

BODY-ALTERATIONS AND THE CREATION OF THE OTHER: A MACEDONIAN CASE

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In this article I discuss the discourses about the body that were used by a group of young female engineers in the city of Skopje, Macedonia, during that period of political turmoil in which Yugoslavia fell apart and the Republic of Macedonia declared its independence. These discourses of body alterations juxtapose my informants to the notion of “Balkan” that was introduced by members of the Western media who were covering the Yugoslavian conflict. When Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991, my group of informants fell into a vacuum. As proud Yugoslavian engineers who represented the elite of the country and the generation that would lead Yugoslavia to unite with Europe, they witnessed their country declaring independence and being denied the most fundamental aspect of nationhood by the international community: that is, a name. In this struggle to determine if they were Yugoslavians or Macedonians, and to make sense of what this distinction meant, my informants began to identify themselves by taking issue with the ways they were being presented in the Western media: peasants, backwards, uneducated, and uncultured. Instead they ascribed these characteristics to the Albanian minority in Macedonia, and especially Albanian women. They depicted Albanian women as draped in grey coats with headscarves, uneducated with many children to feed, sweaty, and following their husbands ten feet behind. My Macedonian friends began to alter themselves in speech, body gesture, and clothing until finally they began altering the body images that had been introduced by Western media.

The timeframe of my research is from 1988 to 1996, a period in which dramatic changes took place in the lives of my informants. In trying to understand my friends’ motivations to persevere during the difficult adjustments to a new country and to new political and economic circumstances, I noted one central theme: the symbolic meaning attached to their bodies. Their positions in society differ from the positions

their grandmothers and mothers held, and it differs also from the expectations they had for themselves when Macedonia was part of the former Yugoslavia. In my conversations with these women, they often described their lives as lacking personal autonomy, a notion that derived from the American and Western European television they viewed and which had become a part of daily family life. The changes in their country that affected them directly were beyond their control. Consequently, after seeing on television beautiful “Western” women who appeared immune from normal female bodily processes, my female friends gave a very specific meaning to these bodies on television.

Although these women are certainly not so naive as to believe that such representations are real, they do in fact accept the general idea that life in the West provides more perfect ways of concealing bodily processes and that it offers ways to alter the body to fit the images on television. For instance, when I arrived in the field with a set of “Always” sanitary napkins, they provoked great interest and I was asked if I could spare one or two. The shortage in sanitary towels had, however, ended; and what women really wanted was the experience of a Western – and therefore superior – method of hiding bodily processes. Shortly thereafter a wide variety of Western pads were available in the duty-free shops located around the city and in other import stores. In this article I will argue that the changes in the daily routines of my friends – changes that are directly linked to Western images of the slender and fit body – suggest a way of managing their bodies. It is through this body management that the group of graduates I introduce here are making their inner intentions, capacities, and dispositions visible to themselves and to others (Benson 1997:123). These intentions, capacities, and dispositions are directly linked to the image of “the other,” that is, the One they are not – the Albanian woman.

1995 in Independent Macedonia

Silhouette is a “Body Sculpture Studio.” Prominent signs displaying the stylized black silhouette of a slim female body against a purple background guide you to this studio on the third floor of an apartment building reminiscent of the buildings located at the epicenter of the 1963 earthquake. The street is dusty; downstairs people sit in the café or go shopping in one of the old supermarkets that have only recently begun carrying Western brands of yogurt. The hallway is dirty; the elevator squeaks and is full of messages written in the Latin alphabet. There is no sign on the door, but the clientele show you the way. A loud doorbell announces your arrival, but they let you wait. Eventually a beautiful and slim young woman opens the door. You might have seen her at the university faculty or in one of the cafés in the evenings. She recognizes you and smiles. Inside the leather seats are inviting. The “goddess of the temple” sits behind her desk facing you and looking at you with her eyes half shut. She is sizing you up: how much do you have to lose? How could they tone those legs? Those arms? She takes out some of her index cards and makes several phone calls on a cordless phone. Glossy, shiny magazines from Germany, France, and Italy present the ideal: the women pictured in these magazines are very beautiful; they smile at you and measure you while you measure them. The owner is 50, but looks older. A tower of false blond hair is piled on her head, with escaped hairs surrounding her fake, dull face; she wears tights and a tight T-shirt.

