Becoming Visible
Corporeal Politics, Spaces of Appearance, and the Miss America Protest

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Abstract: Jacques Rancière's discussion of disidentification provides an important account of how existing inegalitarian structures and hierarchically ordered identities may be challenged. However, Rancière treats disidentification as a discursive phenomenon, centered on naming. As an explanation of how the invisible might become visible, it is problematic to overlook the body, since appearance requires our bodies to be seen, to become visible. Drawing on discussions of the subject-in-process and the idea of identity as both enfleshed and performatively constituted, this article seeks to enrich Rancière's discussion of disidentification by focusing attention on its embodied dimensions. It does so by exploring, through an analysis of the Miss America protest of 1968, the role of corporeality both in constituting spaces of appearance and in articulating democratic demands for visibility.

Keywords: corporeal politics, disidentification, identity, Jacques Rancière, Miss America protest, spaces of appearance, visibility

The question of identity has been much debated within feminist and democratic theory. Some regard identity as "the basis of political action" (Bell and Klein 1996: xviii). Politics, on this interpretation, is "anchored upon" (Elam 1994: 70) the idea of a pre-given subject with a common or shared identity to justify and ground its claims. Critics, by contrast, have countered that this mistakenly essentializes and reifies identities (e.g., W. Brown 1995; Butler 1992; Mouffe 1992). Identities, including democratic identities, it is claimed, are performatively produced (e.g., Butler 1992; Ferguson 2007; Lloyd 2009). "Woman" is thus not the pre-political category on which a feminist politics of presence is founded; rather, feminist identity is generated *through* democratic political participation. This article begins from the premise that identities are always in-process (Lloyd 2005), always mobile, impermanent, and transformable. Consequently, radical democratic politics, the conception that concerns me in this article is always a "politics of becoming" (Asenbaum 2023; Connolly 1996).

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For that reason, we must ask how identities can be both democratically de- and reconstituted. Here, Jacques Rancière's (1992, 1999) account of disidentification as "radical democratic practice" (Asenbaum 2021) is particularly evocative (Asenbaum 2021, 2023; Sü 2022).

For Rancière, the process of disidentification is intrinsic to radical democratic political subjectivation. It creates political or democratic subjects. (For Rancière, politics is synonymous with democracy.) Disidentification entails twin facets. First, a rejection of and break with the "'right' names," or identities, mandated by the police order, Rancière's term for the hierarchical organization of society that allocates roles, functions, and places, decides how "bodies, names, and identities" (2007: 561) are linked, and determines "the visible and the sayable" (Rancière 1999: 29). Second is the deployment of "'wrong' names" or "misnomers" (Rancière 1992: 62; see also 1999, 2004a), names, based for Rancière on an assumption of equality, that reconfigure the relation between identities, bodies, and places, opening the way for new political subjects to emerge.

Tying it so closely to "naming," however, presents disidentification as an abstract, discursive process. This overlooks its corporeal dimensions (but see Muñoz 1999).[1] My purpose in this article, therefore, is to consider the connection between disidentification and embodiment. My contention is that disidentification and political subjectivation are invariably corporeal. I thus seek to augment Rancière's Arendtian-influenced idea that politics is a "matter of appearance" (2003: 202) by showing how radical democratic disidentification as a corporeal process enables hitherto invisible populations to claim visibility for themselves.

Addressing the relation between embodiment, disidentification, and visibility is important for at least two reasons. First, there are perceptual, material, and structural limitations that restrict which bodies can "appear" publicly. Some are excluded from the public sphere; others can only be seen as inferior. Disidentification, understood as a corporeal process, indicates how such limitations might be contested democratically to render the invisible visible. Second, identities are never simply names assigned to bodies. Rather "bodies manifest the categories they are identified with" (Machin 2015: 49). As Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has shown, sexed and gendered bodies do not have fixed essences but are performatively materialized through the repetition of gestures, movements, norms of appearance and morphology. If identities are generated through repetitive, bodily performances or "doings," and are always in process, then, by implication, disidentification can also signify "doing" things differently.

To make my case, I reread one of the founding moments of the women's liberation movement, the Miss America protest of 1968, as well as

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briefly considering what role practices like hunger strikes or "die-ins" might play within a disidentificatory process.

