



14TH MAY 2020

A History of the Foot

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The foot. Where will feet take us today? In the middle of a pandemic, most of us will be thinking: not very far. Some people may be lucky enough to have a garden to run around, but those of us who live in large cities or small flats have to contend with pacing between the living room and kitchen. Feet – that enabler of movement and symbol of freedom, the appendage with which we ‘play footsie’ – are not being allowed to be ‘footloose and fancy free’ anymore.

If you have been following my talks on body parts (hair, eyes, breasts, stomachs, penises and clitorises), you will have identified a number of common themes: the non-naturalised, non-universal body; power and agency; malleability; the social life of organs and limbs. I will be returning to those themes in this talk as well. But, more important for today’s focus on the foot are questions of ethics and desire. In fact, I hope to persuade at least some of you that there is more sexiness in the foot-as-fetish than in the rest of the body.

To do this, I need to start with Feetishism. This is not a misspelling of fetishism. Feetishism was a brief, revolutionary, queer-theological movement in Brazil in the mid-1980s. Started by Glauco Mattoso, a blind Brazilian poet, this was a transgressive, consciously indecent theology that sought an unveiling of God’s love through the power of *massagem linguopedal* or ‘tongue-foot massage’. Adherents were encouraged to lick and kiss the sweaty, filthy feet of the oppressed and the oppressors in an active demonstration of love and respect. Workers and the destitute, homophobes and policemen, were recipients of this sacramental act, which sought to invert positions of power through the giving and receiving of pleasure. Mattoso published *The Feetishist Handbook: Adventures and Readings from a Guy Crazy for Feet* and, when that book became a cult classic with hundreds of followers, he turned it into a cartoon called *The Adventures of Glaucomix, The Feetishist*. Followers of Glaucomix (think: a perverted Asterix) kissed and licked feet in a religious rite of self-mortification and big-hearted human-sympathy for the unknowable ‘Other’. Like Liberation Theology more generally (which was very popular in Latin America at the time), this was an ideology of humility that sought to give people permission to confront harmful hierarchies and injustices. It was no passive exchange but an active ‘doing’ of divine love. As Argentinian theologian Marcella María Althaus-Reid explains:

The scent of a Latin American theology will always be the scent of a materialist theology that knows how poverty smells and understands how erotic revelations (revelations of divine love) occurred when some policemen kissed the feet of factory workers in São Paulo. And this is because a Latin American fetishist theology arrives at an erotic unveiling of God’s love among the dirty, sweating bodies of the marginalized and excluded. It is queer and it is political, as it is driven by that sense of urgency for social justice that still characterizes the liberationist Latin American theological movement in its search for alternative orders – loving orders and theological ones.

Clearly, Feetishism was a fetishistic theology – not in the sense that Freud espoused (with its emphasis on castration and the female phallus, which I will turn to later) but in the sense of the fetish as a displacement of the object of desire: the object of desire being God, displaced to the feet of the poor, the sinning, and the sick. It is, as Stefanie Knauss explains in ‘Theology and the Senses’, a way of looking...

for God in places where one would not – traditionally – think of looking, and which does not reduce the multiple forms of loving other persons and God to a few socially acceptable ones, like heterosexuality or the official ritual of the liturgy.

After all, fetishists don’t kiss and caress just *any* feet or shoes. There is no place in this queer theology for Christian Louboutin’s signature shoes with their exclamatory red soles and fetishistic celebration of social *exclusion*. Rather, Mattoso and his followers seek out the threadbare sneakers worn on factory floors, the filthy boots of manual labourers, and the smelly feet of men and women who carry out those essential services that we



today – in the midst of our own pandemic – have suddenly noticed actual *exist*. Equally important, his theology does not even require a belief in a Higher Being or God, because it is grounded in a materialist ideology dedicated to radical justice in *this* world.

Of course, I am *not* suggesting that we re-energise Feetishism. It was a movement that had its time (1980s), place (Brazil), and spiritual roots (Liberation Theology). And my own intellectual attraction to Feetishism resolutely excises God (a idea I develop in my book *What It Means To Be Human*). But I am suggesting two things that will be the focus of this talk. The first is the pivotal role of feet in religious and secular movements opposed to oppressive regimes and global injustice. And secondly, I want to encourage us to think anew about the erotic politics of feet in our society.

Feetishism was a unique movement, but it drew on symbols and practices that can be traced back to the ancient world, where hosts would wash the feet of visitors, a ritual designed to transform Strangers into welcomed Guests. Krishna bathed the feet of the Brāhmanas. Muslims and Jews thoroughly cleanse their feet before praying. In the Christian religion, we hear of the female sinner who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, kissed them, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with ointment. During the Last Supper, Jesus knelt before his disciples, before washing and kissing their feet:

'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them.... Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them'.