You are given a diet plan in which you are instructed to drink only water and some soup for the next ten days. You are measured with measuring tape strung loosely around your too ample waist and thighs. You will pay the equivalent of an average monthly salary for the ten-day program. This program includes exercise on eight automatic exercising machines that force you to move your legs up and down and left and right. You sweat. The last bench is heavenly because you can lie there for three minutes as the machine gently shakes you. The next day you experience a different kind of shaking as electricity passes through your limbs and stomach. In the same room there is a big mirror and a pair of scales. Every newcomer is weighed in this room, and her weight is announced to the girl who fills out the index cards. Everyone lies there shaking together. At the same time, you are forced to look into the mirror, forced to face your own unwilling flesh.

One treatment uses electrical current to cramp your buttocks so hard that for a few weeks you have a perfectly shaped backside. For ten days you are beautiful. Then you are measured again, and this time the measuring tape is pulled as tight as possible, showing all the inches you have lost. But you could have lost more if only you had kept to the diet. Every day you were reminded by the lady at the front desk: “Stick to the diet.”

The preceding passage describes my own experiences at the fitness studio when I accompanied my friend Ina. During my research many more new body studios opened in Skopje due to demand and the freedom of privatization. Most studios are located in private apartments or in institutions like public swimming pools, and are often combined with activities such as body-building and aerobics. These studios have come to replace the semi-private cosmetic studios that offered body hair removal and facials in socialist Macedonia. The differences between these studios are explained by a cosmetician, an enterprising woman who had the first private cosmetic studio in socialist Macedonia, perhaps due in part to her husband’s position as an important politician with the former socialist government: “Women come to me to be treated nicely and with care, even the waxing. I do this for them. They come to me to be spoiled. Those body studios make you work hard and they punish you, they put you down all the time, they look down at you.”

In Yugoslavia, the socialist system offered planned comfort and allowed for semi-private beauty studios. In today’s Macedonia, however, it is not comfort that is sought, but firmness and shape, in order to compete with the images from the West. This different objective is one of the central differences in the world of beautification between socialist and post socialist Macedonia. Yugoslavia offered comfort and self-confidence. Yet today’s body cult in Macedonia offers more restraint than comfort, and it could be very much identified as an obsession that was beyond any rationality. For instance, my friends often spent their entire salaries on diet products, health food, body-treatment, or clothing – and all during a period of desperate economical need. It was this new obsession with altering bodies, often combined with excessive dieting, that drew my attention to the broader political discourses in which it was located. During the time of my research between 1991 to 1995, there were three main issues within Macedonia: 1) the country’s exclusion from Europe (there had been no

physical boundaries with West Europe since independence; there was not an official Yugoslavia passport that enabled people to travel; instead, people needed travel visas that were impossible to get); 2) the lack of recognition of a Macedonian identity by Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria; the lack of recognition of independence under the name “Macedonia” by the international community; 3) and threats of violent conflict with an Albanian minority that had boycotted the referendum for Macedonian independence, demanded independence, had pursued a union with Albania and Kosovo to form the independent state of Iliria.