Protesting Miss America

On 7 September 1968, around one hundred feminists assembled on the Atlantic City Boardwalk to protest the Miss America pageant, an annual beauty contest with a television audience of circa 27 million and live audience of approximately 25,000 (Kreydatus 2018: 22). Organized by New York Radical Women, the protest took issue with the demeaning image of women portrayed by Miss America. The assembled women picketed the pageant, leafleted, lobbied participants to join the protest, sang songs, and announced a boycott of the products of the competition's commercial sponsors. They carried signs reading: "I am a Woman, not a Toy, Pet or Mascot" (Duffett 1968), "Let's Judge Ourselves as People," and "Can Make-Up Cover the Wounds of Our Oppression" (Little 2021). They enacted guerrilla theater. A woman dressed as a Wall Street broker oversaw the pretend auction of a life-size Miss America paper doll to which other protestors were chained (Duffett 1968). Two African American feminists (Flo Kennedy and Bonnie Allen) were bound to a maypole during the staging of a cattle auction (Kreydatus 2018: 25). A live sheep was crowned Miss America and paraded on the boardwalk to "parody the way the contestants … are appraised and judged like animals at a country fair" (Duffett 1968; Echols 1989: 93).

The "highlight" of the afternoon, for one participant (Duffett 1968), was not bra-burning, as has been falsely claimed, but the tossing of "instruments of female torture" (Hanisch [1968] 2003), including girdles, bras, wigs, high heels, makeup, and copies of magazines (like *Playboy, Cosmopolitan,* and *Ladies Home Journal*) into a "huge Freedom Trash Can" (Dow 2003; Redstockings 1968). In the evening, a group of 15 or 16 women, trying "to disguise themselves with 'straight' clothes and lots of makeup" (Suthelm 1968), entered the hall where the televised pageant was being staged. As the outgoing Miss America was reading her farewell speech, the protestors hung a large banner proclaiming "Women's Liberation" over the balcony and shouted: "No More Miss America" and "Freedom for Women" (Echols 1989: 94).

The Miss America protest has been described as the moment when "feminism suddenly burst into the headlines" (Davis cited in Dow 2003: 130) and "put women's lib on the map" (Dow 2003: 135), marking "the end of the movement's obscurity" (Echols 1989: 93). How, though, might we understand it in terms of corporeality, visibility, and appearance?

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Making the Invisible Visible

"Political activity," Rancière notes, "is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it" and "makes visible what had no business being seen" (1999: 30). Political subjects are thus subjects-in-process that emerge *through* politics – through the transformation of policed identities "into instances of experiences of a dispute" (36). This includes feminist subjects of the kind explored in this article. Although Rancière says little about how race, gender, or heteronormativity govern possibilities for disidentification (Sparks 2016: 421), he does furnish an example germane to the current analysis when he notes that, within police logic, woman is an identity that "hold[s] no mystery," but in politics "'woman' is the subject of experience – the denatured, defeminized subject – that measures the gap between an acknowledged part (that of sexual complementarity) and a having no part." It is this gap that creates the conditions for disidentification from the police order's sense of woman as the sexual other of man, and the performative appearance or making visible of the "militant" (Rancière 1999: 36) feminist subject(-in-process).

The ten points identified in the press release accompanying the Miss America protest encapsulate the protestors' disidentification from the demeaning policed image of woman reiterated by the pageant – an image, in their estimation, that is racist,[2] embraces the cult of youth, propagates divisive beauty standards, perpetuates the idea of women as merely competitors for male attention, requires them to be both "sexy and wholesome" ("Madonna" and "whore"), judges them only by their appearance, and bolsters militarism through the expectation that Miss America be deployed overseas as a "military death mascot" to entertain the troops – woman, that is, as "Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol" (Redstockings 1968). We might understand these objections as initiating "a quarrel over the *perceptible givens* of common life" (Rancière 2004b: 7, emphasis added). In this case, over the gendered expectations about women's ways of acting, being, and doing demanded by white heteronormative beauty standards – standards that turned "[e]very day in a woman's life" into "a walking Miss America contest" (Baxandall cited in Hanisch [1968] 2003).

