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The Ethnographer's Body as Text and Context: Revisiting and Revisioning the Body Through Anthropology and Disability Studies

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I decided to pursue anthropology as a field of study because the record it documented of a wide range of human potentiality across time and space intrigued me. When I entered graduate school, one of my professors expressed her concern for the ability of someone with a disability to conduct fieldwork. I was told that she wanted to protect me from the prejudicial attitudes of people toward the disabled that she imagined were well-neigh universal. I was taken aback by her comments because I had simply assumed, given my own life experience thus far, that common ground was never to be taken for granted in human interaction, but always something to be established in negotiation with others. I imagined that engaging in ethnographic field research would only necessitate the application of those skills to another setting.

In pursuit of my doctoral degree, I lived in Israel for nearly two years and investigated a sect of Jews called the Karaites. This group had immigrated to Israel from Egypt under the Law of Return, the law that confers automatic citizenship on Jews, but the group's initial entry had not been without controversy. The status of the Karaites in Israel was, at first, problematic because their rejection of the Oral Law of Rabbanite Jews in favor of the Written Law only was construed as threatening to the Orthodox hegemony in Israel. So for many years, they were classified by religious authorities as safek mamzerim, under suspicion of bastardy,[1] and labeled bo'ale niddah (literally, men who sleep with menstruating women; in this case, implying that the entire group is polluted).[2] This classification prevented Karaites from marrying other Jews and from legally overseeing their own divorces. Eventually, the designation was lifted (although the label periodically resurfaces), but they still continue to sometimes be treated as an anomalous group in the press, in pedagogical materials, and by civic and religious representatives, despite their participation in the workforce, educational institutions and military.

I was interested in this group because I thought that being a Jewish minority in a Jewish state constituted a curious paradox. How could one be thought of as Jewish and not Jewish at the same time? Or alternatively, what did it mean to be the "wrong" kind of Jew? And "wrong" from whose standpoint and why? Unraveling this paradox required an investigation of criteria for Jewishness defined by civil and religious legal frameworks which establish eligibility for citizenship and marriage as well as an identification of more informal standards of Jewishness that have evolved in Israeli popular culture. It entailed an examination of media depictions and educational materials on Karaites. It involved an exploration of the experiences of Karaites in a variety of institutional settings such as schools, the military, and work environments. It necessitated a consideration of ways in which the Karaites assessed their own standing in Israeli society, assimilating, accommodating, and resisting external conditions and forces. In general, then, I was asking what it means to be a full citizen in Israel, exploring the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and figuring out how those classified as marginal maneuver within and against these complexities of power.

My broader queries concerning how anomaly was constructed, what the designators of anomaly thought was at stake, how minoritizing cultural representations shape institutional practices and quotidian encounters, and how and under what conditions the designees respond to these representations or counter them with alternatives was very much consonant with a critical theory approach. Such an approach begins by deconstructing the unmarked category of normal in order to unveil the means by which "deviants" are created and not born.

This essay is about how I have thought about these issues over the years or, more specifically, how disability has moved from margin to center in these musings. When I returned from the field, reflexivity, the term applied to a consideration of the impact of one's social characteristics and cultural upbringing on ethnographic engagement, had not yet become an accepted convention in anthropological writing. Moreover, developmentally (from both personal and political vantage points) I was not ready to critically assess what disability meant for my role as an ethnographer or for my formulation of questions and accompanying interpretations. Nonetheless, my use of Goffman's *Stigma* in my dissertation suggests that disability lingered at the boundaries of my text waiting (patiently?) for analysis.

In the early 1990s, I participated in a panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings on disability and fieldwork providing me with a platform for revisiting my fieldnotes to discover how my body figured in these texts only to find that, at times, my body had been the text for inscribing the resistant narratives of Karaites (especially Karaite women) against their social invisibility within the Israeli body politic. More recently, I attended a NEH Summer Institute on the New Disability Studies that has impelled me to reflect further on my original conclusions on liminality, anomaly, and the

possibility of rupture that encounters with bodies and texts and bodies as texts may stimulate.

