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In Touch: The Body and Sensibility as Historical Text

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When introducing the body as an interpretive framework, it has become almost cliché to cite poet and essayist Adrienne Rich's instruction that we "begin . . . with the geography closest in."[1] For well over a decade, scholars have addressed the body and its attendant intimacies as microsites for examining broad sociopolitical systems of race, gender, class, sex, empire, and nation. This focus on the body contributes to the ongoing feminist work of overturning the analytic dichotomy of public and private and has launched a much newer project of approaching our physical selves as historical subjects in their own right.[2] Scholars of the Middle East have been slow to join these conversations, often having found ourselves rhetorically confined by the walls of the harem or the folds of the veil. However, recognizing the body as an expressive and dynamic site of communal and individual agency is particularly useful for those of us who struggle to locate minority voices in our research. From this perspective, the words that immediately follow Rich's popular quote are perhaps even more apt: "Here at least I know I exist."[3] Rich refers not to the simple fact of existence, but to a sense of social and historical location. The body is our first and primary site of identity formation. Through its gestures and movements we are rooted in a particular place and time. Yet while scholars across fields have analyzed the body as a social or cultural category, we have paid scant attention to its sensory nature: its physical markings of existence. In my own work on northern Sudanese women, I frequently use phrases such as "progress" and "mobility" to capture the sense of the kinetic transformations that characterized life under British imperialism. Still, I have to remind myself that I am not only studying women's movement *across* space and time, but also women's experience of existing *within* a moving body. Thus, I have come to interpret body marks, modifications, and movements as an archive: a tangible, collective accounting of experience. What follows are select, but by no means comprehensive, remarks on how we might better turn our attention to the topography of this close, intimate geography and recognize the ways in which scars, wrinkles, tattoos, and piercings record individual and communal histories.

As described by Terence Turner, the skin serves as the "frontier of the social self." He explains that "the surface of the body, as the common frontier of society . . . becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted."[4] Scars, tattoos, accessories, and cosmetics all carry information about an individual's class, gender, marital status, race, or ethnic group. But it is the drama of these social codes that is most important and often overlooked. Here, the image of the frontier is particularly useful. The body functions as an active and contested terrain on which individual and social desires meet and compete. Within this landscape, body rituals determine who is or is not a part of one's social world. Writing of women's tattoo culture in colonial Mozambique, Heidi Gengenbach explains that "women used their skin to map a social world in which boundaries of belonging were rooted . . . in shared feminine culture, bodily

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experience, and geographic place."[5] Across the Middle East, ritual scarring, tattoos, henna, sugar waxing, veiling, and female genital cutting served as landmarks of culture, experience, and place. These were harem lessons, not schoolhouse lessons. Boundaries of belonging were defined and understood through lived, sensory experiences rather than the circulation of formal texts. The result was an exclusive female rhetoric with tangible signs, symbols, and references that affirmed a woman's relationship with her own body and those of her peers. The pain of a tattoo was the price a woman paid for the assurance of her place on the social map.

The materiality, the felt, physical sensation, of body marks and modifications make for compelling and promising historical texts. In northern Sudan in the first half of the 20th century, moral womanhood was constructed on a series of high visceral body rites: cosmetic scarring on the cheeks of young girls; female genital cutting (infibulation) at the onset of puberty; lip tattoos, henna, and exfoliating smoke baths for new brides; *zār* spirit ceremonies to cure infertility; and the cutting open and restitching of genitalia upon the birth of a child. Each of these practices modified the body, either permanently or temporarily. Each marked a woman's place in a reproductive life cycle. And all of them carried a measure of individual agency that has not been fully explored. Sarah Ghabrial's essay in this roundtable on the multiple lives of agency challenges us to define agency's "indicators and contents."[6] With respect to body rituals in Sudan, the existence of pain did not preclude feelings of pleasure or power. A young bride could take grim satisfaction in not flinching when her lip was tattooed. Or, a woman with chronic malaise might revel in the illicit pleasures of cigarettes and alcohol, forbidden in daily life but key props in the *zār* drum circle. Even female genital cutting, though exceptionally painful and carrying numerous health risks, afforded Sudanese women an authority in determining standards of femininity, fertility, and purity within a firmly patriarchal society. Within the bounds of each ritual, the pliancy of the body provided a vital agency. Collectively, Sudanese women used these rites to construct their understanding of moral womanhood. At the same time, individual responses of resilience or creativity in new patterns of scars and tattoos allowed for self-fashioning as well. As Dorothy Ko explained in a similar context, a woman might find special "delight in her own ability to remake her body."[7] In acts of remaking the body, obligation and pain, agency and pleasure were often combined in the same gestures.

