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Skinning science in early modern Eurasia

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Movement makes things.

Knowledge, objects, relations, experiences, agency: all of these are made in motion, and in the encounters that movement makes possible. In a number of important ways, they do not pre-exist their movement: they emerge *from* movement and encounter. The spaces we are looking at are created by that movement. We know this. And we have seen it happening in the context of a number of the chapters in this volume. In Robert Morrison's chapter, we see astronomical theory being made through encounter in the Veneto. Carol Pal and Marcelo Aranda illuminate different forms of networks – an “information factory,” an Ignatian Tree – as loci of knowledge production. Elise Lipkowitz and Ivano dal Prete show us the power of things that moved – here, letters – to create and circulate knowledge, and to trace formal and informal networks of exchange and correspondence. Matthew Sargent, Benjamin Breen, and Londa Schiebinger demonstrate the creation and management of botanical and pharmaceutical knowledge – sometimes successful, sometimes not. Lydia Barnett's chapter shows the power of bones and stones to generate and sustain Transatlantic networks of communication, and to reveal gaps and asymmetries within them.

In many of the wonderful essays collected in this volume, individual objects and agents serve as centers, conduits, and brokers managing the circulation of information and the production of knowledge. We often need to hold something stable, however temporarily, in order to tell these sorts of stories about movement and circulation: a node in a network, a space of encounter, a constant throughout circulation. However, I want to offer a brief thinkpiece not on stability, but movement itself and its generative power.

Movement makes things. This is a relatively uncontroversial claim. More controversial, perhaps, is the claim that *things* are made of *movement*. It is much more difficult to recenter our craft as historians on this second position and adopt it as historical practice. My own work seeks to bring questions from “process philosophy” (or something like it) into dialogue with the history of materials and materiality.¹ What could archival or documentary work look like if we embraced the idea that historical objects do not pre-exist our encounters with them? What happens if we do not presuppose the existence of objects and knowledge prior to our archival or documentary encounters? How could this change the appearance

of early modern science? How might we reframe our histories as histories of movement? I can offer no answers, here. (Answers are less interesting than questions, anyway.) But what I can do is make space to dwell in these questions, if only for a little while.

First things first: what happens if we don't take the existence of objects and knowledge as stable, as already given, as existing prior to our archival encounters?

Imagine with me that things are composed of movement. A patch of skin on your hand, for example, becomes activated when it is set in motion and encounters other things. A breeze blows over it, your eye glances at it, you lick it to taste if it is salty, you use your hand to pick up a glass, you flex it, you plunge it into water and then dry it off: whether you are experiencing them *in situ* or reading about them or imagining them or watching them after the fact, these are the moments when the patch of skin on your hand becomes an active storied thing in the world.²

Imagine that, like the patch of skin on your hand, the objects of history are also processes, encounters, and loci of motion.³ Where would we look for moments and sources for a history of that patch of skin? We might look for traces of moments when that patch of skin was rendered into word, sound, image, or material, and make our archive from those traces. We would need to figure out where to look. And then how to look. (Neither of these is a simple matter.) We would need to limit our archive: how distant is too distant from that patch of skin, how many steps removed? Where would we stop looking? When does a document or object stop being relevant?

All of these are questions that historians typically wrestle with: this is normally a suite of issues that we have to contend with regardless of the stories that we are attempting to tell. The process becomes even more complicated, however, when what we are looking for is not a series of moments of representation or rendering of that patch of skin, but instead is a collection of moments of encounter. (And I don't mean encounters *between* objects and entities: I mean looking for encounter as constitutive *of* the object. I don't mean movements *of* objects and entities: I mean movement as constitutive *of* the object. Prepositions are important, here.) The skin then becomes a catalyst for encounter between ways of moving in the world (or, forms of movement): blowing (like a breeze), feeling cold, looking and being looked upon, tasting, being inside (water), being under (a towel).⁴ How would we constitute an archive of documentary traces of these forms of movement and of ephemeral comings-together among them? If we understood that patch of skin to be a process or collection of processes – not a stable thing at all – and if we understood that skin to be constantly in motion – to *be* motion itself – then what would an archive of that motion look like? How would we access it? What would a story about that patch of skin look like – what kinds of work could it do? What kinds of stories about the world could we tell if we didn't approach worlds as collections of stabilities (things, objects, states, stuff-that-can-be-labeled) but instead as collections of processes and events? How could this change how we trace histories of early modern science? By doing this, how might we begin to refashion what early modern history looks like?