An important feature of Rancière's account is that in democratic politics, "subjects act to create a stage on which problems can be made visible – a scene with subjects and objects, in full view of a 'partner' who does not 'see' them" (2004b: 7). For the Miss America protestors this was achieved by appropriating a stretch of seafront promenade, where, aided by the media, they used their "presence as a group … to make women's oppression into a conscious social issue" (Hanisch [1968] 2003). A stage where they could expose the inegalitarian logic of the prevailing police

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order that not only hierarchizes bodies according to gender, race, and sexuality but also configures the public sphere as masculine, white, and heteronormative,[3] where women could not be "seen" as the non-objectified equals of men. In Rancièrean terms, the Miss America protest, on my reading, made visible certain "wrongs" the women were facing and, as dissensual action, entailed an assumption (or "verification") of equality by the protestors.

The idea that politics is concerned with appearance and visibility is not exclusive to Rancière. In *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt sets out her well-known idea of the "space of appearance" as "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me" (1958: 198). This space—a stage, perhaps—does not preexist politics but is performatively constituted "wherever," and whenever people "are together in the manner of speech and action" (Arendt 1958: 199), albeit on a temporary and evanescent basis. The space of appearance is neither a physical space nor a particular location, though, as Butler (2015) shows, specific material conditions are necessary for its actualization. It is a space produced *between* people "acting and speaking together" (Arendt 1958: 198). While Arendt might not recognize it as such, because of its focus on (in her terms) social rather than political issues and on women's interests rather than a "concern with the world" (Markus 1987: 85), the Miss America protest arguably constructed just such a fleeting space of appearance.

In their accounts of politics, however, both Arendt and Rancière privilege speech, with the former writing: "Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor," for "speech is what makes man a political being" (1958: 178, 3). Likewise, as illustrated, for Rancière, by the plebians on Aventine Hill, politics "exists because those who have no right to be counted *as speaking beings* make themselves of some account" (1999: 27, emphasis added). As indicated earlier, Rancière's idea of disidentification centers on the dual rejection of the specific names—and thus identities—the police order assigns, "names that pin people down to their place and work" (1992: 62) and the deployment of "litigious" (2004a), "wrong," or "political" names (1992, 1999), such as Auguste Blanqui's use of "proletarian" to designate the "part of those who have no part" (Rancière, 1999: 39). These "improper" names, as others (Asenbaum 2023; Deseriis 2012) have called them, are thus vital discursive elements in political subjectivation.

Exclusion and marginalization do not occur only through the denial of political voice. They also operate through the differential distribution of visibility, through what can be *seen* rather than said or heard. Visibility calls attention to bodies. Yet, neither Arendt nor Rancière sufficiently consider the role of the body or, indeed, of insurgent corporeal practices

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in democratic claims to appearance. Indeed, Arendt does not regard corporeal matters to be the proper subject of politics at all (for further discussion see Butler 2015; Deranty and Renault 2009; Honig 1995b; Norton 1995; Zerilli 1995).[4] Butler's work on public assembly is instructive here. Butler builds on Arendt's ideas about the space of appearance—she is silent about Rancière—but insists the bodies involved are "exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field" and "pose[s] its challenge in corporeal terms" (2015: 11, 83). Understanding appearance, for Butler, requires us to acknowledge the necessarily "bodily dimension of action" (2015: 73; see also Cavarero 2021).

Informed by Butler's reading of Arendt, I want to turn in the final section of this article to the role of the body in democratic disidentification. Specifically, how embodied political actions might enact democratic claims to visibility that, in Rancière's terms, challenge the dominant distribution of the sensible dividing bodies into "two categories: those that one sees and those that one does not see" (1999: 22).

Disidentification as Corporeal Practice

The body is central to the Miss America protest in three main ways. First, the issues the women were protesting focused on the female/feminine body: on its objectification, as exemplified in the pageant's swimsuit contest, its disciplining to attain heteronormative beauty standards, the gendered and racialized norms determining how it is expected to look, and the norms of "respectable" femininity conditioning how the contestants, and by implication all women, ought to behave. The Miss America demonstration was thus one of the inaugural moments in the development of feminist "body politics": the idea that the material body could be the locus of political contestation (Bordo 1993). Indeed, such was the novelty of this emphasis on corporeal matters that onlookers allegedly "didn't know how to categorize what they saw. It couldn't be a political demonstration," they thought, because "the slogans weren't 'political' and anyhow, it was just women" (Suthelm 1968). The protestors, however, made fleshy issues political when they challenged the hierarchical distribution of bodies associated with the prevailing patriarchal and heteronormative police order, making visible what it occluded—namely, that it was precisely *as* bodies, specifically *as* sexed and gendered *bodies,* that women were objectified, marginalized, and oppressed.