1988 in Socialist Macedonia

In 1988 my friends were entering university. After they had passed the university entrance examinations, a group of these friends and I went to Greece for a holiday. The days were hot, and at night we danced at the local disco to the songs of Madonna. For some of my friends the singer represented what they wanted to be: “She does not care,” said one woman in complimenting Madonna. Susan Bordo (1993:268) depicts Madonna as a heroine who refuses to be constructed as the passive object of patriarchal desire. “*Nema gaile*,” which translates roughly as “it doesn’t matter” or “I don’t care,” was the phrase used to express this sentiment in Macedonia. It was this kind of sentiment that made my young female friends feel very much at the center of things. They felt that they did not need to care about old traditional ways of their grandparents or about the ideology of their parents. Yugoslavia supplied them with everything they needed, both economically and professionally, and then gave them freedom to want more. Life was interesting and revolutionary. Many of my friends joined the prestigious engineering faculty in Skopje. They also knew that they would eventually meet their ideal husbands and, in the not too distant future, they would have families. This family would not look like the families in which they had been brought up, however. Instead these young women would have open relationships with their partners, and they would be friends with their children. They would have their own flats, and their friends would live nearby and would always be available for a quick chat. Leisure time would not be limited by housework as housework would be shared equally with partners, and there would be less of it anyway as there would be microwaves and frozen food and a cleaning lady once or twice a week. Then there

would be careers, challenges at work, and occasionally travel abroad. There was much talk of such matters that summer in 1988 and in the following two years, and it seemed just a matter of time before these dreams would become reality.

These women felt that they were defining themselves in terms of who they were and who they wanted to be. They were young women ready to face what life had in store for them, and they assumed that this future would be good. Madonna, the heroine of MTV (Music Television) and youth culture, stood as a symbol of beauty and assertiveness for my friends. The world surrounding Madonna gave them social clues as to how a world could be. By watching MTV, my friends experienced the world outside Macedonia as one big television transmission; and as recipients of this transmission, they were part of this world. People from all over Europe called in to MTV with specific music requests, and many callers were from Yugoslavia. Through television my friends, “us,” “we,” and “Europe” intersected.

According to these young women, the word that they most commonly associated with the years 1988-1990 is “freedom.” This period of time reached its peak in the summer of 1990, when Ante Markovich, then the Finance Minister of Yugoslavia, tried to help Yugoslavia’s economy through drastic economic reforms. The Dinar was bound to the Deutsch Mark, and during that summer, people in Macedonia felt closer to Germany than ever before. Yet by the very next year, people in Macedonia felt that they had never been more distant from Germany; and my friends had difficulty identifying with Madonna and those like her. These symbols of the West became a subject of longing for things my friends felt that they once had possessed but was now lost to them.

The Body

It was during my return in the winter of 1993 that I was first introduced to a *tresnje*, a “shaker” – that is, a person with a shaking machine, which was a new sort of private enterprise. The *tresnje* whom I visited with a friend had brought her “shaking machine” all the way from Australia, where she and her husband had stayed for a while because her husband was a famous football star there. The woman told me, however, that she was happy to be back in Skopje, because nothing was better than home. Now, drawing from her experiences abroad, she had started a small business “shaking” fat off

people and assisting in the ongoing fight against cellulite. To my shame, I had not, until this time, ever heard of cellulite; but of course my friends had made me realize that my legs were in very bad shape. Irina and I sat in the flat adjacent to Vera's, which she had turned into a beauty parlour. We were wrapped in blankets while electrical currents, conducted by wet towels, ran through our bodies; we itched terribly. We talked with Vera throughout these sessions, and she told us about her life in Australia, how hard they had worked, and how little time they had had for themselves. Meanwhile we became slim and beautiful. We flipped through the Western magazines available in Vera's parlour and imagined how it would feel to look like Linda Evangelista and to be able to afford all that we saw in these magazines. In 1993, prices and lifestyles were not very different from 1988, with the exception of shopping malls and beauty parlours. Nevertheless, there was an important difference, and this difference was visible in the ways in which my friends sought to alter their bodies.