Contesting Relationships

When I had my doctoral defense, one of my professors queried me concerning my emphasis on Erving Goffman over Mary Douglas. I somehow suspect that I may not have been as secure in my own answer then as I am now. Nevertheless, probably what I knew, but did not explicitly articulate, is that anomaly is not simply a problem of classification but an embodied status that must be worked out in everyday social situations. Not surprisingly, the person who raised the issue occupied the position of a unidimensional "normate"[3] who may never have been confronted with what I imagine every individual with a disability understands implicitly, that is, that to focus primarily on the "classificatorily challenged" is to fail to relinquish the privileged perspective of the classifiers. Charles Carnegie (1996: 484) makes a similar point in reference to Victor Turner's concept of liminality in his assertion that the goal of Turner's work was to "reaffirm the center."[4] By extension, he argues that greater attention be paid to the "experiential reality of the liminal subject" accompanied by a critique of the "debilitating contradictions" that liminality as an "on-going life condition" imposes (1996: 483-84).

Whereas the shortcomings of Goffman's theory of stigma have been addressed elsewhere, its value to my research was located in its focus on stigma as a "language of relationships" ([1963] 1997: 204) because relationships, even when largely scripted, are never entirely predictable.

Indeed, much of the contemporary writing on the politics of culture posits a much more dynamic and complex interplay between majority and minority perspectives than previously acknowledged, exposing ways in which both help constitute the other. Moreover, the overturning of once widely-held anthropological truisms, such as "culture is shared," have given way to much less monolithic frameworks through which the processes of culture can be unveiled as they engage multiple subject positions operating within and against coexisting, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, and ever shifting ideological narratives and practices. It is within this context I argued in my original work that the "ideologies of the larger society need not be the only or the most convincing ideologies available to `stigmatized' individuals for constructing and understanding their identity and association with one's group need not be for the sole purpose of licking wounds and devising political slogans against the majority" (1980: 281). Rather, I noted, many Karaites publicly assert a positive sense of identity and enjoy debating the merits of their doctrine with non-Karaites.

By suggesting that contestation is a common, if not always socially obvious or effective dynamic in power relationships, I by no means wish to ignore or obscure the structural and discursive forces that reproduce social inequalities. More

exactly, my purpose is to call attention to the insights and tactics that living with "debilitating contradictions" may engender. Apropos to this point, James Fernandez and Mary Huber (2001: 1) comment:

> In the face of uncertainty and the `unwelcome contradictions' of life, many people have found irony a valuable resource for measuring or exciting the moral and political imagination against whatever is given, assumed or imposed.

Indeed, it was my own sense of the ironic (ergo, an awareness of my enculturation into a discipline that touts the inventiveness of culture and the adaptability of humankind simultaneous with its sometimes blatant and unexamined display of privilege) that eventually helped clarify my own relationship to my "informants." This relationship was both empowering and disempowering for both parties, but forever one in which our bodies together generated alterations in received scripts about the impurity of Karaite bodies and the incompetence and undesirability of disabled ones. Hence, I return to (or perhaps arrive at) Rosemarie Garland Thomson's assessment (1997b: 32) that "stigma theory is useful, then, because it untangles the processes that construct the normative as well as the deviant and because it reveals the parallels between all forms of cultural oppression while still allowing specific devalued identities to remain in view."

Double Embodiments

In *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, Eilberg-Schwartz makes a distinction between the analysis of written texts that address characterizations of Jewish bodies and data on the body collected and analyzed via the ethnographic process. He describes the latter as "an embodied practice of interpretation" (1992: 13). After reviewing my fieldnotes, I decided that, as an ethnographer with a disability working with Karaites in an Israeli context, the text that emerged from my research could be said to be "doubly embodied." By "double embodiment" I meant that since my disability necessitates assistance with showering and personal grooming, I learned as much from how my informants spoke of and handled my own body as how they spoke of and handled their own bodies (see Colligan 1995 for examples and more thorough analysis).

In Karaite religious discourse, the discipline and regulation of the body is a central theme and in Israel serves as a counterclaim that they are the "pure" Jews. Karaites argue that the vigilance with which they maintain the purity of the body contributes to the pure condition of their synagogue rendering it a microcosm of the Temple. They also assert that their Torah is the "pure" Torah with nothing added to it or subtracted from it and that the Torah's messages are apparent to the careful reader, its meanings not deceiving nor concealed.

