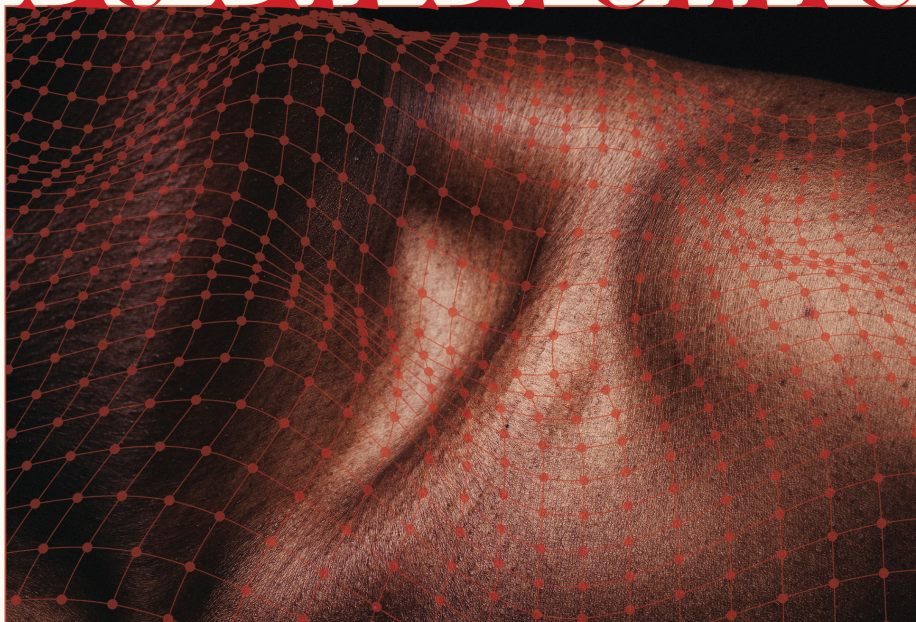


The Body As An Archive



A Journey Through the Marks and Memories We Bear.



di:angewandte

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Introduction

The inspiration behind this book began with a seemingly insignificant occurrence—a small, unnoticed bump on my finger from holding my phone in a particular way. What seemed like a trivial discomfort led me to a profound curiosity: What kind of traces do our bodies bear, and what stories do they tell? Are these marks merely physical, or do they contain deeper narratives about our daily lives, histories, and identities?

I started noticing these marks everywhere around me. Take, for example, the distinct tan line most Cairo taxi drivers have on one arm, a mark created by years of driving with their arm out the window under the hot sun. It's more than just a tan—it is a shared memory, a mark

that connects these drivers not just to their profession but also to the city and the environment that shapes their daily lives. This mark becomes a collective symbol, reflecting not only an individual experience but also a shared cultural memory.

Then there was a close friend who had undergone eye surgery to realign the muscles around her eye so that they would be straight. She was told by the doctor that it would take time for

her brain to relearn how to interact with her newly positioned muscles. Yet months after the surgery, she found herself tilting her head as if her eyes were still misaligned—a subtle but powerful reminder of how the brain retains memory of past conditions, even after physical change. Unlike the taxi drivers' tan line, this mark wasn't visible, but it still captured how our bodies can

remember the past long after it has passed. These seemingly simple stories sparked deeper reflections for me. I wondered about the marks our bodies accumulate over time—whether physical or invisible—and how they might serve as a kind of archive, holding not just personal but collective histories.

Could the body be a living archive, constantly recording and reflecting the experiences, rituals, and traumas of our everyday lives?



What is This Research About?

How do the various physical marks and imprints on human bodies serve as archives of personal, cultural, social, occupational, technological, environmental, religious, emotional, historical, and psychological experiences and histories? What insights can these marks provide into the dynamic interplay between individual lived experiences and broader societal, historical, and emotional influences, and how can storytelling and phenomenology deepen our understanding of these bodily archives?

This book aims to explore the physical and emotional marks our bodies bear additionally, serving as a collection of stories and observations that we will delve into and reflect upon together. Through my research, I came to the realization that surprisingly little has been written specifically about this topic, which reinforced my curiosity to explore it further. By sharing these narratives, I hope to open a space for a deeper understanding of how our bodies function as living archives, shaped by both personal experiences and the collective memory of our communities. This work also invites you, the reader, to pause, look inward, and reflect on the marks you carry—both seen and unseen—and the stories they hold.

But what is a mark? What kind of marks does this research look into?

A mark is simply a small area on a surface having a different colour, or texture from its surroundings, a line, figure, or symbol made as an indication or record of something, a visible impression or stain.

This research is about the marks that our body collects on its own, the marks that occur due to daily habits, marks that slowly leave a trace on our bodies, habitual marks, behavioural imprints; about documenting a story. It also tries to explore physical trauma and how our minds deal with all of the above. **It's not about** marks we intentionally acquire, like tattoos, piercings, implants, or modern body modifications such as shaping or fillers. Instead, this research focuses on the unintentional marks that emerge naturally, representing the stories of personal and collective memory—those silent imprints from everyday life that document our engagement with the world. However, I have come across various profoundly significant cultural body modification practices that highlight the deeper meanings behind these deliberate body marks. Many Indigenous cultures use body modifications as expressions of identity, community, and spirituality. For instance, the stick-and-poke Coptic cross tattooed on the wrists of Egyptian Christians holds a deeper history—it's not only a symbol of faith but a reminder of past persecution. During darker times, Copts faced religious discrimination, and the tattoo became a marker of resilience, a defiant declaration of identity that endures today. Similarly, Kayan women of Myanmar wear brass neck rings to elongate



their necks, symbolizing cultural beauty and tribal identity as well as, the Māori people of New Zealand practice tā moko, traditional facial and body tattoos that signify personal genealogy and social status. In some African cultures, scarification marks rites of passage, with each scar telling a story of endurance, beauty, and belonging. These cultural practices are sacred acts of self-expression, rooted in conscious decisions. In contrast, the marks I seek to explore emerge without intention, yet they quietly narrate our lives, shaped by routine, experience, and memory. These natural imprints may not be culturally prescribed, but they are no less significant in the way they archive personal histories.

Along with that, considering the vastness of these stories—each individual carrying their own unique marks tied to specific experiences—the possibilities for narratives are nearly endless. For this reason, the research had to carefully curate a collection for us to explore together in this book, selecting stories that best capture the essence of how our bodies serve as archives for these memories.

Focusing on how the body remembers and records experiences, and traumas, this research explores the intricate narratives of events, injuries, moments, and habits that shape an individual's identity, and whether deliberate or unconscious, they leave their own marks. Our bodies gradually evolve as a result of repetitive behaviour where; subsequently, these imprints are not merely signs of ageing; rather, they

serve as reminders of how our bodies have archived the routines, actions, and moments that shape our lives. Over time, these marks become subtle yet persistent records of our lived experiences. Our bodies are like living archives, capturing, and preserving the stories of our lives through these physical signs and transformations. These manifestations go beyond mere biology—they reveal how deeply connected our physical selves are to the stories we carry, **as if the body itself is a storyteller.** The body, in this sense, becomes an autonomous entity, recording the details of our lived experiences, whether we are conscious of it or not. Every gesture, scar, pattern, or habit imprints itself onto the body as though it is constantly documenting our existence. This subconscious recording creates a silent archive, an ongoing narrative that captures not only the visible marks but also the invisible imprints of emotional and psychological experiences. It is as if the body operates on a memory system of its own, storing and reflecting back on a life lived, shaping the very way we move and engage with the world. As Pierre Nora explains, “Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.” Just as memory evolves and interacts with the present, so too do our bodies bear traces of past events and present circumstances, creating a dynamic, living record of life.

