

The Political Body: An Analysis of the Body/State Relationship

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The italicized quotations throughout this essay reflect on the state/body relationship. As you read through the essay, pay attention to the way that the quotations change with the writing, and the push/pull that exists between the 'state' and the 'body.'

I discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer, I pull, it lifts off, it coils above your knees, I pull starting at the labia, it slides the length of the belly, fine to extreme transparency, I pull starting at the loins, the skin uncovers, the round muscles and trapezii of the back, it peels off to the nape of the neck, I arrive under your hair, m/y fingers traverse its thickness, I touch your skull, I grasp it with all my fingers, I press it, I gather the skin over the whole of the cranial vault, I tear off the skin brutally beneath the hair, I reveal the beauty of the shining bone traversed by blood-vessels, m/y two hands crush the vault and the occiput behind, now m/y fingers bury themselves in the cerebral convolutions, the meninges are traversed by cerebrospinal fluid flowing from all quarters, m/y hands are plunged in the soft hemispheres I seek the medulla and the cerebellum tucked in somewhere underneath, now I hold all of you silent immobilized every cry blocked in your throat your last thoughts behind your eyes caught in m/y hands, the daylight is no purer than the depths of m/y heart m/y dearest one.

- *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig 17.

Violence upon the body is enacted at multiple levels. Within the state, there are unique and drastic measures such as abortion laws, citizenship, labour, and imprisonment that are taken to ensure the continued normalization of the 'right' kind of body, and these measures inscribe violence upon the skin. Many resist the state's influence, utilizing their bodies in ways that subvert the normalized discourse of the political body; they seek to shock, to make blatant their difference, and to challenge the supposed necessity of normality. Yet despite this challenge, the body is a being in constant negotiation with its surroundings, and its permeability is inescapable; attempts at discipline and resistance exist as a tug of war between the state and the individual, who are both seeking to define themselves, and who use the actions of the other in their attempts at definition. How does the state create the political body through discourse and discipline, and how does this impact the physical body? How is the body used for resistance and rebellion? Does this resistance signify actual bodily rebellion and escape from normality, or does it simply reinforce the dominant narrative?

1. The Formation and Continuation of the Political Body

On the other side is the river / and I cannot cross it / on the other side is the sea / I cannot bridge it

- *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa 161.

The men of history formed the body politic, which was intended to serve as a definition of government in relation to the body: the arms, the parliament, the legs, the senate, the brain, the judiciary, the heart, the prime minister. Moira Gatens discusses

the intent behind the body politic in terms of who represents, and who is represented (Gatens 21). Gatens's work serves to more narrowly define the citizen, or the political body (22). The political body, a male body, seeks to remove himself from the workings of women, to narrow his surroundings so as to exclude others. And he does exclude women, and more individuals who differ from him. By defining government based solely on male terms, the male "incorporates and so controls and regulates women's bodies in a manner which does not undermine his claim to autonomy, since her contributions are neither visible nor acknowledged" (Gatens 23). Furthermore, as long as the hegemonic male body is reproduced, others will be excluded. The polis is then represented by one body, and one voice (Gatens 23).

In its tendency towards exclusion, the body politic has clearly defined what type of body is most valuable to the state. The strong, white, heterosexual male is the body that publicly serves the state through government, the military, the workforce, and the economy (bodies of colour are frequently exploited to serve the state). This political body has served as *the* political body through the state's reinforcement using borders, citizenship, identity politics, discipline, and socio-cultural practices (not an exhaustive list). Beginning with citizenship, women, by virtue of their relegation to the private sphere, were initially excluded from citizenship rights (Walby 382, 385). Eileen Boris states that women's association with unpaid labor, as well as their historical lack of 'bodily autonomy or integrity' informs our idea of who the dominant political body is (163). This also relates to a discussion on borders, which Gloria Anzaldúa states "are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (25). Even when individuals are able to cross borders, to merge into a society that may not be their own, they are haunted by

their lack of belonging, needing to shed their ‘otherness’ to be accepted (Boris 164). From the beginning, the dominant, white, masculine, heterosexual body was reinforced by entry to the state, even for those who may be present within the state but were not afforded the right to exist as a citizen.

