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Introduction: Soft-Tissue
Modification and the
Horror Within

This volume is about the body as a site of adornment, manipulation, and mutilation, practices with roots reaching far back in the human record, at least 30,000 years.¹ At archaeological sites in Africa, for example, scientists have uncovered bits of clothing on some of our human ancestors; objects from a wide variety of cultures have displayed and recorded forms of body modification for centuries. Bound feet, flesh permanently marked either by a knife or tattoo needle, elongated ear lobes, stretched necks, deformed skulls, shrunken heads—these are practices that have long fascinated the West where they have been viewed as exotic distortions of the body, as is suggested in the standard terminology of “mutilation” and “deformation” itself. Today, as theorists struggle for critical understanding of the West, of its relations of domination and the ideologies which support and mask them, these practices are newly interesting; they no longer serve as bizarre extremes against which

we construct our naturalness, but rather to denaturalize the Western body. They are talismans which help us recognize how the body is always culturally constructed. But, of course, even the concept of denaturalization implies a residual belief in the existence of a natural body it seeks to deconstruct, a body outside of culture, a physical norm that grounds human commonality in the face of vast "surface" or cultural differences.

A large mural in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. entitled "Soft-Tissue Modification" testifies to the Western fascination with "exotic" body modifications. The mural is displayed on a center wall in Hall 25, the physical anthropology room. A reading of this room, and the current controversy over it, reveals the tensions that characterize contemporary theorizing of the body, tensions explored and analyzed in the papers in this volume.

Thousands of viewers annually are exposed to this mural: a jumble of superimposed human forms depicting a wide range of body modifications from mostly non-Western contexts (see cover). Figures displaying such unfamiliar practices as head deformation, Japanese tattooing, African scarification, Chinese foot-binding and Mesoamerican tooth filing—as well as such unusual adornments as Burmese brass neck rings, Sara lip plates, South American cheek plugs, and New Guinea nose rings—are contrasted with the foregrounded depiction of a white Western man being tattooed, suggesting a British sailor like those described by Conrad. This juxtaposing of the foreign with the more familiar is a common anthropological technique designed to disrupt the viewer's notion of these practices as exotic. We are invited to overlook the vast differences of culture that separate human beings and find unity in the body: it is portrayed as a ground on which all cultures inscribe significant meaning.

But this anthropological reading is, of course, only one interpretation among many. My thirteen year old son's reaction to the mural was revulsion and horror, despite my painstaking efforts to point out to him the standard anthropological message of cultural relativism that I saw it demonstrating. To him, the practices shown were mortifications, violations to the integrity of the body. The intense pain expressed in the body and face of the young boy apparently during ritual scarification may well have contributed to this impression. The depiction of the sailor's body actually undergoing tattoo invites the Western observer to identify and underscores that the other bodies portrayed have been modified by processes that could also be put to work on the viewer.

My son's interpretation of the mural as a depiction of bizarre and unsettling practices was informed and reinforced by a number of other displays which seem to help construct this particular reading. For while most of the displays in Hall 25 exhibit physical anthropology's contemporary concern with "reading bones" to reveal disease, growth patterns, or the work of evolutionary processes, those nearest the mural seem misplaced by today's anthropological standards in their highlighting of the freakish and the exotic.² What, for example, are we to make of the curious Ripley's-believe-it-or-not-like exhibition of the man with the seventeen and a half foot beard? Or "Soap Man," the corpse that decomposed into soap due to a peculiar eighteenth-century burial practice?

But whether one reads in the mural a disruption of ethnocentric attitudes or a reinforcing of the notion of the "other" as exotic or horrific, the underlying message seems surprisingly the same: that the unadorned, unmodified body is an unspoiled, pure surface on which culture works. Either way, this message dehistoricizes and decontextualizes the body. It ignores the particular meaning that both the body and the specific modifications to which it is subjected have for the people being represented. It resolves all bodies into the Western notion of the body as prior to culture and, thus, as natural.³

Contemporary theorizing, whether feminist, postmodernist, or anthropological, has contributed recently to exposing "the natural" as a Western cultural construct, calling into question the often taken for granted dichotomy between nature and culture and the ways in which this distinction has acted to reinforce relations of power and domination. Indeed, the body has become an important site for rethinking such binary oppositions as masculinity and femininity, gender and sex, the public and the private, and the cultural and the natural. Contemporary attempts to expose these categories as ideological constructions buttressing Western and/or male supremacy and to disrupt them have focused on the body. Understanding the body not as simple materiality, but rather as constituted within language as in much contemporary thought, is intended to question traditional notions of the body as prior to, or outside of, culture. This move is, of course, just one of the latest attempts in the West to grapple with the relationship between the natural and the cultural and to put the body, and representations of it, in service to this struggle.