This notion of the body as a living archive is something I've encountered not only in personal narratives but also as a recurring

theme within religious and cultural traditions. It reflects a profound connection between the human body and the act of shaping, forming, and sculpting. The Quran, for instance, speaks of human creation from clay:

(وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَالٍ مِنْ حَمِإٍ مَسْنُونٍ) “We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape” (Surah Al-Hijr, 26). Another verse recounts the conversation between God and Iblees, where God reminds him that humans were created from clay, while Iblees was made from fire: (إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِنْ طِينٍ)

“I am creating a human being from clay”

(Surah Sad, 71-76). What makes these references to clay

particularly interesting is the material’s inherent malleability. Clay, as a

material, can be reshaped and moulded by external forces, it carries the

impressions of touch and pressure, much like how the body is constantly sculpted by life experiences, time, and memory, it accumulates marks, scars, and imprints. The body, like clay, is flexible and responsive, it allows memories—both personal and collective—to be embedded within its very form. These verses in my opinion, emphasize that the

12 human body, from its very origin, carries the memory of

its creation, shaped from the earth itself. This theme is mirrored in other religious and cultural narratives.

In the Bible and Jewish tradition, Genesis speaks of man being formed from dust: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19), signifying not only the physical cycle of life but also the body’s continuous connection to the earth. Similarly, in Judaism, the term “*afar*” (dust or soil) represents humanity’s humble origin and the material from which humans were shaped. Egyptian

mythology also tells of humans moulded from clay by the gods, and this concept is echoed in ancient, Greek, and Chinese legends as well.

Across these traditions, clay and dust serve as metaphors for the human body’s capacity to bear memory—shaped



and marked by divine forces, life experiences, and ultimately returning to the earth. The body is a medium that allows for transformation, constantly moulded by memory and circumstance. These religious references preserved through storytelling highlight the idea that the body is not just a vessel for life, but an archive, formed and remembered by the very elements of creation itself.

The Body as a Vessel of Memory: Personal and Collective Traces

Framing the collected stories within the broader context of body memory theory and cultural memory reveals how the marks on individual bodies reflect both personal history and collective identity. Scholars like Bessel van der Kolk provide crucial insights into the way trauma is stored in the body, connecting directly to the emotional scars and physical imprints shared by participants. As van der Kolk states, **“The body, rather than the mind, is the bridge to dealing with emotions and experiences. Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.”** This underscores the body’s active role in recording and reflecting lived experiences, beyond just trauma, as these marks represent the ongoing interplay between physical and emotional realities.

Drawing from cultural theorists as well, such as Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs highlight the importance of collective memory in shaping how we understand the lasting marks on the body. Through cultural practices—whether religious rituals or occupational habits—these marks become a part of our identity, connecting personal experiences to broader societal patterns. As Halbwachs explains, “We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually recalled by our relationships with the various groups of which we are part.” These connections, formed through social groups, deeply influence how we remember and interpret the physical imprints on our bodies. In this way, the body becomes both a personal
 archive and a reflection of the communities and cultural

practices it engages with.

Through this ongoing narrative analysis, storytelling continues to serve as a powerful means of understanding how bodies act as living archives—bearing witness to both personal histories and the cultural and social forces that shape them.

Research Method

According to the National Library of Medicine National Centre for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), the use of storytelling is a valuable research tool in health and social science contexts. Storytelling not only resonates with listeners, validating their personal experiences and aiding in the retrospective and prospective understanding of real-life events, but it also uncovers deeper emotional truths that other methods might miss. Increasingly, storytelling is employed to gather contextualized and culturally reflective insights. Its ability to influence knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour through emotional engagement makes it a powerful tool for both data collection and behavioural change. Although storytelling is still emerging as a formal research method, its validity is supported by its ability to offer deep insights into the connections between physical marks and emotional experiences, thereby enriching our understanding of body memory.

This connection between storytelling and the body's ability to hold memory is further supported by the philosophical framework of phenomenology. Rather than focusing on abstract, theoretical knowledge, phenomenology seeks to understand how we experience the world through our bodies and senses. It emphasizes that our perception of reality is always shaped by our physical and bodily experiences. In this context, the body is not a passive vessel but an active participant in recording and remembering life's events. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes, storytelling often

reveals knowledge we **“didn't know we knew,”** tapping into memories that are embedded within the body itself. The concept of the 'lived body' suggests that the body acts as an archive of lived experiences, much like storytelling captures the emotional and psychological layers of memory. Physical marks and imprints, then, are not just biological traces but embodied records of how we have lived, interacted, and remembered. This philosophical approach enriches our understanding of how storytelling, as a research tool, can help us access these bodily archives and the experiences they contain.

To create a more structured and clear approach to narrative analysis, I have divided the process into three key steps:

1. Story Collection:

Personal stories were collected through informal, open discussions that allowed individuals to share their reflections on their body marks. Rather than formal interviews, I aimed to create a comfortable space for participants to share their thoughts, ensuring the narratives provided were spontaneous and personal. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how their physical marks (whether visible scars, imprints, or habitual postures) connected with emotional experiences or personal histories. These discussions took place across different cultural backgrounds to capture a wide spectrum of experiences.

2. Thematic Analysis:

Once the stories were collected, I focused on identifying recurring themes, metaphors, and symbols. For example, the ways participants frame their scars—as symbols of strength, reminders of trauma, or markers of cultural rituals—provided crucial insight into the interplay between personal and collective memory. This step involved coding and categorizing the stories according to themes such as trauma, caregiving imprints, or daily habits, to explore how these themes intersected with the physical marks described by participants.

3. Symbolic Interpretation:

Lastly, narrative analysis was used to explore the emotional and symbolic weight participants attached to their physical marks. A key aspect of this process was interpreting how personal stories reflected larger cultural, social, and emotional narratives. For instance, some scars became symbols of resilience, while others captured moments of vulnerability or trauma. This interpretive process allowed me to draw connections between individual experiences and broader societal influences, such as how caregiving practices or daily routines shaped the body over time.

By following this narrative analysis structure, I aimed to go beyond surface-level observations of body marks and explore the deeper narratives that shape our bodies as living archives. Through this process, the research seeks to uncover how personal and collective histories become embedded in our physical forms. Additionally, the data will be anonymized to protect

the privacy of participants, ensuring an open, judgment-free space for sharing especially when discussing sensitive topics, then protecting the privacy and well-being of the participants is essential. Furthermore, to keep the focus on the shared human experience rather than individual identities.

These stories then will be

The emotional connections behind physical marks

analysed using a narrative analysis framework, which focuses on how individuals construct meaning through their personal narratives. This allows the possibility of figuring out recurring themes, metaphors, and symbols that participants use to describe their body marks and memories. For example, how participants frame their scars—whether as symbols of strength, reminders of trauma, or markers of cultural rituals—will be crucial in understanding the interplay between personal and cultural memory. Narrative Analysis allows us as well to discover how physical marks on the body are often tied to emotional experiences. A scar may not just signify a past injury but also the emotional trauma associated with it, such as fear, pain, or even resilience. Collecting personal stories allows researchers to explore the emotional contexts surrounding these physical marks, providing a more holistic view of body memory. For instance, in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's book *Memory in the Flesh* (ذاكرة الجسد), the protagonist, Khaled, has lost an arm during the Algerian War of Independence, which serves as a physical reminder of the trauma and emotional pain of his past. Mosteghanemi often uses Khaled's lost arm as a metaphor for the emotional scars and memories that haunt him. This loss

symbolizes not just a physical injury but also the deep emotional and psychological trauma associated with war, loss, and the struggle for freedom. **"You carry your memory on your body and that requires no explanation."** Khaled melancholily yet proudly describes the loss of his arm; affirming that the physical mark is a permanent archive of a story so powerful that it transcends words. The loss of his arm thus becomes not only a symbol of his resilience but also a means of holding onto a past that defined him and his homeland's independence, offering insights into how emotional and physical experiences are intertwined and for this reason, emotional context is essential for understanding the full impact of body memory on an individual's life.