When social and political values change, rituals of the body shift as well. In 1920s Sudan, British imperialists instituted a concentrated campaign against the most extreme form of female genital cutting, known locally as "pharaonic circumcision." In the 1930s, the growing class of Sudanese intelligentsia began to clamor for educated wives, companionate marriage, and "modern" beauties, whose faces were free from scars and whose circumcisions "had not been of the Pharaonic kind." As one writer described his ideal wife, she would have, "the allure of Clara Bow, the enchantment of Greta Garbo, and the smile of Lillian Gish."[8] On the eve of independence, Sudanese women activists echoed this call for literate and unscarred girls. One activist vividly recalled,

> When the women's movement started in 1947 we felt at the time that the Sudan was the most disagreeable of all countries in which to be a woman . . . Girls, backward and uneducated, had to endure the inhumane operation of pharaonic circumcision. Their right nostrils were pierced to

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hold heavy wedding rings, their lips were tattooed, and they had to go through the agony of the eventful forty days of the marriage.[9]

For British and Sudanese, both male and female, the presentations of women's bodies were direct reflections of modernity and civility, or the lack thereof. Scars and heavy wedding rings anchored Sudanese women to the past, while fresh Hollywood smiles promised a bright future.

And yet changes in social expectations and beauty standards had to contend with the stubbornness of human flesh. While new henna patterns were easily applied, scars and cuts could not be undone, and bodies used to loose wraps and flat sandals stumbled when they donned miniskirts and high heels. Young Sudanese women who aimed to inhabit modern bodies disavowed the marks, rituals, and "boundaries of belonging" that had defined their mothers and grandmothers as respectable Sudanese women. As certain traditions fell out of favor, this younger generation lost critical avenues of control in constructing gender values, morality, and a sense of place. It is no surprise then that during the national turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, Sudanese women described their bodies as rushed, threatened, disordered, and out of shape.

It is at this intersection of pliancy and permanence that we can make our most fruitful interventions. I refer to not just the flesh but society as well. The body stands as the physical geography on which the negotiations between individual desires and social obligation play out. And the intractability of one is intimately linked to the outer limits of the other. We might ask of the body-as-historical text: How does pliancy change over time? Which gestures and marks are fixed, and which are open to interpretation? When body standards change, how is agency recovered, and by whom?

Viewed through this analytic lens, sensory experiences of the body become evidence of broader social positioning. In the northern Sudanese town of Wad Medani, health investigator and educator Geraldine Culwick recognized a new, relaxed attitude in her students' behavior at the start of the 1952 school year. She wrote home, "Two years ago, the women all refused to doff their *tobes* (enveloping outer garments), but now they lay them aside and sit around quite easily and un-self-consciously in ordinary dresses . . . it takes a very sophisticated woman here to be at ease with a bare head."[10] What Culwick terms "sophistication" is more accurately viewed as control. When the women of Wad Medani removed their *tobes* at school, an action normally reserved for the home, they recalibrated privacy in public. This gesture was about far more than accepting a formal education; Culwick's classes had been highly popular from the start. But after two years, the women altered the ways their bodies related to the classroom. It was no longer a foreign space, but rather akin to their own home. With their bare heads, these sophisticated students signaled a critical comfort with and ownership over an imperial space. Half a century later, the intimate associations between body, agency, and space continue. Anthropologist Selma Nageeb notes that Sudanese women's experiences of social space today are "constantly expressed in relation to the body and body functions." Those who feel restricted by social conventions or familial supervision often talk of suffocating. One young woman describes, "My father is so strict I could not breathe." Conversely, women frequently use the phrase, "I smell my breath" to express their social freedoms.[11] Taken together, Culwick's students and Nageeb's interviewees demonstrate how a woman's authority over her body correlates to broader social agency. Loosened

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veils and deep breaths were powerful means through which women located themselves and laid claim to the social space—indeed, the very air, that surrounded them.