Ladelle McWhorter summarizes Michel Foucault’s sense of ‘discipline’ as techniques utilized by the state to mould the body, identifying that techniques were utilized to ‘retool’ the body, turning any body into a soldier, pupil, labourer, or other role (204). Through the military and other institutions, the state exploited the body for its use, creating a model citizen that shoulders a gun, marches, defends, and more. According to Foucault, “This form of power [discipline] applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (781). Individual subjection is what defines who we are, yet it is heavily influenced by the state. Thus, the individual creates an identity based on an idea of a whole body, one that learns how to conform to techniques that allow it to serve the state through the military, education, and/or the workforce.

Lastly, sociocultural practices serve to further the normalization of the male political body. Susan Wendell discusses the enforcement of bodily normality in society, remarking that it is almost entirely self-governed (88). Norms such as cosmetics, shaving, hair dressing, dieting, skincare, and the like “are not forced upon women by anyone in particular,” and as a result, “they appear to be natural or voluntary while they wield tremendous power in women’s lives” (87). Similar to Foucault’s statement on identity, women internalize and define themselves based upon prescribed norms that

reinforce their position within the private sphere, and reinforce the dominant political body as male. Theodore Schatzki and Wolfgang Natter identify that social institutions are secured through bodily activity, including consumption, desire, constitution, and so on (4-5). In a sense, sociocultural practices could be seen as a subset of Foucault's disciplinary techniques, in that women, who have been deemed to not possess the qualities necessary for the public sphere, must follow specific norms that relegate them to activities that are not as valued within society.

2. The Political Body Inscribed

The more I shrivel the more I shrink, the more you grow and develop.

- *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig 162.

In remaking the body, these methods inscribe norms upon the skin. In most cases, the inscription is a violent one, wrought with power relations that serve to demonstrate the authority of normality and the subservience of the body to the state. Foucault discusses the level of power present within identity, saying, "the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others... Power exists only when it is put into action... This also means that power is not a function of consent" (788). Rather, power exists in relation to others; for our purposes, it exists between the state and the body only when they come into relation with one another, when they attempt to utilize the other to define themselves. Susan Wendell notes that our proximity to normality is highly present in the creation of our identity. That is, we seek to define ourselves as though we are as 'normal' as possible, using the definition of the white, masculine body (88). This

comes to be in a few ways: changing our looks, changing our behaviour, or having our behaviour and choices modified for us based on our conformity or nonconformity. Regarding looks and behaviour, Kathy Peiss notes that cosmetics, although signifying a newfound independence for women, were initially created out of an anxiety about the bare faces of women (166-167). Andrea Elizabeth Shaw relates the trends in Black culture (straight hair, weaves, natural, ghetto) as attempts by black women to renegotiate their identity in a space they never seem to truly belong (22). For bodies that do not automatically fit within the white, hyper gendered body, identification can be a constant process of conforming and non-conforming, at times in a violent manner (such as black women lightening their skin).

There is also evidence of external entities forcibly conforming other bodies into hegemonic roles. Rosemary Nossif notes that the lack of autonomy surrounding women's reproductive rights stems directly from the normalized male political body, saying:

They [reproductive laws] are... shaped by traditional attitudes about women... that they are incompetent to make decisions and are unaccountable for their actions... [and] that once a woman is pregnant, her citizenship can be abridged and her rights to privacy and equality shared with her physician, the State, and the fetus she is supporting (61).

