

## FOR A BODY NOT TO BE

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The idea had been to see the cherry blossoms, but either they were past their peak or the spring was so protracted they never reached it. We took our son to see the dinosaurs instead, or rather—but how to explain this to a four-year-old—we took him to see the models created from molds scientists had made of their bones. Afterwards, we walked down to the Lincoln Memorial to have lunch on its steps, which were packed densely enough, as was the whole area, to drive us into the trees on the periphery. That was just as well. The whole experience—flowers, dinosaurs, memorials—had aroused my ambivalence, and the longer we sat there that feeling transformed into open hostility. I recoiled from the overblown trappings of Athenian democracy, or was it Athenian ruin?

I remember feeling differently when, at thirteen, my parents brought my brother and me here as part of our civic education. It wasn't that the trip inspired any real patriotism, nor was it precisely intended to, but I suppose I felt the paternalism of the place as a comfort, not a menace. I didn't yet see that the versions of history I had been spoonfed had been written by the victors, and that to someone looking back on first seeing the ships arrive off the coast of Hispaniola, Massachusetts, or Virginia—ships that must have appeared as though from some alien civilization—the course of history could only read as a progressive disintegration.

Walking the area with our son, it felt fitting that the memorial I most admired was built just outside the mall proper, as though the dominant version of the American myth meant a peripheral place for justice. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," read one inscription in the marble: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects

all indirectly.” Although in my thirties I take King’s words as a credo, I realize how absent his sentiment was from that civic education. Staring up at Lincoln twenty years earlier, or running my fingers along the names of the war dead, it didn’t occur to me that I was a political site, a small but vital node in King’s “network of mutuality.”

In the homogeny of 1990s West Michigan, there was little reason for a straight white kid to become a site of resistance. I grew up with a variety of privilege that meant, at least in my hometown, my skin, gender, and sexuality didn’t immediately politicize my body. Or rather, I didn’t *feel* politicized, even though, as I know now, it’s impossible for a body not to be. Had I been transplanted at thirteen to parts of DC beyond the tourist trail, I would not have had the same luxury. My body would have marked me in a way that it never had at home.

That could be why, in retrospect, I admire those kids who took up the gauntlet in spite of their apparent exemption. For whatever reason, they must have felt King’s sense of mutuality much earlier than I did. Either that or some part of their lives had incited a rebellion that would never be quelled, only stoked, by the comforts that kept the rest of us quiet. I’ll never forget the sight of one of these kids, a scrawny guy named Marc, wearing a flowered dress and playing, at a school dance, a cover of Nirvana’s “Rape Me” with his band. The administrators were appalled, but most of us were simply confused. The sexual politics in the cafeteria that night didn’t conform to anything anyone in the room had been taught. We lived in what is still one of the most conservative congressional districts in the country, and at least as I remember it, the assistant principal cut the power before the song was finished.

It was undoubtedly some version of my admiration for Marc that re-emerged in March of this year, not long before our trip to DC, when I

learned that a nineteen-year-old Tunisian woman named Amina Tyler had posted two photos to her Facebook page. In the first, she had written the words “Fuck your morals” across her bare chest; in the second, this time in Arabic, “My body belongs to me, and is not the source of anyone’s honor.” The response was severe. By her own account, Tyler was drugged by her family, whisked away to a secret location, and there subjected to virginity tests. One prominent cleric publicly demanded she be stoned to death.

If the photos had been sexual, it wouldn’t have made for international news, but in asserting her body as the site of an informed political self, she raised the ire of conservatives, who saw in her liberation from the abstractions of modesty the possibility of a vicious contagion. Tyler meant to reclaim the body and to begin thereby to shape the nature of the state. At least on this level, conservatives were right to feel alarmed. Her breasts were absolutely a threat.

