

Gender and the Body, An American Perspective

Patriarchy, as a rule, has made ownership of one's body a subversion, perversion or unhealthy immersion. This is evidenced in the suppression of "alternative" sexualities (which means any sexuality that does not yield children to perpetuate the culture), the structures of death and dying which separate the ill or the dead completely from the living, often allowing for blame to be cast at the sick for their "weakness", and the frank disregard for the bodies of those that are colonized, captured or repressed in the dominant culture.

Bodies that do not conform to the standards of the privileged class have little value. As an American, I viewed the photographs from Abu Ghraib with shame and horror. These bodies were treated as new possessions of the empire and the racism of home, so long repressed in the age of political correctness, found the strength of its whipping arm on these prisoners. In the regime of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq knew what it was to have a body owned by the state. In the regime of American occupation, the people of Iraq now know what is to have a body owned by a foreign state that needs them even less than Saddam Hussein did.

But privilege does not stop at disrespecting the body of foreigners. Michael Moore points out in *Fahrenheit 9/11* that because America has a volunteer army, the majority of people for whom the military seems a good choice are the underemployed working and lower economic classes who are seeking some way of financing a college education or job training. These bodies are an easier sacrifice than the bodies of the ruling elite.

Sacrifice of bodies for freedom is a well-known trope in American mythology. Take a look at some lines from one of our favorite patriotic songs, "God Bless the USA":

"I am proud to be an American
Where at least I know I'm free
And I won't forget the men who died
Who gave that right to me
And I gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today
Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land
God Bless the USA"

Lee Greenwood, a known conservative and the writer of the song wrote this song in 1983, long after women had been admitted into the military, and by the way...women died too, even before they were in combat. Their bodies, however, disappear from Greenwood's song that glorifies the sacrifice of men's bodies for freedom. American mythology rarely makes note in its songs or records of the sacrifice of great minds who prevented the disintegration of freedom here or abroad through reason, protest or negotiation. But is it really surprising that we base so much of our identity on the idea of sacrifice of body in light of the fact that one of our biggest cultural icons is Jesus Christ? Whether you believe

in Jesus as a religious leader, Son of God or not, you cannot live in American culture without being inundated by Him/him. What was His/his claim to fame? Sacrificing a body for souls. It is a fundamental ideal of Western Culture that we must eliminate the body in order to retain culture and spirit.

This tenet can become sticky for women especially, who biologically experience reminders of body on a regular basis because of menstruation and their biological capacity for childbirth. At the heart of the pro-life, pro-choice debate is this question: is it ever alright for women to master their bodies, to direct the work of their bodies, to conquer the nature of the body in the same way that we as a culture have conquered the nature of the land. Too hot? Turn on air conditioning. Too cold? Turn on the heat. Technology, despite the byproducts that it emits which destroy so much of nature, also helps us to overcome the natural and live in idealized conditions. No matter where you stand on abortion your question remains, "How much control over the body is too much for human beings to have?"

Interestingly enough, the answer is always that there is never ENOUGH control when it comes to vanity. Americans spent \$7.7 billion on cosmetic surgery in 2002 with a steady annual climb since. Men make up about only 13% of the total procedures, a stark reminder that for women, control of the body in all matters non-reproductive is not only encouraged but often an imperative for them to remain economically viable.

But if you think \$7.7 billion is a lot, it may cost us between \$100-200 billion to conquer the foreign bodies of Iraq. Suddenly, Botox looks cheap.

As feminists turn their attention to the strange relationship of power and privilege to body, we often find that we must reclaim body in order to shake off the assumptions patriarchy inflicts on culture. We must accept body differences along with ideological, sexual, and emotional differences. We must expand dialogue to include the physical dialogue of flesh to flesh...what we speak of with our skins behind closed doors is also part of who we are and what we believe. To separate body and politic is to create a culture of lies and of betrayal. But to reunite these long lost kin is problematic, particularly in a culture with deep Puritan roots.

In 1642, Thomas Granger of Plymouth plantation was hanged for committing sexual acts with many, many farm animals. In 1998, President Bill Clinton was nearly impeached for having sex with Monica Lewinsky, a much more willing participant than the Granger family goats. Certainly, other factors were involved in the legitimizing of this attempt at impeachment (all of which were determined unfounded ultimately) but in the public eye the big issue was Monica, a dress, and a cigar. Public opinion decided that a body owned by a public official was subject to their judgment and control. Although you could argue that Hilary Clinton may have had some claim to that, owing to their voluntary marriage vows,

I don't recall seeing anything during Clinton's inauguration ceremony that promised his flesh to the public. Actually, the specific oath of office is:

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Yet, despite this Americans felt that control over the president's body was important enough to consider impeachment. Now, lest I oversimplify, Clinton did try to get away with it, saying he did not have sex with "that woman" and its arguable that this blatant attempt to hide an affair from his wife means that his character is flawed. It's a discussion for another time whether or not we should expect superhuman perfection from our leaders, but suffice to say that there was unalterably an issue of body and its control involved in the Clinton debacle. Further, think about how often jokes were made about the President's body...his penchant for eating fatty foods, specifically. The Presidential body belongs to the people. And if the most influential body in the land is common capital, what about the body of you or I, especially those living with less privilege: women, minorities, Other in all its wrappings?

This column raises more questions than it answers, I know. That is one of the things that Meowpower hopes to do with all of its content, to raise questions and to encourage discourse. In this our inaugural issue, we hope you will find many questions you can take back into your work, your writing, your teaching, your learning.

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