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# Bodies Moving in Space: Ancient Mesoamerican Human Sculpture and Embodiment

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# Bodies Moving in Space: Ancient Mesoamerican Human Sculpture and Embodiment

## **Abstract**

Judith Butler's proposal that embodiment is a process of repeated citation of precedents leads us to consider the experiential effects of Mesoamerican practices of ornamenting space with images of the human body. At Late Classic Maya Copán, life-size human sculptures were attached to residences, intimate settings in which body knowledge was produced and body practices institutionalized. Moving through the space of these house compounds, persons would have been insistently presented with measures of their bodily decorum. These insights are used to consider the possible effects on people of movement around Formative period Olmec human sculptures, which are not routinely recovered in such well-defined contexts as those of the much later Maya sites.

## **Keywords**

embodiment, archaeology, gender, sex, Mesoamerica, Maya, Copan, sculpture, Olmec

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology

## Bodies Moving in Space: Ancient Mesoamerican Human Sculpture and Embodiment

Holly Bachand, Rosemary A. Joyce & Julia A. Hendon

*Judith Butler's proposal that embodiment is a process of repeated citation of precedents leads us to consider the experiential effects of Mesoamerican practices of ornamenting space with images of the human body. At Late Classic Maya Copán, life-size human sculptures were attached to residences, intimate settings in which body knowledge was produced and body practices institutionalized. Moving through the space of these house compounds, persons would have been insistently presented with measures of their bodily decorum. These insights are used to consider the possible effects on people of movement around Formative period Olmec human sculptures, which are not routinely recovered in such well-defined contexts as those of the much later Maya sites.*

In previous publications, the authors of this article have explored the intersection of embodiment, materiality, and subjectivity in prehispanic Mesoamerica, drawing on a range of anthropological and gender theory (Joyce 1993; 1998; 2000a,b,c; 2001; 2002; Joyce & Hendon 2000). Central to this work on embodiment — the materialization of the physical person as the site of the experience of subjectivity — has been an understanding of the writing of Judith Butler and its applicability to archaeological inquiry (see Perry & Joyce 2001). Butler noted that a starting point for many analyses of gender was the argument that genders were 'ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body', means by which particular symbolic value was given (within specific cultural circumstances) to human bodies with distinct sexual characteristics (Butler 1990, 24–5, 112, 134–41). Butler convincingly argues that such a presumption of the priority of the body, and the dichotomy between nature (sex) and culture (gender), are insupportable. As Butler put it, the 'production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender' (Butler 1990; emphasis added). The illusory transparent existence of the 'natural' body is itself a by-product of discourse about bodily materiality (Butler 1993, 1–16, 101–19). *Materiality* is consequently a

critical part of the apparatus through which sex, and other aspects of subjectivity, are produced and reproduced.

From this perspective, materiality cannot simply be subsumed as a kind of inarticulate discourse. We argue that materiality is better considered in terms of Butler's (1993, 12–16, 101–19) concept of performance. She defines performance as a form of repeated *citation* of a disciplinary norm, a largely or normally nondiscursive (*not* prediscursive) enactment of a mode of being that is shaped by culturally-situated precedents, and in turn shapes new cultural performances. We thus view materiality as a mechanism through which social actors transform fleeting identities into historical facts (Joyce & Hendon 2000).

We draw on the terminology of Paul Connerton (1989, 72–3) in our discussion of processes through which social memory is concretized and generalized (Joyce 1998; Joyce & Hendon 2000). Connerton identified a tension between what he called 'practices of bodily incorporation' and 'practices of inscription' that is central to the two archaeological cases we consider in this article. Bodily practices — intimate, internalized, and fleeting — take place in what Michael Herzfeld (1991, 10) calls social time, 'the grist of everyday experience . . . the kind of time in which events cannot be predicted but in which every

effort can be made to influence them . . . the time that gives events their reality, because it encounters each as one of a kind'. In contrast, inscriptional practices make permanent more ephemeral actions and appearances, and separate them from their locally situated position in the bodies and lives of particular persons. Inscriptional practices are marks in monumental time, which Herzfeld (1991, 7–10) argues 'is reductive and generic. It encounters events as realizations of some supreme destiny, and it reduces social experience to collective predictability. Its main focus is on the past — a past constituted by categories and stereotypes'.

