis, women are classified by its lack. These patriarchal assumptions shaped the social world of both Mayan and Egyptian civilizations. Representations of sexual power in Egypt contrasted the clothed male body with the naked and revealed female body. In Mayan society, there was a powerful homoerotic culture that was represented through images of athletic young men, and ball game playing, dancing and military activities dominated courtly art. In Classic Mayan art, there is a parallel drawn between the male penis and the tongue, and in bloodletting rituals the perforation of the male penis had a counterpart in the perforation of the female tongue, expressing a further connection between spittle and semen. Mayan patriarchal representations of sexual subordination often show the woman's tongue in submission to the male penis.

The anthropology of the body has often provided compelling support for cultural relativism that is associated with the ethnographic tradition of

fieldwork research. The ethnographic imagination has in particular uncovered a bewildering diversity of cultural practices associated with the body. There appears to be no particular coherence to human cultures; on the contrary, everywhere there is diversity and difference. *Embodied Lives* can also be read as a phenomenological inquiry into the mind-boggling diversity of body-practices and representations. In Mayan and Egyptian worlds, bodies could exist beyond the boundary of the skin; there were fantastic hybrid bodies constructed through animals and humans; gods created worlds through scattering their sperm; men had gigantic genitalia; and their penises enjoyed erection in death. There is ample evidence here that human beings were embodied differently in the phenomenal world, and yet there is at least one major ontological issue that underpins this complex world, which is, I would suggest, the vulnerability of embodiment. The phallic culture of the ancient world of patriarchal power was constantly threatened by castration, but more importantly life and the living body were permanently threatened by death. In this sense, mummification was, as Meskell and Joyce so cleverly show, equivalent to the preservation of the body through its violation. The human body was never considered to be divine, and it required considerable modification and reconstruction to achieve perfection after death. The Egyptian mummy aimed to achieve a perfectly preserved image of the dead person, thereby transmuting the body into a simulacrum of itself. Mummification transformed the former living, sensual body into a new object. In addition to the fabrication of the body, there were elaborate precautions to safeguard and protect the dangerous borders and orifices of the body. The nostrils, ears and anus were often covered with resin to protect the individual from external, supernatural threats. However cunning the art of the embalmer, threats to the safety of the individual were ever present, and mummification could never quite solve the tensions between a desire for divinity and the rigidity and intractability of the dead body. The stiffness of the corpse contradicted the flexibility of living tissue, and the embalmer's arts were always compromised by the stubborn process of decay. The spells of the Book of the Dead point to this unresolved contradiction between the quest for divinity and the inescapable fact of putrefaction.

Classic Mayan culture exhibits a different set of attitudes and practices towards death and the dead body. Mayan people made no attempt to preserve the body or to counter the inevitable decay of the flesh. The hot climate of Egypt and the wet and humid conditions of central America may have contributed significantly to different mortuary practices. While the Mayan dead were left to decay, there was a clear sense that the personhood of the dead continued to have a place among the living. The disappearance of the flesh was not a cause for horror, and death did not preclude continuing membership of a social group, because the ancestors were buried in house compounds that were integral to social life. Dead bodies were not treated in any way to stop the process of physical decay, but they were provided with

elaborate costumes and masks that ensured that the face and identity of the dead were sustained. These masks were often attached to the flesh of the dead person and at other times actually replaced the head of the deceased where decapitation had taken place. While bodily integrity does not appear to have been an issue for Mayan people, the point was to connect the dead with the future, and this projection was sometimes achieved through the use of the bones of the dead by the living, for example as ornaments.

I do not disagree with the argument in *Embodied Lives* that we cannot treat Egyptian mummification or Mayan mortuary rites as evidence that human attitudes towards death are universal. Meskell and Joyce present compelling evidence to the contrary; Mayan and Egyptian societies had very different approaches to sexuality, death and the human body. There is evidence however that embodiment means that human beings are vulnerable and that they share a common ontological insecurity. This is what phenomenology tells us. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perceptual experience impresses us with the uncertainty and instability of our modes of apprehending and comprehending the world, and hence it must drive home an inescapable sense of the contingencies of the life-world. Although Mayan and Egyptian mortuarial and funerial practices were very different, they have one thing in common: they express a perplexity about the world in which death turns the living body into a putrefied mess and eventually into a not-body. Egyptian and Mayan visions of hell were different, but they both addressed the problem of human death and the conundrum of non-existence. Although Mayans may have contemplated the not-body with less existential horror than Egyptians, who went to extraordinary lengths to bring about mummification, death in both cultures exposed the vulnerability of our being-in-the-world and the precariousness of human institutions. In western Christianity, the body also played a major part in understanding evil and holiness. Theologians solved the paradox of Christ's perfect humanity and his divinity by developing the doctrine of his immaculate birth by a virgin whose womb was not penetrated; we might say that Mary was not wounded by the Annunciation. The problem of death and decay was resolved through the resurrection stories of Lazarus and Jesus in the New Testament, in which the wounding and death of Christ on the Cross was merely a prelude to his resurrection and entry into Paradise. Our embodiment in the world is characterized by its precariousness, and we can argue plausibly that religions are cultural modes that seek to address our vulnerability by mythology and by bodily practices that attempt for example to disguise our death by giving our face a mask or through the mummification of the corpse. Doctrines of resurrection and practices of mummification are both cultural institutions that address our experiences of the incompleteness of embodied lives in the everyday world.

These facts about the social world may be grasped by phenomenology, but they are less easily and effectively understood by the textual strategies of structuralism, that is by "discourse determinism." Vulnerability literally means

that human beings have the capacity to be wounded, or opened up. According to Diodorus, embalmers who were responsible for the visceral incision on a corpse often ran away to avoid being stoned and abused. While this process was necessary for embalming, it was regarded as an abhorrent act. It was an act against bodily integrity; it was a wounding. *Embodied Lives* is an inspirational contribution not simply to an archaeology of the body but to any humanistic inquiry into the phenomenology of life and death.

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