HANG ON TO YOUR SELF: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves

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Abstract During the past twenty years the human body evolved from a rather marginal social fact into a notion of central concern to current social and cultural anthropology. But recent studies question the idea of the body as a given physical entity. They focus on the experience or threat of finiteness, limitation, and vulnerability and also raise doubts regarding the individuality of the self: Instead they emphasize its fragmentary character and focus on the embodied uncertainties (such as hybridity or irony) of human existence. In three main sections (respectively, on the social body, embodiment, and subjectivity) this review eclectically explores an anthropological debate that also betrays a more generalized and rising concern in Western society with bodiliness and bodily appearance. From the discussion, the body emerges as a changing relationship that, at the same time, unfolds as an ethical horizon—and challenge—for the (un)making of self, identity, and belonging.

INTRODUCTION

We all have and we all are a body. This allusion to Merleau-Ponty’s (1970) work is probably one of the (if not the) most recurrent expressions—or perhaps clichés—in the literature reviewed here. But even this certainty—that for many signified the last objective stronghold against deconstructionism—is not so certain anymore. Under the influence of, among others, disability studies and of feminist and postcolonial scholarship, researchers have questioned the unity, neutrality, transparency, universality, and objectivity of the human organism (Grosz 1995b, Harraway 1991, Ingstad & Whyte 1995); the supposed continuity, transcendence, and individuality (indivisibility) of the self (see Battaglia 1995b, De Vos et al. 1985, Strathern 1988); and the self-evidence of bodiliness and embodiment (Csordas 1994a, Geurts 2002, Weiss 1999, Shildrick 2002).

This review focuses mainly on the literature of the past two decades. But it does not pretend or intend to be an overview of bodies and selves in social and cultural anthropology (see Csordas 1999; Farnell 1999, p. 346v; Frank 1990;
Instead it sketches my own itinerary from the study of body symbolism to the uncertainties of embodiment as a crucial but precarious project of subjectivation: the incarnate subjectivity I refer to as the body-self.

Thus the review’s scope is rather eclectic. To a varying degree it has been influenced by postcolonial criticism (see Fanon 1986; Mbembe 1992, 2002), Africanist anthropology (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997; Devisch 1993; De Boeck 1996; Ranger 1993; Turner 1974; Werbner 1998), psychoanalysis (see Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1995, Grosz 1995b, Weiss 1999), feminism (Counihan 1999, Flax 1990, Haraway 1991), and (French) phenomenology and praxeology (Bourdieu 1977, 1980; Merleau-Ponty 1970; see also Jackson 1996; Csordas 1994a,b). I hope, then, to offer some sort of “social phenomenology”—to many a contradiction in terms—of which the basic premise is the idea that intersubjectivity is grounded in bodiliness or corporeality. This bodiliness, however, is that of the scarred and vulnerable body. It concerns, in the first instance, an intercorporeality (see Foster 1996).

To an important extent this perspective is also molded by my fieldwork in northwest Namibia, in an arid border region characterized by the memory of South African occupation and apartheid (1918–1990), civil war (1966–1988), and international conflict (1975–2002). Most people in this region practice a herding economy, and most refer to themselves as Himba and/or Herero. Among these herders, notions of selfhood do not refer to a psychological or biological core (ego-genes): As “bodiliness” also implies the bodies of the animals in one’s herd, or the ancestors, selfhood in the first instance concerns a decentered (or ex-centric) subjectivity; it implies a body-self that originates in “outer” fields of meaning and extends in space and place, in material culture, in animals, and in the bodies of others (Van Wolputte 2004).

**BODY AND SYMBOLISM**

To an important extent, the history of the body (both as an object of study and as an analytical metaphor) in anthropology is a history of notions of self, person, and subject. This also means that the different bodies scholars care to distinguish and analyze reflect their concern with more encompassing social and political, or epistemological and methodological issues.

