

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

REBECCA POPENOE, *Feeding Desire: Fatness, Beauty, and Sexuality Among a Saharan People*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, xv + 230 p.

The glorification of thinness in Western culture, and concomitantly women's conflicted relationships with their bodies and food, has been well documented in sociological and anthropological literature. In *Feeding Desire*, Rebecca Popenoe presents the reader with a refreshingly different perspective, one in which fatness is considered the ideal for women. Yet, what is, in fact, most remarkable about this study is the evident similarities among women of decidedly dissimilar societies.

Through fieldwork in a small village in Niger, Popenoe examines the practice of "fattening" among Azawagh Arab women, more commonly known as Moors. While this is a pre-marriage tradition in other cultures, the Azawagh Arabs begin fattening their female children from a very young age and the practice continues throughout their lives. Popenoe argues that fatness is valued not for the "practical" reasons often identified (such as its association with fertility or wealth), but, rather, for purely aesthetic reasons. This observation alone makes the text interesting; especially for those of us embedded in a culture that invokes both biomedical and moral arguments against corpulence. But the text also takes a multidimensional view of this practice, understanding it in the context of other factors, such as marriage and patrilineal arrangements, the centrality of Islam, blood ties and milk kinship, the intricacies of the humoral system, and an especially interesting consideration of gender and space. Moreover, Popenoe demonstrates the importance of the body, both literally and metaphorically, in an environment where few material belongings exist. The body is creatively used, culturally connected, and highly valued and, yet, as Popenoe astutely observes, "the 'natural' body is never enough" (7).

There is, she rightly argues, a universal drive to socialize the natural body. Thus this ethnography of a small Saharan village has a resonance for readers of diverse experiences and backgrounds, as well as being suitable for study in a range of academic disciplines. The text does not expressly make comparisons between the Azawagh Arab women and their Western counterparts, though the intersections of gender, class, and ethnicity are clear throughout this work. As only certain classes of Western women can afford "proper" food and the time to exercise, the women of this village can only fatten if they do not have to perform household work. Indeed, fattening becomes their work. Issues of ethnicity arise among the Moors,

with “white” Arabs enjoying preferred status over “dark” Arabs. Though Popenoe notes this is not necessarily about actual skin colour, a parallel might be drawn with Western preoccupations about bodily features and perceived ethnicity. Young girls and women worldwide are engaged in socialization of the body, starving or feeding themselves to the point of pain, weakness, and exhaustion. The physical results may be dramatically different, but the process is disturbingly similar. At the same time, body practices offer an opportunity for female power and cultural success. These connections might have been made more explicit in the text, but it is arguably more effective to allow the reader to recognize the universality of body socialization.

Popenoe asserts that much of the work on bodily ideals has presented women as oppressed by the pressures of media and the male gaze. Thus her analysis seeks to illustrate the larger social and structural factors at work. While I am in complete accord with this more comprehensive approach, I would point out that, contrary to the author’s characterization, it does not really represent a departure in the research, as the portrayal of women as passive recipients of culture has been extensively critiqued in feminist literature on the body. Further, I was disappointed to find only a very brief consideration of agency in Popenoe’s discussion. Although there are examples of women exercising power, taking an active role in their own socialization, these are most often presented in anecdotal accounts, and I feel this aspect of the analysis deserves greater attention.

I was impressed by Popenoe’s honesty in addressing conflicts between the Moor standards of beauty and her own culturally produced preferences. Recalling her initial impressions, she reveals moments of tension and discomfort: “I will risk the confession that I found the sight of these women somewhat off-putting. Their unwieldy bodies...rounded full faces, and their slow swaying approach went against most conceptions I previously entertained of appealing womanly conduct and appearance” (20). Even by the end of her time in Niger, Popenoe acknowledges that while she has an appreciation for diverse perceptions of beauty, “it would be untruthful to say that I ever became free of my conditioned negative associations with rolls of fat and stretch marks” (188). Such reflections, as well as Popenoe’s sense of how her own body was viewed by the women in her study, effectively illustrate the extent to which our vision may be culturally limited.

This is a very readable text, at times almost a “travel” book, with wonderfully written descriptions that will also appeal to a non-academic readership. Although the theoretical and methodological discussions are quite seamlessly integrated, there is no question that this is a scholarly work. Popenoe’s research is thorough, her analysis comprehensive, and the result is a most interesting and welcome contribution to social studies of the body.

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