Second, the Miss America protest confirms the importance of embodiment to radical democratic politics more broadly—not just because all

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such action is carried out by enfleshed beings and engenders (involuntary) sensate affects and reactions that elicit corporeal responses (Coole 2007; Krause 2011; Machin 2022), though this is correct, but because creating a space of appearance or staging a disagreement requires the embodied presence – the physical coming together – of democratic subjects (Butler 2015; Cavarero 2021). It is through what Melissa Tyler describes as a "collective, corporeal claim to public space" (2020: 190) that, I am suggesting, alternative modes of disidentificatory subjectivation can emerge. Physically congregating on the Atlantic City Boardwalk – being there *as* bodies – to perform guerrilla theater or to trash feminine accoutrements was how those involved subverted policed expectations about embodied femininity and performatively enacted an alternative mode of gendered embodiment.

This takes me to my third point. If, as Rancière observes, the "political realm" is the "realm of appearance" (2003: 202), then, as just noted, tying political action to speech clearly limits our understanding of how democratic claims to visibility are performed. What, then, are we to make of the fact that when Rancière defines politics he describes it as "whatever shifts a *body* from the place assigned to it," and when he characterizes subjectivation he notes that it involves "a series of actions of a *body*" (1999: 30, 35, emphasis added)? It implies that politics has a corporeal dimension, though not one Rancière actively explores (but see Quintana 2019).

We know, however, from discussions of the subject-in-process that (policed) identities are embodied effects, incorporated through everyday compulsory repetition of corporeal norms and practices. A need for repetition that renders fleshy identities both contingent and potentially open to democratic contestation, subversion, and transformation. Embodied subjects can resist or subvert entrenched enfleshed norms (Butler 1990, 1993; Schippers 2009). They can seek alternative ways of living their bodies in the world (Machin 2022). The corporeality of democratic disidentification is not, of course, limited to specific practices or activities. Bodies can "appear" publicly in several different ways. Nevertheless, in this final segment of this article, I want to reflect on how the somatic practices underpinning certain forms of protest, not all of which relate to the Miss America protest, can serve as the modality through which presuppositions of equality are enacted, bodies and identities are reconfigured, and new modes of embodied subjectivation emerge.

Employed mainly by refugees or asylum seekers, lip sewing, where participants literally suture their lips together, performatively materializes the silence imposed on those who enact it just as it resists that imposition (Bargu 2022; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005). Incarcerated hunger

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strikers refuse food to reclaim control over a body that is no longer theirs to control, a confined, surveilled, administered, and micromanaged body (Bargu 2014; Machin 2022; Shah 2022). Refusing food is an enfleshed refusal to *live* that way. Of course, the Miss America protests took place in full public view, while lip sewing and hunger strikes frequently occur in detention. Yet sometimes even from captivity, such modes of fleshy disidentification secure visibility for previously unseen prisoners and detainees (Shah 2022).

Not all embodied performative practices directly harm the corpus of the protestor. Some are nonviolent. Sit-ins, used by civil rights protestors in, for example, Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 (see e.g., Kowal 2004; Morris 1981; Schmidt 2018), served to stage a political disagreement over the system of segregation that refused to see African Americans as equal to their white peers—that treated them as "invisible" (Ellison [1952] 2011). Others are more theatrical, such as die-ins, used by a broad range of movements, including climate activists, antinuclear campaigners, critics of the Vietnam War, and Black Lives Matter. During the late 1980s, to make visible the high mortality toll from AIDS, large groups of people laid down silently in busy public venues and simulated being dead (M. Brown 1997; Gould 2009). Their "corpses" serving as physical reminders of how many, particularly within gay communities, had perished from AIDS. The goal being to expose and contest the public invisibility of AIDS at a time when governments were largely ignoring it.

As a bodily action, the physical chaining of women to a giant Miss America puppet worked similarly. It demonstrated—evidenced and protested—"women's enslavement to 'beauty standards'" (Echols 1989: 93; see also Duffett 1968). As another nonviolent action, binding women to a puppet, was (part of) an attempt to assert a hitherto denied political presence by making the unseen visible. Taken as a whole, however, the Miss America protest, I submit, parallels, what Athena Athanasiou terms, "a performativity of embodied agency" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 178), where through their various actions in concert and appearance in public, the women not only asserted control over the very bodies they did not control but constituted those bodies differently.