**The Social Body**

In social and cultural anthropology, the body was never completely absent, even if only for the fact that, implicitly, the bodiliness of the Other served as a principal marker of his or her Otherness (see De Kock 1996, McClintock 1996, Thomas 1994). But only in a few instances it gained explicit attention. Elias (1978a,b), for example, traced back the origin of the comportment and sentiment of Western
civilization to its early medieval beginnings. He linked their history to the origin of the state in the centrifugal forces radiating from the feudal system in Europe. Mauss (1950, p. 379) formulated the idea that people are identified and distinguished by the way they “use” their bodies; this complex of bodily techniques he subsumed under the notion of habitus. Victor Turner (1974, pp. 55, 73–86; 1975, p. 55), in turn, amply demonstrated the bodily (or as he called it, “orectic”) dimension of dominant symbols in Ndembu social life. And Douglas (1978) distinguished between the natural and the social body. Each body, she claims, is a physical entity but also is a representation; it is a medium of expression but one that is controlled and restricted by the social system. These two bodies constitute different realms of experience; they mirror the physical into the social and cause the physical to be experienced in social terms. The social body, hence, is a body of symbolic representation, a representational reality that “constrains the way the physical body is perceived” (Douglas 1978, p. 70); it refers “to the representational use of the body as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society and culture” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987, p. 7). Or, in the words of O’Neill (1985), “just as we think our society with our bodies so, too, we think our bodies with society” (p. 51). In the villages and former townships of northwestern Namibia, for instance, the animal body reflects the way people think about the human body and hence about society. So men will eat the hard parts of a sacrifice, and women and children the soft parts of the animal’s body. Likewise, the way the herd is composed reflects dominant ideology regarding authority, power, gender, and seniority—regarding human relationships (see Van Wolputte 2002).

Body and Space

But Douglas’ distinction, arguably, only reaffirmed the dualism of body and mind and the supremacy of the latter over the former. The 1975 Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) conference on the anthropology of the body, for example, studied the human body as a privileged medium of expression and nonverbal communication (Blacking 1977). However, the conference responded to the need of a growing number of scholars to find a third term to mediate the conceptual gap between individual and aggregate, nature and culture, biology and sociology.

For some authors, this mediatrix was the human body. Terence Turner (1980, p. 140), for instance, demonstrates how among the Amazonian Kayapo the skin marks the boundary not only of the individual (as a biological and psychological entity) but also of the social self. Hence a social skin fashions the boundary not only between individual and other social actors, between the individual’s presocial, individual drives and energies and its “internalized others,” its social values, and norms, but also between groups of people, between social classes (also see Ahmed & Stacey 2001; Synott 1993).

Other writers prefer space as the third term to mediate (or interarticulate) social structure and individual agency. Hugh-Jones (1979), for example, documents in detail how spatial ordering “fits” the symbolic and social order; Moore (1996)
interprets Marakwet spatial practice as the interface between ideology and history, text and context, or between actors’ strategies and the “objective” social and economic conditions. She no longer considers space a reflection of social discourse. Instead, she views it as a social praxis riddled with contradiction and conflict, as much shaped by ruling ideology as it is by the practicalities (the material conditions) of everyday life. In these analyses of space the body is never far away; and some authors explicitly interpret space and time as closely related aspects of bodiliness that underpin the production of meaning (Casey 1996; Devisch 1993; Lovell 1998; see Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, pp. 2–5). Space is not a datum, but a relatum, a—bodily—relationship that for instance in Himbaland (“the land where Himba cattle graze”) is associated with lineage membership, gender, and seniority, and with memory and history, ideology and hegemony, compliance but also subversion both toward local power-brokers and toward the postcolony (Lefebvre 1991).

For some scholars, space offers a way out of the subjectivism often associated with the study of the body. Jacobson-Widding (1991, pp. 15–23), for example, contrasts “body” and “space” as two different, though related, approaches to “meaning.” Spatial models of the world operate according to a binary logic. They belong to the public, overt daytime realm and vehiculate a (dominant) symbolic order, a symbolic (hence logical understanding) of the world. Bodily (or triadic) models, in contrast, are part of the muted, covert, or inarticulate domain of ritual, myth, healing, and poetry. These models express (subjective) experience, phenomena, and agency, and not (objective) structures. These two logics coexist, though, and people continuously switch between body and space, dyadic and triadic models of thought.

Medical Anthropology and the Body Politic

By the mid-1980s a new subdiscipline that focused on the cultural, social, political, and historical dimensions of healing and health appeared. From this medical-anthropological perspective Scheper-Hughes & Lock (1987) launched their appeal to problematize the body in anthropology. For this purpose they distinguished three bodies, and three anthropological approaches, as well.