I want to suggest here that it is possible to do this, and by doing this to reframe our histories of early modern science as histories of forms of movement. In creating a history of forms of movement, we need an archive that lets us identify those forms. And we can do that by identifying points (like our patch of skin) when different forms of movement meet. We create an archive out of those points, and that archive lets us use those moments of rupture to identify the relevant forms of movement and proceed to follow along with them. So, in short, it becomes a different kind of history that proceeds from a different way of producing an archive. And it opens up a way not just of thinking about, but also of practicing what it might look like to do a history of early modern movements.⁵

Let us say instead that it is a patch of skin on the hand of an eighteenth-century man. Perhaps the skin attached to a man who worked at the court of the Kangxi emperor during the Qing dynasty, and who read and wrote Manchu texts. Let us imagine what an archive of points of encounter (interruptions, hiatuses) between different forms of movement that engage and activate that skin might look like.

For me, one place to locate those interruptions is in moments of tension in translation. So, we might ask: how might eighteenth-century skin have been translated? There was much interest in skin – its generation, its decomposition, its role in simultaneously carving boundaries between self and world and allowing translations and movements across those boundaries. In the early eighteenth century, two French Jesuits (Joachim Bouvet and Dominique Parennin) at the court of the Kangxi emperor – likely aided by their language tutors, and by the emperor himself – translated ideas about skin (among other bodily structures and phenomena) from their Latin and French anatomical texts into the Manchu language and a Qing context.⁶ Their *Dergici toktobuha Ge ti ciowan lu bithe* – or more simply put, *Manchu Anatomy* – records these translations, especially in two major sections of the text that dealt directly with body covering: one on the covering of the head, and another on the covering of the belly and abdomen.⁷

This is not the place to go into this text and its discussions of skin in any detail. But, briefly put, the discourse on skin in this text has a common theme: movement and translation across insides and outsides, across boundaries and membranes, across surfaces and environments. If we treat the text itself as an archive of encounters forming a notion of skin, we can see a number of places where skin mediates relationships. The text discusses air bladders, blankets, jewelry, garments, and other objects made of fish, deer, antelope, cow, sheep, and other skins. It discusses specific kinds of skin that cover animal and human limbs, and infectious ailments: growths, boils, pustules, pox, sores, and calluses. It mentions skin-related actions – flaying, molting, piercing, burning, rubbing, growing – and associated objects and materials. Throughout this archive, we can see that relationships that both produce and are produced by skin are consistently a part of the discourse about body covering: relations among animal and human, normal and abnormal, instrument and goal, among others. The archive of skin is an archive of relations and encounters which define the object of study.

There are moments of tension in this archive. Rupture, interruption, and error – of some sort of botched encounter or translation – signify the contact of different forms of movement and being. These tensions can help us to identify and follow forms of movement. In the discourse of Manchu skin, there are multiple moments where something is unclear, where the text seems to reveal concerns with the reader's understanding of what is being conveyed. These (potential) ruptures generate a need to translate or explain. At these moments, the discussion often invokes an analogy or comparative example.

The text explains the genesis of human skin in terms of animal bodies: human skin is compared with the skin, feathers, and hair of birds and wild animals, while blistering from heat is compared to the molting of snakes. The discussion of skin formation also reflects the transformations of household materials (for example, by analogy to what happens to hot milk in cold air) and to other forms of birth, growth, and generation (including pregnancy and the concomitant changes in observable qualities of newborn and mother). Skin accomplishes similar work to clothing by protecting the wearer against hot and cold. Skin is also, occasionally, a kind of mind or brain: the language of cognition (intelligence, thought, and reason) is used to describe sensation in the layers of skin.