A reading of other displays in Hall 25 can expose earlier attempts of using the body to conceptualize the relationship of nature and culture, attempts that remind us of the politics of entangling

biology and culture that contemporary biological anthropology has worked to correct. Behind the mural, in the final section of the Hall, is a large display that tells a particular story of human difference fashionable in the West until well into this century. It categorizes physical variations into a racial typology overlaid on a map of the world, superimposing human figures of various colors and shapes onto the continents to show the origin of "the races." By de-emphasizing the wide range of differences within a group in order to highlight differences among groups, such racial classifications reduce arbitrarily the variation in human physical traits into a few simple, static, and discrete categories: Negroid, Caucasoid, Mongoloid.⁴ These types, then plotted onto geographic and cultural areas, are made to imply a congruence between physical features such as skin color or cranial size and cultural traits such as kinship terminologies, dress styles, or even sleeping in the nude (see, for example, Morgan 1870:274). This suggests inherent racial identities once seen as part of an evolutionary hierarchy that equated the black with the savage, the white with the civilized. In the heyday of this approach, race and culture were presented as inextricably linked in such a way that a wide range of cultural and behavioral traits were understood as biologically determined.

It is not surprising then that Hall 25 has been the focus recently of criticism from a number of sectors. The allegations of racism and sexism that have been raised, however, reflect more than merely a change in the composition or sensibilities of the viewing public since the construction of the Hall in the early 1950s. The charge by groups whose cultural and physical remains are displayed that they have been misrepresented underscores the current understanding of the museum as an institutional site for depicting not the truth of humankind, but representations of particular cultural notions about identity, human behavior, human similarities and differences, and the role that the body plays in these ideas.

That the body is an important symbolic site in this contest over the representation of cultural identity is perhaps best illustrated by the intense controversy in recent years over the proprietorship and use of Native American skeletal remains in museum exhibitions. Indeed, a number of displays in the physical anthropology room have been modified over the last several years in response to criticism by Native American groups. Thus, the museum, and the representation and display of the body within it, has become an important location where the contestation over cultural identity is being waged in American society.

Like Native Americans, members of other disenfranchised groups have demanded the right to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories, protesting their appropriation into the discourse of the West. What, then, is the responsibility of the Western critic today? Recognizing that representations of the primitive, like those in Hall 25, function to construct the West as normal, as unseen, in contrast with the spectacle of the exotic, critics today struggle to foreground in the images and narratives told about the other, underlying stories about ourselves. The papers in this volume focus on deconstructing some of these Western assumptions, paying particular attention to the construction of femininity and its relationship to the natural and the primitive.

This effort to understand the body as a site for cultural power struggles, initiated by Michel Foucault, has recently emerged as a focal point of research in the humanities and social sciences. Yet this new and intense focus may reflect more than just the new opportunities opened up for research by Foucault's paradigm. Following Lévi-Strauss, Emily Martin suggests that this fascination may express our sense of the demise of the body as we have known it in the West: it may create "the illusion of something which no longer exists but should exist" (Lévi-Strauss 38). Thus, current interest in the body might be understood as nostalgic longing for the simple and knowable in a world in which scientific and medical advances have broken down traditional boundaries. Outside and inside can no longer be distinguished when the technological sophistication of immunological medicine has opened up to view an inner body frequently likened to the vast mysteriousness of outer space (Martin); nature and culture are confused as artificial insemination, pacemakers, implanted lenses, face lifts and sex change operations construct the body as manipulated cyborg (see Haraway). Thus, current preoccupation with deconstructing the body as it has been known may reflect theoreticians' scrambling to understand changes which have already modified the tissue of the body.

In this context, the very question of what the body is is up for grabs, and the contest over the right to define the body's meaning has high stakes. The papers in this volume participate in this debate, using "the body" as a site to ground power struggles over meaning. Like practices of adornment, disfigurement, and manipulation, these papers denaturalize the body, calling into question constructions many in the West have tended to think of as natural. Thus, these papers keep alive a dual perspective on the body. Like the mural in the National Museum, they portray the body as a site of

cultural manipulation and focus on the ways in which people are subjugated through the distortion, manipulation, and disfigurement of their bodies or on how such oppression is resisted and protested through the body. They also go beyond such analyses to challenge traditional assumptions about the body, such as those in the work of Aristotle, Freud, or Hawthorne, as well as some newer ones embedded in contemporary scientific discourses, popular culture, and post-modern theories. Informed by an awareness of the politics of representation, each of these papers focuses on how messages about the body are encoded and reinforced in narrative whether newspaper accounts, horror films, stories of the disappearances in Argentina, perfume advertisements, or nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction.

Thus, in her discussion of popular accounts of the recantation of an accusation of rape in the Webb case, Helena Michie calls into question the idea of the female body as inherently desiring. She exposes the complex workings of the master narrative about women and sexuality in our society. Similarly, Louise Krasniewicz upsets our assumption that reactions to horror films are merely instinctual, visceral responses to violence. She demonstrates the way in which the body, in these films, is used to mediate tensions between the individual and the social. Her reading of the movie *Halloween* suggests that horror films encourage a recognition of incest and bestiality as threats to appropriate sexual relations and the social structures dependent on them. Like Michie, Colleen Ballerino Cohen reads multiple, conflicting discourses that address women in terms of their body and sexuality. Examining various perfume advertisements, women's feelings about scents, and the story one designer tells of creating a particular one, she exposes how the perfume industry promises women autonomy even as it reinforces traditional notions of heterosexual romance and instinctive attraction. Each of these papers interrogates the way in which Western narratives construct the body as true and natural, even as the definition of the natural changes historically.