As a result of the assistance I received from the Karaite families with whom I lived or visited, my body became like an "open" book and I ceded my own body and bodily processes to a "close" reading. Anthropologist Ruth Tsoffar reports (1993) that Karaite women in the San Francisco Bay Area are discouraged from crossing their legs during religious worship because having an "open" body leaves one "open" to the sacred. I hypothesized that from a Karaite perspective, by exposing my own body, I became more receptive to the "truth." However, in so doing, my body's conditions were made apparent, revealed to the informant's gaze, and subject to social control. In a sense, the disciplining and regulation of my body came to represent the disciplining and regulation of the Karaite social body as it interacts with the Israeli body politic. In fact, Douglas (1966) and Goffman seem to merge here because my negotiated treatment of my body was framed, in part, by Rabbanite vulnerabilities that construe the Karaites as a threat and by Karaite safeguarding of their own bodies and spaces. Moreover, my body served as a "text" for the inscription of Karaite cultural meanings and opposition to a disembodying Israeli public discourse. This resistance took the form of "hidden transcripts" described by James Scott (1991) in which challenges to subordinating dominant discourses are produced and communicated in "offstage" settings, in this case, the privacy of people's homes.

I concluded that, as a non-Karaite, a non-Jew and an anthropologist from the West, I could have been viewed as a potential colonizer, but that my own power was diffused as a result of the assistance I requested. Leaving my body open to a close "reading" helped create a more reciprocal, balanced flow of information between the anthropologist and her subjects and brought to the surface the process by which we were mutually constituting one another. Karaite practices in Israel are often under attack and the presence of an outsider such as myself threatened to further dilute or pollute what is "purely" Karaite. Exposing my body to the Karaites offered them the recourse of sanction and allowed them to monitor the "truth" of my intentions and actions thereby providing them with an avenue to battle the forces that imperil their ongoing viability as a group.

Of course, bodies can "embody" diverse social messages and I also surmised that, in this instance, mine functioned as a "communicative" body. "The essential quality of the communicative body is that it is a body in the process of creating itself" (Frank 1991: 79). In addition to my body becoming enabling, it became "other"-abling generating a dialogue about self and other. As such, my body became a platform for cultural contestation that might ultimately contribute to the re-embodiment of Karaite women as well as Karaites more generally.

Refreshing Entanglements

My participation in the NEH Summer Institute has provoked me to further consideration of the liberatory potential of bodies and the malleability of culture for creating space for bodily

encounters that encourage and release these refreshing entanglements. David Mitchell argues that autobiographies of people with disability do not easily escape being narrated through a "singular subjectivity" (2000: 311) and often fail to underscore "disability as an inherently social phenomenon" (2000: 315). Yet what has become abundantly clear to me upon reflecting back on the fieldwork process is that the very success of my project rested, in part, on the context of sociability my body afforded. In other words, my disability consciousness began to develop clarity, however unwittingly, from the lessons that Karaites taught me concerning the power of bodies working together to revision history and bodies and the history of bodies, and to hint at alternative truths.

In this regard, I was struck by Susan Kahn's characterization of Orthodox beliefs concerning reproduction as significant in their acknowledgement of reproduction as a "cultural achievement" (2000: 168) anchored in a "bodily experience [that] is consistently singled out as that which establishes a more significant relationship between persons than the simple combination of reproductive genetic material" (2000: 171). My point here is that disability, like reproduction, may expose the cultural productivity of bodies whose purposes become interwoven, but placement within a disability community may not be entirely requisite to discovering a positive disability identity inasmuch as the knowledge of the generative potential of bodies may be acquired in a wide variety of settings.

Indeed, the value of cross-cultural research is that it serves as a useful reminder that much of the world does not require post-modernism to teach us that bodies are never entirely self-contained, self-willed entities whose core worth and qualities reside in their interiority. In fact, the very conventions of ethnographic reporting now recognize the myth of the detached observer mastering his/her subjects as a falsehood that conveniently masks power relationships between observer and observed. This approach has been largely replaced with an emphasis on the intersubjectivity of the fieldwork process (a space where singular subjectivity and singular objectivity lose their potency) in which a negotiated collaboration is both a goal of that process and explicitly formative of the descriptions and interpretations that ensue (Salzman 2001).

What is remarkable is that anthropology and disability studies very much mesh in their ability to challenge the fixed, natural, and solitary nature of bodies. For example, in Margaret Lock's and Nancy Scheper-Hughes' widely-cited article, "The Mindful Body," the authors maintain that bodies are both concrete entities and symbolic artifacts whose experiences occupy and should be documented in three overlapping, simultaneous realms: the phenomenological (the locus of individual perception), the social (the locus of social relations), and the body politic (the locus of legal and political regulation). Likewise, Rosemarie Garland Thomson supports an approach to body criticism that embraces the following four facets: first, the ways that the body

is represented in culture; second, the ideological discourses that inform those representations; third, the political, social, and material effects of those representations; fourth, the relationships among representations, biology, and the lived body. (1997a: 297) Thus, anthropologists and disability studies proponents alike recommend the body be studied as a multi-layered phenomenon, although Thomson recognizes that variations in human biology may be a factor to be assessed as well (albeit not in an essentialized fashion).