The individual (note this shift from the “natural”) body is the domain of phenomenological analysis as it studies the “lived” or embodied experiences people have of their bodies. The social body, in contrast, relates to the ways the body (including its products: blood, milk, etc.) operates as a natural symbol, as a tool at hand to think and represent social relationships such as gender, kinship, and mode of production (see Featherstone et al. 1991). A third dimension states that power and control are embodied as well. This is the body politic: the human body as tool or weapon of domestication and disciplination and of identification, subjection, and resistance. These three bodies also constitute three levels of experience and analysis. What mediates between them, what according to the authors interarticulates nature, society, and individual, are emotions. As proto-symbols or
proto-rituals emotions affect experience most immediately. Hence they can bridge the mind/body divide and bring the three bodies together (also see Lyon & Barbalet 1994).

Within this subdiscipline, scholars focused on the role and status of the body in local understandings and in so-called “traditional” healing (see Corin 1979, Koss-Chioino 1992) or on the way the body bridges or provokes the contradictions of the double bind (see Jacobson-Widding & Westerlund 1989, Taylor 1992). Influenced by Foucault, several authors questioned the social and cultural underpinnings of biomedicine and scrutinized the way the bodies of Self and Other were represented by Western ideology and technology (see, for example, Butchart 1998, Gilman 1988, Helman 1990). Alternatively, they analyzed how the body functions as the focus for disciplination strategies devised by the structures of dominance and bio-power of the West (for instance, Lyons 1992, Stalleybrass & Whyte 1986, Turner 1992, Vaughan 1991).

Others, following Bourdieu, studied the body as a medium and operator of social processes and political change. Munn (1986) concentrates on the bodily transformations effected by the circulation of Kula shells in Papua New Guinea; Jean Comaroff (1985a,b), in turn, studies how history and relations of power are mediated through social practice, notably through bodily symbolism. Just as the evangelization of the southern African interior puts central focus on the body, so do the Zionist churches of the South African Tshidi. In a context of apartheid and oppression, these churches address the experiential conflict of their members; they achieve healing through manipulating symbols so as to alter the state of the physical and social body. An outcome of a process of simultaneous reproduction and transformation, Zionist healing also implies a powerful social and political critique. It embodies a form of resistance that on the surface, however, and for obvious reasons, presents itself as apolitical. This kind of praxical and not discursive resistance may not directly confront the forces of domination: It defies the penetration of the hegemonic system into the structures of the natural world, of everyday life. Likewise, resistance against indirect rule in northwestern Namibia targeted in the first instance the state veterinarians and apartheid livestock policy. Through their animals rather than through armed rebellion people confined state power to certain, well-defined areas of life.

Studies such as these provide an unsettling critique of the Western civilizing mission. They reveal, among others, the striking parallels between the colonization of consciousness both in the colony and at home, and between the domestication of bodies whether female, laboring, or black (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, McClintock 1996).

**Antibodies**

In a provocative essay Terence Turner (1994) warns against those poststructuralist approaches that, not unlike Foucault himself, strongly oppose the bodily realm to the discursive exercise of power. Thus in equating bodiliness with the subjective
experience of pleasure and pain they reduce it to individual sexuality and desire in order to, subsequently, neglect it (Brown 1988, Johnson 1987, Le Breton 1990, Martin 1992). This body, according to Turner, appears as distant, abstract, ahistorical, and self-contained as the Foucaultian concept of Power, of which it is the product and object (see Foucault 1986). This Foucaultian body concerns, ironically, a conceptual body, a disembodied subject. Turner (1994, p. 47) therefore coins it an antibody, a defensive organism that protects rather than questions mainstream Western philosophy and political thought by emphasizing the private and individualistic dimensions of bodiliness at the expense of its plural and relational aspects. Similar critiques (namely, that the turn toward the body remained embedded in a representationalist paradigm; that most scholars regarded the body solely as an outcome, and not as agent of social praxis; that bodiliness was reduced to physical properties; that all too often the body was considered an empty box or as a mere tool for the mind; and that the saliency of the body in contemporary debate reflected the centrality of a consumerist and medicalist representation of the body in social theory) were formulated by Benoist & Cathebras (1993), Csordas (1994b, p. 6), Devisch (1993, p. 43), Frank (1990), Jackson (1996, p. 2), Lyon & Barbalet (1994, p. 54), and Kirmayer (1992, p. 331). The body as understood by Turner (1994, p. 28) is, in the first instance, a relationship. It is both subjective and objective, meaningful and material, personal and social, and can be considered the “material infrastructure” of the production of selves, belonging, and identities.