Joyce (1998) has argued that in ancient Mesoamerica, standardized body ornaments and human figural images executed in permanent materials were media for the inscription and control of bodily practices at the scale of the individual subject. Joyce & Hendon (2000) have extended this argument to the construction of places. They suggest that the location of buildings on the landscape can be understood as a way that social groups seek to concretize and generalize certain key identifications. Placing buildings in space can create more enduring histories for specific identities by marking them permanently on the landscape. Through the interplay of placed bodily materialization and the inscription of embodied subjectivity in places, settings in which citational precedents for performance shaped the subjective experience of bodies moving in space were constructed.

### **Bodies moving in space**

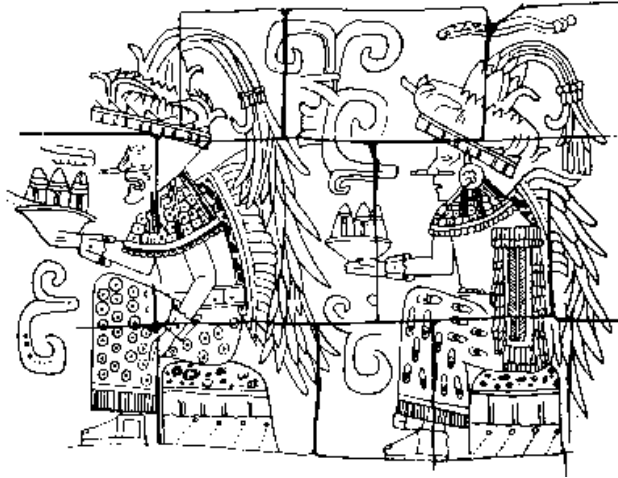
Our current investigation concerns the effects on embodiment and on day-to-day experience of the constant presence of permanently-inscribed images of idealized human bodies, which served as citational precedents for lived performance in Mesoamerica. Although there are many distinct societies in the history of the region, across different contexts, personhood took the form not of the autonomous and disconnected individuals of contemporary methodological individualism, but of relational selves (López Austin 1988; Furst 1995; Gillespie 2001; Joyce 2001). The materialization of the embodied person was accomplished through social interaction among groups of people living in structured spatial settings. Mesoamerican practices of materializing the body, with substantial antiquity and longevity, include the inheritance of ancestral names, calendrical fates, and named spirit doubles who are active while the embodied person sleeps, dreams, or has visions. The cultural modification of the skin, skull, teeth,

and ears were physical practices materializing embodied Mesoamerican persons from the earliest villages known, around 1500 BC, through to Spanish contact in the sixteenth century AD.

The profusion of human sculpture in Mesoamerican sites has received much attention as a source for individual histories, for the definition of culture-specific styles for establishing chronology and interaction, and for the study of iconography to construct models of cosmology and ideology. Less attention has been paid to the fundamental question of the effects on the people living in these places of ornamenting space with human figures. Needless to say, this is by no means a universal cultural practice. Human figures need not predominate nor even be present in different representational traditions. Consequently, we take the deployment of images of the human body as a significant exercise of agency, making choices to depict, and to patronize the depiction of, idealized models of human bodily being.

In Mesoamerica, not all societies portrayed human images in all, or even most, spatial contexts. For example, while the façades of residences of nobles (the apparent social, political, and economic élites) at Classic Maya sites like Copán (discussed below) incorporate human images, the façades of residences of the corresponding social segment in the Postclassic Valley of Oaxaca featured geometric patterning (Hamann 1997). Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1950, 170–72) noted the replication of human figures on virtually every visible surface of monumental architecture at the Terminal Classic Maya site, Chichen Itza (Fig. 1). This multiplicity of human figures contrasts with more selective use of human figures in partly contemporary Classic Maya centres further south. Proskouriakoff suggested that the architectural spaces of Chichen Itza were visually populated with a permanent crowd of warriors, reflecting a distinct social world from that of other Maya sites.

In order to discuss such contrasts, and particularly to relate them to the lived experience of human subjects for whom these images served as a source of precedents for citational performance, we need to sketch out some distinctions among Mesoamerican spatial settings. Joyce & Hendon (2000) identify variation in intimacy, visibility, and circulation frequency as key dimensions in the spatial organization of Mesoamerican settlements. Variation in the scale of settings, from the interiors of individual houses to the great exterior plaza spaces, created and reinforced differential relations of intimacy among those persons present. Visibility ranged across a spectrum from the least visible, subdivided interior spaces of



**Figure 1.** Drawing of seated human figures from a bench in the Terminal Classic Maya Temple of the Chac Mool, Chichen Itza, Mexico. (From Tozzer 1957, fig. 671.)

buildings, to the visual omnipresence within sites and even regions of monumental architecture. Regular or opportunistic visits to sites of ritual practice, prescribed by calendars or required by events in individual lives, and everyday circulation within house compounds established endpoints in a continuum in circulation frequency and formality.