Khaled's pride stems from the fact that his injury is not just a personal loss but a symbol of sacrifice for a greater cause: the fight for Algerian freedom. For Khaled, the physical absence of his arm is a tangible mark of his contribution to the collective struggle, a badge of honour that ties his personal story to Algeria's broader fight against colonization and oppression. His injury represents not only his own trauma but also the collective memory of a nation grappling with its history. Khaled's experience demonstrates how deeply trauma can become intertwined with

the physical body, but he is not alone in this connection between emotional pain and physical marks. In a similar vein, other stories reveal how unresolved emotional experiences leave lasting traces on the body. For example, one person I spoke to shared how an emotional trauma from childhood—witnessing a death in church—manifested physically. The anxiety from that unprocessed event became overwhelming, leaving them without an outlet for their emotions. As a result, they developed a coping mechanism of habitually pressing on their ribs during moments of anxiety. This repetitive motion, a subconscious attempt to manage emotional pain, eventually caused a noticeable shift in their rib cage over time. This transformation is a striking example of how our bodies, when forced to contain psychological stress, can create physical archives of emotional experiences. This physical mark became an archive of a profound emotional experience, much like a scar that not only reflects a physical mark but also the lingering psychological scars that accompany it. Just as Khaled's physical scar is a reminder of a struggle or sorrow, this individual's altered rib cage illustrates the deep connection between physical marks and the emotional experiences they represent.

Caregiving Imprints: Marks of Early Life

The process of collecting marks begins the moment we are born, with caregiving practices, especially in infancy and early childhood, leaving both physical and symbolic imprints on the body. During these formative years, a baby's bones are softer and more malleable, making them particularly vulnerable to being shaped by external pressures. For instance, among Slavic mothers, the tradition of tightly wrapping babies often resulted in a distinctive mark—a flat head, known as the “Serbian head.” This unintentional byproduct of caregiving reflects cultural practices that prioritize comfort and security while showing how such methods can have lasting effects on the body.

The phenomenon of flat head syndrome, or positional plagiocephaly, is not unique to Slavic cultures. In Austria and Germany, similar childcare practices involved placing babies on their backs or stomachs to prevent choking or reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). However, the softness of an infant's skull meant that prolonged periods spent in one position often resulted in flat spots or asymmetrical head shapes, reflecting not only the vulnerability of the infant's bones but also the caregiving norms of the time. Although these methods were intended for safety, they unintentionally left lasting imprints on the child's body. Today, despite the continued recommendation to place infants on their backs to reduce SIDS, this has contributed to a rise in flat

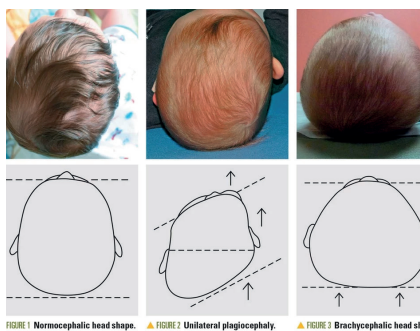


FIGURE 1 Normocephalic head shape. ▲ FIGURE 2 Unilateral plagiocephaly. ▲ FIGURE 3 Brachycephalic head shape

head syndrome, which can often be managed through repositioning or helmet therapy.

In modern discussions, the connection between caregiving practices and mental health adds complexity to understanding these marks. Studies suggest that prolonged periods of lying in one position, often linked to postpartum depression in mothers who may not pick up their babies as frequently, can lead to more pronounced physical marks like flat heads. The soft bones of the infant's skull adapt to constant pressure, creating lasting impressions that reflect both caregiving practices and the emotional and psychological context in which the child is cared for.

Furthermore, historically, many cultures have used caregiving techniques that left distinct marks on infants by taking advantage—whether consciously or unconsciously—of the malleability of a baby's bones. For instance, Native American cradleboards, which allowed mothers to carry infants while keeping their hands free, often shaped the skulls of babies, leaving flat or elongated heads depending on the community's tradition. Far from being seen as negative, these changes were symbols



of cultural identity and belonging. Similarly, swaddling, a practice observed from Ancient Egypt to modern times, restricted an infant's movement and could affect the development of muscles and bones. Extended swaddling sometimes resulted in shifts in bone structure, leaving marks that could last into later childhood. Though intended to provide safety and comfort, this method left a lasting imprint on the developing body.

toddlers often develop stronger arches and better posture. In contrast, rigid shoes introduced too early can limit natural development, subtly influencing gait and posture. Similarly, allowing infants the freedom to crawl strengthens muscles and bones, while restricting or rushing this stage can cause imbalances in motor development and alignment issues. These early experiences mould the child's still-forming bones, illustrating how caregiving practices shape both immediate and long-term physical

As infants grow into toddlers, their bones remain soft and malleable, making caregiving practices crucial in shaping physical development. For example, the type of shoes introduced during early walking stages can affect the development of bones in the feet and ankles. In cultures that encourage barefoot walking,

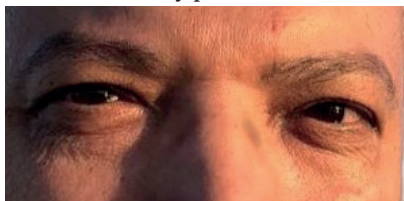


Imprints of Daily Life: Marks from Everyday Movements

development.

Beyond early life, our bodies quietly collect evidence of our daily habits, leaving behind marks that reflect the simple, unspoken stories of everyday life. These imprints, often overlooked, form narratives shaped by repetitive movements and routines, serving as physical reminders of how we adapt to our environments.

Some marks are visible and stem from our most practical, everyday needs. For instance, the indentation left by glasses on the bridge of the nose, formed through years of wear, is a subtle yet clear reminder of the body's accommodation to practical needs. Similarly, a wedding ring, worn daily, leaves a lasting impression on the finger, subtly altering the skin's shape or tone. Both marks carry personal stories—of



function, necessity, and commitment.

Calluses provide another clear example of bodily archives. Whether formed by playing an instrument, writing, or engaging in manual labour, calluses are a testament to skill, dedication, and perseverance. Guitarists develop hardened skin on their fingers, while craftsmen and athletes, such as tennis players, develop marks from repetitive strain, which often manifests as conditions like tennis elbow. These imprints tell a story not just of passion, but of the

body's endurance.



Our feet, too, bear the marks of our daily lives and societal expectations. A phrase I often heard growing up—“Don’t walk barefoot; it will make your feet grow larger”—is an example of how cultural norms influence even our physical form. Walking barefoot or wearing specific types of shoes over time can alter the shape of one’s feet. As I now wear size 40 shoes, I wonder whether it’s due to genetics, the result of walking barefoot, or both. Regardless, I continue to embrace walking barefoot, appreciating the way it connects me to my environment.

Other daily habits leave more visible imprints on the body, such as smoking. This habit can stain the fingers, lips, and teeth, leaving tangible reminders of its long-term presence both inside and outside the body.

However, not all marks are visible on the skin. Some, like posture, develop more subtly over time, shaped by habitual behaviours and the environments we occupy. For instance, musicians who spend years cramped in orchestra

pits may unconsciously carry the memory of this constraint into other settings, adopting a habit of occupying less space even when on a larger stage. Their bodies hold an imprint of past environments, shaped by repetition and memory.

In some cases, daily routines shaped by cultural expectations lead to even more specific bodily adaptations. For example, left-handed individuals living in predominantly right-handed societies must continually adjust

their movements to fit environments designed for right-handed people. A common example is driving, where controls favour right-handed drivers.

Over time, these adjustments can subtly alter muscle tone, posture, and dexterity. The adaptation extends beyond driving to everyday tasks like writing or using tools, where left-handed individuals must modify their actions to suit a world that caters to right-handed norms. These persistent, unspoken adjustments create imprints that may not be immediately visible but deeply influence how the body engages with its surroundings.

indentation left by glasses, the habits of musicians, or the adaptations of left-handed people—highlight how daily routines leave lasting marks on our bodies. These physical and behavioural imprints serve as quiet documents of the repetition of actions that shape not only our bodies but also our personal histories. Each mark tells its own story, forming a chapter in the larger narrative of our bodies and how we navigate the



Diet and the Shaping of the Human Jaw: Tracing Social and Physical Evolution

practical, emotional, and societal expectations placed upon us.

Our diets also, not only influence our health but also the very shape of our faces, particularly the structure of our jawlines. The foods we eat—whether tough and fibrous or soft and refined—require different levels of chewing and jaw engagement, shaping our jawbones, muscles, and dental structure over time. This chapter explores how dietary changes have left lasting imprints on the human jaw, reflecting shifts in lifestyle, social status, and cultural identity across centuries.