Weeks later, groups of European women protested in solidarity, writing similar slogans across their own bare torsos, and Tyler’s viral gesture adopted a physical form. In the photographs that wound up back in the ether, many of the women stand assertively, even aggressively, feet shoulder-length apart, one arm raised upward in a fist. In some pictures, protestors are being dragged away from in front of embassies, mosques, monuments, and, in a photo taken weeks later, Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin. In one dramatic shot, an older man kicks a protestor, whose face is covered in a pseudo-jihadist scarf.

The organizing group calls itself Femen, and the rhyme with semen is as provocative as the nudity central to its strategy. It may be because the female body is simultaneously an object of desire and the site par excellence of repression that it works as a tool of protest, but while critics argue that Femen’s tactics are hypocritical, there’s more to it than reveling in surfaces: in revealing themselves the protestors unveil a pervasive unease with the

body, a general preference for a concealment that is at once domineering and titillating. Remove what is either the ruse of ornamentation or true tyranny over the body and the response, as Femen and Tyler prove, is dramatic. In a sea of burqas and business suits—even in a sea of bikinis—a naked form is nearly anarchic. And though one can claim that these protests do nothing to advance women, such arguments may miss the point. All demonstrations are symbolic, as John Berger writes. They do not represent political action as much as they dramatize the power the demonstrators lack. It isn't to solve inequality in one fell swoop that the Femen activists remove their clothing: it is to dramatize that inequality—to make a scene of the body, rather than an abstraction of it.

The cherry blossoms came and went, but Femen stuck around all summer. The group presented a dilemma I had long been interested in: justice, as it pertains to the body. I had also seen, on one of those weekends in March or April, Harmony Korine's film *Spring Breakers*, and it, too, stuck around all summer. I spent an inordinate amount of time arguing about the film, which had become entwined, in my mind, with Femen. Where other cultures blatantly repress their young, I remember saying (or trying to say) one night while various kids, including our son, were propped in front of the TV, ours infantilizes them, reducing them to gleaming torsos and pleasure-seeking naïfs, and in this country in particular, repression often goes by the insidious name of *freedom*. Take *Girls Gone Wild*, for instance, in which the subjects do not shed submission along with their clothing but rather adopt another version of the male gaze.

The title of Korine's film also seems to say it all. But instead of bare bodies and easy living, Korine delivers a fantasia on gender, race, and violence—an allegory with characters named Candy and Faith, characters for whom the body is hardly a body any more, or rather it is *only* body:

little or no self persists here, only its (bomb-) shell. It is the purely superficial body to which the culture prostrates itself continuously. It is the body made meat, and as it has been rendered into the shape of desire, so it renders all it touches—or that touches it—into extensions of an unquenchable want. That the sex *Spring Breakers* appears to promise never comes to fruition is also in perfect keeping with a principle common to much pop culture wherein pornographic poses are adopted but not fulfilled. In Korine's hands, these empty sexual gestures become ironic stagings both of what we have been trained to desire and how this desire is purposefully thwarted. Although the young women in the film may have been shaped by the male gaze, in the final act this gaze turns on itself and it is as though, to borrow a line from the French collective Tiquun, "we witness an ironic epilogue in which the 'male sex' becomes both the victim and the object of its own alienated desire."

Whether Korine's film is a confection, a prophecy, or a verdict was the source of some debate on those summer nights when we tried to tranquilize our kids to talk a little longer, but it is in the film's final violent scenes, I maintained, that the costs of infantilization, which is at root about control, stand out in stark relief. The projections come home to roost, and everybody falls victim to the apotheosis of the bikini-clad blonde—no one more so than the black bodies that line the grounds of the mansion at which, near the end of the film, the "heroines" unload their dainty semi-automatics. Those bodies that conform least to the dominant paradigm are sacrificed to it. In the end, we're back at the beginning in some sense, at the lecture the two female leads are attending. The professor is speaking about civil rights during World War II. The girls are not paying any attention.