Particular Mesoamerican settings can be characterized in terms of these three dimensions of spatial difference (Hendon 1997; 1999; 2002; Joyce 2000b; 2001). Only those with access to the intimacy of the interior space of the house would have witnessed practices in this location. Plazas were potential assembly spaces for many people and offered high visibility for practices taking place on the raised, larger-scale external platforms facing plaza interiors. Different spatial settings combined or segregated the repetition of everyday practices, the punctuated, predictable timing of practices dictated by calendars, and the irregular but marked periodicity of the practice of life-cycle ceremonies (compare Conkey 1991, 66–81; Love 1999; Pred 1984; Moore 1986; Rodman 1992).

Different spatial settings provided more and less hegemonic scales of performance (Joyce & Hendon 2000; Joyce 2001). Performances that were highly visible to larger segments of the population would have been normative, creating a community through common experiences. Less visible, intimate performances in house compounds, repeated daily and at punctuated intervals, would have been effective media for the reproduction of performance, because awareness of discipline incorporated through

repetition was routine in everyday life (Butler 1993, 93–119; compare Bourdieu 1973). Residential buildings constructed as citations of a vernacular architecture (see Steadman 1996, 64–72) would have disciplined their inhabitants through the repetition of architectural features. Specific motor habits required to navigate different kinds of building are learned through experience and remain uninterrogated. Mesoamerican buildings, with their stairs, stepped platforms, floor level thresholds, and low benches for seating, would have conditioned particular habits of movement. These features of architecture would have interacted with other materialities of embodiment, such as clothing, whose effects were experienced simultaneously as human actors moved through Mesoamerican sites. Among the most striking intersections of architecture and other materialities of embodiment in ancient Mesoamerica was the representation of the human body in living spaces. In Late Classic Maya sites, for example, life-size human figures were literally attached to the façades of buildings, merging spatial discipline with citational precedents for embodiment.

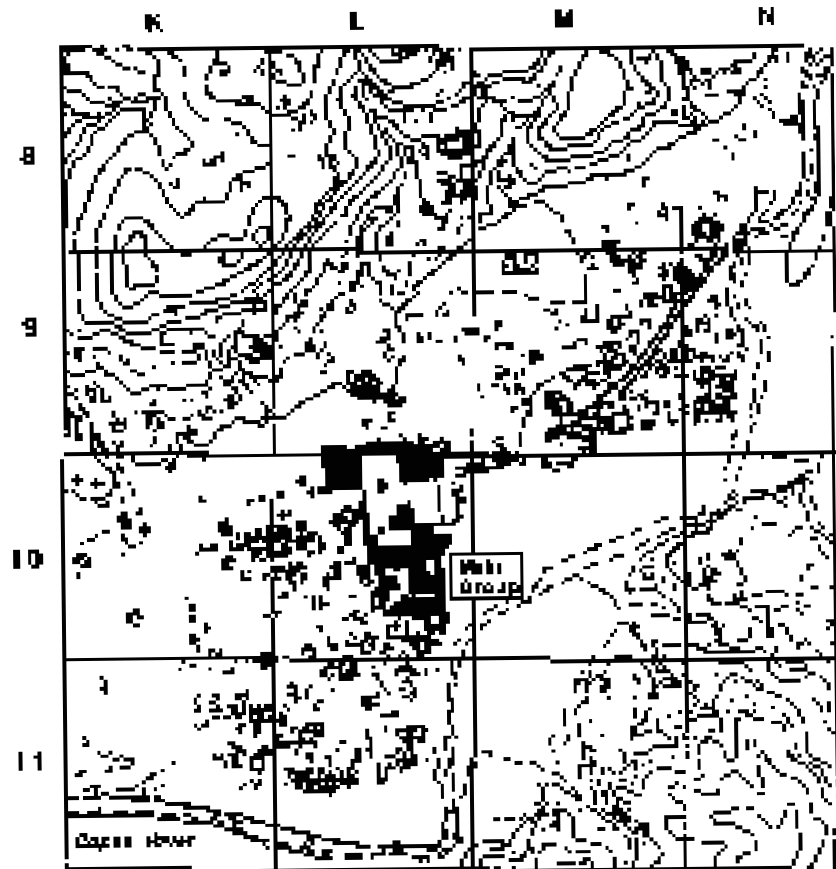
#### Embodiment in Late Classic Maya residential space