These biblical stories inspired the Liberationist followers of Mattoso and have been parodied by others, most notably by T. S. Eliot in 'The Waste Land'. The verses go:

*O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They washed their feet in soda water.*

This is both a satire of the Biblical story of Jesus' feet being washed by the tears of a female sinner and an allusion to Mrs. Porter, the Madame of a popular Cairo brothel during the First World War. The original ditty goes:

*O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on the daughter of Mrs. Porter.
They wash their c**ts in soda water
and so they oughter [sic]
To keep them clean.*

In other words, they washed their genitals in a solution of bicarbonate of soda to avoid contracting or transmitting syphilis.

As these diverse accounts of feet washing suggested, feet and their coverings convey meaning. They connect people to the earth. Mattoso praised the filthy, diseased foot: it was noble, sacred even, because it belonged to men and women 'of the people'. If we fly like the god Hermes (who spouted wings at the back of his feet) from the favelas of São Paulo to a different impoverished context – the remote Fenlands of England – dirty feet take on a different significance. In the Fens, where men engaged in the demanding labour of digging peat, cutting sedges, and repairing dykes, they cleaned their feet as rarely as possible: water, they believed, would wash away their strength. Even as late as the 1950s, when preparing bodies of these men for burial, one of the highest compliments a mourner could make was that 'she had never seen dirtier feet'. Mud-encased feet were a sign that the deceased man had retained his strength until the end.

Some commentators have claimed to be able to diagnose character from feet. I have spoken a great deal in this lecture series about the Victorian pseudo-science of physiognomy. Podoscopy was the physiognomy of the feet.



It was promoted by writers such as a man signing himself ‘Philopedes’, published in *La Belle Assemblée* or *Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine* in 1825. ‘Philopedes’ contended that ‘if you may know a man from the bumps on his skull, the wrinkles on his face, or the characters of his hand-writing, so you may know him from the shape and outline of his FEET’. He continued:

The most shallow observers may clearly discern, in the capacious, full-grown, and well-formed FOOT, the plainest indications of a vigorous and masculine understanding. What eloquence in the bold sinew, in the strong tendon! What firmness exhibited by the sound hearty brown! No flabbiness, no superfluous flesh, nothing to impede the free use of the member! Can such a FOOT be given to a sluggard?

Unlike the praise given to ‘capacious’ men’s feet as virile organs, big feet in women are held in disdain. An author in *Hearth and Home* on 10 May 1894 was especially blunt. On the one hand, he sought to point out that it was a ‘fallacy’ that ‘small extremities signify high breeding’. He contended that small feet were not hereditary but were ‘the gift of Nature, like a Cupid’s bow mouth, golden hair, and dimples, but their possessor is usually as proud thereof as though she were their creator’. On the other hand, he endorsed the view that the ‘luckless... big-soled girl’ should be deeply embarrassed by her appendages. He noted that such girls and women were acutely conscious of a ‘short-coming in this matter of beauty’ and so is likely to be ‘anxious to please, and to win affection by other means than charms of person’. Unfortunately, she was also...

sometimes guilty of a little uncharitableness towards the pretty wearer of the No. 2 slipper, which bears about the same relation to her own ample footgear as a thimble to a three-decker.

He advised the ‘big-soled’ woman to invest in ‘well-made boots’ that would ‘cover a multitude of ugliness’. After all, although ‘the average man is never insensible to the charms of a tiny foot, he is not repelled by the sight of a large one if it be smartly and appropriately shod’.

Importantly, not all cultures prefer small feet. Men in North Sumatra (Indonesia), for example, have a preference for big-footed women. At least one major study revealed that the preference for large female feet was positively correlated not with non-patriarchal societies but with rural ones with less exposure to the Western media. In the west, however, the idolized foot is the small one, as in Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s painting *The Swing* (1767), which depicts a beautiful young woman on a swing. The young woman wears tiny, delicate mules, one of which she has kicked off towards her besotted lover hiding in the bushes.

Not surprisingly, the coverings of feet come clad in rich cultural meaning. A shoe can be an *objet d’art*, a fetish, a sign of sexual preferences or moral attitudes, and a performance of gender and identity. The shoes that Vincent Van Gogh painted in 1886 – simple titled ‘A Pair of Shoes’ – has become one of the greatest philosophical reflections of the twentieth century. Martin Heidegger’s ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ observed the painting of these shoes in a 1930 exhibition. He wrote:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes, the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrate the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.

