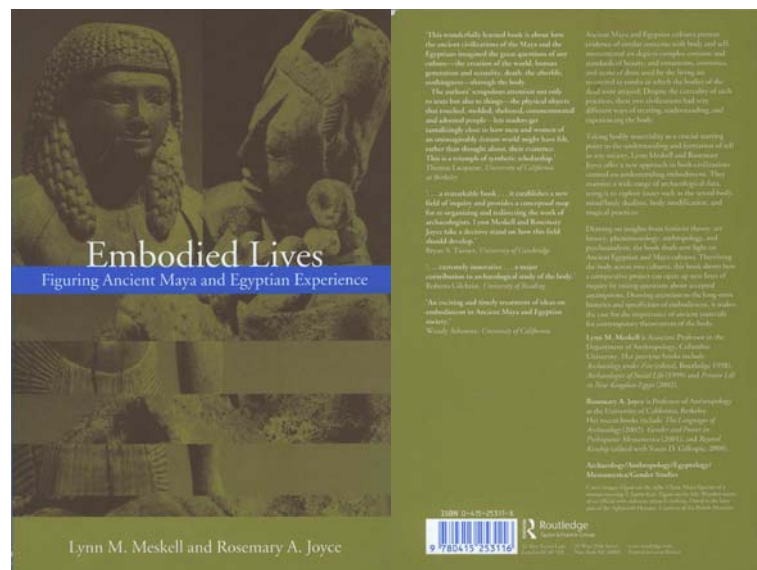


Meskell, L.M. & R.A. Joyce. 2003. Embodied lives. Figuring ancient Maya and Egyptian experience. – London/New York, Routledge

Book review by K. Muhlestein



In the midst of a constant call for multidisciplinary work, Meskell and Joyce have created a study which truly crosses cultures, millennia, and disciplines. As they examine the ideas of personhood and bodies in both the Egyptian New Kingdom and Classical Maya, they create “an experiment in comparative analysis,” from a phenomenological and feminist perspective, hoping to expose “unexamined postulates” (p. 1). The study is archaeologically based, hoping to reach, via material remains, the non-elite that are not often represented in textual or iconographic sources, although the discussion of the book frequently relies on iconography.

After outlining the purposes of the book, in chapter two the authors discuss the various words that are used for the body, including very brief discourses on nuanced differences between these terms. Typical manners of portraying the body are also outlined, including a description of the Mayan practice of body and dental modification. Chapter three, based on the premise that the materialisation of a person is framed by social interactions, demonstrates the Mayan bodied and social links between the self and mother, father, and other ancestors as the fundamental social block. Joyce also highlights the portrayal of social status by depicting central social figures frontally as opposed to subordinates who appeared in profile. While pursuing the idea of social interactions, Meskell notes that the clothing depicted in iconography is not a realistic portrayal of that which was actually worn, but instead allowed the desired presentation of the body. Elsewhere (p. 118) she notes that the archaeological record of clothing does not match iconographic clothing. She postulates that women were depicted according to a strict format which determined the ideal female body, but that “no specific stipulations were placed on the ideal nature of the male body” (p. 53). Just a few lines later she notes that “male limbs were shown well muscled, and biceps were indicated by a prominent bulge in the upper arm. Musculature of the lower leg was somewhat more schematic,” a seeming stipulation of male presentation. In such cases one wonders if the feminist has overpowered the Egyptologist. She perceptively notes that archaeology reveals that the paraphernalia of beauty, such as mirrors, tweezers, combs, and pins, crossed gender lines.

Chapter four aims at demonstrating that both the New Kingdom Egyptians and the Classical Mayans conceived of the body as something more complex than the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body. In doing so, Meskell admirably demonstrates the subtleties and ambiguities of the Egyptian conception of self and its various elements. She reviews the ideas behind the *ka*, *b3*, *akh*, and name, though this discussion would be much enhanced by Gee’s recent work on the subject of the *b3* (Gee, 2003). Similarly, Joyce notes the complexity of Mayan conceptions of the self consisting of elements such as breath, blood, and bone, and their interrelationships. Chapter five is dedicated to demonstrating the fluidity of the body when it served as a symbol. Meskell illustrates the point by examining hybrids such as depictions of the divine which include human bodies and animal heads, representations of pharaohs as animals, or the representation of gods as animals. She does not add anything to Hornung’s work on this subject (Hornung, 1996: 109-125), but such was not her intent. Instead she successfully highlights the Egyptians’ ability to think of the body in symbolic concepts. The depictions springboard to a discussion of man’s relationship to deity, and of the representation of demons, who are often depicted in twists and turns that run contrary to the decorum for presenting humans or gods in similar settings.

Likewise, Joyce demonstrates the Mayan proclivity for depicting the soul as an animal, both pictorially and textually. An important difference from the Egyptian depiction of deity is that Mayan gods are usually distinguished from humans by having different eyes.

Chapter six investigates bodily fluids and their meanings, which could be both positive and negative. In Egyptian thought, bodily fluids which held particular import were blood, tears, semen and urine, all of which could be either helpful or dangerous. Meskell masterfully ties phallic culture to myths of becoming. As a part of this discourse, she avers that birth and rebirth were viewed as phallic events. In doing so she ignores some of the most potent birthing symbolism of ancient Egypt, such as Nut's role in the birth and rebirth of the sun. Joyce demonstrates that in Mayan depictions the body of the young male is largely exposed while those of females are largely covered. She attempts to dispel the idea that displaying sexuality was distasteful for Mayans in two ways. She notes that phallic symbols are part of the glyph system. Additionally, from her feminist and phenomenological perspective the depictions of older men watching the activities of younger, largely exposed men, must be homoerotic. This is a conclusion not necessarily reached when viewed from broader perspectives.

Chapter seven investigates the transformation of bodies in the death process. For Egyptians, the need for a body was paramount. Even so, Osiris and all preserved bodies were viewed as liminal bodies. These bodies had to be protected in death, especially in their most vulnerable orifices, such as the eyes, ears, mouth and nose. Bodies were even repaired as part of the process of preparing them for their liminal yet crucial status in the afterlife. For the Mayans, interaction with the dead was a given, thus the loss of flesh was not as looming for them as it was for Egyptians. Another contrast is the Mayan practice of burying the dead within living spaces. The Mayan dead remained part of the community. This presentation is followed by chapter eight's discussion of the sufferings undergone by dead bodies that were condemned, according to Egyptian New Kingdom thought. For Mayans, the dead had trials and punishments, but would not be exposed to perpetual pain. For them, the danger of pain was greater in life, due to the continual prospects of raids, human sacrifice, and auto-sacrifice.

In writing this book Meskell and Joyce set out to demonstrate that the personhood of Classic Mayan and New Kingdom Egyptian individuals has not been lost (p. 158), to help us see some degree of these people's conceptions of self, and to expose unquestioned assumptions. While the book is somewhat disjunctive, and often the imposition of feminist perspective seems artificial or even creates an extremely skewed vision of the data, these elements actually help accomplish the goals of the authors. Their study truly gives the reader a feel for ancient personhood in these societies, and constantly causes one to question foundational assumptions. In this respect, Joyce and Meskell have masterfully accomplished their aims.

Meskell, L.M. & R.A. Joyce. 2003. *Embodied lives. Figuring ancient Maya and Egyptian experience.* – London/New York, Routledge. 184 pp. ISBN 041525311X. Price £ 18,99 (paperback).

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