Residential compounds in the Copán Valley were one locale in which social relations were constructed through practice, and citational precedents of concern to the inhabitants of the compound were insistently enforced. At its peak of population in the eighth century AD, the Classic Maya Copán Valley was dotted with groups of low stone platforms supporting residential structures, arranged to form rectangular courtyards (Fig. 2). While many of these groups consisted of one set of buildings, others were aggregates of multiple courtyard groups. Along the Copán River, the density of buildings reached a maximum in an area extending approximately 2 km. Here, the largest number of aggregated courtyards are found, the tallest supporting platforms were built, and the most labour-intensive forms of construction were employed, using cut stone blocks, rubble fill, and stucco plaster. Included here was the Main Group, a massive set of buildings including the residence of the ruling family, large plaza spaces surrounded by inscribed monuments, and special-use buildings, including a ballcourt. High-status, but non-ruling, families occupied other residential compounds in this centre of population and construction.

The façades of the inward-facing, massive buildings of high-status residential compounds provided their owners with a locus upon which to inscribe mes-

sages, in the form of stone sculpture, that are intimate, visible, and generalizing (Hendon 2002). Not all buildings are so decorated, not all compounds, even in the high-status area, used sculpture, and not all sculpture depicts the same images. Animals, plants, objects, natural features, humans, and deities are all represented. Human images are frequent but do not predominate. The decoration of certain buildings' façades with human images (Fig. 3) represents a set of choices. We argue that these choices relate directly to the desire of certain noble houses to represent permanently their view of the ideal person both for the benefit of their own members and to convince others of their approximation to that ideal. Since the compounds in which such imagery was featured were the settings for feasts celebrating significant life-cycle or ritual events, they were regularly visited by guests from outside the patio (Hendon 2001). Some of these guests would have been relatives who had the opportunity to renew their association with the citational precedents embodied in the sculpture. Other guests would have been from unrelated, even rival, houses. In being reminded of the claims of their hosts, these outsiders would have had the chance to compare their own approximation of proper bodily decorum with that of their hosts.

The high-status residents of three compounds, Groups 9N-8, 8N-11, and 10L-2, invested great time and energy in the creation of permanent citational precedents in the form of idealized human figures. Groups 9N-8 and 8N-11 are located East of the monumental centre. Group 10L-2 lies just to the South of that centre. Its residents may have been connected with the ruling Copán dynasty (Andrews & Fash 1992) whereas the inhabitants of the other two groups, while certainly noble, do not seem to have had such a close connection.



**Figure 2.** Map of the Main Group and nucleated settlement in the Copán Valley.



**Figure 3.** Restored façade of a Late Classic Maya noble residence from Copán with three-dimensional stone human figural sculpture. (Photograph: Julia Hendon.)

In Group 9N-8, the southernmost building of the southernmost patio, Structure 9N-82, was deco-

rated with eight seated human figures — three on the front, three on the back, and one on each side (Fash 1989). Carved almost in the round and held in place by tenons, the figures projected out beyond the plane of the wall and were placed more than 5 metres above the level of the patio. Structure 10L-32 of Group 10L-2 also features seated figures, three on the front and three on the back (Andrews & Fash 1992). The figures on Structure 8N-66S in Group 8N-11 do not include the lower body. Eight figures, with heads, arms, and torsos only, are arranged on the upper façade in the same way as the Group 9N-8 full figures. The Structure 8N-66S figures emerge out of niches. Their arms are folded as if they are leaning on the niche and the palms of their hands face each other in front of their chest (Webster *et al.* 1998).

The figures on these buildings share certain characteristics. They are all male, young, and beautiful, with large, high-bridged noses, sloping foreheads, rounded limbs, and graceful posture. Dressed and ornamented as people of high rank, they also wear regalia that associate them with deities or sacred materials such as maize. The full-figure carvings show people sitting cross-legged or with one leg folded under and the other hanging down. They hold their arms out in front of their bodies and gesture with their hands. Young male figures are presented as the ideal human form not only here at Copán but in sculpture and other visual media associated with noble courts, such as painted polychrome vases, at a variety of Maya sites. Joyce (2000c; 2002) has argued that the presentation of young male figures as the ideal human form singled out young men as subjects of desire and admiration for adult men and women.

