CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

Introduction: the body as representation and being-in-the-world

Thomas J. Csordas

Much has been written about the body in recent years. Beginning in the early 1970s, and with increased energy in the late 1980s, the body has assumed a lively presence on the anthropological scene, and on the stage of interdisciplinary cultural studies. Feminist theory, literary criticism, history, comparative religion, philosophy, sociology, and psychology are all implicated in the move toward the body. Anthropologists with interests ranging across medical and psychological anthropology, the anthropology of space, material culture, practice theory, performance theory, critical theory, and even cognitive anthropology have problematized the body in recent writings.

In her keynote address to the 1990 annual meeting of the American Ethnological Association dedicated to the theme of "The Body in Society and Culture," Emily Martin suggested that although the widespread interest in the body may be accounted for by the contemporary centrality of the body in Western social forms, it may also be due to the contemporary historical moment in which "we are undergoing fundamental changes in how our bodies are organized and experienced" (1992: 121). Citing Lévi-Strauss's observation that academic attention seems to become focused on phenomena precisely when they are ending, she suggests that we are seeing "the end of one kind of body and the beginning of another kind of body" (ibid.: 121).

Recent scholarship in the social sciences and humanities would appear to support Martin's claim. The kind of body to which we have been accustomed in scholarly and popular thought alike is typically assumed to be a fixed, material entity subject to the empirical rules of biological science, existing prior to the mutability and flux of cultural change and diversity and characterized by unchangeable inner necessities. The new body that has begun to be identified can no longer be considered as a brute fact of nature. In the wake of Foucault (e.g. 1979, 1980), a chorus of critical statements has arisen to the effect that the body is "an entirely problematic notion" (Vernant 1989: 20), that "the body has a history" in that it behaves in new ways at particular historical moments (Bynum 1989:

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

171), and that the body should be understood not as a constant amidst flux but as an epitome of that flux (A. Frank 1991: 40).

Others have argued that, due to the destabilizing impact of social processes of commodification, fragmentation, and the semiotic barrage of images of body parts (Kroker and Kroker 1987: 20), the human body can no longer be considered a "bounded entity." In the milieu of "late capitalism" and "consumer culture," with its multiplicity of images that stimulate needs and desires and the corresponding changes in material arrangements of social space, the body/self has become primarily a performing self of appearance, display, and impression management (Featherstone 1991: 187, 192). Fixed "life cycle" categories have become blurred into a more fluid "life course" in which one's look and feel may conflict with one's biological and chronological age (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). The goals of bodily self-care have historically changed from spiritual salvation to enhanced health, and finally to a marketable self (ibid.: 170; cf. Foucault 1986 and Bordo 1990: 85). The dieter's techniques are not directed primarily toward weight loss, but toward the formation of body boundaries to protect against the eruption of the "bulge," and they serve the purposes of social mobility more than the affirmation of social position (Bordo 1990: 90, 95). The asceticism of inner body discipline is no longer incompatible with outer body hedonism, but has become a means toward it; one not only exercises to look good, but wants to look good while exercising (ibid.: 171, 182), as can be attested to by anyone observing that in some health clubs women apply makeup *before* their workout. It stands in sharp contrast not only to early historical periods, but to other societies such as that of Fiji in which the cultivation of bodies is not intended as an enhancement of a performing self, but is regarded as a responsibility toward the community (Becker, Chapter 4 of this volume).

Donna Haraway argues forcefully that "Neither our personal bodies nor our social bodies may be seen as natural, in the sense of existing outside the self-creating process called human labour" (1991: 10), and that as a feature of ideology "the universalized natural body is the gold standard of hegemonic social discourse" (Haraway 1990: 146). According to Haraway, the appropriate alternative to the naturalized and essentialized body is not relativism, which is only the inverse of the totalizing perspective, a view which denies embodiment by "being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (1991: 191). Instead of relativism she advocates the recognition of *location*, that is, non-equivalent positions in a substantive web of connections. The emphasis on location accepts the interpretive consequences of being grounded in a particular embodied standpoint – the consequences of relatedness, partial grasp of any situation, and imperfect communication. Theoretically, this situatedness extends to the domain of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