Human jawlines have evolved significantly over millennia, largely due to changes in the texture and preparation of food. In early hunter-gatherer societies, diets were rich in raw, fibrous foods such as roots, nuts, and wild meat, which required substantial chewing effort. This consistent, intensive use of jaw muscles promoted a broader, more robust jaw structure with ample space for wisdom teeth. In this context, wisdom teeth were a functional asset, filling out larger jaws shaped by tough diets.

With the advent of agriculture and cooking techniques, food became softer and easier to chew. Grains, cooked vegetables, and meats became staples, reducing the need for powerful jaw muscles. Over generations, these dietary changes contributed to a narrower jaw shape and smaller oral cavities, which are more common in modern populations. As a result, wisdom teeth, once necessary, now often cause crowding or

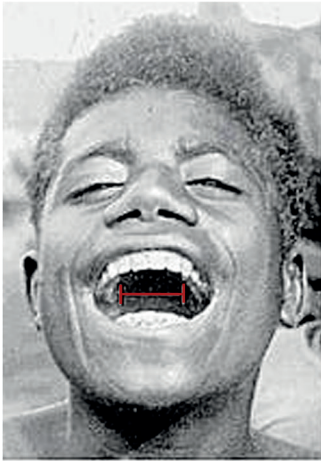
alignment issues, leading to frequent removal in modern dental practice. This shift in jaw structure marks an evolutionary adaptation, a form of body memory that reflects the transition from a rugged, natural diet to one that is cultivated and processed. Wisdom teeth removal, which was rarely necessary in the past, has become an increasingly common procedure as jaw sizes have adjusted to softer diets. In today's world, the prevalence of soft, processed foods has further impacted the development of our jawlines. Many modern diets are high in foods that require minimal chewing, such as bread, pasta, and dairy products. As a result, jaw muscles are often underutilized, which can contribute to narrower jaws, dental crowding, and even misalignment issues. This phenomenon, sometimes called “soft food syndrome,” suggests that our diets are actively reshaping our facial structure.

Orthodontic studies have found that chewing resistance and jaw muscle engagement are crucial for proper jaw development. When these muscles are not regularly exercised, as happens with soft-food diets, the bones may not grow as fully, potentially leading to a receding chin or misaligned teeth. This physical shift underscores how profoundly diet influences not only internal health but also our outward appearance.

Throughout history, diet has also served as a subtle indicator of social and economic status. In many societies, the wealthy had access to softer, refined foods that were considered luxurious, such as finely

ground flour, processed sugars, and delicate meats. In contrast, the poor relied on tougher, coarse foods like whole grains, root vegetables, and less refined meats, which required more extensive chewing. Colonial influence further complicated these distinctions, often imposing new food practices on colonized societies and reinforcing dietary hierarchies. Colonizers introduced refined foods, which quickly became symbols of status, while indigenous diets—typically high in fibrous, unprocessed foods—were labelled as inferior. Over time, this dynamic altered the physical structures within these populations, with colonized people often maintaining more robust jaws due to limited access to processed foods. This lasting impact of colonization on diet and physical appearance illustrates how historical forces have influenced not only societal structure but also physical form. These dietary disparities often resulted in noticeable differences in jaw structure between social classes. The poor, who ate more fibrous and labour-intensive foods, tended to have stronger, more developed jaws. In contrast, the wealthy, who consumed softer foods, displayed narrower, more delicate jawlines. In this way, jaw structure became a subtle social marker, reflecting one's access to certain types of food and, by extension, their place within a social hierarchy. The shape of the jaw, therefore, holds the memory of one's lifestyle and social class, illustrating how personal appearance can carry deeper cultural and economic histories.

shape illustrates how deeply the body remembers our daily habits, preserving a physical record that transcends individual lifetimes. Just as scars, calluses, and other body marks document personal experiences, the jawline can be seen as an archive of lifestyle, shaped by millennia of dietary habits. The “soft food syndrome” observed in modern jaw structure may one day be recognized as a marker of our current era, a time when convenience and processing dominate our food systems. As we continue to shift towards even softer, more processed diets, it's possible that future generations will inherit even more pronounced changes in their jaw structure. By studying these physical imprints, we gain insight into how the human body adapts to environmental and cultural factors, recording changes in a way that merges biology with social history. This reflection on jaw structure as body memory not only emphasizes the body's adaptability but also reminds us that the foods we eat today will leave an



Well Developed
Facial Features
From Native Diet

Middle third of
face is wide
and fully formed

Well developed
jaw and
lower third of face



Above: Wide face and jaw



Poorly Developed
Facial Features
From Modern Diet

Middle third of
face is narrow

Jaw is narrow,
some compression
of facial features



Above: Narrow face and jaw

NIGHTLY IMPRINTS: TRACING THE BODY'S SLEEP STORIES

imprint on the faces of tomorrow.

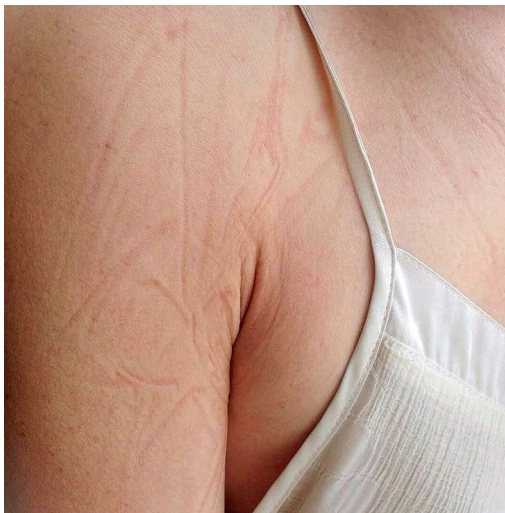
A continuation of daily routines` marks our bodies also accumulate imprints from another vital yet unconscious part of life: sleep. Sleep habits leave subtle but telling marks on our bodies, quietly documenting how we rest.

Sleep, seen often as a restorative process, doesn't just rejuvenate the mind and body; it also leaves its own subtle, physical imprints over time. These marks accumulate as a result of how we position ourselves during rest, shaping our bodies in ways that may go unnoticed but are nonetheless significant.

Sleep-related habits also have an influence on how we breathe and how our internal organs adjust during rest. For instance, sleeping on the left side is recommended for pregnant women as it enhances blood flow to the heart. For others, this position may help reduce acid reflux. Long-term side-sleeping can subtly affect the positioning of internal organs, making individuals more sensitive to their sleeping postures due to the body's weight distribution, including that **32** of the heart.

One of the most common and understated effects is facial asymmetry, a result of consistently sleeping on one side. Over the years, this repeated pressure can cause the skin to compress, creating uneven lines and wrinkles, even leading to slight shifts in facial structure. But this asymmetry isn't confined to just facial features. It can influence hair, posture, and body alignment as well. Sleeping predominantly on one side may also redistribute body weight, leaving indents or marks on the side of the body that presses against the bed. Over time, such patterns can lead to visible differences in muscle tone or even shifts in alignment, particularly in the shoulders and hips.

One of the more subtle but telling marks of sleep is the faint lines that appear on our skin after hours of resting—those temporary imprints, along with redness or tingling



numbness from lying in the same position too long.

Though these marks quickly fade, they reveal important clues about the way we sleep, like where pressure was applied or how deeply we

rested. These quiet, physical traces narrate our unconscious movements, showing how our bodies respond and adapt throughout the night. By paying attention to these signs, we can better understand our nocturnal habits—such as what makes us turn in our sleep or how different positions impact our comfort and quality of rest.

These marks, often overlooked, serve as subtle maps of how we inhabit and interact with the world even in our most unguarded moments, reminding us that our bodies are always in silent dialogue with their environment.

Personally, they are one of my favourite marks to find, reminding me of the quiet, constant dialogue between my body and its surroundings, even in sleep.

These physical responses to sleep habits—be they creased skin, shifts in muscle tone, or altered body alignment—serve as lasting traces, much like the imprints we accumulate during waking hours.

They remind us that our bodies continually respond to daily habits, recording each experience as part of



THE BODY AS AN ARCHIVE OF FAITH

our unique physical narrative.