EMBODIMENT AND PRAXIS

Bourdieu (1977, 1980) tried to answer similar questions when he argued that social action is governed by a hazy logic of approximation. This logic is operated by the habitus, the socially informed body, history turned into nature, or society embodied (Bourdieu 1977, p. 82; Mauss 1950, p. 368). It is subjective but not individual (because it is shared by members of the same social group or class), and it results in an immediate adhesion (doxa) to the world understood as “an endless circle of mutually reflecting metaphors” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 91). This unquestioned but not unquestionable acceptance of the world is a state of the body (Bourdieu 1980, p. 115). Bourdieu maintained that his approach moves from social facts to the process of the social facts’ (re)production, from organism to embodiment. But his critics claim that he takes embodiment for granted and mistakes it for bodiliness (see, for example, Comaroff 1985a, p. 7; Lyon & Barthelet 1994, p. 50).

Body and Metaphor

Metaphor and metonymy also were forwarded as bodily alternatives to the “cognitive crystallography” of mainstream (post)structuralist approaches (Kirmayer 1992, p. 331; see Fernandez 1986; Jackson 1983). Some writers say these terms move beyond the symbolic order, beyond cognition and discourse. As Kirmayer
(1992, pp. 333, 337) shows, metaphors are extrarational and are tools not only to think, but especially to work with experience. They belong to the realm of praxis (and not of cognition) and suggest instead of conceive, elicit instead of define, or provoke instead of prescribe. At the same time, they are rooted in bodily (sensuous) experience, especially in the sense of touch that in more psychoanalytic approaches is put forward as the source of self (Anzieu 1985, see Brazelton 1990). And likewise, writers on this subject understand trauma and the violation of bodily boundaries as major sources of “unmaking” the self (see Scarry 1985, Favazza 1987).

Paraphrasing Winnicot (1989), metaphors are “the imaginative elaboration around bodily functions” (pp. 60, 205), and this bodiliness gives them a certain thickness and contiguity. However, their meaning is not bound by symbolic conventions (Devisch 1993, pp. 276–77); metaphors link one domain of experience to another, but this linking could both generate and cloud understanding—they do not have a mission (see Fernandez 1986, pp. 235–36). On the contrary, they create “an abundance of possible meanings” (De Boeck 1994, p. 468) and expand simultaneously in all directions. Nevertheless they produce effect, an efficacy that one can attribute to the fact that metaphors address both bodily and social experience (Kirmayer 1993, p. 184). Meaning is or can be bodily felt all over the world: For instance, Western pharmaceuticals convey a certain view of world and man; they (re)present a certain power and technology and metaphorize both the illness and a concrete way of addressing it. This not only accounts for their popularity but also in part explains why they work (Van der Geest & Whyte 1991, p. 353; see Helman 1990). Meanings are not only representational; they are or may be presentational also—embodied. Among the Himba, for instance, ancestors are embodied—remembered—by the particular diet of each patriclan; in the interdiction to mention one’s fathers or husband by name; in the herd, in particular by the animals carrying their names; in the pastures and water holes claimed by the lineage and given by the ancestors’ journey; in garments, hairstyle, and finery, or in the cooked butter with which women and men cover their bodies. Ancestors are intrinsically part of daily life and society.

Bodies and Embodiment

Emphasis on the body (and, arguably, embodiment) as the source of meaning is one of the things Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu have in common (see Marcoulatos 2001). Advancing this point, Csordas (1990, p. 5) argues that the body should not be considered as an object but as the subject—the existential ground—of culture and that the latter should be studied by focusing on embodiment. In his study of healing among North American Charismatic Christians, for instance, Csordas (1994a) discusses glossolalia (speaking in tongues) as a ritual language that goes beyond or leaves behind the semantics of common language, that by most participants is experienced as inadequate to communicate with the divine. Speaking in tongues evokes (embodied) images that are further elaborated in vernacular
speech—discursive thought—and participants in charismatic faith healing, typically and without effort switch back and forth between the two. Speaking in tongues creates belonging: As a verbal gesture it opens up the world of the sacred that, like ritual language, is a gift from God (Csordas 1990, pp. 25–26). Csordas also distinguishes, for example, between the demon as a cultural form or object, taking a place in an elaborate demonology that in itself is read as a moral statement, and behavior, thoughts or emotions—embodied distress—experienced as “out of control,” as a “lived” manifestation of “evil” (Csordas 1994a, pp. 171–76).