In some of these cases, understanding skin entails drawing connections between anatomical and domestic modes of existence. Comprehending Manchu skin involves perceiving the body as a microcosm of the processes and material cultures of kitchen, household, garden, and field. In other cases, describing the work skin does – to protect, or to transmit sensation – requires drawing connections between the labor of the body covering and the labors of other parts of the body. In each case, the text attempts to translate something potentially jarring for the reader in terms of familiar movement – working, coming into existence, being used, transforming. Moments of rupture then turn into moments of encounter.

As the historians of the text, identifying analogies, euphemisms, and mistakes would be the first step, and creating a record the second. We might do this by looking at the documentary technologies that create likeness, including terms in Manchu like *adali* and grammatical technologies of comparison. In doing this we actually begin to transform the nature of our archive: instead of an archive of Manchu skin, it becomes an archive of *likeness*. Rather than trying to understand the history of skin as an object, we might study the technologies that activate skin as a site of encounter, such as discursive and documentary tools of likeness, and follow them to other sites. Once we understand this about skin, in other words, we can treat skin as a momentary concretion (or, a ghost) in a larger archive of likeness that strays well beyond just discussions of skin.

This was an extremely abbreviated introduction to one example of what it might look like to write a history of an object as movement. Once the object itself has served as a tool for identifying movement, it drops out of the story, and/or becomes an ephemeral center of gravity or a changing map of constraints. From here, we might use this archive to consider how kinds of likeness changed over time, or the connections between ways of being the same and other contemporary

social, cultural, scientific, or medical phenomena. We might take this archive of likeness, create a comparable archive of likeness connected with other aspects of the eighteenth-century Manchu man we discussed above, and relate the two to tell a larger story. Whatever we do with this archive, it allows us to ask different kinds of questions and tell different sorts of stories than we might otherwise be able to.

What I am advocating here is just as much a history of coming-apart as it is a history of coming-together. It is a history of processes and relationships that stem from rupture, error, and breaking. This is helpful to imagine, for me, as I attempt to imagine what it could look like to write global history from here on out. Recent critiques have called the future of global history into question in the context of our contemporary moment, urging that historians rethink popular and lauded approaches to connected, networked histories with their “contacts” and “linkages” and suggesting a reorientation toward a history that equally emphasizes “separation, disintegration and fragility.”⁸ Many of the chapters in this volume begin to do just that. I share in the call for more histories of the ephemeral and the disintegrating; histories that move from stories about connection and wholeness and toward stories that grow from rot and ruins and broken things and acts of breaking. Perhaps our stories of empires and networks – stories, that is, of objects at massive scales – will increasingly give way to stories of gesture and process – stories, in other words, of ephemeral objects made of movement that do not persist but instead resist. They will be stories written by following ghosts, attending to where they lead us, and then letting them pass on.

Notes

- 1 Along these lines, I have found two particular works formative for how I approach these issues: Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of Transindividuation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); and Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 2 Another time, we can think together about the connection between existence and storytelling, between being and being storied.
- 3 “Objects” here are broadly defined not as material stuff, but instead as that which we study, including “knowledge” and “information.”
- 4 Roughly speaking, “movement” for me is a way of existing in and attempting to understand and make knowledge about the world. It is not necessarily spatial. This is analogous to, but not the equivalent of, what Bruno Latour has recently called “Modes of Existence.” See Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) and the companion website <http://modesofexistence.org>.
- 5 The title of this chapter, “Following Ghosts,” is a way to get at two aspects of what I’m suggesting here: “following” signals the project of critically considering “movement” in early modern scientific networks, and “ghosts” signals the ephemerality of what is emerging from these movements in early modernity. But, remember: ghosts have power.

- 6 Manchu texts (including those on anatomy, *materia medica* and drug use, medical treatments and conditions, and natural history) from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are full of terms for, and discussions of, the coverings of bodies. And in this sense, the *Manchu Anatomy* is representative of this archive.
- 7 *Dergici toktobuha Ge ti ciowan lu bithe* (Bibliothèque Nationale de France manuscript Mandchou 289).
- 8 See Jeremy Adelman, "What Is Global History Now?" *Aeon* (March 2, 2017), available at: <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (accessed March 15, 2017).