The Muslim prayer mark, or “zabiba” (Arabic for “raisin” due to its distinctive shape), forms on the forehead through the act of sujood—a key element of Salah (Muslim prayer). During sujood, worshippers bow and place their foreheads on the ground in a gesture of complete submission to God. This repeated contact between the skin and the floor, practised multiple times a day over the years, gradually creates a darkened patch on the forehead. More than a mark on the skin, the zabiba is often viewed as a testament to one’s spiritual devotion, reflecting regular prayer



and linking the individual to the broader Muslim community.

The act of sujood—often regarded as the ultimate expression of humility—highlights the close relationship between body and faith. The forehead, being the primary point of contact during sujood, symbolizes this bond, acting as a constant reminder of the individual’s submission to God.



Just as the prayer mark is physically shaped by repetitive prostration, it also carries with it the consistency and devotion of a prayerful life. For many, it serves as a symbol of both individual piety and collective identity within the Muslim world.

Beyond its spiritual and cultural significance, the zabiba has, in some instances, taken on political connotations. For example, following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, individuals with visible prayer marks were sometimes associated with religious or political affiliations to the ousted regime. This led to increased scrutiny, arrests, and stigmatization of those with the

mark. In this context, what was once a purely spiritual symbol became, in certain settings, a political statement.

This evolution of meaning underscores how body memory—such as the zabiba—can shift, gaining new layers in different social and political landscapes; showing how a simple mark on the forehead can hold profound spiritual, communal, and, at times, contentious political significance. By examining the prayer mark, we see how religious rituals leave physical imprints that transcend personal faith, touching on cultural identity and, in certain cases, political memory.

Other faiths, as I have come across in my research, also leave visible, maybe even permanent marks on the body, and here are just a few examples.

In Christian monastic traditions, particularly among Catholic monks and nuns, the long hours spent kneeling in prayer can lead to calloused or worn knees. These marks are unintentional byproducts of a life dedicated to worship and humility, serving as silent reminders of the physical toll that religious devotion can take on the body.

Similarly, in some religious communities where head coverings are worn tightly for extended periods, unintentional marks such as hair thinning or even tension alopecia can develop over time. For example, some Sikh men, who wear tight turbans daily, may experience hair loss. While not a deliberate religious mark, these changes in the body reflect a deep commitment to faith and tradition,

36 with physical traces that reveal how religious attire interacts

with the body.

These examples across various religions demonstrate how faith unintentionally manifests on the body, leaving imprints that go beyond the symbolic, acting as ongoing markers of personal and communal identity. These physical traces are not merely signs of piety, but they carry deeper cultural, political, and spiritual connotations, reflecting how closely the body is intertwined with religious devotion. Just as the zabiba has evolved from a mark of prayer to a political signifier, other religious marks, whether from prayer or attire, can take on new meanings over time, influenced by cultural, social, or

BODY MARKS AND POLITICS

political shifts.

In certain historical contexts, body marks and physical traits have been politicized, manipulated, or weaponized to serve broader agendas. This extends beyond religious symbols, as seen in the previous chapter on the Muslim prayer mark, to something as arbitrary as wearing glasses, a mark that once indicated intellectualism. Following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, where body marks like the prayer mark took on political dimensions, we now turn to an example from Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge regime, under the leadership of Pol Pot, ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. During this time, they carried out one of the most brutal genocides in modern history, aiming to turn Cambodia into a classless agrarian society. The regime targeted intellectuals, professionals, and anyone they deemed “enemies of the state” or threats to their vision of a Communist utopia.

One of the most disturbing aspects of their campaign was the identification and execution of individuals who wore glasses. In the Khmer Rouge’s view,

someone might have been educated or part of the middle class. Those who wore glasses were often assumed to be readers or scholars, and thus enemies of the agrarian state the Khmer Rouge sought to build. In their twisted logic, glasses became a visible target for identifying people who might oppose the regime, and many were executed simply for this perceived association.

This tragic example underscores how physical traits, much like body marks, can take on dangerous political significance. The Khmer Rouge’s weaponization of such a mundane object as glasses reveals the extent to which regimes can manipulate identity, turning everyday features into signs of opposition. Just as the prayer mark in Egypt became a potential symbol of political affiliation, in Cambodia, glasses



38 glasses were seen as a mark of intellectualism, a sign that

TRACES OF
COLONIALISM:
THE MARKS WE
HAVE, AND THE
MARKS WE LOST

became a mark that could cost people their lives.

Reading further into the marks our bodies come to bear, each mark can also be a timestamp in its own way they allow us to take a journey through time. Colonialism for instance, has inscribed its history on our bodies. Growing up in Cairo, I was acutely aware of how colonial histories remained etched not only in the city's architecture and institutions but also in the bodies, behaviours, and everyday practices of the people. Its influence extends beyond the political and social realms; it has been inscribed directly onto our skin, hair, and physical appearance, leaving marks that speak to stories of oppression, adaptation, and resistance that span centuries.

One of colonialism's most significant traces was altering how people in colonized societies viewed their bodies by imposing Western beauty standards that marginalized indigenous physical traits. One vivid example is the impact on African and Afro-diasporic women's hair. The desire to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals, such as straight, sleek hair, has left a legacy of body memory for many, especially in North Africa, where girls were often subjected to tight hair brushing to reduce the appearance of curls. This constant strain led to conditions like traction alopecia, a possibly permanent form of hair loss that reflects the generational influence of colonialism on body practices. I, too, grew up experiencing this, as many

North African girls did, where

became a marker of "refinement" imposed by colonial narratives.

This imposed beauty standard has had far-reaching consequences, particularly in professional settings where natural hair textures are often seen as "unpresentable" or "unprofessional." In formal job environments, such as banking or corporate offices, big, natural Afro-textured hair is frequently viewed as unruly or too casual for professional settings. The pressure to straighten or chemically alter one's hair to fit Western standards persists in many industries, reinforcing the colonial belief that sleek, European features are the epitome of sophistication. Unfortunately, these practices of straightening, chemical treatments, and tight hairstyling can lead to irreversible damage to the hair and scalp. From chemical burns to follicle weakening and permanent bald spots, the effort to meet Eurocentric beauty standards comes at a high cost to hair health. Even today, individuals in such roles may feel compelled to adjust their natural appearance to fit into these narrow definitions of professionalism, revealing how deeply these beauty norms continue to shape bodies and behaviours long after the end of colonial rule. The very act of styling one's hair in line with Eurocentric ideals can be seen as a form of body memory, a way in which cultural pressures manifest physically, perpetuating the historical constraints imposed on personal expression.

The use of chemical straighteners and the widespread adoption of Western grooming methods in colonized

societies illustrate how deeply these beauty standards have affected the body. These practices have altered the natural shape of hairlines and even affected scalp health. **Our hair carries memory**—whether through braids, protective styles, or the absence of them. Every choice reflects personal preference, but it also represents the weight of history, the pressure to conform to European ideals, and, for many, the journey toward reclaiming and celebrating natural features. This is not merely an individual expression; it is a broader cultural statement.

The reach of colonial beauty standards is not limited to hair. The use of skin-whitening products as well as, actively avoiding the sun, unfortunately still remains prevalent across post-colonial societies, a practice rooted in the colonial association of light skin with privilege and status. In Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, light skin came to symbolize access to power and higher social standing during colonial rule, a standard that continues to persist. The stigma attached to darker skin tones persists in beauty industries today, reinforcing the colonial hierarchies that equated whiteness with desirability and darker skin with inferiority.

Moreover, the impact of colonialism extends beyond beauty into the way bodies were physically carried. European colonizers-imposed ideals of “proper posture” as markers of civility, discipline, and refinement. In many African cultures, natural, fluid walking styles with relaxed shoulders and rhythmic movements

were typical, a reflection of cultural expression and the need for practicality in daily life. Colonial authorities, however, enforced stiffer, more controlled bodily movements, which they associated with “civilization” and European superiority.