Embodiment, says Csordas, is situated on the level of lived experience and not on that of discourse; embodiment is about “understanding” or “making sense” in a prereflexive or even presymbolic, but not precultural, way (Csordas 1990, p. 10). It precedes objectivation and representation and is intrinsically part of our being-in-the-world. As such it collapses the difference between subjective and objective, cognition and emotion, or mind and body (Csordas 1994a, p. 276).

Thus, for example, the garments and finery of members of the Herero “flags” (or social groupings) in Namibia and Botswana prove to be important markers and makers of individual and group identity. Scarfs, flags, and uniforms embody (and not merely represent) belonging; they make some body part of a larger social and moral community; as such they could (and can) forge the Herero into a political force during and after apartheid (Hendricksson 1996). Likewise, Africanist anthropology understands witchcraft or divination as an embodied epistemology, as knowledge-in-action that is the basis of social practice and world-making (De Boeck 1994, Peek 1991). Lan (1985), for instance, describes how spirit mediums in Zimbabwe effected political change and revolution by mobilizing the spirits of the royal ancestors—the bringers of rain and the original and legitimate owners of the land—for the independence struggle.

The occult, indeed, also manifests itself as a “lived” social and political commentary: Geschiere (1997, pp. 199, 212) documents how witchcraft practices embody a deeply rooted distrust toward the postcolony and its representatives. However, witchcraft discourse also is a tool to safeguard and fence off personal profits and political influence by the postcolonial elite. Witchcraft is ambiguous because power itself is experienced as such. In a similar vein, Mbembe (1992) forwards the body and embodiment as the playground of both oppression and resistance: Both the postcolonial state and its subjects indulge in a grotesque and obscene bodiliness that dissolves the boundaries between rulers and ruled, the powerful and powerless, the hegemonical and the counterhegemonical (see also Comaroff 1985b; Stallybrass & White 1986, pp. 138–48). Comaroff & Comaroff (1991, 1997) illustrate how these same ready-made dichotomies are challenged by microhistories and local experiences.

Ultimately, these highly contradictory and paradoxical processes of change, rupture, and transformation revolve around notions and experiences of space, time, body, self, and identity (see Fardon 1995, Werbner 1996). Bodd (1989), for example, studies female possession in the Zar cult in North Sudan as a form of embodied resistance or counterhegemonic practice. In the experience and performance
of trance, women are brought into touch with their different selves and their non-selves, while the trance unlocks the dominant categories of gender, ethnicity, status, or religion (see also Comaroff 1985b). Hunt (1999), in turn, offers a microhistory of the medicalization of childbirth in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the way it effected the bodies of African women. In the first place, she focuses not on colonial discourse and on docile bodies, but on the way colonial power was mediated, translated, and transformed through obstetric practices and the female body (see also Whittaker 2001). And Counihan (1999) illustrates that in Sardinia and the United States the relation between gender and the production and consumption of food exemplifies cultural questions of power and control. Female identities are embodied in food practices; whereas thinness in dominant Western (and, increasingly, global) discourse is promoted as a symbol of self-control and power, however, the eating body may also manifest self-empowerment.

