

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 04 October 2005

Reading

- Eve Keller, “The Subject of Touch: Medical Authority in Early Modern Midwifery,” in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, pp. 62-80.
 - Scott Manning Stevens, “New World Contacts and the Trope of ‘the ‘Naked Savage,’” in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, pp. 124-140.
 - Constance Classen, “The Witch’s Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, pp. 70-84.
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(student presentation by Aayesha Siddiqui)

central theme: body/touch as a means of experience and interpretation of everyday life

The Subject of Touch by Keller

Medical authority – there was a shift from an emphasis on the self-professed oral history of the patient with visual cues to “full contact” medicine of examination by touch.

Midwifery was very gender-divided and there were arguments that the emergence of male midwifery was usurping the only stronghold of female power, but it soon became a debate of professionalism, attacking the *inexperienced* rather than the *women* (though they could and were associated...)

The knowing, **experienced hands of the physician** were glorified in contrast to the rough, crude midwife (p.72-73).

The mother became **abstracted** from her own body – she was no longer a *participant* in her birthing experience (as she used to be with traditional midwifery), but rather, a *patient* (p. 70).

The use of published texts and emerging ‘standards’ of [male] midwifery were an adventure in **identity formation** – doctors used the texts to portray themselves as they saw fit, as the **rational doctors** who worked with their mind (*via* their hands) to help the body – touch became associated with **reason, authority, and legitimacy** (p. 75).

Soon, this resulted in the carving of a **new social space for the physician** – before, midwives used to deliver ‘normal’ births and surgeons would intervene if there were trouble, but physicians were always peripheral up until this escapade in their establishment of their own **medical authority** (p.77).

Physicians became the holders of discrete **expert knowledge** and used the “body as self-promoting” for themselves and their careers (p. 74)

Naked Savage by Stevens

The issue was whether different bodies meant different selves (p. 127). This was in reaction to the European exploration and colonization of the Americas where they encountered the natives with whom they found dramatic differences – primarily **nakedness**, as this article focuses on.

The **native body was fetishized** (p.128). Native “specimens” were taken back to Europe as spectacles and tangible evidence of the newly discovered territory. Their *nakedness* most visibly set them apart from “civilized” Europe.

There was an idea that the natives’ continual state of nakedness tended to “**desacralize human corporeality**” (p. 137). Since they were always naked, their **conception of the body** and its meaning was totally different from the European conception.

- ∞ For example, it was thought that the natives would be running around having **sex**, but that wasn’t the case – the state of open nakedness in a way muted rampant sexuality because the nakedness was **routinized**, unlike how the Europeans were **alienated** from their own bodies by clothes (p. 133).
- ∞ Also, different conceptions of the body were evident in the extent to which **cannibalism** was accepted or abhorred.
- ∞ *Touch was boundary-setting in relation to the body.* (p. 133)

The body also served as a manifestation of civilization. Naked body = naked culture, thus legitimizing the European “civilizing mission.” **Environmental determinism** said that culture was influenced by the local environmental factors, suggesting that if a native was taken *out* of his/her environment, then he/she could be “civilized” or “humanized” by the **change of custom** (p. 133). This thought process was related to the **global theory of touch** at the time, which said that touch dictated all human interaction with our environment (p. 134-135) – we all *felt* and *experienced* our world through touch.

The native body was foreign and unknown – interaction with it (by touch) posed a danger, such as contraction of disease (p. 132). Sexual relations were also a part of this issue – there were ideas of native peoples being either licentious or innocent – mapping on character judgments based on the difference in the body (i.e. nakedness).

The medieval notion of the **fantastical Other** influenced European expectations for what the native should be. But post-contact, there were diverging interpretations of the native. Nakedness still remained the defining trait, though.

The body and how it was situated in its environment was a **cultural separator**. The body was also equated with the **self, character, and morality**.

The Witch’s Senses by Classen

The body and the senses were the nexus of **morality**.

There was a **division of perception** (p. 70) – higher senses of sight/hearing were male and associated with thought, touch/taste/smell were female associated with domesticity.

