

Embodiment

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Further Readings

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this awareness alert to all its meanings and changes is what becomes one’s sense of embodiment: to become a self through knowledge of a bodily being encountering other embodied beings. This sedimented bodily sense for humans is an ordinary, banal, mundane accompaniment as much as an accomplishment. However, the gritty, layered meaning of morphology and built-up proprioception can become pushed forward into agreement or conflict with other “social facts” like gender, race, (dis)abilities, and age that hook into or zip up one’s embodiment. This entry considers how Trans Studies scholarship, some anchored in the embodied knowledge of trans persons, has developed important theories of time, space, difference, subjectivity, and more according to lived experiences. It does so while examining how this scholarship builds on diverse traditions in critical race theory, media studies, queer sexuality, and feminist theory that center the body.

What Is a Body?

What is it to be a bodily being, sentient, woven into the world? This is a philosophical question but also a practical one. Freudian theories look at bodies as vectors of drives—for pleasure but also for death—in which a body is organized through desire lines that cathect it with other bodies and objects. The poststructuralist development of linguistic theories for subjectivity has an elaborate framework for understanding “bodily inscription” in which the matter of bodies cannot be thought separately from the discursive impressions, self-carvings, and the intelligibility of the ruling episteme. Philosophies of perception such as phenomenology, cognitive sciences, and their elaboration in dance and choreography know-how would say that spatial orientation, rhythm, and kinesthetic sense ground subjects in their bodily flesh. These fields attempt to reconcile how to weight combinations of psychic–corporeal, matter–language, affective thrumming, and felt sensibility. The ontological question of trans bodily knowledge can never be settled, for there is no one way to experience being “trans”; however, the combined attempts at working from the subjective sense of self offer important inroads to grasping what a body is through the trans prism of

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All living things have a body, a container that consists of muscles, sinew, blood, water, skin, microbes, and more. Awareness of this body and history of

experience. Trans bodily knowledge is an optic for analysis: the intersectional analysis of sex, gender, race, age, (dis)abilities, linked to analyses of health, vulnerability, care; of sexuality, desire, erotics; of language, discourse, and *dispositifs*.

Body Politics and Identity Politics

The question of what makes a body “trans”—in the widest possible sense—has echoes in other discussions: What is a woman, what is it to be Black, and how do we think about bodies before colonialization, before modernity, or according to religion? The ways in which embodiment differs, therefore, is not only about considering the single person’s body but how sociality tethers one to their body in shared, collective, but also forceful ways. The measure of difference between embodiments therefore has critical importance.

Since the dawn of Eurocentric Enlightenment thinking, sexo-psychic medical discourses have had a hegemonic grip on trans embodiment. Their ascension into being a proper “science” has been assisted by the creation of taxonomized categorizations that separate the normal from the abnormal. The legacy of proper naming and recognition for sex/gender/sexuality differences—invert, psychic hermaphrodite, transvestite, transsexual, gender identity disorder, homosexual, or autogynephilia—is being actively challenged by the depathology movement, which places value on the wide variety and diversity of sexed and gendered embodiment. These movements for self-determination push back on the presumed authority of “scientific expertise” while challenging its legacy of misnaming, misrecognizing, and misusing differences of sex, gender, and sexuality that so often coincides with racialization/racist epistemological paradigms.

Discussions within the field of Trans Studies differentiate embodiment according to how the optic of gender might operate differently from that of sexuality, namely, via queer theory with its roots in gay and lesbian studies. The so-called border wars, as a key publication dossier in a 1998 issue of *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* called them, examined the fraught understanding of the difference between masculine embodiment understood as lesbian butch and as female-to-male transsexual (FTM or F2M) in the language of 1990s discourses. This discussion often referred to the historical figure of Brandon Teena, who was murdered

for daring to take liberties and pleasure in their masculine embodiment as an assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) person. The violence of Brandon’s death was reenacted in the fight over claiming their body for different communities. The proffered notion of a *continuum* of masculinity brought about more debate regarding the self-assessment of one’s trans status and respect for gender expression, identity, and in one’s gender attribution, for instance, through pronouns and use of a chosen name. The prefixal expansion of trans* with the asterisk multiplier that became popularized in the mid-2000s challenged the legacy of being perceived as “trans enough” to claim the identity within various social circles.