Embodiment and Intersubjectivity

These studies have in common the idea that the body unlocks a moral universe that often escapes social (symbolic) discourse. From this perspective, embodiment is not solely the source of self and subjectivity. Weiss (1999), for instance, explicitly forwards embodiment as a precondition for intersubjectivity, which she in the first instance conceives as an intercorporeality (see also Ahmed & Stacey 2001). This fundamental exchange between bodies is vested in the inherent multiplicity and indeterminacy of the body we have and are. Moreover, and paradoxically, this possibility of moving from one body (or body-image) to another may cause a more-or-less coherent sense of self to develop: This very flexibility and fluidity, this indeterminacy or metaphoric character of embodiment (see above), enables the self to engage in a wide variety of contexts and relationships (Weiss 1999, pp. 83, 166–167). In a similar vein, Grosz (1995b, pp. 32–36) notes that embodiment is made possible through the corporeality of the Other, how it originates in sources outside the self. In psychoanalysis as well feminist critics expose the centrality of the phallus and the fear of castration of the dominant patriarchic paradigm (see McClintock 1996). Lichtenberg-Ettinger (1995, pp. 15, 28), for instance, proposes the matrix (or womb) as an alternative, complementary way of entering the symbolic or imaginary realm. Against the fantasy of castration, she places the matrixial fantasy (Freud’s Mutterleibphantasie) that refers neither to absence nor to separation but to “relational difference in coemergence,” to experience and subjectivation. In a sense, one can regard this matrix as complementary to the habitus: It is memory, not history, turned into nature (Bourdieu 1977, p. 82; see above).

This shift in social and cultural anthropology from symbol to metaphor, sign to signification, or meaning to sense marks the possibility of giving ambiguity and indeterminacy, nonfixity and indirection, irony and paradox, or contradiction and ambivalence (elements that do not fit the orthodox symbolic order) a place in anthropological theory and praxis. It also leads away from the dominant groups
(in particular, the elders and ritual specialists in control of social discourse) in society. Moreover, it implies the abandonment of an almost exclusive focus on localized, bounded-off communities to more overarching or encompassing processes of globalization and marginalization, identity building, creolization, counterhegemony, commodification, or violence.

The shift brings with it also a renewed emphasis on the quotidian, on the daily experience (the doxa), of common people. But in postcolonial Africa, says Richard Werbner (1998), this “silent” experience of the world is, to an increasing extent, in crisis as daily life loses its taken-for-grantedness and the traces—the scars—left on the body and in the landscape continue to betray an often-untold history of violence and shattered identification (Devisch 1996). This crisis of the quotidian reveals also a crisis of memory. As memory practices—embodied memory—have become contested, so too the moral horizon along which self and subjectivity unfold has become insecure (see Battaglia 1995b; Das & Kleinman 2000, pp. 7–9; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Stoller 1994). That said, the quotidian is being bracketed by dissimulation: Daily upheaval and alienation are mastered by dissimulating them. Indeed, as Fernandez & Huber (2001, pp. 4, 18) remind us, ours is an age of irony (see also Strathern 1995). In this context, irony is a tool of the moral imagination, a way of questioning hegemony and fighting subordination (see Scott 1985). The question remains whether irony makes a material difference, or whether, ironically, it only perpetuates the existing (political, economic, etc.) discrepancies. In popular imagination, for example, the inhabitants of northwestern Namibia are described as natural-born conservatives. Most of them know that they are rewarded for behaving that way, i.e., “traditionally,” in the past by the apartheid government and nowadays by the tourist industry in its quest for authenticity. Thus the irony appears: By mocking and subverting the Western stereotype of Otherness it is being confirmed and strengthened.

To the extent that each theory of meaning also implies a theory or critique of power (see Parkin 1982, p. xlvii; Arens & Karp 1989) the notion of power also has become dispersed or decentered; it is found to be polycentric and ambiguous, contradictory and uncertain. This subjunctivity is what I, following Flax’s (1990, p. 222) lead, consider the material object of contemporary semantic anthropology: not to solve these contradictions, paradoxes, and uncertainties but to trace and expose them (Whyte 2002, p. 175). In this idea, the human body emerges as the meeting ground of both hegemony and counterhegemonic practices, power and defiance, authority and subversion. This body, though, extends far beyond the human organism, in space and time, in animals or in things (see Warnier 2004).

SELVES AND SUBJECTIVITY

Ironic, parody, memory, moral imagination, and narrative—the list is incomplete—can be considered processes (and technologies) of self. Revolving around embodiment, they involve “individual” experience, but also, “always-already,” imply
intersubjectivity. Or, as Mead (1974) notes: “[W]e cannot be ourselves unless we are also members” (p. 163). He pointed out that a self is a social structure and process that arises in and from social experience, that it involves the body, and that the self—the generalized Other—is multiple or composite (Mead 1974, pp. 136–42; see Turner 1995). In northern Namibia, for example, selves—each with their own voices, memories, and history—are associated with different places and spaces (for example, with homestead and cattle post, village and town), periods of time (such as the rainy and dry seasons), or with different animals in the herd. They are exemplified by the garments and finery one wears. But one’s dress also inscribes women and men in the history of the lineage, as aprons, bracelets, etc. are inherited and circulated through the lineage. These things forward an intercorporeality that, at least in northern Namibia, implies not only the ancestors and one’s descendants, but also the animals at the center of the homestead and of daily life.