biology itself, as is evident in recent feminist theory that eliminates "passivity" as an intrinsic characteristic of the female body, and reworks both the distinction between sex and gender (Haraway 1991: 197–8), and the decoupling of female sexual pleasure from the act of conception (Jacobus 1990: 11, 22, 26; Bordo 1990: 103; Haraway 1990, Doane 1990; Keller 1990). With biology no longer a monolithic objectivity, the body is transformed from object to agent (Haraway 1991: 198; see also A. Frank 1991: 48). The body as an experiencing agent is evident in recent social science work on the experience of illness (Devisch and Gailly 1985; Kleinman 1988; Murphy 1987; Lock and Dunk 1987; Gordon 1990; Pandolfi 1991; Ots 1991; Kirmayer 1989, 1992; Good 1994), body image (G. Frank 1986), pain (Good et al. 1992), religious healing (Csordas 1990, 1993, 1994; Roseman 1991; Desjarlais 1992), and ethnographic practice itself (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Jackson 1989; Stoller 1989), as well as in the chapters included in the present volume.

The contemporary cultural transformation of the body can be conceived not only in terms of consumer culture and biological essentialism, but also in discerning an ambiguity in the boundaries of corporeality itself. Haraway points to the boundaries between animal and human, between animal/human and machine, and between the physical and non-physical (1991: 151–4). Feher, in his introduction to the influential *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, places the boundary between human and animal or automaton (machine) at one end of a continuum whose opposite pole is defined by the boundary between human and deity (1989: 11). Examining what takes place at these cultural boundaries is critical, given the circumstances of corporeal flux and bodily transformation sketched above. With respect to religion, the question goes beyond the distinction between natural and supernatural bodies, or between natural corporeality and divine incorporeality, to the question posed by Feher of the kind of body that members of a culture endow themselves with in order to come into relation with the kind of deity they posit to themselves (1989: 13). If we are to assert that the body is a cultural phenomenon, religion is one domain of culture that offers evidence rich enough to help us grasp the significance of that assertion, and it is thus no coincidence that several of the chapters in the present volume take up the relation between religious experience and embodiment.

Another inescapable transformation of the body in the contemporary world is being wrought by the incredible proliferation of political violence of all types: ethnic violence, sexual violence, self-destructive violence, domestic violence, and gang violence. As much as any of the transformations sketched above, this one has to do with the very meaning of being human as being a body that can experience pain and self-alienation. From Scarry's (1985) examination of the dissolution of self in torture to Feldman's (1991) portrait of the denatured body that exists in the climate of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

permanent violence in Northern Ireland; from Scheper-Hughes's (1992) analysis of unarticulated bodily resistance to hegemonic oppression among impoverished residents of Brazilian slums, and again to the madness of "ethnic cleansing" and rape as a political weapon that characterizes the former Yugoslavia at the time of the writing of this introduction, the body appears as the threatened vehicle of human being and dignity. The moral and political urgency of this phenomenon is evident in the work of several contributors to the present volume.

Along with its critical and pragmatic implications for world civilization, the theoretical implications of the scholarly discovery that the body has a history and is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a biological entity are potentially enormous. Also, if indeed the body is passing through a critical historical moment, this moment also offers a critical methodological opportunity to reformulate theories of culture, self, and experience, with the body at the center of analysis. The aims of this volume are to draw out some of those theoretical implications and to seize this methodological opportunity. Neither of these aims is to be taken for granted, since among anthropologists facing the "obsolescence of the body" and a related "death of the subject" the jury is still out as to whether the body will persist as a central analytic theme, the "existential ground of culture and self" (Csordas 1990), or whether interest in the body is merely an intellectual fad. At the 1990 meeting of the American Ethnological Society, dedicated to the theme of "the body in society and culture," it was evident that many participants were using the term "body" without much sense of "bodiliness" in their analyses, as if body were little more than a synonym for self or person. This tendency carries the dual dangers of dissipating the force of using the body as a methodological starting point, and of objectifying bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity. It thus misses the opportunity to add sentience and sensibility to our notions of self and person, and to insert an added dimension of materiality to our notions of culture and history.

What we are calling for here is a more radical role for the body than that typical in the "anthropology of the body" that has been with us since the 1970s. In studies that fall under that rubric, the body is an object or theme of analysis, often the source of symbols taken up in the discourse of cultural domains such as religion and social structure. Without attempting a bibliographical essay, I will summarize the approaches characteristic of the anthropology of the body in order then to distinguish a methodological standpoint more tailored to the above-stated aims.[1]

