An Unsettled Body

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Directed by Kenneth Collins

Part Two,
What They Hear

I. A Scene Between My Third Grade Teacher and My Younger Self

MRS. FRISHMAN
Alright. Are you ready?

JEREMY
Yeah.

MRS. FRISHMAN
What is it? You nervous?

JEREMY
Yeah. A little bit.

MRS. FRISHMAN
You'll do wonderfully. Trust me.

JEREMY
What if I forget something?

MRS. FRISHMAN
Then you'll start over! No need to get worked up over it, dear. If you forget something, then you'll just start over.

JEREMY
…

MRS. FRISHMAN
Do you know what I like to do when I'm scared or nervous or…?

JEREMY
What?

MRS. FRISHMAN
I like to sing a little song to myself in my head. Not one that anyone else can hear. But just a little song to myself, for myself.

JEREMY
…Are you doing it now?

MRS. FRISHMAN
Oh yeah. You try.

JEREMY
"No more…"

MRS. FRISHMAN
No, no. Just in your head.

JEREMY
…

MRS. FRISHMAN
…

JEREMY
…

MRS. FRISHMAN

Alright. Are you ready?

II. Some Thoughts on Empathy

In the Winter 2020 issue of the journal *Early American Literature*, historian John Demos (2020) embodies the Puritan Reverend Adonijah Bidwell of colonial New England in a series of fictional diary entries from 1752 to 1780. In his introduction, Demos describes this endeavor as "an invented datum, something that *might* have been written by an actual person who lived and died three centuries ago" (p. 8). Throughout the Foreward and Afterword of this "fictional history" (p. 7), Demos refers to himself in the third-person, expanding the mission of this performance-based academic pursuit beyond the containment of this single paper. This integration of the lived-experience – as Demos describes it: "an assemblage, a composite - a snapshot (or brief video) - designed to draw together the central threads of a life" (p. 17) – acts as a demand for scholars to recognize the daily, performative functions of life that are largely left undocumented, inferred by contemporary researchers. This changes the behavioral function of the scholar; as Demos notes: "He does not *absorb the record* of the past; he *reenacts* that life" (p. 17). Demos claims the marriage between invention and study in the name of empathy. He ends his article "Reenacting an Early American Life" simply: "In history...empathy is all" (p. 18).

However, as a playwright wheeling and dealing in the economy of the make-believe and the insight we gain from it, I find this claim unhelpfully vague. When we pursue Demos' axiom, we find that empathy is a misnomer for the cumulation of an audience's (or even a maker's) experience engaging a narrative. Empathy is a happy byproduct of the meaning an audience or reader generates. But to understand it as the primary outcome of any artistic or scholarly pursuit distorts empathy as something quantifiable.

The forwarding of a body onstage, its function as a vehicle for an audience to access the metaphoric terms of a work, ensures complications. Certainly, one of those being an audience's

intrinsic desire to connect with the circumstance, the action, of the play they watch through the body that 'experiences' it. But it has always startled me that most - not all - audience members (and frankly, that most - but not all - theater-makers) name this desire as empathy. This does a disservice to the mechanics of theater because in actuality, what is happening in the space between a play and its audience is much more complicated than the failsafe defense of empathy would suggest - a defense that rhetorically means to secure theater's cultural utility. That is not to say that we cannot have an empathic recognition between our experience and what we view onstage. But plays at their best, should elicit wonder, not understanding. Because plays at their best reckon the bodies that we witness with the world, simultaneously narrative and poetic, around them. As Aristotle wrote in *The Poetics*: "Namely, the plot must be so structured, even without benefit of any visual effect, that the one who is hearing the events unroll shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens…" (1967, p. 40)

The body that we witness onstage at the theater must never be mistaken for our body that sits in the audience; calling forward empathy suggests this transference of experience. Instead, we must recognize that the body we watch is the home of our hopes and desires for the manufactured world around it to come into order with it. At the theater, we long for this body that we witness to harmonize with the associative overtones that have shaped our movement through an hour, an hour and a half, a two, a three-hour experience.

In many ways, the audience witnessing the body performing in the theater can act as an analogy for the presence - theoretical or otherwise - of embodiment in scholarship. As is true in the theater, this phenomenon largely bypasses empathy; it highlights the distance between the scholar's contemporary experience, the subject they wrestle with, and the world through which subject is made as object of study. So, it is with this in mind that I borrow Demos' impulse to

reanimate the history of Lydia Wardel, a Quaker women, who on a Sunday in 1661 walked naked into a Puritan church service in Newbury, Massachusetts as a means of protesting the persecution of her religious counterparts living in the colony. This phenomenon – this performance-protest – is called "Going Naked as a Sign". I build this reenactment not to draw it closer to my experience, but to recognize the deeply embedded cultural neuroses present within the life of white religious colonists in New England during the 17th century. For it is from this anxiety regarding one's salvation - spiritual expression bound within the corporeal - that the cycle of state-sanctioned punishment and protest makes one of its first stands in American history. An anxiety that I can brush up against, but never fully experience.