In other words, Heidegger argues that Van Gogh’s painting reveals both the Being of shoes and the truth of the peasant women’s entire *world* to us. As Heidegger put it, ‘The artwork lets us know what shoes are in truth.’

Shoes are all historically mutable and come sheathed in regimes of power. In the eighteenth century, men who wore high heels were conveying a message about their elevated social class. In contrast, after the French Revolution, high heels came to be seen as symbols of aristocratic corruption: they were rejected as democracy swept through Europe and North America. National identity was often linked to shoes: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, leather-shod Englishmen looked down on the wooden clogs worn the Netherlands, France, and Belgium. In the American South, brogans (that is, the cheap, unlined boots imported by poor Irish immigrants and worn by slaves and manual laborers) were signs of servitude. The fact that they



were mass-produced by Northern shoe manufactures who claimed to oppose slavery was given as evidence of their hypocrisy. In the American west, the high-heeled boots of cowboys boasted their virile skills roaming the frontier. Amongst urban women, neoclassical-inspired flat-soled sandals pointed to their adherence to the *fin de siècle* 'Cult of Domesticity'. In contrast, the *femme fatale* wears the phallic weaponry of red or black stilettos while the extravagant shoe collections of women like Imelda Marcos unashamedly proclaimed their vanity. The contrast between the high platforms worn by male glam rockers in the 1970s proclaiming their 'rebellion against the rebellion' and the sneakers of twenty-first century rappers could not be greater.

Feet and shoes also play major roles in our literary imaginary. Cinderella is reputed to be the first fairytale, appearing initially in Egyptian texts followed by Chinese ones in the ninth century. All feature a woman with exceptionally tiny feet. The closest version to the one we know today was told by Charles Perrault in the seventeenth century – although it is important to note that a mistranslation of Perrault's story meant that the original fur shoe became a glass one. We all know the bare bones of the story. It involves the innocent and much-abused Cinderella with delicate feet, her malevolent stepmother and stepsisters, and a handsome prince. The story revolves around the Prince seeking out the owner of a small shoe. In Brother Grimms' 1857 version, the heroine's stepsisters have feet that are too large for the slipper. Their mother reassures them that once they become queen, they won't have to walk, so one sister cuts off her heel while the other amputates a toe. Their deception is revealed to the prince by two pigeons perching in a hazel tree. They tell him:

*Looky, look, look
At that shoe that she took,
There's blood all over, her foot's too small,
She's not the bride that you met at the ball.*

When the Prince slips the slipper onto Cinderella's foot, she is found to be a perfect fit in size and form. Her small foot is proof of her 'natural' superiority and morality.

The 1950 Disney film version of the story takes the meaning of feet to another level. The stepmother and stepsisters have oversized feet, bulbous noses, and hairy bodies, indicating their bestial natures and transgressive sexualities. In contrast, Cinderella is small and smooth-skinned. While the stepsisters stomp around with large, naked feet and monstrous, protruding toes, Cinderella has shy feet, modest and demure, and glimpsed only briefly before being slipped into slippers. Unlike the Grimms' tale, which is really about true and false brides, this version is about capitalist aspirations and the right of innocent, honest, hardworking girls to ascend in the class structure. Aspiration is no longer a moral defect (as in Hans Christian Andersen's 1845 classic, 'The Red Shoes') but a democratic right.

Obviously, feet are also about sex (although I doubt that Cinderella was capable of giving her Prince more than a chaste kiss). It doesn't require any in-depth knowledge of fetishism or Freudianism to know that Fats Waller's song 'Your Feet's Too Big' is really alluding to a man's anxieties about sexual performance. The lyrics go:

*Can't go nowhere with you,
'Cause your feet's too big.
Can't get into bed next to you,
'Cause your feet's too big.
Can't stand you
'Cause your feet's too big.
Can't tolerate you
'Cause your feet's too big.*

In Waller's tune, the large foot is associated with a frightening, all-enveloping vagina.

Literary representations of feet routinely allude to their owners' sexuality. One of Mattoso's comic strips – *Roxana, a Senborita de Santana* (Roxana, A Young Lady from Santana) – is told entirely from the legs down. Readers never catch a glimpse of the character's faces but are given a clear sense of their sensual lives and morals simply through portraying their feet, ankles, and knees. This is also the viewpoint of the veiled woman in



Ginu Kamani's story 'Younger Wife'. The story starts by the narrator – a veiled woman – describing a man's feet:

The father of Harinath has the most beautiful feet in the world. His big toes are juicy knobs of ginger and his small toes curled cloves of garlic. His soles are as red as chilies, from the mud of the fields where he works.