Whereas psychological approaches place heavy emphasis on the antagonism between the “individual” and “collective” representations of self and the effects they have on the way selfhood is represented and experienced (see Sedikides & Brewer 2001), other investigators understand it as primarily the capacity for self-reflexivity and self-consciousness (De Vos et al. 1985), as a reflexive project (Giddens 1991), or as a tendency to organize and offer structure and continuity to experience (Morris 1994). And the more phenomenological approach of Csordas (1994a, p. 9) understands the self as an indeterminate process to engage or become oriented in the world; it is a whole of processes in which aspects of the world are thematized into different Gestalts and, next, represented (objectified) as a person with one or many identities. He portrays the self as indeterminate and inherently metaphorical; it appears through the interaction (embodiment) between bodily experience, cultural milieu, or world and habitus (see above; Csordas 1994a, p. 15). It is this incarnate subjectivity I refer to as the body-self (Langer 1989, p. 53; Merleau-Ponty 1970; see Anzieu 1985, Devisch 1993, Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987, Winnicot 1989).

These authors draw attention to the self as an embodied and contextual, but also practical knowledge process [in the sense of “knowledge-at-hand” (Schütz 1962)]. This means that they do not focus on the question, “What is self?” Rather, they try to document how people create or maintain a sense of self and belonging and how this “becoming” is permeated with questions of hegemony and power (see Nast 1998, 96).

As Battaglia (1995a, pp. 3, 7) reminds us, the image of an unchanging and “universal” self is part of Western dominant ideology that associates individuality with modernization and a sociocentric personality with either traditionalism or nostalgia. Sökefeld (1999, p. 418), too, notes that the non-Western self is often conceptualized as the opposite of the bounded, autonomous, reflexive, and independent Western self and, consequently, that anthropology denies the possibility of self in the Other. It is therefore important to distinguish between, on the one hand, the self as an embodied process of self-making, of becoming (the body-self),
and, on the other hand, the socially sanctioned self-image or representational Self. Dominant ideology could, for instance, promote a “transcendent self” or even the absence of self, a nonself (see De Vos et al. 1985). In this regard, Karp (1990, p. 90) points to what he terms “the paradox of agency.” Studying Iteso spirit possession in Kenya he concludes that when agency is denied, as when the woman’s body is taken over by the spirit, this female body becomes the most powerful locus of agency: By surrendering her self and body the “victim” suddenly finds herself in the center of power and once again in control of her life. Larsen (1998) makes a similar point by documenting how women and men in Zanzibar become identified (or localized) through their association with a spirit that, other than people, has a distinctive identity and a specific association with a place.

**Fragmentation and Vulnerability**

Directly and indirectly, studies such as these also question the unity and indivisibility (the atomic character) of the body-self. Whereas in the West multiple selves traditionally have been associated with pathologies such as schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder, the ethnographic record documents many instances where dominant ideology does promote a multiple Self (see Cohen 1998, pp. 12–13; Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987, pp. 15–16). In Europe and North America as well, ideas and experiences regarding the in/individual and self are subject to profound change.

Jameson (1991, p. 26) argues that the alienation and havoc brought about by late capitalism has resulted in a fragmented (and false) consciousness in the West. Postmodern culture (novels, movies, etc.), he says, testifies to this “schizophrenic” self characterized by information overload and the absence of an overarching narrative. According to him, this end of a coherent self or centered subject also means the end of individual expression and feelings and emotions. In a similar vein, Littlewood (1997) suggests that postmodernity and globalization have instigated an epidemic of multiple personality disorder in North America. The question he raises is whether this pluralism of the self reflects a new “idiom of distress,” the pathology of postmodernism as informed and inspired by new information technologies and cyberspace; whether it embodies a new discourse on and model of self and subselves, an increasing fragmentation of self under the influence of the breakdown of the grand metanarratives; or, in contrast, a new technology to represent, incorporate, and master the Other in the form of serially accessed identities (or alters), a further step toward enhanced self-awareness.