Yet certain disciplinary contradictions remain to be addressed. Whereas the very methodology of anthropology highlights the social construction of knowledge and the social and cultural fashioning of bodies, it sometimes misses the important and diverse ways in which the particularity of actual bodies matters to this process. On the other hand, disability studies focuses centrally on the cultural construction of physicality (Mitchell and Schneider 1997). Nevertheless, too often, a concern for the imposed and regulatory quality of discursive and institutional scripts and regimes detracts attention from embodied strategies that support people with disabilities (or any people culturally designated with aberrant corporealities) to live within and against these oppressive forms.

On the positive side, anthropology's promulgation of cross-cultural comparison offers insight into the restrictive nature of our own categories. For example, in the United States, we are socialized to think of our bodies as constitutive of our most private selves, something we own and must guard against incursion. On the other hand, we assume that bodies relegated to the domestic realm are bodies that do not count, whose impact can not be felt elsewhere, whose command can not extend outward. Nevertheless, ethnographic research points to many instances in which the private and public are blurred and counters the conclusion that power lies exclusively in the public realm. Apropos to these distinctions, Louise Lamphere (2001: 105) explains that analysis governed by Victorian era dichotomies that once shaped "an interest in spheres and domains has become replaced by an interest in relationships." She also notes that within this scholarship, "dominance and subordination become more layered, textured phenomenon, processes through which women's inequality is constructed and laid bare rather than flatly asserted."

I believe that these findings have implications for thinking about the social and relational characteristics of all bodies and the latent power of disabled bodies in specific. By immersing oneself in novel cultural circumstances, one becomes quickly disabused of the notion that bodies and spaces are ever really private. Among the Karaites, ceding my body and bodily processes to a "close" reading was a necessary condition of fieldwork (ergo, I received the help I needed and they received information about my body). The "findings" were made public and as with Karaite women when I was menstruating I was prohibited from

attending the synagogue or rites of passage celebrations. I had to sit in a designated chair and take my meals apart from non-menstruating family members and informants with whom I resided would often announce my "condition" quite openly to other Karaites who entered their homes or via the telephone with Karaites I planned to visit.

Despite the restrictions and embarrassment this protocol prompted (a point to which I will return), what surprised me more was the degree to which the Karaites (especially the women), accepted not only my presence, but engaged my body. After all, their proximity and contact with my body rendered them vulnerable to the pollution they assiduously avoided. Overall, I was embraced by the Karaite social body and allowed to permeate their sacred and social reality. Hence my body became a vehicle for bonding and a vessel for the transmission of knowledge rather than simply a site of control, negation, and shame. As a matter of fact, the practice of transmitting the lessons of the Torah through the body is an established mode of instruction between Karaite mothers and their daughters (Tsoffar 1993). Although Karaite women are excluded from adopting a visible role in synagogue ritual, the lessons they teach their daughters at home are still considered key in maintaining the synagogue as a microcosm of the Temple.

Given that, however, their willingness to integrate me into their everyday lives still remains something of an enigma because the Temple was viewed as a "place where the best representatives of humanity met with God" (Abrams 1998: 17). Nonetheless, in Jewish texts, a congregation's familiarity with the disabled person diminishes the negative impact of the disability on the experience of the sacred (Abrams 1998); therefore, the very known-aboutness of my body probably did much to alleviate the anxieties of the women who handled it. Moreover, Buckley and Gottlieb argue that with regard to menstruation, pollution theory may have its limits because:

> it is men who have by and large defined menstruation as polluting, and the typical ethnography rarely tells us what women of the culture at hand think of their own menstrual periods, and those of other women. (1988: 31)

Hence, in my own case, responses to my menstruating body engendered fluctuating polarities, one based in a desire for avoidance and the other in a recognition of a common humanity stemming from a "shared substance" (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 35) which demanded an adherence to cultural regulations to which both the ethnographer and Karaite women were expected to abide.