A premise of much of this literature is what we might call an "analytic body" that invites a discrete focus on perception, practice, parts, processes, or products. By perception I mean the cultural uses and conditioning of the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

five external senses plus proprioception (our sense of being in a body and oriented in space), as well what Kant (1978 [1800]) called the inner sense of intuition or sensibility. Practice includes everything that falls under Mauss's (1950) classic notion of techniques of the body – swimming, dancing, washing, ritual breathing in meditation, posture, the variations in batting stance among baseball players – in which the body is at once tool, agent, and object. Parts of our anatomy such as hair, face, genitals, limbs, or hands have long been of interest to anthropologists for the social and symbolic significance they bear. Bodily processes like breathing (not as a technique but, for example, as the sigh), blushing, menstruation, birth, sex, crying, and laughing are of interest in their cultural variation. Finally, a great deal of cultural meaning can be distilled from the treatment of body products such as blood, semen, sweat, tears, feces, urine, and saliva.

Other literature in this field concentrates on the "topical body," that is, an understanding of the body in relation to specific domains of cultural activity. The body and health, the body and political domination, the body and trauma, the body and religion, the body and gender, the body and self, the body and emotion, the body and technology are examples. The generation of abundant literatures on all these topical bodies has been quite recent and quite rapid, such that the body's existential ubiquity has become overwhelmingly apparent in scholarly production. This postmodern proliferation itself again begs the essentialist question of whether there is in fact any such thing as *the* body – whether the body is more than the sum of its topics. The paradoxical truth, in fact, appears to be that if there is an essential characteristic of embodiment, it is indeterminacy (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1993).

Finally, there is what we might call the "multiple body," with the number of bodies dependent on how many of its aspects one cares to recognize. Mary Douglas (1973) called attention to the "two bodies," referring to the social and physical aspects of the body. Her distinction roughly reiterates that between mind and body, culture and biology. More precisely, Douglas differentiates between the use we make of our bodies and the way our bodies function, and emphasizes the way elements of physiology and anatomy can be taken up into the symbolic domain. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) give us "three bodies," including the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. The first refers to the lived experience of the body as self, the second to representational uses of the body as a symbol of nature, society, and culture, and the third to the regulation and control of bodies. John O'Neill (1985) ups the ante to "five bodies." For O'Neill, the world's body refers to the human tendency to anthropomorphize the cosmos. The social body refers to the common analogy of social institutions to bodily organs and the use of bodily processes such as ingestion of food to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

define social categories. The body politic refers to models of city or country as the body writ large, forming the basis of phrases such as "head" of state or "members" of the body politic. The consumer body refers to the creation and commercialization of bodily needs such as for sex, cigarettes, labor-saving devices, or cars, a process in which doubt is created about the self in order to sell grace, spontaneity, vivaciousness, confidence, etc. The medical body refers to the process of medicalization in which an increasing number of body processes are subject to medical control and technology.

To greater or lesser degrees all these approaches study the *body* and its transformations while still taking *embodiment* for granted. In my view this distinction between the body as either empirical thing or analytic theme, and embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self is critical to capitalizing on the methodological opportunity identified above. But lest it be objected that if anything can be taken for granted it is embodiment, let us begin to reframe the problem this way. In his often-cited essay on "Techniques of the Body" Marcel Mauss (1950) argued that the body is at the same time the original tool with which humans shape their world, and the original substance out of which the human world is shaped. Yet of all the formal definitions of culture that have been proposed by anthropologists, none have taken seriously the idea that culture is grounded in the human body.[2] Why not then begin with the premise that the fact of our embodiment can be a valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings? I suggest that the promise of such a standpoint is to throw new light on questions traditionally asked by anthropologists and other scholars in the human sciences (see Fernandez 1990 for an example of a scholar reconsidering his own data in this way). It should also, as the chapters in this volume bear out, bring to light new questions and sources of data overlooked by thinkers in these fields. Finally, it offers the grounds for a fruitful rereading of the classic data of ethnography, where passages about bodily experience are tucked away in discussions of ritual and social organization, waiting to be rediscovered.