In her study of female body builders, Anne Bolin exposes the tension between the contemporary ideology of fitness and musculature and the traditional Western ideal of the feminine body as soft and curvaceous. This feminine ideal persists, she shows, even in a sport dedicated to the building of a muscular physique. Her analysis of the conflicting discourses of weight lifting and female beauty highlights the paradox women body builders face in seeking to affirm both their strength and their femininity. Robyn R. Warhol's

paper also affirms femininity in the face of an aesthetic standard, one which dismisses female emotion as embarrassingly sentimental. She uses nineteenth-century views of the relationship between the body and emotion—the idea that certain bodily poses directly produce the physical response of tears and corresponding feelings—to dislodge the conviction that high tragedy taps into “naturally” authentic feelings in the audience.

Ñacuñán Sáez’s paper, too, is concerned with the relationship among emotions, the body, and language. Examining the record of the Argentine generals, he challenges the rationale underlying torture, that exerting pressure on the body will produce truth. Like Warhol’s, his paper is concerned with the conceptual splitting of mind and body and its implication for class relations. Sáez’s analysis explores the relationship of “First World” theories to “Third World” bodies, concluding that the exclusive focus on textuality of much recent theorizing may perpetuate this split. Such a double view, focusing at once on a bodily practice and on theoretical symbolism, is also central to our analysis of tattoo. We use the practice of tattooing as an image for contemporary theories that conceive culture or history as writing on the body. We juxtapose the popular film *Tattoo* with Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” to expose how the impulses to mark women as well as to erase the mark of difference have similar consequences for women in Western culture: both attempt to repress a multiplicity of meanings for the body in order to make the female body signify just one thing. Like most of the other contributors to this volume, we highlight the body as gendered and explore the specific ways in which female bodies are conceived, addressed, and erased in contemporary discourses.

The Smithsonian mural displays a similar erasure; it excludes the white Western woman. Although it was presumably constructed in the early 1950s when women’s pancake make-up, bright red fingernail polish and lipstick, tight girdles, uplift bras, and stiff permanented hair-dos might well have been classed as “soft-tissue modification,” these phenomena go unrepresented. Despite the contortions these women’s bodies went through to conform to a narrow ideal of beauty, these practices were constructed as natural and normal and went unseen. The Westerner focused on in the mural is the tattooed sailor who would, by contrast, be seen as a renegade, an adventurer. Somehow his thoughtful, outward gaze and his oversized portrayal suggest that all the other cultural variants depicted take place in his memories of his travels, in imagination.

Thus, the mural, like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, equates the

exotic other with the unspeakable within the white Western male unconscious, while the white Western woman—in Conrad's story the virtuous Intended—represents a purity which demands repression and denial. She can only be constructed as the epitome of civilization, as "whited sepulchre," by constructing an alternative, the uncivilized as the site of "the horror" where all that is repressed has free play. Thus, the story and the mural exempt the white woman, and her body modifications, from scrutiny in order to construct the exotic and thereby reaffirm her "naturalness." These papers, in deconstructing and disentangling the theoretical Western male mind and the body of the other, and in insisting on bringing the white woman into the picture, hope to offer a new mural of soft-tissue modification, one that disrupts the dominant story and enables us to see its workings.

NOTES

1. We wish to acknowledge all those at the Smithsonian Institution who generously gave their time, especially Kathleen Gordon and Felicia Pickering.

2. This interpretation is underscored by the reaction to the room by other anthropologists with whom we have talked about it. Many feel that the room is terribly outdated while others are embarrassed by it.

3. See Marilyn Strathern's "Between a Melanesianist and a Deconstructive Feminist," for a detailed analysis of a different conceptualization of the body. She suggests that notions about the body among the North Mekeo of the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, "do not allow . . . the idea that things are done 'to' the body." For them, "the body is neither subject nor object" (61).

4. Interestingly, Jacques Derrida's work on the idea of *différance*, which focuses our attention on the differences within, is similar to the statistical idea of comparing within-group difference to between- (or among-) group difference. This technique is at the basis of biological anthropology's debunking of the notion of human races as discrete, stable entities since it has been shown that there is frequently more variation within a group on the trait being considered as the basis of classification (for example, skin color) than between this group and another classified as distinct from it. Derrida exposes this process of highlighting differences between groups while obscuring those within as a strategy for promoting the idea of stable identities or concepts. See any recent biological anthropology

textbook for a more detailed description of the problems with the concept of race from current statistical and scientific perspectives.

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