This athletic moving body of youths — an intrinsically transitory moment in the experience of embodiment — as a citational precedent would necessarily have presented all those moving through these spaces with such an unachievable ideal. It was a constant reminder of their failure to approximate this unachievable ideal. And while the representation of desirable human bodies would have visually embellished noble residences, the figures at Copán also communicated subtle but significant images of essential social difference.

Although at first glance all figures on a building at Copán present an overall similarity and a sense of repetition, implying the importance of the whole rather than its individual parts, they also speak of hierarchy. The central figure on each building has different regalia and body ornaments. Baudez (1989) has argued that the men on Structure 9N-82 are apotheosized ancestors. According to Andrews &

Fash (1992), the figures on Structure 10L-32 represent the most important person living in the compound. A similar argument has been made for the central figures on Structure 8N-66S (Webster *et al.* 1998). Whether the figures were past or present important members of the house, all are surrounded by sculpture representing elements of the natural and supernatural world. They are embedded in a set of ritual and metaphorical associations that transcend the everyday world of day-to-day activities going on in the patio compounds below them. These figures of bodies not only embody an ideal but are also a representation of the people who were living or had lived in the compound. In this sense, they result from practices similar to those evident in the sculpture of the Main Group associated with the ruling lineage.

Copán rulers invested considerable energy in the construction of permanent, monumental citational precedents incorporated into architectural settings. Like their noble subjects, they too placed idealized images of themselves and their ancestors on and in buildings. Perhaps the most salient example is the Hieroglyphic Staircase where the dynastic history of Copán is embodied in statues of rulers seated in the midst of the documentation of their accomplishments (Fash 1992; Fash *et al.* 1992). But like other Maya ruling houses, the Copán dynasty *detached* imagery of these ideal versions of themselves from buildings and especially from houses. Free-standing monuments (stelae) are the principal way that Maya rulers inscribed their citational precedents on the landscape. In the Great Plaza — a larger, more accessible, version of the patios in residential compounds — stelae presenting images whose specific historical identity is precisely delimited by texts with dates in the Maya 'Long Count' calendar foreground the person of the ruler over the corporate group (Fig. 4). In high-status residential compounds, patios were clear of free-standing sculpture while images of exemplary bodies were bound to the houses. In the most visible area of the residence of the ruling family, the ruler's presence and history framed the architectural space. Copán rulers extended this process to enclose the settlement around the Main Group within a framework of inscription, through the erection of stelae at the eastern and western edges of the valley (Morley 1920).

#### Embodiment in Formative Olmec settlements

While their spatial contexts are not as well defined as those of the Classic Maya, Olmec human sculptures in the round are an equally striking example of

the material representation of bodily practices and ideals. Produced between 1200 and 400 BC at sites in Mexico's Gulf Coast (Fig. 5), Olmec sculptures are the earliest large-scale figural representations in Mesoamerican history. The archaeological sites where they are located include some of the earliest examples of monumental architecture, including earthen pyramids and platforms defining large open spaces. These sites also included residences of people whose material culture suggests that distinctions in economic status were well established.

Olmec figural representations include colossal human heads (Fig. 6), large rectangular block seats or thrones with life-sized human figures carved on their sides (Fig. 7), and free-standing human figures in the round (Fig. 8). Zoomorphic figures were also produced so the decision to represent human figures has some significance. All of the human figures depict males.

Although Olmec sculptures are not physically incorporated into architecture they are explicitly linked to structures by being set on top of, against, or in proximity to them. Pairs or groups of sculptures often are incorporated symmetrically in architectural settings. Earthen plazas and mounds like those at the Olmec sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta acted as the mortar into which these stone carvings were set. Sculptures either rested on the ground surface, or were partially embedded in the clay surfaces (Drucker *et al.* 1959; Coe & Diehl 1980, 340). In some cases other stone figures may have been seated on top of thrones (Cyphers 1999, 168).

