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0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self

Edited by Thomas J. Csordas

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Students of culture have been increasingly concerned with the ways in which cultural values are “inscribed” on the body. These essays go beyond this passive construal of the body to a position in which embodiment is understood as the existential condition of cultural life. From this standpoint embodiment is reducible neither to representations of the body, to the body as an objectification of power, to the body as a physical entity or biological organism, nor to the body as an inalienable center of individual consciousness. This more sensate and dynamic view is applied by the contributors to a variety of topics, including the expression of emotion, the experience of pain, ritual healing, dietary customs, and political violence. Their purpose is to contribute to a phenomenological theory of culture and self – an anthropology that is not merely about the body, but from the body.

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# Embodiment and experience

*The existential ground of culture and self*

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*Edited by*

Thomas J. Csordas

*Case Western Reserve University*



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

---

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction: the body as representation and being-in-the-world THOMAS J. CSORDAS	1
<b>Part I Paradigms and polemics</b>	
1 Bodies and anti-bodies: flesh and fetish in contemporary social theory TERENCE TURNER	27
2 Society's body: emotion and the "somatization" of social theory M. L. LYON AND J. M. BARBALET	48
<b>Part II Form, appearance, and movement</b>	
3 The political economy of injury and compassion: amputees on the Thai–Cambodia border LINDSAY FRENCH	69
4 Nurturing and negligence: working on others' bodies in Fiji ANNE E. BECKER	100
5 The silenced body – the expressive <i>Leib</i> : on the dialectic of mind and life in Chinese cathartic healing THOMAS OTS	116
<b>Part III Self, sensibility, and emotion</b>	
6 Embodied metaphors: nerves as lived experience SETHA M. LOW	139
	vii

Cambridge University Press

0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self

Edited by Thomas J. Csordas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)viii *Contents*

- |                                 |  |     |
|---------------------------------|--|-----|
| 7                               | Bodily transactions of the passions: <i>el calor</i> among Salvadoran women refugees<br>JANIS H. JENKINS AND MARTHA VALIENTE | 163 |
| 8                               | The embodiment of symbols and the acculturation of the anthropologist<br>CAROL LADERMAN                                      | 183 |
| <b>Part IV Pain and meaning</b> |  |     |
| 9                               | Chronic pain and the tension between the body as subject and object<br>JEAN JACKSON  | 201 |
| 10                              | The individual in terror<br>E. VALENTINE DANIEL  | 229 |
| 11                              | Rape trauma: contexts of meaning<br>CATHY WINKLER (WITH KATE WININGER)   | 248 |
| 12                              | Words from the Holy People: a case study in cultural phenomenology<br>THOMAS J. CSORDAS                                      | 269 |
|                                 | <i>Index</i>   | 291 |

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0521458900 - Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Illustrations

---

- |  |                |
|--|----------------|
| 3.1 Street scene. Camp for displaced Khmer on Thai–Cambodia border. (© Bill Burke, Swanstock.)                                     | <i>page</i> 70 |
| 3.2 Recent amputees standing outside the surgical hospital that serves the entire Thai–Cambodia border. (© Bill Burke, Swanstock.) | 72             |
| 5.1 Practitioners of Crane- <i>gigong</i> in the final stage of catharsis.   | 121            |
| 5.2 The master of the group ejects <i>gi</i> on a practitioner in order to support her catharsis.                                  | 122            |



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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## Preface

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It is probably no fluke of intellectual history that a turn toward the body in contemporary scholarship in the human sciences has coincided with the realization that the postmodern condition is now the uneasy condition of all intellectual activity. If behind the turn to the body lay the implicit hope that it would be the stable center in a world of decentered meanings, it has only led to the discovery that the essential characteristic of embodiment is existential indeterminacy. Each in their own way, the contributors to this volume explore this indeterminacy, in which embodiment is reducible neither to representations of the body, to the body as an objectification of power, to the body as a physical entity or biological organism, nor to the body as an inalienable center of individual consciousness.

For anthropologists the culminating event in the turn to the body was the 1990 annual meeting of the American Ethnological Association dedicated to the theme of “The Body in Society and Culture.” The majority of papers included in the present volume were originally presented in sessions at that meeting. The core of the volume originated in a session on “The Body as Existential Ground of Culture,” organized by me and Susan DiGiacomo. Most of the others were recruited from sessions in which individual participants were clearly struggling with the problem of how serious consideration of embodiment implied a change in our conceptualization of culture, self, and experience. How this change will be realized remains to be felt. For the present, we offer these original essays as a step toward an anthropology that is not merely about the body, but from the body.

Thomas J. Csordas