Nossif's statement signifies the physical violence that bodies who are not included in the political body can undergo as a result of their exclusion. The state enacts reproductive injustice, and at times physical harm, upon women who they do not see as inherently valuable to the state. Another example of violence upon bodies is the treatment of detainees in American prison, specifically those who attempt to use their bodies via

hunger strikes. Reesia Orzeck notes that the state often force-feeds detainees who are hunger striking to silence them, since it disrupts the states ability to use detainees for security and political gains (32). Orzeck also is sure to note that it can be argued that force feeding was used as a form of torture, with guards:

... restraining even those who were willing to accept enteral (tube) feeding; feeding detainees so much that they became ill; inserting the nasal tubes roughly; inserting them anew with every feeding rather than allowing the detainees to keep them in between feedings; and using the same tubes for multiple detainees (33)

This extreme violence within force-feeding exemplifies a micro example of the macro issue – the guard represents the state, who is physically forcing the citizens body to do something it may not want to do, removing the autonomy and rights from a body that dared to resist. Thus, the social practices and methods of discipline that society and the state enact to ensure normality do not stay at the level of abstract. Rather, they have specific and unique impacts on the physical body and the skin, often in an invasive and violent way

I take you by surprise, I tackle you, I take possession of you...

- *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig 71.

3. Resistance: Utilizing the Body

I announce that you are here alive though cut to pieces, I search hastily for your fragments in the mud, m/y nails scrabble at the small stones and pebbles, I find your nose a part of your vulva your labia your clitoris, I

find your ears one tibia then the other, I assemble you part by part, I reconstruct you, I put your eyes back in place, I appose the separated skin edge to edge, I hurriedly produce tears vaginal juice saliva in the requisite amount, I smear you with them at all your lacerations, I put m/y breath in your mouth, I warm your ears your hands your breasts, I introduce all m/y air into your lungs...

- *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig 80.

Other forms of resistance exist in freak shows, music, pornography, and even simply existence as a deviant body (again, note that this is not an exhaustive list). Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, after discussing black women's identity politics, discusses how fat, Black women challenge the narrative, especially when they "harness strength from the erotic by reveling in [their] fatness and blackness all at the same time – aware of [their] sexuality and not ashamed of it" (72). Shaw calls fat black women a "repository of latent energy" through their engagement with western ideals of the body as a result of their existence (131). We can assume that any body that challenges the dominant narrative can serve the same purpose by harnessing their latent energy, and that is why the state is so fearful of difference. We can also see why unrelated activities such as freak shows, porn, and music serve as sites of resistance. Within the freak show, 'others' congregate to celebrate and utilize their otherness, critiquing hegemony (Langman 661-662). Porn follows the same thought; for actors, it can be freeing to participate in an act you are frequently taught is inappropriate, especially if the focus is female pleasure (Langman 669). Many of these actions focus on subversion, taking a hegemonic narrative and redefining for yourself as an act of resistance.

Music follows a similar violation, specifically techno music. As Bernd Herzogenrath discusses, music can function as the unconscious of the body politic, as an experiment with new social and political realities (233). Herzogenrath delves into techno as a site of resistance, noting that “in its use of polyrhythmic beats, its use of machines, and its futuristic themes, techno seemed to directly engage with the social and political issues of twentieth century urban industrial America...” (246). Techno raves are generally held in abandoned places that once signified industry and production (critiquing capitalism) and the collective dancing serves to remove “the gaze”; the group transforms the body by celebrating together (Herzogenrath 247-248). These sites of resistance utilize the body in ways that work above the skin, yet challenge the dominant narrative and work to resist normalization. They take actions subscribed by the state and use them in ways the state may not expect nor authorize, which allows for personal meaning and reclamation of the body.

More violent methods of resistance also exist. Much in the same way that hegemonic discourse can violently imprint upon the skin with its meaning, individuals seeking to remake their identity work to change that meaning through physical inscription. As mentioned above, the state enacts violence upon the bodies of prisoners through force feeding. Orzeck identifies hunger striking as a form of political speech that exemplifies the denial of other forms of speech such as speaking in front of a court, or even being seen by the general public (42). By hunger striking, especially within a prison, the “internal ordeal transforms the body’s surface, turning it into a legible text” utilized for a purpose (42). The prisoner’s body is used in a sometimes fatal way that symbolizes their efforts at resisting their dominant narrative, which is that of the state as protector while actually mistreating detainees. Body modification is also a significant

portion of bodily resistance. Lauren Langman, in her discussion of the freak show, identifies body modifications as a signifier of belonging to the ‘other’ (664). In much the same way that normality is reproduced through identity, so is otherness. Langman states that, “many adherents of such body modification regard their embrace of the grotesque as a rejection of the alienation, sterility, emptiness and inauthenticity of modernity” (664).

