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## Book Review Essay: Working Out Desire: Women, Sport, and Self-Making in Istanbul

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***Book Review Essay: Working Out Desire: Women, Sport, and Self-Making in Istanbul***<sup>1</sup>

Melissa Langworthy<sup>2</sup>

*Working Out Desire* is an ethnographic investigation of the workings of *spor meraki* – interest or curiosity in sport. Sehlíkoglu bills the book as an expression of her “scholarly enchantment” with women’s desiring subjectivities in all of their formations – foreseen and unforeseen. To achieve this, Sehlíkoglu establishes *Working Out Desire* as a platform for presenting “an ethnographic account of the formation of desiring subjectivities, the human capacity to desire that is not only informed and shaped by sociohistorical constraints but also markets in its agentic aptitude” (p. 4).

As Sehlíkoglu explains, a complete understanding of *spor meraki* requires not only a desire to become physically fit but locating this desire within the neoliberal, modern, and social complexities at the same time as women themselves are seeking to leave behind old, traditional, and rural identities. In this way, *spor meraki* connects Istanbulite women from diverse backgrounds and inspires desiring subjectivities across time and space. Primary among the goals of Sehlíkoglu is an investigation into women’s interest in sport as a launching point to promote a deeper interest in establishing a self that is separate from conventional feminine duties, and that allows women to do something for *oneself* rather than for others (i.e., family, partners, social networks, community, neighbors).

In an effort to recognize “how easily the realms of desire can escape from analytical focus” (p. 247), Sehlíkoglu contributes to literature investigating the quotidian nature of cultural complexities in Muslim cultures<sup>i</sup> and establishes sports as not just a mode of discipline for the body, but also as a process through which existing gendered, classed, and ethnic hierarchies are reinforced.<sup>ii</sup> For women in Istanbul, Sehlíkoglu establishes that desire and agency are intractably linked to a complex interplay of factors including age, pregnancy, religion, and class. In this way, Sehlíkoglu positions exercise as an accessible form of neoliberal desiring subjectivity, one that can render a woman modern, urban, and knowledgeable when other avenues, such as independence, education, and employment, may not be accessible.

From a feminist perspective, the focus of this book on the desiring subjectivities of Istanbulite women is an achievement in building non-Western – and especially Muslim – women as agentic, desiring beings. It provides a space to explore when and whether desires are initiated by or independent of masculinist systems. In this, Sehlíkoglu builds on the work of others examining (Arab) women’s navigation of neoliberal and/or consumption patterns<sup>iii</sup> and Muslim identities.<sup>iv</sup> With this discussion, the book contributes to the expanding research space for Arab and Muslim women outside of sociocultural barriers and constraints. The further investigations of kinship dynamics in denying women’s desire and defining women’s object status invites comparisons to Kate Mann’s<sup>v</sup> positioning of women as ‘human givers’ insofar as women’s familial roles often

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<sup>1</sup> Sehlíkoglu, S. (2021). *Working Out Desire: Women, Sport, and Self-Making in Istanbul*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

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position their responsibilities to offer attention and affection to members of their family above their own desires.

In the first section of *Working Out Desire*, “Self,” the book situates women’s sport in Turkey in the historical and nation-building objectives of Turkey and describes how modern Turkish women create their own desiring subjectivity and agency. Sehlkoglul directly tackles the false binaries that impact women’s agency, notably Western-Muslim, religious-secular, and tradition - modernity. Further, this section investigates the impact of role models – or “mediating figures,” primarily in the form of exercise celebrities – who are able to stimulate women’s interest in exercise and to connect with these women via the shared movements and goals which then enable women to expand their desires.

‘Space’ – the second section – queries themes of self, segregation, and control as women’s bodies move in modern, urban environments. This section investigates both the municipal development of outdoor spaces for exercise as well as contrasting these public, mixed spaces with the homosocial spaces of women’s gyms. In analyzing spatial elements of *spor meraki*, Shelikoglul’s investigation of women’s handling of ‘blind spots’ (or “spaces that fall outside of religious, nationalist, familiar and even lingual limits” (p. 76)) in their creation of desiring subjectivities is especially vivid. Women’s choices of whether to participate, and which spaces are used to highlight the complex relationships between geography, class, education, and modernity. The specific attention to women’s privacy (*mahram*) in public spaces and women’s daily boundary-building against invasions of the privacy – especially by males – sheds light on the ways selfhood, gender, and body are linked in Islamicate contexts. In this way, privacy does not just demarcate spaces free from the (male) gaze, but also those free from comments on women’s bodies, weight, etc. Especially in closed, private, same-sex gym environments, women are able to reinterpret social and patriarchal ideologies, cross check norms established by pop cultures, and to reimagine themselves in relation to others.