This fragmentation (or dislocation, perhaps) of the self is illustrated by Strauss (1997, p. 369). She interviewed a number of Rhode Island (sub)urbanites in the wake of the closure of a major chemical plant and documents how people talk in different voices, with each voice referring to a set of metaphoric imagery and emotional valence. This fragmentation, though, is not total: According to Strauss, some integration is achieved through emotions, often associated with (the memory of) early life experiences. Ochs & Capps (1996, p. 22), in turn, put forward narrative
as an important way to both evoke and partly integrate these fragmentary selves. They suggest that this fragmentation can take place along many axes, such as past and present, male and female, or public and private. And to an important extent this questioning of the self also implies the self of the ethnographer. For instance, in a challenging essay Rambo Ronai (1992, p. 122) points out the conflicts and fragmentation she experienced between her being a dancer, participant observer, student, wife, and author of the narrative (an “emotional striptease”) that was meant to reassemble her self (also see Josephides 1997, p. 21; Kulich & Willson 1995). In the mountains of northern Namibia, too, this dividuality and fragmentation of the body-self may be partly and temporarily overcome during rituals and other emotionally charged events such as birth giving or death. This integration, however, is neither logical nor complete: It is associative, metaphoric, and “matrixial.”

We all are Creoles of sorts: hybrid, divided, polyphonic, and parodic—a pastiche of our Selves. This contemporary body-self is fragmentary, often incoherent and inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory and paradoxical experiences, social tensions, and conflicts that have one thing in common: They are real, that is, experienced. Therefore, the anthropology of the body focuses no longer on the abstract or ideal(ized) body, but on those moments during which the body and bodiliness are questioned and lose their self-evidence and on the experience or threat of finiteness, limitation, transience, and vulnerability. These embodied uncertainties do indeed challenge the autonomy of the in/dividual insofar as they no longer appear as a lack or deficiency, but instead as an existential characteristic of the human condition and as an ethical challenge (Shildrick 2002).

It can thus be argued that it is through fragmentation that the sometimes violent rupture between experience and discourse, and objective and symbolic reality can be overcome, and a sense of belonging achieved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Is, as Jameson holds, a fragmentary or conflictual body-self particular to late capitalism, to postmodernism, or postcolonial disenchantment? Or are we dealing with a new academic paradigm and social discourse of self in the West? Does recognizing the existential eccentricity—the decentered subjectivity—and fragmentary character of the body-self mean it was not there before? And, to the extent that Western hegemony is based in and legitimated by the idea of an inalienable physical or psychological core, does not this mere recognition already jeopardize dominant modernist discourse and ideology (Weiss 1999, p. 168)? Haraway (1991), for example, stages the cyborg as a challenge to established power relations. The man/machine, as carnate hybridity, blends nature and civilization, organism and technology, male and female; thus the cyborg also is a parody to the themes and archetypes of modernist discourse. But is, as Moreiras (1999, p. 396) suggests, the political prize of this hybridity to resign to one’s subaltern position vis-à-vis Euro-American hegemony and subjectivation?
In today’s context the body is no longer given. On the one hand, it is a canvas on which major cultural, social, and political changes are projected. On the other hand, it is a (if not the) major focus and objective of these changes. In the West as elsewhere, traditional boundaries (between individual and society, public and private, nature and culture, masculine and feminine) have become insecure, but is the fear of change not something of all times and places? Distances have narrowed, and remoteness in space has evolved into a remoteness in time (Grosz 1995a, p. 49). For those who can afford it, the body is fully customizable and adaptable, whether through tattoos, piercings, branding, liposuction, or cosmetic surgery. And although identity is considered conterminous with lifestyle, a commodity to be purchased, dominant ideology promotes looking young and beautiful (“californication”) as a way of being healthy, successful, and morally right (see Brodwin 2000).

I do not think this fragmentation and decentralization, or at least its recognition in the West, means that the West has lost its Self. On the contrary, in a context of globalization—a process of increasing compartmentalization—it asserts its hegemony stronger than ever before. This constitutes a fundamental paradox, namely that the awareness of fragmentation and multiplicity brings with it a stronger emphasis on an ideology that denies it. This political discourse has every interest in symbolically representing the person as indivisible and “one.”

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