With regard to the last point, it is telling that what is perhaps the most vivid example of the body as a cultural phenomenon subject to cultural transformations is also one of the oldest in anthropology. Maurice Leenhardt, the anthropologist and missionary whose classic work on New Caledonian culture first appeared in 1947, described his discovery of the impact of Christianity on the cosmocentric world of the Canaques with the anecdote of a conversation between himself and an aged indigenous philosopher. Leenhardt suggested that the Europeans had introduced the notion of "spirit" to the indigenous way of thinking. His interlocutor contradicted him, pointed out that they had "always acted in accord with the spirit. What you've brought us is the body" (Leenhardt 1979 [1947]: 164). In brief, in

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

the indigenous world view the person was not individuated, but was diffused with other persons and things in a unitary sociomythic domain:

> [The body] had no existence of its own, nor specific name to distinguish it. It was only a support. But henceforth the circumscription of the physical being is completed, making possible its objectification. The idea of a human body becomes explicit. This discovery leads forthwith to a discrimination between the body and the mythic world. (1979 [1947]: 164)

Here is an explicit acknowledgment of what has only recently begun to be formulated by much of the literature cited above. In phenomenological terms it suggests the preobjective character of bodily being-in-the-world and likewise suggests two possible consequences of objectification, that is the individuation of the psychological self and the instantiation of dualism in the conceptualization of human being.

In the example from Leenhardt, cultural change in the colonial encounter reveals the play of the preobjective and objectified body in experience. We must emphatically not conclude here that the body in "primitive" culture is necessarily preobjective while the body in "civilized" culture is always objectified. Objectification is the product of reflective, ideological knowledge, whether it be in the form of colonial Christianity, biological science, or consumer culture. Our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that *end* in objectification (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Csordas 1990, 1993, 1994), and the play between preobjective and objectified bodies within our own culture is precisely what is at issue in many of the contemporary critiques.

What most clearly distinguishes the concern with embodiment from the various forms taken by the anthropology of the body is the methodological and epistemological problematization of a series of interrelated conceptual dualities, among which that between the preobjective and objectified is only the first we have mentioned. Immediately implicated is the conventional distinction between mind and body, along with a series of derivative distinctions between culture and biology, the mental and the material, culture and practical reason, gender and sex. It appears at times that there is, among champions of the body in contemporary human-science theorizing, a tendency to vilify what is usually called "Cartesian dualism" as a kind of moral abjection. Descartes himself introduced the doctrine as a methodological distinction, a valuable aid to analysis and a way to free scientific thought from subjection to theology and strict institutional supervision by the Church. The philosopher is doubtless not entirely to blame for the ontologization of the distinction, and the way it has become embedded in our ways of thinking.[3]

Perhaps the most lucid extended critique of the mind/body duality has

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

been provided by Leder (1990). From a phenomenological standpoint based in the work of Merleau-Ponty and others, he begins with the observation that in everyday life our experience is characterized by the *disappearance* of our body from awareness, describing how the "body not only projects outward in experience but falls back into unexperienceable depths" (ibid.: 53). On the other hand, the vivid but unwanted consciousness of one's body in disease, distress, or dysfunction is a kind of *dys-appearance*, a bodily alienation or absence of a distinct kind: "No longer absence *from* experience, the body may yet surface as an absence, a being-away *within* experience" (1990: 91). Predicated on this analysis, Leder rehabilitates the experiential core of Cartesian dualism, while at the same time identifying its fundamental error. For the dualist, "An experiential disappearance is read in ontological terms. Yet ... this disappearance arises precisely from the *embodied* nature of mind. The body's own structure leads to its self-concealment" (ibid.: 115), and thus to a notion of the immateriality of mind and thought. Meanwhile, alienation from the body as it dys-appears in times of breakdown or problematic operation leads to a "natural bias of attention towards the negative" (ibid.: 127), a bias elaborated in the Western tradition by construing the body as the source of epistemological error, moral error, and mortality. Mind/body dualism is thus identified as a culturally shaped "phenomenological vector," that is "a structure of experience that makes possible and encourages the subject in certain practical or interpretive directions, while never mandating them as invariants" (ibid.: 150).

The example from Leenhardt gives us the body as an important site for analyzing the relationship between the preobjective and the objectified, and Leder's analysis shows how the duality of mind and body calls into question the further distinction between the experiential and the ontological. Close on the heels of these problematic relations is the perennial problem of the relation between subject and object. The indeterminacy of this relation is highlighted by the observation that, depending on one's methodological standpoint, both mind and body can be construed as either subject or object. Thus mind can be an object, a "central processing mechanism" (Shweder 1990) as it is for cognitive science and mainstream psychology, or it can be the Cartesian subject of rational thought and moral reflection. Body can also be either an object, as it is for contemporary technological medicine and conventional biological science, or it can be the subject of sensation, experience, and world. For anthropology, to understand the body as the biological raw material on which culture operates has the effect of excluding the body from original or primordial participation in the domain of culture, making the body in effect a "precultural" substrate. Mind is then invariably the subject and body is an object either "in itself" or one that is "good to think." Little space remains to problematize the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

alternative formulation of body as the source of subjectivity, and mind as the locus of objectification.