Impact on Theories of Time, Space, and Media

Employing a trans optic on questions of embodiment allows the researcher to consider how to extrapolate from common experiences to comment on a generalized condition and even overturn previously held assumptions. For instance, the experience of “gender transition” can be parsed in multiple discipline-specific ways: as a period of time, a technological feat, a medical hurdle, a legal fix, a personal psychological trajectory that remains in play. At its core, examining accounts of gender transition raises questions of what is the duration of transition, for whom is the transition sudden or continuous, and which authorities and acts are involved in a transition? The quality of one’s “transition time” might operate according to different temporalities than, say, the typical transitions of life as one ages, because of markers like the change of name or reintroduction to kin, the start of hormone treatment, and physical changes that induce a second puberty. Although specific rules apply to trans persons, similar transitions occur when someone marries or undergoes menopause. The embodiment of trans time then might be fractured, discontinuous, and layered: At any rate, it goes against the presumption of a linear, enduring sense of self-sameness associated with a cis identity.

Related to the axis of time, the spatial orientation of transness both locally and in terms of a geopolitics of location has shifted scholarship in sociology, anthropology, political science, and more. In the early period of writing on trans embodiment, researchers turned to non-Western

contexts to confirm the sameness of trans experience or show the potential for locating “third gender” options that may be imported back to the West/global North. The critiques of these attempts, such as pointing out how they “romanticize the Native” or form a colonial mentality within the transgender imaginary, have been essential to making Trans Studies sensitive to how space interacts with identity formation: appropriation in assumed proximity or exotification through distancing or denial of coevalness. The erasure or misuse of specific local nonwhite or non-American/European terms such as *queen*, *tranny*, *aggressive*, or *hijra*, *waria*, or *fa’afafine* also requires thinking through the spatial axis in embodiment practices as transmitted through the use of dialect and vernacular language.

A third issue is the coalescing of trans identities alongside modernization, with the threat of temporally and spatially distancing those in premodernity versus postmodernity. As electronic, digital, and computational technologies have driven many instances of modernization, scholars have been interested in parsing the ways in which embodiment has been affected by newfound experiences of these media (also in relation to older forms). Feminist film theorists have long argued for the key role that bodies play in interpreting images, centering a corporeal rather than a cognitive engagement. The launch of the Internet 1.0 and 2.0 has also made for new means to engage an immersive bodily experience. While “cyberspace” was hailed as a meat-free space of freedoms in which identity might be adopted at will, these dreams have been tempered by a turn to acknowledge the extractive process of user tracking, data mining, and how algorithms direct online behavior. Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” in 1987 described the programmable grammar of gender and presaged many theories about digital embodiment, such as its updateability and modulation.

Bodying Forth?

The field of cultural studies and cultural critique has also been a rich site for thinking through the optic of trans embodiment, particularly by examining the values placed on bodily change. Transness has most often been exploited for its spectacular features, so as a spectacle that might induce horror or arousal. Rarely has trans embodiment been

allowed to remain background noise, the mundane experience of one’s gendered body. In trans cultural production, as in popular and mainstream venues, the increasing visibility of (some) trans bodies in narrative and documentary media has transformed the media landscape. What do (some) trans people gain from shifting from being relegated to the laughingstock on talk shows to playing the protagonist of a dramatic feature? Historians, such as Joanne Meyerowitz in 2001, show that media representation can produce a “shock of recognition” that assuages isolation and fosters community formation. As an actress and leading voice in cultural politics, Laverne Cox has called media presence a significant mode to present “possibility models” for being trans. How might producers, creatives, and viewers each and collectively “body forth” the horizon for actualizing trans embodiment?

The language of the human right to self-determination, as used in parts of the transgender movement, overlaps with the struggle of decolonial, feminist, and race equality social movements. Within a neoliberal framework, the notion of self-determination might be reduced to being able to privately access surgical procedures (modifications and enhancements), which tends to mistake the self in “self-determination” to be a wholly autonomous private citizen. The body’s vulnerability to others requires scholarship in Trans Studies to think more expansively about accomplishing self-determination as a collective act. Thus, acts of bodily liberation link up prison abolition with gender abolition; the continuous accomplishment of that bodily freedom in use and mobility requires others to be accomplished. Embodiment is a collective feat. Hence, Trans Studies has often advocated the refusal to be just a body—to the law, to medicine, to a disciplinary study, or on display in media—and to instead foster awareness of *this* unique body situated within a wider context. Embodiment is a powerful concept because it facilitates attentiveness to the history of embodiment, alert to all its meanings and changes wrought through and with our encountering other embodied beings.

Eliza Steinbock

See also Body Image Disturbance and Eating Disorders; Gender Dysphoria; Identity Politics; Misgendering; Phenomenology; Resiliency; Sexualities/Sexual Identities