The treatment of the body in disability studies introduces an added dimension to this discussion because it interrogates the transition from the valorization of wholeness to the celebration of hybrids in contemporary society. For example, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's discussion of representations of disability among African-American writers, she notes that their works

provide an opening for:

> alternative, affirmative narratives that do not depend on a faith in oneness or a range of valued concepts such as wholeness, purity, autonomy, and boundedness - characteristics of the ideology of unity that both sanction the normate self and generate its opposite, the corporeal other. (1997b: 113)

Nonetheless, what is interesting about the Karaites is that despite their own concern for wholeness and purity (albeit based on different interpretations than the Rabbanites), their social experience within Israeli society has been that of hybrids (since they are viewed as both Jewish and not Jewish). Moreover, the ambiguity of Karaite status creates parallels with disability experience (as one that is both normal and not normal). Thus my contact with Karaites within an Israeli context was clearly an encounter of hybrids in which the merging of our bodies (an extension of the hybridization process) helped create an interspace that had emancipatory possibilities for both of us. The concrete intimacy of our physical merging served to dispel our sense of cultural dislocation and reinscribe our sense of agency in our bodily collaboration.

Standpoint Theory or Starting Point Theory?

I began this essay by proposing that my purpose here is to explain how and why disability has moved from margin to center in the examination of my ethnographic encounter with the Karaites. However, in truth, disability continually shifts in and out of view. During the NEH Summer Institute, we discussed the value of feminist standpoint theory for evaluating issues of disability. Standpoint theory purports that our social position determines our social experience and perspectives on the world. I suggested that instead we relabel it starting point theory because the knowledge we gain and the strategies we develop from our individual embodied experiences may inform our analysis, without fixing or containing our consciousness. Moreover, epistemological insights that stem from our own placement in the social world need not be limited to those who share our corporeal particularities. Additionally, the crystallization of a disability rights consciousness need not be formed solely within the boundaries of a disability community.

People often ask me how I felt about my body becoming a platform for the reaffirmation of another people's ideology and jockeying for another people's social location. There were certainly times when the manipulation of my body, the open communication of my body's truths, and the disciplining of my body precipitated both resentment and discomfort. Whereas the gaze may be turned on feminine bodies and the stare on disabled ones (Rosemarie Garland Thomson 1997b), in specific instances the line between them may dissipate and the objectification that the combination instantiates may become especially loaded for the

receiver. The visceral anxiety that the collapse of gaze and stare (combining elements of spectacle and deviance simultaneously) provoked was revealed in a dream I had just prior to my return to the field a number of years ago. In the dream, I was extremely embarrassed by a complete stranger discovering a used kotex that I had carefully concealed in a cabinet.

Nonetheless, our negotiated encounter also brought forth a new knowledge and affirmation of my own body and its possibilities. My prior experiences with medical personnel, teachers, family members, and personal attendants had left me with a heightened awareness of how inequalities in social standing often operate in and through the body. What I learned was that my body was not simply an entity to be acted upon, but could participate in a conjoined agency, a co-authoring, and mutual authorization of our roles as "entitled bearers of a new view of reality" (Rosemarie Garland Thomson 1997b: 38). Again, this realization is consonant with a postmodern approach to ethnography that purports that ethnographic description is not so much a product of our observation as it is understandings that emerge from a "bargaining for reality"[5] that takes place between the anthropologist and her field subjects. Hence, anthropologists need to embrace a more expansive view of the potential for non-normate bodies to attract sociability and combat oppressive narration. Likewise, disability studies should cast its net to other shores where disability consciousness may surface in the interspace waiting to find its way to center stage.

Notes

1. The Orthodox Rabbinate recognized the legitimacy of Karaite marriages, but granted no authority to their divorces. In Judaism, illegitimacy of children is defined in the context of adultery, rather than wedlock. Thus, for Karaites, children from a second marriage were considered illegitimate. The Rabbinate claimed an inability to trace the validity of all Karaite unions, thereby declaring the entire group suspect.

2. According to Eilberg-Schwartz (1992), Jews were "otherized" in the European imagination through projections of distorted body imagery such as images of Jewish men menstruating. Similarly, the label of bo'ale niddah, when attached to Karaites by adherents of Orthodox Judaism is intended to feminize and marginalize the entire group (Tsoffar 1993).

3. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997b: 8) defines a normate as "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them."

4. In her reading of Victor Turner, Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997b) emphasizes the creative and subversive potential that Turner's concept of liminality encompassed. However, he was addressing these possibilities as they might occur in ritual (assuming that anti-structure always returns to structure),

whereas Carnegie's emphasis is on liminality as a permanent life status.

5. "Bargaining for reality" is a term coined by Lawrence Rosen (1984: 4) to characterize social relations in Morocco. He describes it as "the process of bargaining out the terms of their relations, the definition of their situation, and the implications of their attachment." My argument is that this approach to social relations is descriptive of ethnographic encounters more broadly.

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