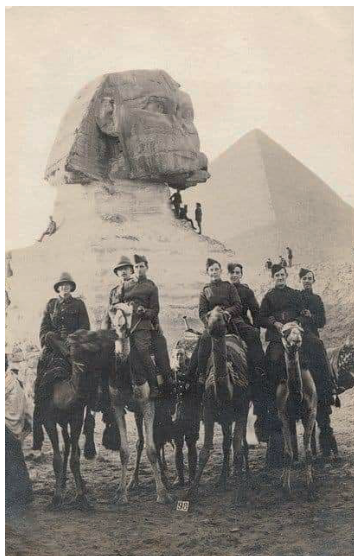
This emphasis on rigid posture was a subtle form of control, with colonial schools, missionary institutions, and military forces reinforcing ideals of how a “civilized” body should move through space. Proper sitting, walking, and standing became symbols of submission to colonial authority. The psychological impact of these postural expectations is profound—open, relaxed postures symbolize confidence and comfort, while rigid ones signify restraint and suppression. Colonial rule, in this sense, was not only about controlling lands and resources but about reshaping the very way bodies moved, curbing freedom of physical expression.

Even after the end of formal colonial rule, these changes remain embedded in post-colonial societies. Today, the effects of colonialism can still be seen in how we view “correct” body language. The postural shifts imposed during the colonial era represent the deeper ways in which colonial powers sought to control not just outward appearances but also the emotional and cultural freedoms tied to physical movement. What I can’t help but wonder about are the marks our bodies might have carried before colonialism—traces of traditional grooming, hairstyles, or natural movements that were

erased by imposed standards. These lost imprints, which could have reflected a deeper connection to our cultural roots, have been replaced by the physical and aesthetic markers of colonization, altering not just our appearance but the very way we inhabit and express our bodies.

In sum, the physical imprints of colonialism are far more than symbolic. They represent a legacy of forced assimilation, oppression, and cultural erasure. These marks, whether seen in hairlines, skin tones,

or posture, continue to shape bodies across generations. They serve as powerful reminders of how colonial ideologies have not only reshaped appearances but also altered



TECHNOLOGY'S MARKS: HOW DIGITAL TOOLS SHAPE OUR BODIES

how bodies navigate the world, often in ways that are still being unconsciously replicated today.

Just as the body's marks can trace some of the damage from colonialism, that's not the only time-related imprint we can come to learn. Technology as well has allowed us to learn not only how our bodies have transformed but also how each generation, shaped by different experiences, carries distinct physical imprints of their era. And just as repetitive motions leave visible imprints on our bodies—calluses from physical labour, scars from accidents—technology also has been recently leaving behind its own kind of imprint, throughout the generations with variations of intensity. From subtle and unnoticed, like the small bump on my pinkie finger, caused by holding my phone in the same way for extended periods, to more drastic effects on posture, vision, and mobility, technology now has a profound influence on how our bodies are shaped and remembered. The human body has been adapting to the increasing use of digital tools, and these adaptations are leaving both temporary and permanent marks. Long hours spent at a computer for instance can lead to significant changes in posture, causing what has come to be known as “tech neck,” a condition where the neck slumps forward due to prolonged screen time. Over time, this can lead to chronic pain and a reshaping of the spine, turning what was once a temporary effect into a permanent transformation of the body. Similarly, carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive strain

injuries (RSIs) are common among individuals who use keyboards and mice for long stretches.

These conditions arise because of repetitive motions that, while small and seemingly inconsequential at the moment, accumulate to leave a lasting physical imprint. Even something as simple as prolonged use of a smartphone alters our body mechanics. The “smartphone pinkie,” a small indentation or bump caused by the way many people rest their phones on their pinkie finger, is a visible reminder of how even subtle habits can leave marks. These marks represent a kind of body memory, a physical record of our reliance on digital tools and the ways in which they reshape our bodies, sometimes permanently.

The effect of technology on our eyesight is perhaps one of the most obvious examples of how the digital world leaves its mark on the body. The increasing amount of time we spend staring at screens—whether on computers, tablets, or smartphones—has led to the rise of digital eye strain (or computer vision syndrome), a condition characterized by dry eyes, headaches, blurred vision, and difficulty focusing on distant objects. The eyes, like the rest of the body, adapt to the environments they are exposed to. Over time, this sustained exposure to screens can reshape how the eyes function, leading to near-sightedness, or myopia, which is now seen in increasing numbers among younger generations. The shift in vision caused by digital screens is a clear example of how technology not only leaves temporary imprints on the body but may also create

generational changes. Studies suggest that increased screen time in children may be linked to a higher prevalence of myopia in younger generations. This raises the possibility that our constant interaction with technology could lead to evolutionary shifts in how future generations see and use their bodies.

The rise of wearable technology as well, such as fitness trackers and smartwatches, introduces a new dimension to the concept of body memory by externalizing it. These devices record a wide range of physiological data—heart rate, steps taken, sleep patterns, and even calorie consumption—essentially creating a digital archive of the body's activity. While this data is stored outside the body, it mirrors our natural memory system by tracking patterns and behaviours over time.

For instance, a fitness tracker might log that someone consistently walks a certain number of steps each day or gets a set amount of sleep each night. These patterns, when analysed, offer insights into the person's overall health in the same way that scars or calluses provide a glimpse into the physical activities or habits of a body. This technology externalizes the body's memory, turning it into digital data that can be referenced later—a record of our ongoing bodily experiences.

However, this growing reliance on wearable technology raises important questions about how we relate to our bodies. As we increasingly depend on technology to tell us how well we've slept, how active we've been, or how

our heart rate fluctuates, we risk losing touch with our own natural ability to sense and respond to our bodies' needs. The more we look to devices to monitor and manage our health, the less we might listen to our internal signals.

Being in sync with our bodies is critical to our well-being. When we attune ourselves to the subtle cues of hunger, fatigue, or stress, we cultivate a deeper awareness of our physical and emotional state. Relying too heavily on technology can disrupt this connection, potentially leading us to ignore the body's natural rhythms.

Furthermore, although, technology offers valuable insights into our bodies, it also risks turning health and wellness into a set of numbers or data points to be optimized. This shift can encourage a more mechanical relationship with our bodies, where we focus on achieving numerical goals rather than fostering a holistic sense of well-being. The question arises: will future generations evolve to rely even more on external devices to monitor and maintain their health, thus reducing the body's natural ability to track its own rhythms and needs? Wearable technology, when used as a supportive tool, can provide useful information, but it should not replace the deep, intuitive relationship we have with our bodies. Our ability to be present with ourselves, to understand the messages our bodies send, is as crucial as any data point a device might log. As we continue to integrate technology into our daily lives, remembering this balance becomes increasingly

important.

The impact of technology on the body is not limited to individuals but extends across generations. Just as past generations bore the physical imprints of manual labour or cultural practices, current and future generations will carry the marks of their technological environments.

The changes we see today, may leave lasting marks that influence how future bodies adapt to the digital age.

Whereas, technology advances, so too will the marks it leaves on the body. Future generations may find themselves bearing the physical imprints of technologies that have yet to be invented, and these marks will reflect the social and cultural environments of their time. Perhaps they will have different types of postural adaptations, changes in bone structure, or even digital implants that leave marks not yet seen today. What is clear is that the relationship between the body and technology

INVISIBLE MARKS

is one of continuous evolution. Just as past generations were marked by the tools they used; the bodies of the digital generation will reflect the technologies that shape their lives.

While much of this research has focused on the visible marks our bodies bear, there are countless imprints that remain invisible to the eye yet leave just as significant an impact on our lives and identities. These “invisible marks” are stored deep within our bodies, manifesting not in scars or calluses, but in muscle memory, psychological responses, emotional trauma, and physical adaptations to the environment or past experiences.

A powerful example of these invisible imprints can be seen in the Haenyeo women divers of Jeju Island, whose lungs adapted over generations of deep-sea diving. These women, known for their extraordinary ability to stay under water without breathing apparatuses for extended periods, developed expanded lung capacity and adapted to the immense pressure of the ocean. These internal changes tell a silent story of endurance, survival, and a relationship with the sea that is both physical and cultural. The Haenyeo tradition dates back to the 17th century, when women began replacing men as the

primary divers due to economic and social shifts. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), the Haenyeo were heavily taxed on their harvests, forcing them to dive deeper and for longer durations to sustain their livelihoods. Their bodies became archives of resilience, bearing the invisible marks of exploitation and survival. After the Jeju Uprising in 1948, when many men were killed or imprisoned, the Haenyeo took on greater responsibility as providers, sustaining their



communities against immense loss. These imprints, though unseen, are deeply embedded in their bodies, reflecting the intersection of labour, history, and identity.