The possibility, arising from the cultural and historical changes outlined at the beginning of this introduction, that the body might be understood as a seat of subjectivity is one source of challenge to theories of culture in which mind/subject/culture are deployed in parallel with and in contrast to body/object/biology. Much of our theorizing is heir to the Cartesian legacy in that it privileges the mind/subject/culture set in the form of representation, whether cast in terms of rules and principles by social anthropology, signs and symbols by semiotic/symbolic anthropology, text and discourse by structural/poststructural anthropology, or knowledge and models by cognitive anthropology. In the human-science literature relevant to cultural theory a critique of representation has begun to take shape. There is both a substantive and an epistemological form taken by this critique. The former is a cultural critique that objects to the ideological substance of representations and seeks more apt ones. The latter is a methodological critique that objects to the dominance of representation as an epistemological modality.

There are several discursive sites for the critique of representation. Feminist theory offers critiques of the way women are represented in terms of body, biology, emotion, sexuality, and instinct (Humm 1990; Suleiman 1986; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Grosz 1991; Jacobus et al. 1990). Much of the feminist critique comes from disciplines such as literature and philosophy and operates in a poststructuralist semiotic paradigm that questions the content of specific representations while assuming the pragmatic and epistemological primacy of representation. Others challenge the bounds of representation, including existential features of subjectivity within a semiotic paradigm as in Julia Kristeva's (1986) notions of the semiotic chora and *jouissance*, arguing for the existential immediacy of bodily experience (Bigwood 1991), or taking issue with the exclusion of identity and agency in the Foucauldian account of the body (McNay 1991).

A second site of the critique of representation is the philosophy of agency/action. Charles Taylor (1985, 1989), for example, takes issue with a Cartesian theory that identifies subjectivity as internal representation in a "monological" form projected on a "premoral" world, opting instead to construe subjectivity as interpersonal engagement via a "conversational" form within a world constituted by existential concerns. Paul Ricoeur (1991) examines the bounds of representation in his attempt to move from a hermeneutics of text to a hermeneutic of action, and from a semiotic of metaphor to an experiential theory of imagination.

In anthropology the critique of representation has largely taken the form of a critique of ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Stoller 1989). The substantive issues in this critique are

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self
Edited by Thomas J. Csordas
Excerpt
More information

political and ideological: by what right do we represent the ethnographic other, what are the consequences of doing so, what are the best alternative modes of representation? Occasionally a more radical critique appears of representation as a privileged epistemological modality. From the direction of postmodernism, Tyler (1987: 58) asks "why not reject outright the whole idea of the sensorium, of representation, of the correspondence between inner and outer signifiers whether known as mind and body, thought and language, words and things, or any of the 'othering' dualisms that have trapped us?" He argues that the point of ethnographic "discourse is not to make a better representation, but to avoid representation," suggesting instead that ethnography would do better to "evoke" than to "represent" (ibid.: 205–8). From the direction of phenomenology, Jackson uncovers the representationalist bias in the anthropology of the body itself, particularly in the work of Douglas where "the human body is simply an object of understanding or an instrument of the rational mind, a kind of vehicle for the expression of a reified social rationality" (1989: 123). He argues that the "subjugation of the bodily to the semantic is empirically untenable ... meaning should not be reduced to a sign which, as it were, lies on a separate plane outside the immediate domain of an act" (ibid.: 122). He refers to the methodological standpoint that captures the existential immediacy of bodily existence as "radical empiricism," a term also adopted by Stoller (1989: 151–6) in his phenomenologically oriented effort to develop an evocative anthropology of the senses.

It will not do to identify what we are getting at with a negative term, as something non-representational. We require a term that is complementary as subject is to object, and for that purpose suggest "being-in-the-world," a term from the phenomenological tradition that captures precisely the sense of existential immediacy to which we have already alluded. This is an immediacy in a double sense: not as a synchronic moment of the ethnographic present but as temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement; and not unmediated in the sense of a precultural universalism but in the sense of the preobjective reservoir of meaning outlined above. The distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy. Representation is fundamentally nominal, and hence we can speak of "a representation." Being-in-the-world is fundamentally conditional, and hence we must speak of "existence" and "lived experience."

In general terms, the distinction between representation and being-in-the-world corresponds to that between the disciplines of semiotics and phenomenology. There are without question equally as many variants of one as of the other, and to some extent the representation/being-in-the-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org