It takes the reader some time to realize that the narrator is in love with her husband, and in particular, his feet, because, behind her veil, she never sees his face. She experiences intense erotic experiences when she washes his feet. When her husband tells her that he wants more sons, she complies and, after he 'does the work' (that is, has sex in the dark), she turns and kisses and sucks his feet. She confesses that 'They are my own special toys for licking and sucking, like nipples for a baby'. Because this unnamed narrator is unable to look at her husband's face, her erotic life has fixed onto his 'juicy knobs', his toes. This is the fetish as understood by Karl Marx: an object that is imagined to have independent existence while being the product of social relations. Sexual attention is invested in the object in its own right, not as part of a wider economy or, as in this case, person.

Sigmund Freud developed a very different understanding of the foot fetish – and a very masculinist one. For him, feet were phallic symbols. The foot fetish emerged from the castration complex in early childhood, in which the foot functioned as a substitute for the penis. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud maintained that...

The foot replaces the penis which is so much missed in the woman. In some cases of foot fetishism [sic] it could be shown that the desire for looking originally directed to the genitals, which wished to reach its object from below, was stopped on the way by prohibition and repression, therefore adhered to the foot or shoe as a fetish [sic]. In conformity with infantile expectation, the female genital was hereby imagined as a male genital.

Later, in his essay 'Fetishism', Freud linked the fetish with infantile traumas and castration complexes. The foot was the substitute for the invisible female penis, Freud claimed, adding that...

It is not a substitute for a chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost.... The fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and... does not want to give up.

The fetishist wants to disavow the 'castrated' and therefore 'castrating' woman.

Whatever we may think of the theory, Freud was correct to identify feet as the primary fetish. Foot fetishes account for nearly half of all fetishes associated with body parts; the second most popular fetish is bodily fluids (such as urine or feces) but these account for only nine per cent of body-part fetishes. When it is realized that a further one-third of fetishists have a fetish for feet-wear, we can see the importance of feet in all things perverse.

No-where is this more striking than in the obsessions surrounding the 'three-inch golden lotus' feet of women who have had their feet bound. The practice was once widespread throughout China (although there were major regional variations) and lasted nearly one thousand years. In the eighteenth century, Fang Xun (known as the 'Doctor of the Fragrant Lotus') identified 58 types of bound feet, generally classed within five main styles: lotus petal, new moon, harmonious bow, bamboo shoot, and water chestnut.

Feet-binding is a laborious and painful procedure. Bandaging usually started when a girl was around six years of age and, by adulthood it was irreversible. It is often (although not always) imposed upon young girls against their inclinations because the process is agonizing. It crushes bones and tissue. When walking, in *normal* feet the load is distributed throughout the foot while with bound feet the rear-foot and fore-foot areas bear most of the load. Women with these feet are forced to walk on the back of her heels, thus permanently inhibiting movement.

The binding of Chinese women's feet has been interpreted in a number of ways – some have employed Freud's views on the fetish, while others turn to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. Still other commentators regard it as a form of upward social mobility for women since the practice sent out a signal that the woman was used to sedentary labour, such as household textile production.



Whatever the interpretation, all agree that bound feet have been fetishized and exoticised. The fetishized 'lotus foot' has been given an independent life in art and poetry. The poet Su Shi (of the Song dynasty) is credited with writing the first poem praising bound feet but it was in the late imperial period where such literature flourished. But the practice had always had its critics. The famous eighteenth century poet Yuan Mei, for example, quipped that if fathers wanted their daughters to have small feet they should cut the feet to size (much like Cinderella's sisters). In the twentieth century, protest against feet binding became part of anti-Communist political porn. In the early twentieth century, Chinese nationalists, foreign missionaries, and feminists called for *tianzhu* or 'natural feet' as representing the modern.

This is where more recent scholarship has been particularly trenchant. In *Cinderella's Sisters*, historian Dorothy Ko argued that the western emphasis on 'cultural practices' such as foot binding has reified Chinese women as victims. Ko wants to move beyond the discourses focusing either on 'lotus feet' and erotic or as evidence of patriarchal hatred of females. She emphasizes female agency, observing that 'a pair of shapely bound feet was the lifelong handiwork of women'. Ko points out that foot binding was 'not merely an announcement of status and desirability to the outside world, but also a concrete embodiment of self-respect to the woman herself' and could not have become so widespread without their participation.