The witch was a woman who **subverted** the female senses and **appropriated** the male senses (p. 74). She usurped **patriarchal norms** – the witch was one in whom the feminine traits and senses were **magnified** and **demonized** (p. 71). She was able to get what she wanted using her body and her sensory powers – using the *lower* female senses for her own profit (p. 72).

No escape from a witch because her *own body* was the both source and means of her powers.

The fear of witches and the identification and hunting down of them highlights the pattern of **control over women's bodies**. During the 17th and 18th centuries, women were supposed to suppress their senses and subdue their bodies – it was proper for them to fast, not to talk, to look down – and all of this reinforced **patriarchal domination**. In this sense, the witch *reappropriated* her body, by casting spells (thought – associated with sight/hearing), making potions (taste), using the evil eye (sight). The witch was therefore unashamed of her female body, which was culturally labeled as base – and again we have the **pairing of body and moral self** into one. The witch was portrayed as indulging in her sexual and physical appetite and as having an odor – all tying her body and its functions to her immorality. (p. 73-74)

Emerging **medical science** needed to eliminate the witch and her supernatural powers to make room for **“masculine philosophy”** – ideal rationalism to supplant folk beliefs. In order for science to be consistent and have **authority** and **legitimacy**, natural laws had to be *laws* – we couldn't have a witch manipulating nature! Here was the patriarchal imposition of rationality and order by mapping onto the female body (of which the witch was the grossest of magnifications) all negative attributes, coupling this idea with the cultural push to domesticate the woman and the witch to make room for that “masculine philosophy.” (p. 77)

The witch was a threat because she took the traditionally female sphere and made it powerful. She upset the social order through the means of her bodily experience. The body – particularly the female body – because cultural territory to conquer and regulate. The medical touch of science was rational and legitimate, whereas the the witch's powers were only morally base.

Overarching themes (conclusion of student presentation): The body – particularly the female body (Classen) – was territory to civilize (Stevens), domesticate, and regulate and served as a means of establishing medical authority (Keller). And the body always get inextricably bound up with morality and the self.

Professor James' lecture

Medical texts were circulated and consumed and dealt with **constructing the self** in larger society- *who are we?*

mid to late 19th century into the 20th – examples of the intersection of **body and colonialism**

- ∞ colonial physicians with obstetrics
- ∞ Brazil – debates who should properly have dominion over birth and delivery, endeavors to prove equality to European doctors
- ∞ Belgian government in the Congo - promote working population by transforming midwives into nurses (medical legitimacy)

Class stratification: male rationality and truth through medical science reserved for the upper class, while midwifery for the lower classes

Women's bodies were often equated with **national identity**.

Cannibalism – why does it bother us so much?

- Haiti example: revenge was sought by eating the infant of the perpetrator. Rumors often circulate during **times of war** and conflict, but why this particular cannibalistic one? These types of rumors present the irrationality of the situation, the barbarism of the object of revenge.
- The aversion to cannibalism can also be tied to the ideas of **native cannibalism** – there is conflict over professional and geographic space.
- Cannibalism was eating the body but also **attacking the soul** in some way.

Montaigne was the father of the essay form and took a culturally relativistic stance.

There were boundaries between the distinct **branches of midwifery**.

The body is not a tangible person, but rather the **meanings attached** to it in different time periods. For example, the viewing of the naked body brought up the European discomfort with the body.

Commodification of the native image is evident in the readings and continues today with such things like National Geographic. It is a new form of consumption of the text of the Other.

- *What does the way of presentation say about the culture that is doing the presenting?*

Different cultures focus on different ways of being/sensing and attribute different meanings. For example, Classen talks about the **gendered senses**. Women were often associated with the domestic, men with the cultural.

- *Who has power to make these associations and make them stick?*

The concept of culture changes over time, as do conceptions of what is civilized or savage. On that matter of civilization/savagery, there is a link to the **imperial project** which upheld the view that society progressed on a linear path (savage → barbarian → civilized).

- *Is cultural progress continuous or contiguous?*

Marx argued that economic development was the way to measure progress. Tyler argued for nurture over nature. In the 19th century, the argument was between **monogenism** (everyone came from one “stock”) and **polygenism** (there were several sources of humanity, therefore we were not all on the same evolutionary line).