Foucault suggests that the body is directly involved in a political field in which power relations have an immediate hold upon it. These power relations invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, and force it to carry out tasks, perform ceremonies, and emit signs (Foucault 1995:25). I am arguing that because my friends felt alienated and excluded after the break-up of Yugoslavia, they acted out this alienation on their bodies. Similarly, Boddy (1989) describes Sudanese Bedouin women and their *zar* cult: in this ritual, the women fall into trances in which they often enact non-Bedouins, especially Europeans. Through this kind of bodily experience, these women gain a greater understanding of their own society and their positions within it. In some ways, their ritual represents a comment on their society and gives those women a distant look at their society, when everywhere else such distance is restricted. Following these examples, one could argue, in the broadest sense, that the boundaries of Macedonian society have been altered, that the boundaries of the body reflect this alteration, and that in Macedonia, as in the *zar* cult Boddy describes, one can find similar problems of embodiment. Susan Bordo describes (1993) a similar point in her analysis of anorexia nervosa and bulimia in Western societies, by linking these eating disorders to an idea of the physical body as alien, a *not-self*. In Augustine's formulation, the body is a cage that confines and limits and, as such, it is the locus of all that

threatens our attempts for control (Bordo 1993:144). My friends in Skopje see their body as alien in the ways that Bordo and Boddy describe, so that experiences of hunger from dieting and pain from exercising manifest themselves as sensations that derive from the outside and invade their bodies (see Bordo 1993:146). This resembles the ways in which spirits in the *zar* cult are experienced. Hunger and pain are not experienced as forces that originate from within women's bodies and, in order to master such "alienation," women have to learn to deny their bodies. They refuse to eat and are, therefore, creating their body-shapes by winning over nature and, at the end, by hoping for the satisfaction of material transcendence.

In her work, Douglas (1966) has demonstrated how the body is represented in a particular culture and how the body can be read as a text. Mauss (1979) discusses body techniques, and Foucault (1995 [1975]) views the body as a passive object upon which external power is exercised. Although I am considering how my informants see and treat their bodies in a particular moment of time, I wish to emphasize that it is they themselves, and not society, who are transferring messages that derive from their surrounding social world into their bodies. Women's bodies then, are not simply to be read as "texts of cultures" that passively reflect the values of their society. Rather, it is the young women themselves who draw upon these ideas, who give them bodily form because such actions give them the appropriate expression for personal conflicts (Benson 1997: 143). Nevertheless, the precise motivations that drive young people in contemporary Macedonia to obey specific body images and lead them to a hard regime of body exercise and starvation remains a question.

Conclusion

Essentially, the transformation of the body is an ongoing attempt by the young women in Skopje to master their world. For some it becomes compulsive and extreme; how far it goes depends on an individual's personality. For these young women, their exercising, aerobics, running, clothes, make-up, shopping, and body sculpturing bring a sense of achievement that, in turn, engenders a sense of empowerment. The source of this empowerment lies in the management of their lives, which they see as attainable through the transformation of their bodies. It is important to note that my friends combine their diets with aerobics, body

sculpting, and body building. These forms of transforming the body are linked through the extreme and excessive enactment of Western culture's fantasies of the "self-controlled body." Ultimately, it is through their bodily practices, which are constructed through their interactions with others and the larger cultural framework in which they live that my informants redefine the relationship between what they believe to be their true identity and the ways in which they are represented to their social world (Benson 1997:125). Moreover, my friends have adopted concerns about issues of health and eating that they feel are not addressed in their society. Through television, they come in contact with "modern" issues of healthy eating, health food, organic food, and herbal remedies. By following this popular discourse, they redesign themselves by having the same concerns as their peers in Western Europe. Their image of the "healthy and beautiful self" is sustained, in part, through the creation of the image of the "unhealthy" and powerless Albanian woman. This image is enforced by the European visualization of the Balkans, especially during the war in Bosnia. During my research many young Macedonian women in Skopje created "the other" (i.e., Albanians, and particularly Albanian women) by positing a "sameness" with the West through their bodies. As such, the bodies of these young women become a political statement whose importance should not be neglected.

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