(See Page 20 - 21 for References)

III. Lydia and Eliakim, At Night

LYDIA
Do you think it will rain tomorrow?

ELIAKIM
I don't know. Why?

LYDIA
I was thinking about going out and picking some pot marigolds. Margaret wants her dress yellow, so…

ELIAKIM
Mmm…

LYDIA
Are you mad at me?

ELIAKIM
No.

LYDIA
Okay…

//

ELIAKIM
I'm not.

LYDIA
Okay.

ELIAKIM
William tried this thing at school—

LYDIA
He told me.

ELIAKIM
Almost threw himself off the roof.

LYDIA
I know. I heard.

ELIAKIM
I mean… How did he even get up to the roof?

LYDIA
I don’t know.

//

ELIAKIM
What are you thinking about?

LYDIA
If it’s going to rain tomorrow.

ELIAKIM
Simon ordered me whipped.

LYDIA
Why?

ELIAKIM
He called you a whore.

LYDIA
…

ELIAKIM
And I said he was…damned. So…

LYDIA
Oh, Eliakim.

ELIAKIM
What?

LYDIA
When?

ELIAKIM
Around four today.

LYDIA
No, I mean, when are they going to whip you?

ELIAKIM
Oh. I don’t know.

LYDIA
You shouldn’t have said that.

ELIAKIM
I know.

LYDIA
Well…

ELIAKIM
Don’t give me / that.

LYDIA
What?

ELIAKIM
Don’t roll your eyes at me.
You know: you’re not the only one that gets to be self-righteous. If someone calls my wife / a whore.

LYDIA
Alright! You’re right.
I didn’t mean to try and pick a fight. I…I really didn’t.

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
You can get so testy sometimes.

ELIAKIM
Ugh…

LYDIA
What?

ELIAKIM
It’s my mouth.

LYDIA
Mhmm…

ELIAKIM
I can feel the scar. In my left cheek.

LYDIA
Well, stop biting.

ELIAKIM
“Well…”

LYDIA
Stop biting.
You're being boring.

ELIAKIM
Should we move?

LYDIA
……Why?

ELIAKIM
Well, you don't—
The kids don't like it here.

LYDIA
Anymore.

ELIAKIM
Yes, well…

LYDIA
Jesus, Eliakim.

ELIAKIM
I'm not trying to make / you angry; it was a serious question.

LYDIA
I know, I know, I know, I know.
I know. I know.

ELIAKIM
We don't have to talk about it now.
Just. Think about it.

LYDIA
…

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
…

ELIAKIM
Are you hot?
I'm hot.

LYDIA
Sit outside.

ELIAKIM
No. I was just seeing if you were…

LYDIA
No, I'm fine.
I'm… I'm fine.

ELIAKIM
Do you ever regret doing it?

LYDIA
No.

ELIAKIM
Really?

LYDIA
Yeah. No.
Not for one second.

ELIAKIM
That's how you know it was right.

LYDIA
I guess so.

ELIAKIM
Were you embarrassed?

LYDIA
Why are you asking me all of / these?

ELIAKIM
Were you?

LYDIA
We've done this already.
…No. I wasn't.

ELIAKIM
Not at all.

LYDIA
No.

ELIAKIM
Not even when you see the Woodmans next door?

LYDIA
…What do you want?
Do you want me to feel embarrassed?

ELIAKIM
No. No.
…
No!

LYDIA
I don’t think that you have any idea of who I am.
Which makes you want me.
But it makes me resent you.

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
Tell me if you’ve known me.

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
We’ll talk about this later; I don’t want the kids to know that we’ve been fighting.

ELIAKIM
We haven’t been fighting.

LYDIA
Okay.

ELIAKIM
We haven’t been / fighting.

LYDIA
Okay.

ELIAKIM
I love you.

LYDIA
I love you, too, Eliakim.

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
Don’t say any more.

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
I wish I had…just…

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
…

ELIAKIM
…

LYDIA
Oh shoot.

ELIAKIM
What?

LYDIA
I forgot that I picked all the marigolds for Little Lydia’s dress…

IV. Unsettledness Explained

Wardel's spiritually informed performance of protest reads very differently depending upon our positionality within its history. We, as an audience to Wardel's performance today, must be ready to sit secure within unsettledness. In fact, it is this unsettledness that seems to be the primary theoretic foothold in understanding events of nakedness in history. Ruth Barcan (2004) addresses this claim in her thorough account of the naked form in Western Culture, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy.* "The naked body is a site of *ambivalence*, both personally and collectively. It may be a site for ambivalence about the beauty or sufficiency of one's own body. More abstractly, though, the regulation of nudity often occurs in the shadow of hidden ambivalence about what it is to be human" (p. 3). Any attempt to nail down a reason for, or even a consequence of, Lydia Wardel's performance of protest retroactively removes the ambivalence that Barcan assigns to the presence of the naked body. An ambivalence that stems from an inability to see the fullness of meaning resulting from Lydia Wardel's naked presence. It is again a body that is never settled.