The concept of invisible marks also extends to emotional trauma, which, as described by trauma researchers like Bessel van der Kolk, leaves imprints on the body without visible scars. Van der

Kolk's work highlights how traumatic experiences can become physically stored in the body, influencing posture, movement, and even chronic pain. These are traces of trauma that are not visible to others, yet they shape the way individuals navigate their worlds. For instance, someone who has experienced severe emotional distress may hold tension in certain muscles or adopt protective postures unconsciously. This "body memory" of trauma can persist long after the mind has moved on, revealing how deeply intertwined emotional and physical experiences are.

Beyond trauma, muscle memory is another example of invisible marks. Athletes, musicians, and dancers often rely on deeply ingrained muscle patterns that allow them to perform their craft with precision. A pianist, for example, can play a complex piece without consciously thinking about each key press, as their body remembers the motion. Over time, these patterns become embedded in their muscles, joints, and even neural pathways, creating a form of invisible imprint that reflects years of training and repetition. Although unseen, these marks document the body's adaptation to repeated tasks, carving a story of dedication and practice into its very structure.

On a more subtle level, chronic stress and anxiety, often invisible to the outside observer, also manifest physically, creating long-term imprints. Prolonged exposure to stress can lead to heightened cortisol levels, muscle tension, and digestive issues—physiological reactions that

become deeply embedded in the body's systems. This stress is carried within, leaving a legacy of invisible marks that shape the body's internal landscape over time.

Moreover, cultural and societal pressures can create invisible marks as individuals adjust to norms and expectations. For example, women who are socialized to appear "small" or take up less space may adopt certain postures, such as hunching their shoulders or crossing their arms, unconsciously altering their body language. These habitual movements become part of the body's memory, imprinted by societal expectations rather than individual choice.

In sum, these invisible marks—whether psychological, emotional, or physical—form an integral part of our body's archive, even though they may not be visible to the naked eye. They are stored in the body's cells, muscles, and neural pathways, documenting not only

MUTUAL IMPRINTS: HOW WE SHAPE OBJECTS AND HOW THEY SHAPE US

personal histories but also collective experiences of trauma, adaptation, and resilience. They remind us that our bodies are constantly in dialogue with the world around us, both in ways we can see and in ways we can only feel.

Our bodies, through daily habits and repeated actions, leave subtle but lasting imprints. However, this relationship is not one-sided. Just as our bodies are shaped by the tools, objects, and environments we engage with, these objects, in turn, bear the marks of our usage, becoming silent witnesses to our habits, routines, and personal histories.

Take, for example, the case of a worn-out right shoe. When I was living in Cairo, the intense traffic and constant need to shift between the fuel and brake pedals always left the right shoe, of every shoe I owned back then, significantly more worn out than its left counterpart. Over time, the wear and tear on that shoe mirrored the chaotic driving environment of the city, documenting the demands of navigating Cairo's traffic and the strain it placed on me



as a driver. This is more than just a sign of use—it's an archive of the everyday pressures and challenges unique to that environment. In this way, my shoe didn't just serve its function; it carried a story of crazy

Cairo streets.

A similar phenomenon occurs in everyday household objects. Consider how a favourite spot on a couch gradually sinks, creating a permanent indent over time. This often becomes the place where someone spends hours reading, relaxing, or watching television. The sinking seat is more than just a sign of use; it reflects the comfort and habitual presence of the person who sits there, telling a story of rest, routine, and personal comfort.

In homes, you might notice the well-worn spots on door handles or kitchen cabinets. Frequently used doors or cupboards show smooth, shiny surfaces where hands have rubbed against them day after day. These seemingly small details reveal



the routine actions we perform without thinking, subtly shaping the objects we interact with regularly. Over time, the wood or metal softens in places, worn down by daily life, and stands as a record of both the practical and repetitive moments that occur in a household.

Staircases also bear the imprints of repeated action.



In homes or public spaces, stairs may show uneven wear, often more “melted” or worn on one side where people naturally gravitate. This subtle asymmetry captures human preference and habit, revealing how people favor a particular route without consciously realizing it.

The marks left on the stairs tell the story of hundreds or thousands of individual journeys, each contributing to the erosion of the steps in a specific way.

Even our digital tools, like keyboards, bear the imprints of our habits and the lives we lead. For a designer, gamer, or writer, certain keys on a keyboard may begin to fade faster than others, becoming shiny or worn down due to repeated use.

52 For designers, keys such as

“Ctrl,” “Z,” or “V”—essential for undoing and pasting—might become illegible after hours of use in design software. Gamers may notice that the “W,” “A,” “S,” and “D” keys, commonly used for movement in many games, fade faster than others, reflecting the countless hours spent immersed in virtual worlds. Even through these worn keys, we can read into the lives of the people behind them. A well-used keyboard tells a story of dedication, creativity, or even escapism.

The fading of specific letters or commands becomes an archive of the user’s professional, creative, or recreational journey, silently recording the hours of work or play embedded in the tools they use.

A wooden dining table can tell a similar story. Decades of family meals can leave behind subtle grooves from cutlery, stains from spilled drinks, and scratches from chairs being moved. These imperfections capture not just the physical interactions but also the memories shared around the table—celebrations, conversations, and the rhythm of everyday family life.

Even musical instruments, like pianos or guitars, bear the physical imprints of their players. On a piano, the keys that are most frequently played often become smoother and shinier, creating a visible pattern of wear that reflects the pieces and scales practised over the years. The pedals may also show scuff marks from repeated use, becoming part of the instrument’s physical story. Guitars, especially for professional players, show signs

of wear where fingers press against the strings, with fretboards becoming worn in specific areas and the body of the guitar potentially showing scratches or worn paint where it's held during performances.

Consider also how bicycles evolve through long-term use. A bicycle seat might mould itself to the rider, gradually becoming imprinted with the shape of their body. The handlebars may show wear where hands consistently grip, or the pedals might develop scuff marks from shoes. Each mark speaks to countless commutes, leisurely rides, or perhaps a journey across different terrains. The bike becomes a physical representation of the miles travelled and the experiences accumulated along the way.

Even within the workspace, objects bear the traces of our interaction. An office chair might wear down unevenly, with the fabric on the seat thinning out in areas of consistent use. A desk may develop faint scratches or a worn spot where the wrist rests while using a mouse. Over time, keyboards develop shiny patches on the most-used keys, and notebooks or sketchpads show the telltale signs of repeated writing or drawing in the same areas.

Even nature illustrates the way we leave imprints on objects. A hiking trail, for example, slowly becomes worn down over time, with grass disappearing and soil becoming compacted underfoot. This wear shows the impact of countless hikers taking the same path through a forest or mountain, etching a human presence into the natural landscape.

Benches in parks can display a similar narrative, with wooden slats becoming smoothed by years of people sitting in the same spots, watching the world go by.

Ultimately, these imprints on objects are just as telling as the marks left on our bodies. They form a mutual dialogue between ourselves and



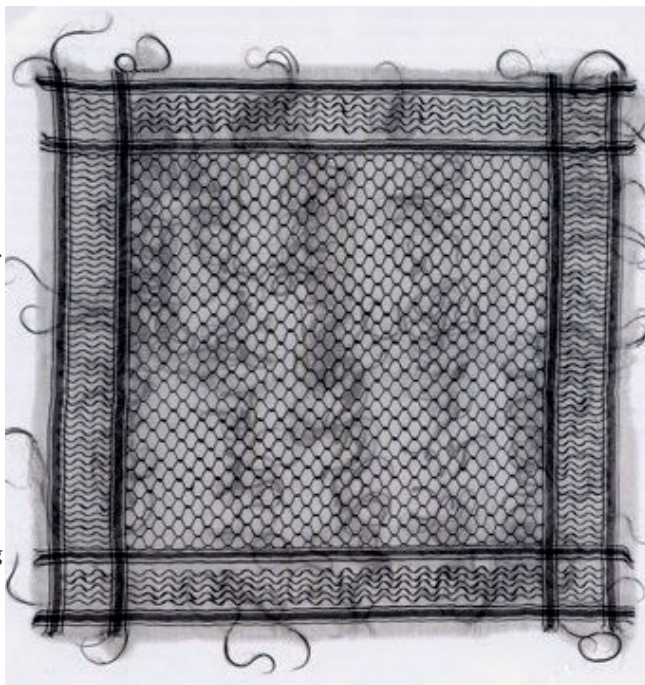
STATE OF ART: THE BODY AS A MEDIUM OF MEMORY AND MATERIAL

the material world, where each interaction leaves a trace, creating a record of our lives. Objects may seem passive, but in their wear and tear, they document our habits, environments, and experiences, reminding us that they, too, are part of the story we live and tell.