In itself, the body is neither moral nor political. It is a field on which morality, like politics, is played, a screen onto which it is projected. More-

over, the body remains when the play has ended—not as a blank space, as something to be filled (or drained), but as a figure whose nakedness defines its function. Put another way, fashion is moral in a manner the bare body never could be: in wearing the burqa, for example, a woman suppresses her body in favor of her belief or, alternately, her modesty. Here, to dress is also to subdue the power of the female form, which, this thinking holds, wreaks havoc. Either women can't control their sexuality or men can't control themselves from temptation; in either case, it is as though we need protection from the body, as though there were no greater threat than its display. But if the wearer of the burqa reveals her morality, it is not necessarily the case—as hardliners of all stripes would have you believe—that the wearer of the bikini reveals her amorality, for the bikini may be less of a proxy for emancipation than an emblem of our own skewed sexual politics. It may be a more palatable variation of the fetishization that elsewhere insists upon the body's complete concealment. It may dazzle, but what it most reveals is, paradoxically, what it demands on concealing.

That the body has become both the province and indeed the basis of power is the premise of Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. "Youth and Femininity," they argue, "abstracted and recoded... find themselves raised to the rank of the ideal regulators of...the Imperial citizenry." The figure of the Young-Girl, write Tiqqun, is an instrument in the ongoing total war waged by capitalism on the people who keep it afloat, an invisible war dependent on "the molecular diffusion of constraint into everyday life." Empire extends to the body, and the struggle becomes "to render oneself compatible" with that imperialism—to wear the burqa or, conversely, to work on one's bikini's body, so as to reify social control. We tell ourselves we are working on our appearances, but appearances are working on us, and in the process our bodies become the picture of dominion, the embodiment of forces that can only express themselves

through us. In place of the shitting, bleeding, stinking one, we assert the body-as-abstraction, as lure, as “the eradication of all alterity.”

It’s now autumn, but the brightness in the leaves has yet to arrive. At a party a few weeks ago, most had mixed feelings about the mild weather, which meant the women were still wearing summer dresses well into October and the men were in shorts and t-shirts. Sitting on our friends’ sunny patio, I made the mistake of bringing up *Spring Breakers* once again. Among us there were those who, respectively, saw irony, anarchy, and exploitation in it. The talk turned to Amina Tyler, and though one vocal critic of the film said she mostly agreed with me about Femen—that there was something noble in it—she was suspicious of the protestors because, in this instance, their praises were being sung by a man.

She has a point. What right do I have to make pronouncements about the experiences of bodies so unlike my own, bodies that have, unlike mine, been aggressively politicized in various ways practically since conception? What right do I have to address categories of which I am not myself a member? How can I not be blinded by the prejudices inherent in my culture, my upbringing, my way of being in the world? These strike me as entirely reasonable objections. And yet King’s words come back to me: shouldn’t I have as much of a stake in Amina Tyler’s liberation, or nearly so, as Amina herself? Isn’t the question of justice at its core really a question of my responsibility for and to her burdens, the burdens of everyone who has not had the privilege of a life spent in a globally dominant demographic?

In the hallway outside my office, I bump into a colleague who has recently sent me a wonderful essay about physical space. I tell her that it helped me solve a problem I was having with another essay, a structural hurdle that was giving me headaches at night. I say that I am now working

on an essay—having put the other one to rest, thanks to her—about activism and the body, but that I’ve once again run into a roadblock. At issue, I say, is my place in it all. I cannot imagine the circumstances under which I would lay my body on the line the way Amina Tyler did. She says she has no trouble imagining them, either for me or for her. When it comes to fracking, to the Keystone Pipeline, she would put herself in harm’s way. Later, I wonder what this might look like. I imagine us drinking quarts of contaminated water at the site of a proposed well, or donning gas masks and chaining ourselves to bulldozers. I wonder what it means that I have less trouble imagining my colleague doing these things, but that in the meantime I’m the one writing about them.