Victoria Pitts defines body modification in a similar way, as a method of blatantly displaying your deviance, with the body as a project necessary to self-identity (664-665). Pitts shares the stories of a number of different individuals who participate in ‘violent’ reidentification; all see their modifications as affirmations of belonging to the other, a signifier of their queerness or deviance, and a rebellion against normative expectations of desire and bodily performance (446-451, 458). These modifications serve to re-signify the body as part of a community that does not prescribe to dominant narratives. They are a physical re-inscription of the skin. The body is a site rife with potentiality, and methods of resistance largely focus on reclaiming and redefining identity on personal terms, removing the states influence from your corporeality, and remaking yourself in your own terms.

*the moon eclipses the sun. / la diosa lists us. / we don the feathered
mantle / and change our fate*

- *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa 221

4. The Meaning of Resistance

I question an absence so strange that it makes a hole within m/y body.

Then I know in absolutely in fallible fashion that I am in need of you, I

*require your presence, I seek you, I implore you, I summon you to
appear you who are featureless without hands breasts belly vulva limbs
thoughts, you at the very moment when you are nothing more than a
pressure an insistence within m/y body.*

- *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig 35-36

Can the body ever escape the state? There is evidence that even acts of resistance simply utilize state-created definitions, concepts, and ideals. Thus, resistance serves less as resistance and more as a rereading of hegemony in terms that may simply reaffirm it.

Pitts states:

The poststructuralist perspective points out that discursive moves are never wholly original and that bodies are neither naturally pristine nor blank canvases; rather, body modification proceeds within the context of forces that socially inscribe the body-subject, producing meanings that make new discursive creations possible (445).

Despite the possibility of “new discursive creations”, this identifies a reality about the body that is inescapable – it is inscribed by its environment (Pitts 445). There is little we can do to ensure our body is wholly ours, wholly neutral, and void of societal influence, even if we use our bodies to create new narratives. Furthermore, the body may be read differently than we intend it to. Pitts also discusses that both cosmetic surgery and branding have been co-opted in ways that enforce the dominant body (454). In this way, body modification may perpetuate normality and contribute to a culture where masculinity is the norm. In a sense, the body cannot be separated from the culture in which it participates.

Even existence cannot escape its connection with hegemony. Wendell, in her work on normality, states that those who are “other” serve to reinforce those who are normal. We know what normal is *not*, and we strive to ensure that we avoid that – seeing them makes it easier to understand the line of abnormality (Wendell 88). This is present in Shaw’s book on fat, black women who, when owning their strength, may serve as resistance to the norm (as mentioned), but also serve as an “opposing identity anchor,” affirming what a legitimate identity is (19). The woman, by virtue of her fatness and blackness, serves as the very clear antithesis to the white woman, and helps the white woman define herself (Shaw 50). Although reclaiming your body as “other” inscribes personal meaning, it can also reaffirm the dominant political body unintentionally.

What is the answer to the question of identity? To the question of body? How do we create ourselves? How do we resist hegemony? *Is my body my own?* There are few ways to answer these questions beyond continuing down the path of identity and personal corporeality. The body and the state exist as a tug of war, each one trying to gain authority and power without realizing that if one lets go, they both fall. Can there be an end? Herzogenrath defines the body as a collective, and as an environment, not an independent entity (32). Foucault theorizes that the solution is not identification, but refusal of identification:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from

the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state (784).

In this way, perhaps identity is not the solution, but the problem. We have seen that the state works to define the body, and the body works to define itself within the state. These actions inflict violence, both in the form of discipline and resistance. They also work in concert with one another; without the body, the state would have nothing to define itself by. Without the state, the body would have no measure of normality or abnormality, nothing to conform to or resist against. Can the state and the body ever exist without the other?

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