While not all of the artworks directly address the concept of body memory, they have deeply inspired the reflections and discussions in this research, offering insights into how personal and cultural narratives become inscribed onto and through the body.

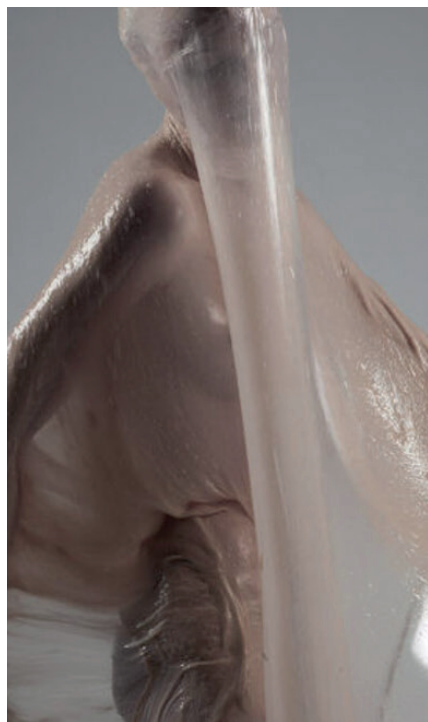
One such artist, whose work resonates strongly with these themes is Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian artist born in Lebanon, known for her evocative and powerful explorations of identity, displacement, and the body as a vessel of both personal and political memory. Hatoum's work frequently engages with the body, employing materials intimately connected to human experience. A notable recurring element in her art is the use of hair, a material charged with complex

socio-cultural meanings. Hair, while a part of the body, evokes reactions of both attraction and repulsion when separated from it. In her piece **Keffieh** (1993-99), in which she weaves her hair into a traditional Palestinian Scarf, explores how symbols of cultural identity can intersect with personal memory and loss. The use of hair in these works not only gestures toward intimate bodily narratives but also opens broader dialogues about political identity, exile, and the body's role in carrying these lived experiences. The personal implications of Hatoum's work are amplified by her own experience of displacement as a Palestinian exile. Hatoum's engagement with



the body's materiality extends beyond mere physical form. Her installations, such as **Hair There and Everywhere** (1994), explore the delicate and fragile connection between the body, environment, and memory. In this piece, hair becomes a web spanning across space, symbolizing the interconnectedness of human experience and the body's entanglement with its surroundings.

Visual artists like Bart Hess delve into these ideas by exploring how bodies interact with unconventional materials and textures. His work narrates the intimate relationship between the human body and its surroundings, often blurring the line between the organic and synthetic. Through innovative



designs, Hess examines how materials, like foamy or molecular textures, interact with the skin, creating a tension that reflects the evolving relationship between the body and its environment. These interactions, much like Hatoum's use of hair, highlight how the body imprints itself on the world, while the world simultaneously imprints itself on the body.

Moreover, theorists like Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed have significantly contributed to our understanding of how bodies are not neutral canvases but sites where histories—whether of trauma, politics, or culture—are inscribed. Butler's work on performativity underscores the role of repetitive actions in shaping not just identity but the body itself, while Ahmed's writings explore how bodies carry the weight of historical trauma and cultural memory, linking personal bodily experiences to wider social dynamics.

By blending the personal with

CONCLUSION: OUR BODIES, OUR STORIES

the political, contemporary artists challenge the viewer to reflect on how the body acts as both a repository of memory and a participant in the socio-political world. Whether through organic materials like hair or innovative substances like Muskin, these artists highlight how art serves as a space for exploring the body's role as a living archive—constantly recording, adapting, and transforming through interaction with the world around it.

Throughout this exploration, we've considered how our bodies are not simply vessels that carry us through life—they are archives that bear witness to our experiences, habits, and identities. From the marks left by daily routines to the invisible imprints of memory and emotion, our bodies tell stories that intertwine with the world around us. Every scar, wrinkle, callus, and ache becomes a page in the book of our personal and collective histories.

As we reflect on these ideas, it becomes clear that body memory is not just a concept limited to trauma or monumental life events but is woven into the mundane, the everyday. The way we walk, sit, sleep, or even carry a bag imprints itself on our bodies over time, shaping our posture, movements, and even our physical form. These are not incidental details; they are part of our living narrative, the subtle marks that define us.

This research brings to light the body's role as a living archive, recording experiences, interactions,

58 and cultural memories in ways that are both individual and

universal. In an increasingly digital world, this study raises important questions about how we interact with our bodies. While digital tools externalize memory through data, the body preserves it in a more tactile, sensory form—creating a narrative that is both embodied and experiential. As technology grows more embedded in daily life, there may be shifts in how we relate to our bodies, especially as digital devices track, store, and even predict our physical patterns. However, the body's organic memory offers an irreplaceable form of documentation, one that carries emotional nuance and sensory depth that digital records cannot replicate.

Looking ahead, the study of body memory might expand to consider the interplay between technology and physical experience, examining how future generations may experience and interpret bodily memory differently. By highlighting these perspectives, this research contributes to the field by grounding the body's archival role as both a biological and phenomenological phenomenon, ensuring it remains central to our understanding of human experience.

Now, I would like to invite you to take a moment to reflect on the unconscious choices your body makes and the subtle imprints they may leave behind. Below are a few questions that may prompt personal reflections about your own habits and the traces they have etched into your body:

1. When crossing your legs, which leg do you instinctively put on

top of the other? Why do you think that is?

2. Which shoulder do you always carry your bag on? Have you noticed any difference in how that shoulder feels or its alignment compared to the other?

3. Does your grandmother, or any older family member, have a side they prefer to lean on when walking? What does this tell you about their habitual movements or their physical comfort?

4. When you clasp your hands together, which thumb rests on top? Is this a habitual movement, and how does it reflect your unconscious preferences?

5. When you walk or stand, do you tend to lead with one foot more than the other? Have you ever noticed how this might affect your balance or stride over time?

6. When you stand with your arms crossed, which arm usually sits on top? What does this suggest about your body's natural posture or sense of comfort?

7. When holding your phone or typing, do you notice that one hand or finger does more of the work? How might this have shaped your muscle memory or even the structure of your hand over time?

8. If you have a favourite side of the bed, why do you choose it? How does this choice reflect your sense of comfort, habit, or the way you interact with your space?

9. Consider how you sit at a

desk—do you lean forward or slouch? How has this posture shaped your back, shoulders, or overall alignment over time?

10. When you chew food, do you favour one side of your mouth more than the other? How might this subtle habit have affected your dental health or muscle development in your jaw?

11. Think about how you hold your phone—do you notice any tension in one hand or wrist? How has this seemingly simple action shaped the muscles or tendons over time?

12. Can you think of any calluses, scars, or marks that you've acquired from specific activities? What stories do these marks tell about your life?

These questions invite you to look at the subtle, everyday marks on your body, marks that you may have never noticed or reflected on before. They are clues to your unique personal story—the habits you've formed, the choices you've made, and the experiences that have shaped you.

Space for Reflection

The next few pages are left blank to give you space for your own reflections. Use this area to jot down thoughts, memories, or observations about the marks your body carries. Consider how these physical traces connect to the experiences, emotions, and routines that have shaped you. Let this be a space for you to begin your own exploration of body memory.

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