Even as someone opposed to both fracking and tar sands oil, I’m still not convinced by my own stake in the issues. I have difficulty placing my body in their path, in conceiving of it as a contaminated site, or potentially so, and I realize that this is where the true failure of my civic education rears its head. Growing up as and where I did, I never learned to feel the body politic in the body proper. I was insulated from the consequences of identity, and as such I have trouble tuning into the issues that might incite me to action. I may feel disgusted by fracking wells, but at a remove. It is an intellectual disgust, one from which, as a body, I’m cut off.

This may be why, in retrospect, I did not fly to New York City in October 2011 as the Occupy protests gathered steam, even though it had immediately occurred to me to drop everything and join them. I understood that the plutocracy is out of control, but my outrage was tempered by my reason, as it often is with people like me. I was willing to send money, via a Nicaraguan social justice website, but I was unwilling to sacrifice my livelihood. I had the dual privileges of my outrage and my well-being, the latter tempering the former, almost by design.

Then the protests went viral, with distant sympathizers telling their stories of corporate malfeasance and personal misfortune, adding at the end, “I am the 99%.” These were posted online by the thousands, each person holding her placard in front of a computer camera, which often had the ironic, if unintentional, effect of partially obscuring the person who held it. The stories, too, tended to obviate the subject: it mattered most that what one wrote was on message, that it kept to the script. Again, my temptation to participate was modulated by something else—in this case, my suspicion that these stories were less rhetorically effective than they might have been.

When I saw the Tyler photos, a year and a half later, it struck me that she had taken the gesture a step further: her message did not mediate her body, or vice versa. Her message *was* her body, and her body her message. While it may not be the case that the virtual Occupiers would have been more effective if, like Tyler, their 99% stories had been written on bare bodies, in obscuring themselves with their signs they may have garbled their substance, defusing their power at the site of its mobilization, muting themselves in the moment they spoke.

If we need some mechanism to project ourselves and our causes into true visibility, Tyler’s stroke of brilliance was to realize she had just such an apparatus: herself. The challenge she continues to raise is how to embody resistance, how to live one’s cause in, or with, one’s body *and* in the context (not *at the expense*) of one’s life. Because to shield that life, to conceal that body, is to disarm it. Divorced from the corporeal and the quotidian, one can only be as others are, and these disembodied abstractions become easy prey for empire, which *deals* in abstractions. As concept replaces contour, the body’s boundaries are replaced by the tragedy of their obfuscation, and though that tragedy may be ironized to some

effect (as in Korine's *Spring Breakers*) it is difficult to tell, in the desert—or beach sand—of our alienation, where that irony begins and ends.

It is in the nature of a demonstration, Berger writes, to provoke violence upon itself, and the degree to which the state responds with violence is an indication of how serious a threat the demonstration is to its power: compare the eviction from Zuccoti Park, or the infamous pepper-spraying at UC-Davis, to the violence provoked by Tyler's breasts or, for that matter, by the Arab Spring itself. As of this writing, more than a hundred thousand people have been killed in the Syrian civil war; in Egypt and Libya, as the Mubarak and Gaddafi regimes were in their final throes, the state responded by imprisoning, torturing, and murdering the opposition.

One would like to see the absence of violence in response to Occupy as a product of our democratic values, but the truth may be that the movement expressed, as Slavoj Žižek has written, "a spirit of revolt without revolution." It was, at best, an exercise in consciousness-raising; at worst, it was little more self-congratulatory than buying a "Starbucks cappuccino where 1% goes for the third world troubles." In place of actual liberation, there was the illusion of it, permitted just long enough for it to appear that there was real opposition and debate, when there was neither. Consider the misnomer, Occupy Wall Street: no one was camping out on the trading floor. It was, and continues to be, business as usual.

In some ways, Occupy was a tremendous success—more so than any Femen protest to date. For weeks, the demonstrators, both in person and online, put on a great show. The problem with the performance was not that it remained primarily a dramatization, but that it may only have been a form of theater to begin with, the theater of disenfranchisement. The protestors never represented a threat to the state, as was proven by the state's slow and quiet response.