Critically, though we might empathize with the imagery of smelling our breath, we must take care not to essentialize sensibilities or equate them with our own. Bodies are historically specific artifacts, governed by unique parameters. The deep breaths of Nageeb's subjects at the turn of the 21st century were quite different than those of mid-20th-century activists, who felt burdened by heavy jewelry and traditions or even of Culwick and her peers, whose fitted, narrow-waisted dress bodices chaffed in Sudan's heat. Here we return to Rich's assertion that the body is the site through which we affirm our location in a particular time and space. Gestures and sensations are not universal, but physical articulations of one's particular sociohistorical place.

Breath, pain, and pleasure are rare subjects for historical analysis; and we lack a strong scholarly vocabulary with which to discuss such physical sensibilities. I have struggled to translate bodily sensations that I intuitively understand into a language of admissible historical evidence. Where is the documentation for the rough, renewing pleasures of exfoliation? Whom do I cite on the sharp prick of pain and lingering burn when a body part is pierced? Such moments occurred regularly (in Sudan and elsewhere), but due to their intimate, quotidian nature there is little recorded evidence of how these rituals felt. Even when we eschew the problems of citation, we still may find ourselves at a loss for words. The methods with which to describe and analyze the materiality of the body lay just outside of our current lexicon. In writing this piece, my thesaurus failed me again and again as I searched for the right words to convey the fleshy, substantive nature of our bodies.

This pursuit of an appropriate language is linked to the feminist project of gender history. Thoughtful and precise analysis of pleasure and pain elevate sensory experiences, long dismissed as anecdotal or mere "memorabilia," to the level of reliable historical texts.[12] Attaching historical value to physical sensibilities allows us to address questions of agency, power, and change in new ways. Still, we must be careful not to reduce women to no more than discrete parts or disembody the experiences of men. My argument is not simply that analysis of the body can serve as an alternate or complement to canonical archives. Nor am I suggesting that body rites were only meaningful for those who were distanced from centers of power. Rather, I want to draw our attention to the ways in which men and women recognized *in their own bodies* a dynamic accounting of individual and group experience. For those of us working on marginalized subjects, Saidiya Hartman cautions that we cannot let our desire to "write a romance," a story that fills in gaps and provides closure, lead us to "trespass the boundaries of the archive."[13] We must work within the parameters of historical probabilities and acknowledge what can and cannot be known. Nevertheless, a vocabulary of the body holds the promise of new stories told in a language of signs and symbols that hold particular resonance for our subjects. We must learn to allow historical bodies to speak for themselves. It is time to restore the flesh and the bone, the sinews and the blood, to the men and women we study.

NOTES

[1]Adrienne Rich, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (London: Little Brown & Co, 1994), 212. Adrienne Rich passed away just as this roundtable essay was sent to the press.

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[2]See, for example, Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); and Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

[3]Rich, "Notes Towards," 212.

[4]Terence S. Turner, "The Social Skin," in *Not Work Alone: A Cross Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, ed. Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1980), 112.

[5]Heidi Gengenbach, "Boundaries of Beauty: Tattooed Secrets of Women's History in Magude District, Southern Mozambique," *Journal of Women's History* 14 (2003): 109.

[6]See Sarah Ghabrial's essay, "Gender, Power, and Agency in the Historical Study of the Middle East and North Africa," in this roundtable.

[7]Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), 102.

[8]Quoted in Heather J. Sharkey, "Chronicles of Progress: Northern Sudanese Women in the Era of British Imperialism," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31 (2003): 64.

[9]Zeinab el Fateh el Badawi, *The Development of the Sudanese Women Movement* (Khartoum: Ministry of Information and Social Affairs, 1966), 1–3.

[10]GM Culwick, "Personal Correspondence, 1949–1952," GM Culwick Papers, SAD (Durham University), 428/3/134.

[11]Salma Ahmed Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers: Women, Social Space, and Islamization in Sudan* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 3.

[12]Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

[13]Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 9.

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