Olmec people did not use stone figures to inscribe permanent meaning on the landscape as did Maya élites with the façades at Copán. Ann Cyphers (1996, 68; 1999, 163, 174) has argued that Olmec sculptural arrangements are scenes with interchangeable and moveable pieces. Olmec sculptures were repositioned, mutilated, buried, and in many cases recycled (Coe & Diehl 1980, 302, 320, 330; Grove 1981; Cyphers 1999, 163, 174). Olmec spaces were more pliable than those at Copán, allowing for the expression of changing meaning through changing practices. Shifting the positions of monuments shifts their meanings, and hence the experiences of people moving through spaces (Love

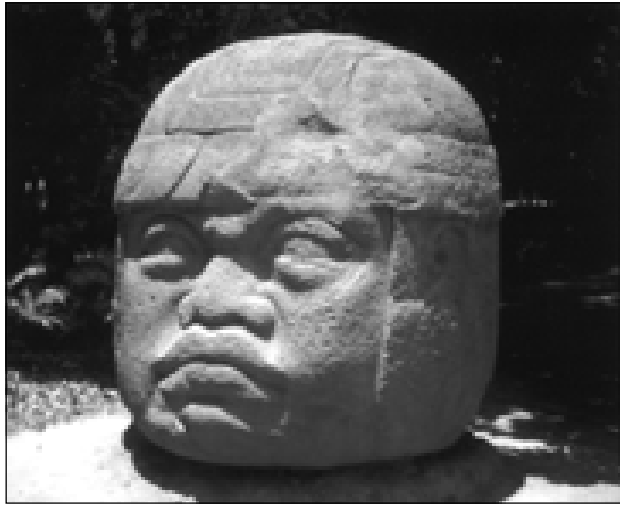


**Figure 4.** Closer view of one of the human sculptural figures of the restored façade in Figure 3. (Photograph: Julia Hendon.)



**Figure 5.** View of the Great Plaza of Copán, showing free-standing human figural representations (stelae). (Photograph: Julia Hendon.)





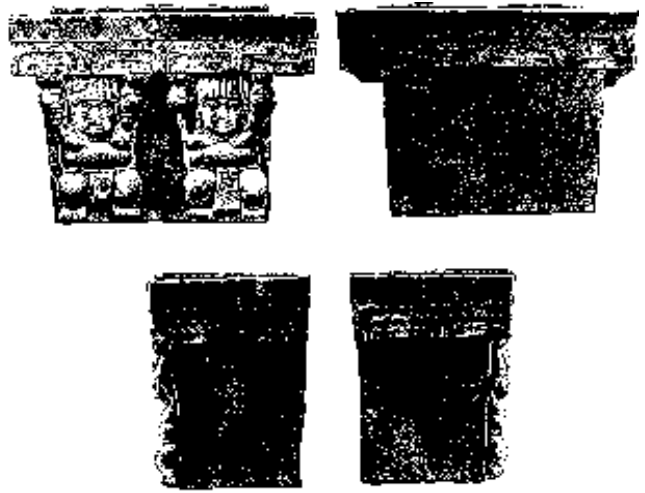
**Figure 6.** Colossal head from La Venta (monument 1). (Photograph courtesy of Rus Sheptak.)



**Figure 8.** Seated human figure from La Venta (monument 23). (Photograph courtesy of Rus Sheptak.)

1999, 130, 144).

Olmec human sculptures are found in groups of large earthen mound structures, plazas, and walled courtyards, and are associated with aqueduct systems (Drucker *et al.* 1959; Coe & Diehl 1980; Cyphers 1999; González Lauck 1996). While walled court-



**Figure 7.** Throne from San Lorenzo. Portrero Nuevo, monument 2. (Coe & Diehl 1980, fig. 496: by permission of the University of Texas Press.)

yards indicate restricted and more intimate practices, plazas were certainly sites for more open and highly-visible special performances. Plazas also may have been experienced in less formal ways, as people moved through them on other occasions. Aqueduct systems, though formal in design and generally associated with elite house groups, were a part of the mundane daily practices of water procurement and distribution (Cyphers 1999, 165). The positioning of monumental human sculptures in zones of mixed activity such as plazas and aqueduct systems provided precedents for embodiment for a variety of individuals performing diverse activities.

The standardized forms and characteristics of Olmec human sculptures imply institutionalized practices and norms. Some of the bodily ideals and practices that can be distilled from these sculptures are posture, ornamentation, and ideals of facial appearance. The postures of the majority of Olmec human sculptures in the round can be described as seated or crouching. Standing figures occur but they are rarer than seated or crouching figures. Seated figures take a variety of cross-legged positions or may be seated with one knee up. Crouching figures are kneeling, or kneeling with one knee up. The torso of the body leans forward with arms akimbo, hands resting on thighs and knees or extended downward towards the ground in front of the legs. The hands in the latter case often grasp a short bar or section of rope.