The persecution faced by Quakers in Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 17th century was severe. Puritan communities sought a spiritual homogeneity; the town of Dedham's covenant, written in 1636, reads: "we shall by all means of labor to keep off from us all such as are contrary minded, and receive only such unto us as may be probably one heart with us." (Bremer, 1995, p. 104). This phobic attitude towards other religious sects came from a sense of self-preservation. We see this desire for regulation of access to spiritual assurance play out in the manner through which Puritan churches in Massachusetts Bay Colony strictly enforced a process for church membership, including both male and female applicants attesting to the proof of their salvation to the congregation, followed by the community of saints judging the authenticity of

this testament (Bremer, 1995, p. 110). Built upon an apocalyptic outlook, Puritans sought to protect their interests by gathering the saved - and only the saved - together. Therefore, the retribution against other religious sects infiltrating the Puritan's community of saints had to be swift and unflinching. The result were laws such as these:

> [E]very such male Quaker shall for the first offence have one of his ears cut off...and for the second offence shall have his other ear cut off… [A]nd every woman Quaker that hath suffered the law here that shall be presumed to come into this jurisdiction shall be severely whipped, and kept at the house of correction… and for every Quaker, he or she, that shall a third time herein again offend, they shall have their tongues bored through with a hot iron… (Hallowell, 1883, p. 137)

The stage is set in this community for Lydia Wardel's naked performance before it even starts by way of the Puritan's fixation on the performance of church member's salvation and the focus on the body in active means of punishment against the contrary-minded. There are explicit codes here that script behavior and build a conception of the divine - codes that drive Lydia Wardel beyond implication to fully embodied action.

The oldest account of Lydia Wardel's act of "Going Naked as a Sign" appears in a text by the Quaker George Bishop, originally published in 1667 and titled *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord*. Bishop recognizes Wardel's act within this modality of protest and righteousness, a prophecy condemning the Puritan's treatment of Quakers; he writes for his introduction of Lydia Wardel:

> ...being a young, tender, and chaste woman, seeing the wickedness of your priests and rulers to her husband, was not at all offended at the Truth, but as your wickedness abounded so she withdrew, and separated from your church at Newbury...and being given up to the leading of the Lord...and, as a sign to them, she went in naked among them, though it was exceeding hard to her modest and shame-faced disposition. (Bishop, 1703, p. 239)

In Bishop's description we see concerns of gender essentialism slam against this performative impulse to prophesy Puritan's "wickedness." Bishop's depiction of Wardel's "modest and shame-faced disposition" unsettles our placement within this event; Bishop aligns nakedness here with everything that is not modest or shame-faced. Nakedness functions as flagrancy, deviance, or even pride, but it is redeemed through Wardel's impulse to utilize her nakedness as a means of retribution. So, Wardel's body can hold within it a dizzying number of contradictions for the Puritan spectator. In the case of Lydia Wardel, it is not simply that it is a body that moves into a socially-condemned state in order to call attention to injustice - it is a *female* body. It is a naked female body.

To further this already complicated image, we must remember that this is also a naked female *Quaker* body. And this slight adjustment illuminates even more surface and structural paradoxes. The Quaker body here foregrounds and predicts its punishment; Lydia Wardel knew that this act of "Going Naked as a Sign" would send her to the whipping post as Puritan laws against Quakers were widely known. And its means justify its ends from every vantage point. From the perspective of the viewer: this naked Quaker body demonstrates its own damnation and so necessitates its punishment. From the perspective of the actor: this naked Quaker body demonstrates its own salvation by submission to its punisher, a symbolic gesture towards Christ.

The unstable ground we find ourselves on when examining Lydia Wardel's performance of "Going Naked as a Sign" - whether we are within the event or otherwise - feels distant from an impulse towards empathy. At the heart of this event, from actor to viewer to viewer's viewer, is a dance with the divine, a reach towards the wonder of certainties concerning salvation that can only be known through embodiment. When considered in this fashion, Lydia Wardel's nakedness seems entirely unpeculiar: how else can one negotiate the assurance that they have

unlocked the door to salvation except on paradoxical terms? Unsettled terms from unsettled bodies? And so, we follow Wardel's example through an attempt at embodying her history - not to empathize, but to try to resolve her presence within her world and our presence - four hundred years later – watching her.

(See Page 20 – 21 for References)

V. *Psalm 1, from The Bay Psalm Book; Recorded by the Playwright at The Great Friends Meeting House in Newport, Rhode Island*

Oh blessed man that in the advice
Of wicked doth not walk.
Nor stand in sinner's way nor sit
In chayre of scornful folk.

But in the law of Jehova,
Is his longing delight;
And in his law doth meditate
By day and ere by night.

And he shall be like to a tree
Planted by water-rivers:
That in his season yields his fruit
And his leafe never withers.

And all he doth, shall prosper well,
The wicked are not so:
But they are like unto the chaffe
Which winde drives to and fro.

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