There is another point to be made about to western critics of the 'barbaric' practice of bound feet: it sits uneasily with the fetishization of the feet of ballerinas and their shoes. In 'Balletomania', dance historian Walter Sorell even observed that one Russian enthusiast purchased the shoes of the famous nineteenth century ballerina Maria Taglioni. In 1842, at a farewell dinner prior to the dancer going to France, the main dish was 'Taglioni's slippers which, expertly cooked, were served with a special sauce'. Like Mattoso's followers who ritually sucked the feet of revered workers, these diners engaged in a quasi-sacramental eating of the flesh-covered ballerina's shoe.

Like the fetishized, 'golden lotus' feet of Chinese women, ballerinas' feet are the product of agonising labour. Suffering is an integral part of the art. As Joseph Mazo explained in *Dance is a Contact Sport* (1974), the use of pointe shoes and the ways legs and feet must be positioned, forces dancers to...

defy the principles of human design.... Human toes were not designed to stand on. Unfortunately, dancers know this very well, but they stand on them anyway.... When dancers learn to turn out 180 degrees from the hips, to dance on pointe, to hold their torsos high off their waists, to arch and point their feet unnaturally, the muscles involved in these operations are strengthened in one way but weakened in others.

Christine Aitken even compares the pointe shoe to the rack and thumbscrew, entitling her article 'These Instruments of Torture' (1990). Ballerinas' shoes often fill up with sweat and blood and may have to be changed multiple times during every performance. Fractures and sprains are common. Most of the damage is not done by injuries but by 'chronically overburdening the body' through overwork, fatigue, ignoring aches, and incorrect technique but dancers are unwilling to admit to injury for fear that it shows lack of dedication. Like the footbound women, the culture of pain that these broken feet embody excite fetishistic interest

The bunions, blisters, ingrown toenails, and calluses that are routine for ballerinas are the equivalent of military feet in men. It is no coincidence that the military call them 'foot soldiers'. It is a part of military lore that 'an army lasts only as long as the feet of its infantryman'. Or, more poetically, 'Feet to the soldier are what tyres [sic] are to the motor, wings to the bird'. During the American Civil War, the *Atlantic Monthly* advised soldiers that the most important attribute for a soldier was 'good feet'. Otherwise, the author continued in a rather defeatist sentence, 'when the field is lost you cannot retire, run away and save your bacon'. He warned that any captain of a company who lets his men march with ill-fitting shoes 'ought to be garroted with shoe strings, or, at least, compelled to play Pope, and wash the feet of the whole army of the Apostles of Liberty'.

And so there we have it: the foot as a theological object, a seductive fetish, a sweaty and smelly appendage. There are 26 bones, 33 joints, and 19 muscles in a person's foot. Evolutionists claim it is what makes us human – distinguishing us from other beasts of burden'. In the words of Frederic Wood Jones, author of the classic *Structure and Function as Seen in the Foot* (1944), 'so long as Man has been Man and so long as he remains Man it is



by his feet that he will be known from all other members of the animal kingdom'. Such a humanist position relies on specie-ist notions of the 'Chain of Being', in which everything in the universe is ranked from the highest to the lowest – from the Divine, to the human, then to the rest of the animal kingdom, and finally incorporating inanimate objects, such as Van Gogh's pair of shoes. A better approach for us today is a post-humanist radical alterity, or ways of thinking *with* different worlds. In other words, it entails 'walking in someone else's shoes' and revealing our own, as well as acknowledging the Other's, 'feet of clay'.

This concludes my series on the history of body parts. But does not see the end of my lectures at Gresham College. Please join me on other occasions for the start of a new series on 'Evil Women'. Meanwhile, *stay safe and keep walking*.

Further Readings

Anna Aalten, 'In the Presence of the Body: Theorizing Training, Injuries, and Pain in Ballet', *Dance Research Journal*, 37.2 (winter 2005)

Marcella María Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism: The Scent of a Latin American Body Theology', in Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (eds.), *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006)

Joanna Bourke, *What It Means To Be Human: Historical Reflections from the 1790s to the Present* (London: Virago, 2014)

Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: the 1950 edition*, trans. Ulrike Kistner (London: Verso, 2017)

Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005)

Stefanie Knauss, 'Theology and the Senses', *CrossCurrents*, 63.1 (March 2013)

Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000)

Fats Waller 'Your Feet's Too Big',
at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in1eK3x1PBI&t=78s>

See my personal website:

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-staff/full-time-academic-staff/Joanna>

See the website for Sexual Harms and Medical Encounters (SH+ME): <https://shame.bbk.ac.uk>

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