The final section, “Time,” positions women’s agency in the face of globalized rhythms, temporal shifts (including pregnancy), and divine corporeality. When women can schedule exercise breaks within their daily routines, the rhythms of music and globalized exercise movements allow them to “become the cosmopolitan world citizen they aspire to be.” Pregnancy is presented as a gendered temporality that introduces tension between the mores of motherhood and having fit, slim (desirable) bodies. Within these temporalities, *spor meraki* is reinforced as a fashionable trend, one that focuses on beauty and fitness, not health and well-being. This is especially obvious in the presentation of *emanet* – the religious belief that women’s bodies (indeed all bodies) belong to God and are thus aligned with a cosmology outside of urban modernity. This analysis shows how women expand religious teachings from a narrow, restrictive focus on guarding the body to a more compassionate dictate to take care of the body (i.e., through exercise and diet). Shelikoglul explains that this temporal corporeality is a source of agency resulting from women’s ability to reinscribe these teachings on to a modern lifestyle.

*Working Out Desire* is a well-crafted analysis built from two rounds of ethnographic research, 2008 and 2011-2012. Sehlkoglul’s background makes her the ideal person to conduct this project. As a native of Istanbul, she brings an “insider’s awareness” (p. 23) of the behavioral codes and customs of women across religion, class, and educational differences. This awareness is strengthened by the intimacy and proximity with which the ethnography is constructed.

Throughout the study, Sehlkoglou lived in Istanbul (including, at times, with participants) and went beyond methods of “participant observation” to participate in the daily lives of a diverse groups of Instambulite women, including by residence, background, age, and income. In all, 98 interviews were conducted (including gym customers, trainers, managers, people involved in women’s magazines, exercise celebrities, daytime TV hosts and staff). Additionally, an aspect and one of the great sources of strength of the book, Sehlkoglou convened focus groups to investigate themes of ageing, pregnancy, and religion.

One of the book’s primary contributions is the analysis of religion. The inclusion presents a refreshing approach to women and religion – especially Islam – in its investigation of religion’s role in women’s sense not only of self and desire as individuals in neoliberal times, and as mothers and wives, but in relation to connecting women’s bodies to a divine and timeless project of self-care. Through illustrating the complex interplay of gender and religion, including investigating the problematic binaries that keep religious women from also being modern, agentic, and knowledgeable, Sehlkoglou documents the intricate, yet powerful sources of agency utilized by (Muslim) women in Islamicate communities.

From a feminist perspective, the focus on pregnancy gives attention to an oft overlooked and critical part of women’s lives and agency, however it is disappointing that the treatment of pregnancy is limited to a temporal interjection to the rhythms of exercise. This treatment overlooks the potential for further analysis into the agentic interface of pregnancy for the women (i.e., as a time to potentially refocus narratives of the body, shift from fitness to health and wellbeing focus; a time where the women’s focus on their body and health is socially sanctioned - and not necessarily a digression from norms). Instead of this richer approach, the book discusses pregnancy primarily in terms of “dissatisfaction” with postpartum body.

Overall, the book is a well-written ethnographic account of women’s desiring subjectivity, exercise, and agency. Sehlkoglou examines a broad intersection of factors including race, class, age, family status, pregnancy, socioeconomic status, modernity, nationality, embodiment, religion, ethnicity, geography, *hijabi* and *nonhijabi*. However, the sheer volume of interactions at play means that the book struggles to fulfill the promise set by the first section – which could have filled the book itself. For an engaged reader, the transition from this tapestry of identities in the first section to the investigation of municipal space in the second section is jarring. This being noted, I applaud the efforts throughout the book to deal directly with women’s embodied experiences from pregnancy to wearing the hijab. These efforts contribute to redressing the all-too-common dismissal or oversight of women’s embodied experiences and the impact of these experiences on women’s agency.

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<sup>i</sup> Buscemi, E. and Kaposi, I. (eds). 2020. *Everyday Youth Cultures in the Gulf Peninsula: Changes and Challenges*. Routledge.

<sup>ii</sup> Sfeir, F. 1985. “The Status of Muslim Women in Sport: Conflict between Cultural Tradition and Modernization,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 20, no 4:283-306. Duncan, M., 1994. “The Politics of Women’s Body Images and Practices: Foucault, the Panopticon, and *Shape Magazine*.” *Journal of Sport & Special Issues* 18, no. 1: 48-65.

<sup>iii</sup> Sa'ar, A. (2016). *Economic Citizenship: Neoliberal paradoxes of empowerment*. New York: Bargahn Books; Kanna, A. (2010). Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal subjectivity in the emerging "City-Corporation".

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*Cultural Anthropology*, 25(1), 100-129; Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.;

Hafez, S. (2011). *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>v</sup> Mann, K. 2018. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.