

Please touch

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Abstract

This article discusses how, in Brazilian society, people tend to touch one another more freely in public than in other societies. Using several anecdotes, the article explores the ways in which men greet each other, women reach out to hug and kiss each other, how children relate to their mothers, and how even within the same society habits and mores related to physical touch change in time.

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One day recently I saw something amazing on a bus in Brazil. A woman asked another woman for directions. One was sitting, the other standing. Each looked to be in her mid-60s. After the one received her reply, the other suddenly reached out and passed her hand across her fellow passenger's cheek. It was more a swipe than a touch, and it was over in an instant, so casually that it may as well not have been done at all.

So why was it? Like any country, Brazil is filled with mysteries. Some of these mysteries—about the glory of soccer, for example, or the distinctiveness of carnival—are so well known that they are mystified among Brazilians themselves. But it seems to me that the real, abiding mysteries of Brazilian life are mundane—so commonplace that, like this touch, they pass beneath notice and only get registered at all by foreigners, like me.

Brazilians touch. Not only do they buss when they meet or pump hands when they part. They engage parts of the body that many other cultures designate as off limits. In particular, men

will rub each other's bellies in greeting. It's always seemed to me the sort of thing that women should do rather than men. But women don't rub their bellies in this way. Only men do. It's expressive of a more comprehensive Brazilian engagement of the whole body.

Of course different cultures, different parts. Brazilian men do not kiss each other on the cheeks as Arab men do, nor do they walk (as both Arab men and women do) arm-and-arm. NO culture activates the entire body. I'm not sure what this would mean if one culture could. (Greetings so elaborate and detailed that a conversation could hardly begin?) In fact, Brazilian practices may

be understood as more generally "Latin" insofar as physical being is concerned.

That is, the body is not something to be feared or suppressed. Instead, it exists to be shared. Contact with other bodies may take place in a variety of ways, each one designated to promote a larger spirit of fellowship and relation. The contact may be purely visual; hence, Latins and Latin women in particular are included to show more flesh—blouses sliced to reveal a bare shoulder or cut to display more cleavage than a North American or a European might be accustomed to.

Another day I chanced to see a shopkeeper regard a woman who was just about to pass by. She was rather spectacularly dressed—to me—in platform heels and a skimpy halter top. But seductively? I couldn't be sure. However, the shopkeeper apparently was. He lifted up his eyes to heaven and made a slow, formal sign of the cross. The woman didn't notice and just moved on. What to make of the shopkeeper's action?

At first I took it to be one of piety: the man was praying to God to help him resist temptation. Or else he was praying to ask forgiveness for already succumbing to temptation. In a religious country like Brazil, you always have to be alert to signs of fervor. I recalled a tour guide in Salvador who once declared: "we Brazilians are so religious we don't even have to pray."

Then another interpretation occurred to me. What if in fact the man was praying to ask God for a sexual favor? If not this woman—she was already gone—then another of equal provocation. If only he could have such a woman, just once, what would he not pledge? His soul? At least his shop. I decided I liked this interpretation best, especially when bundled — never mind coherence —

into the other two. The glory of the body, after all, is that it doesn't always make complete sense.

Northern climates, on the other hand, insist that the body make sense. This is why bit needs to be repressed, covered, and monitored. If it doesn't make sense—depending upon the convention, as dictated by weather, fashion, and so on—the body is released into the sexual realm, which, in turn, thereby demands its own kind of recognition, at the expense of any other. Another way to put the fascination of the body in Brazil is to emphasize how careless it appears to be of sexuality.

Perhaps the most celebrated example is beachwear, especially for women. The standard “dental floss” suit is still worn, and not only at Copacabana. This time I spend a couple days at Guaratuba, along the coast of Parana, and positively marveled not so much as the flesh on display as how at ease Brazilians are in their flesh, which is why, in turn, they display so much of it, or at least so much as a haplessly repressed American would judge to be the case.

I've been visiting Brazil for over twenty years. My wife is Brazilian. In recent years, we usually head first for Curitiba, where many of her family now live. This time, when we were all at the beach, I was struck by a simply action performed by the sixteen year-old son of one of her nephews. Wearing bathing trunks, at one point while sitting around he just propped his thick leg across his mother's lap. Just that.

Would an American teenager have done the same? Perhaps. But not, I believe, typically. Indeed, his whole stance would have been based upon separation from his mother rather than engagement with her. On the other hand, this very typical Brazilian young man was

unashamed of his attachment to his mother, and he put his body quite literally in place in order to demonstrate his attachment. Nobody appeared to pay any attention but me.

There's no getting round the fact: no matter where you go in Brazil, you find that the body exists to be touched—provoked into physical contact at least or enacted by actual touch at most. If you come from a culture where the body exists not to be touched (best avoided in public lest the possible taint of intimacy be incurred), Brazil offers a continual spectacle of touching, whether you marvel or just scratch your own head.

Try as you may, however, you can't imitate. Or rather, you only do so at your peril. During this visit, once again, I thought of something that happened to me over a decade ago, toward the end of a year spent living in the northern Parana city of Maringa. By this time, I felt pretty comfortable with Brazilian ways—comfortable enough to take them as my own. Then one day I chanced to meet a doctor from the Northeast.

His English was good. We had a few drinks and seemed to hit it off. I was especially delighted to meet someone from the Northeast, where I hadn't yet visited. (Famously warm, close, “touchy.”) He was surely delighted to meet an American, from a country to which, he said, he had always wanted to travel. Another night he invited me to stop by the hospital where he was working as a resident. It wouldn't be busy. We could just talk.

Afterwards my new friend drove me home. When he stopped the car in front of my apartment building, we shook hands. As I was exiting, I decided to supplement the shake with a little extra, culled from my observation of native

practices: I reached out and touched my man on his leg. AQ mistake. Indeed, a disaster. Directed somewhere close to the knee, my hand wound up instead dangerously close to the genital area.

Did I blurt out an “excuse me?” To this day I can’t remember. Perhaps I just completed by exit and hoped that my man hadn’t, er, misinterpreted my gesture. Subsequent days suggested otherwise. The doctor didn’t call. We never saw each other again. If he ever got to the United States, I must hope he wasn’t especially wary of American men, who were all, if not homosexuals, at least not to be trusted regarding their cultural practices concerned touching.

Back to the present, on the bus. The woman who swiped the other woman across the cheek? The gesture is probably best seen as the physical

equivalent of a phatic speech response. The woman could just as easily not have reached out. It’s probably quite significant that both women were older; many younger Brazilians would not understand such a gesture, much less enact it themselves. No culture constitutes an absolute unity.

Back once more in my own, I don’t long for such gestures—either to express them myself or just to see them. You can’t import the terms of one culture into another. Yet nevertheless you can find yourself missing them anyway. How else explain why many American words seem to me too detached from the body, and some of them positively disembodied? Hence our current woes over “civic discourse.” It’s as if Americans secretly bemoan the lack of anybody to touch them.