Bodily ornamentation is also simple but distinctive. Clothing usually consists of a sash or loin

cloth and sometimes a short cape. Most figures are barefoot but sandals are sometimes worn. The most common form of ornament is a large circular medallion that may represent an iron ore mirror. Other types of ornamentation include wrist and ankle bracelets. Figures whose heads are still intact have highly varied headdresses. In general clothing and ornamentation are minimal, exposing the chest, legs, and arms.

Perhaps the most distinctive and intriguing form of bodily representation in Olmec human sculpture is the colossal heads. These heads have helmet-like headdresses that are not carved in the same detail or relief as their facial features. Nor are the ears or other peripheral elements highly elaborated. The face is clearly emphasized as a focal point. These faces have broad flat noses, large lips, and the cheeks are full and round giving an impression of chubbiness. Though clearly adhering to a set of standards, the carved faces are individualized by subtle details of expression, such as furrowed brows, crossed eyes, grins, and parted lips exposing rounded and sometimes crooked teeth.

What type of effect did these sculptures have on individuals moving in spaces around them? We have already established that a variety of ordinary and extraordinary activities would have taken place within view of these human sculptures. These concretized presentations of bodily ideals and standards of comportment, when positioned to be highly visible during a variety of activities, serve to create a communal experience and reinforce bodily practice and bodily ideals on a subliminal level.

Part of the subjective experience of viewing inscribed ideals of bodily practice involves scale. The scale of Olmec human sculpture is life-sized or larger. Viewers could compare their bodies to life-sized figures part-for-part without scaling. On the other hand the larger than life-sized colossal heads dwarf a viewer. In both instances the viewer could easily have identified or even highlighted deficiencies of their own body as compared with the large-scale citational precedent.

Like figural representations at Copán, monumental human sculptures may have been employed by Olmec rulers to legitimate their authority and control, through the intimidating presentations of ideal bodily practice and performance. Olmec human figures are identified as depictions of rulers or prominent ancestors (Coe 1965; Cyphers 1999; Grove 1981). If sculptures are indeed embodiments of rulers and their authority, then mutilation or recycling by subsequent rulers or relatives would have served

the purpose of dispelling or revoking the authority or power of that individual (Grove 1981). The great efforts taken to move Olmec sculpture so as to reorder the inscribed citational landscape suggests the importance of sculpture as a medium for the realization of social ideals and power.

### Conclusion

Our investigation of the way that human sculpture served as a permanent marking of precedents for citational performance will continue. At a minimum, we believe we have demonstrated that the experience of human sculpture was pervasive in those Mesoamerican societies that produced monumental sculpture. Most people in these societies would have had the experience of evaluating themselves in the light of these permanent ideals. The permanence of sculpture could be reinforced by its incorporation in architecture. Some people in these societies subverted this permanence. Free-standing sculptures of ruling Maya nobles in the form of stelae, for example, detached embodied personhood from group membership and identity. The almost inconceivable, but well-documented, efforts expended at Olmec sites to reposition sculptures and create new 'permanent' scenarios changed histories that their creators probably thought were set in stone. A narrow range of kinds of personhood was represented in Mesoamerican monumental sculpture, for example, young beautiful men as the dominant subject of Classic Maya sculpture. The crucial importance of scale was particularly salient for Mesoamerica's earliest tradition of stone sculpture, among the Gulf Coast Olmec.

Body knowledge is produced not solely through the experience of the flesh, but also through the experience of embodiment at one remove, in precedents for citation. Among the difficult challenges for an archaeology of the body has been the tendency in the post-enlightenment western tradition to consider the body and mind as one natural unit. This problem, the other side of the often-lamented Cartesian dualism of mind and body, treats the flesh as an unproblematic natural 'given' which is merely experienced. This is not necessarily an ancient Mesoamerican understanding of embodiment. Maya scholars have deciphered claims by ancient Maya ruling nobles that stone stelae were, in fact, not simply representations but parts of their total physical self. While this may seem bizarre to modern western readers, we suggest, following Butler, that the flesh, while a vehicle for experience, neither grounds that experience in a pre-existing essence, nor limits the

experience of embodiment. We would do well to keep in mind the need for theories of personhood in which the person may have many parts, not all of them unique, not all of them bounded by the skin.

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