While it may be possible to have revolt without revolution, it's impossible to have revolution without risk. Mohamed Bouazizi—the Tunisian street vendor whose self-immolation became the catalyst for the Arab Spring—had his wares confiscated. Already deeply in debt, he could no longer make a living. On the surface of it, he risked everything (his life) because he had nothing (his life) left to lose. For him—and for how many others?—the boundary between everything and nothing became dangerously blurred at the site of the only something that remained to him: his body. Bouazizi's tragedy may not be Tyler's, but for both to act is to wager the body, to assert the something of that body against the nothingness (the everything-in-nothing) it is so often reduced to, in various repressive ways.

This urgency propelled the initial Egyptian revolution, but it's worth noting, considering the questions at play here, that it didn't ensure its success. It could just be that few revolutions turn out that well, but the constitution of the first democratically elected parliament was most striking for the way it censored parties that were vital to Mubarak's overthrow, namely liberals and women. In a country in which, according to the journalist Mona Eltahawy, 90% of ever-married women have undergone Female Genital Mutilation, is it any coincidence that only eight seats in the 508-member parliament were held by women? What we mistake for liberation is often a mechanism for averting it, and it is, in that connection, more than a passing curiosity that in the United States women fill only a fifth of the seats in the Senate and slightly less than that in the House.

I don't know whatever happened to Marc, the would-be Kurt Cobain from my high school, so I can't say whether these days he's still dressing in drag or whether he's now a corporate accountant with a smattering of kids and a house in the suburbs. Maybe it's both. As an emblem of revolution

the executive in drag may be a little uninspiring, but such a person, if he exists, may be occupying his life on a profound level. I wonder about all the people for whom any demonstration is merely an outgrowth of the way they live their lives. This may be the truest occupation, in every sense: rather than the message mediating the life, or vice versa, the message becomes the life, and the life the message.

I cannot claim to have done this with anything like consistency or rigor, nor can I claim to have done anything as daring as Marc or Amina Tyler, and if throughout these pages I've been asking what it means for a body to become a political site (without becoming prey or pawn), it is in part because I realize what a poor one my own has made. What I've struggled with here, what I'm struggling with still, is that there is only the sketchiest map for the solidarity I'm interested in. Worse yet, the route through the territory is bounded by the opposing perils of privilege and desperation, and both action and inaction can become detours into foolishness.

But I am also beginning to feel, somewhere in my bones, that any body is every body, that what is done to one is done to all. When, for instance, I read the story of Daisy Coleman—the Maryville, Missouri, teenager who was first raped by the scion of a prominent local family and whose own family was then tormented by the town—it occurs to me that, to protest the mysterious dismissal of charges against her assailant, engineered no doubt by his powerful relatives, I might take and post online a naked photo of myself with the words “This is not an instrument of rape” written on my abdomen.

That this is almost the last thing I will actually do strikes me as a sign of the complacency that is the sine qua non of my demographic. I say this with no more self-loathing than necessary. Instead, I would like to see in that self-diagnosis a prescription against the variety of political

awareness Joan Didion compared, more than forty years ago, to the movies. “Things ‘happen’ in motion pictures,” she wrote. “There is always a resolution, a strong cause-effect dramatic line, and to perceive the world in those terms is to assume an ending for every social scenario.” More defiantly, she pointed to “the particular vanity of perceiving social life as a problem to be solved by the good will of individuals.” History, she suggested, doesn’t progress in an orderly, elegant fashion. It’s a messy matter, full of sacrifice and surrender. Or, as Mona Eltahawy writes of Egypt, “Until the rage shifts from the oppressors in our presidential palaces to the oppressors on our streets and in our homes”—the oppressors, I might add, in ourselves—“our revolution has not even begun.”