It is my contention that the particular examples just cited should all be understood as different modes of disidentifying from particular, restrictive organizations of "being" and "living," be that as refugees, prisoners or detainees, as African Americans within a segregationist structure unable to perceive them as fully human in a normative social or political sense, as gay men within a heteronormative regime construing homosexuality as "unnatural," or, in the case of the Miss America protest, as "oppressed" women in need of "liberation" (see Hanisch [1968] 2003).

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Each entailed an insurgent democratic demand *for* visibility but one that was not articulated primarily or exclusively through speech, as Rancière or Arendt indicate, but through the enactment of a *fleshy* claim to appear as a political subject. In each case the practices engaged in served as the performative means through which the police norms defining how a particular group ought to behave (what it could say, do, or be) were refused *and* embodied subjectivity configured differently.

This is not to say, of course, that corporeal disidentification is either easy or risk-free. Because of the operation of hierarchizing norms of sex, gender, sexuality, and race in structuring the public sphere, not all bodies are immediately able to enter it in the same way. Some are invisible within it, while other types of body are privileged. This means that the possibilities for and perils attaching to corporeal disidentification may vary depending on positionality. Refugees in detention have much more limited opportunities for disidentification, for instance, than other groups, though they still have them (Lloyd 2023). It should also not be assumed that the specific bodily practices I have mentioned (hunger striking, die-ins, and so on) will necessarily or always enable disidentification. Their productivity, in this sense, will depend on context.

Conclusion

To understand how it is possible for subaltern groups to make themselves and their concerns visible, I have argued in this article, it is not enough to conceptualize disidentification as a discursive or linguistic process. It is through movement, appearance, gesture, and other forms of physical doing, that the corpus is shaped by and incarnates the norms that define its identity. Identification thus entails a process of active, continuous, corporeal doing. It is, however, a doing that can be resisted or challenged, which is why it is proposed here that *dis*identification, "as the interruption of identification" (Asenbaum 2023: 94), should be understood as an embodied process, a mode of doing things differently. This might be by going on hunger strike, performing gender in ways that "undo" prevailing norms, as the Miss America protest exemplified, or, to recall one of Rancière's own examples, by physically assembling on Aventine Hill as the plebians did when they challenged the patricians (1999: 23–28).

Employing the idea of the subject-in-process, a term used to capture the view that embodied identities are performatively constituted but also inessential and, thus, open to contestation and transformation, enables us to extend and add to Rancière's account of disidentification by demonstrating that it is invariably fleshy *and* that bodies are reconfigured in the

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process of political subjectivation. Bodies are not the mere instruments of democratic politics or conduits for political protest, used to achieve specific ends but left unchanged by the action. They act and are "acted upon" (Butler 2015: 105), which means they are constituted and reconstituted, done and undone through democratic activity—through, for instance, the processes of disidentification and subjectivation discussed in this article.

From this it seems clear that doing politics, including democratic politics, is always corporeal. What this reinforces is how wide of the mark is the assumption, found within much political and democratic theory, that politics is the province of disembodied acting, of rational minds rather than fleshy bodies (see also Machin 2022). Of course, the somatic nature of disidentificatory democratic politics may be more obvious on some occasions than others, where, for instance, a political action works first and foremost through the body rather than via speech, such as the example of lip sewing. But as a radical democratic practice *all* disidentification, I wager, has a corporeal dimension. Indeed, it would not be possible without it.

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NOTES

1. Muñoz's account, however, is indebted to the work of Michel Pêcheux not Rancière, so, for reasons of space, I do not engage with it here.
2. African American women were barred from the pageant until 1970. Interestingly, a second protest, Miss Black America, was staged at the same time as the Miss America one, organized by African American activists (Kreydatus 2018).
3. The women involved in the protest committed to not engaging with male reporters, only recognizing newswomen. Further "male chauvinist-reactionaries" and "male liberals" were advised to steer clear of the protest, though "sympathetic men" could donate money, cars, and drivers to support it (Redstockings 1968).

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4. Deranty and Renault (2009: 48) contend that because Arendt regards all persons as "similar from the point of view of our embodied existence," it negatively affects her accounts of both political action and distinction.

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