

10/13/2023: ON THE BODY

A person's body affects the way they navigate the world, and their experiences in it. How much power does a body (with regard to, for instance, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) have over, or in, an artist's work? And, with what devices can a writer affect issues their body can present—for instance, via symbolism, or by changing media, or in the physical circumstances of reading and writing?

2. Kevin CHEN (Taiwan)

I disliked my body. No—I'd need stronger verbs. Despised. Loathed. Hated. Scorned. I needed a thesaurus to gather all the synonyms which might fully manifest my disgust. 18 years. My own body disgusted me for 18 years. Until the English Department.

The cohort of IWP 2023 was invited to dine with the Department of English. At the table with the PhD candidates and faculty, Noelle Q. de Jesus suddenly started singing a song from the Tony-Award-winning musical *Avenue Q* titled "What Do You Do with a B.A. in English?"

What do you do with a B.A. in English?

What is my life going to be?

Four years of college and plenty of knowledge

Have earned me this useless degree

I have shared this song with my English Department girls. My girls. My eternal friends. Twenty-five years after graduation, we have carried this useless degree and become the best versions of ourselves. Mothers, editors, managers, translators, headhunters, bankers. Me, useless writer. The truth is that these English Department girls saved my life.

It was 1994 when I began to study at the English Department of Fu-Jen University 輔仁大學. Pretty much like all English Departments in the world, the students were mostly girls. I was a closeted

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Busisiwe Mahlangu (South Africa), Kevin Chen
(Taiwan),

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small-town gay boy with seven sisters. Being in a feminine environment eliminated my freshman anxiety. This felt like home. So many sisters. For a few seconds, the megacity of Taipei did not scare me that much. But would the girls like me? Would they smell my queerness? Would they tolerate my awkwardness? Would they like my new shirts? What about my hair? I felt awful. My English is so bad. They must have seen through me. This was all a big mistake.

Yes! They did smell my queerness. And they included me right away. I remember the first confusing semester of navigating through the mist of William Faulkner, Shirley Jackson, Eugene O'Neill, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. I joined several study groups to dissect Macbeth. We failed miserably. Captain Ahab used too many difficult words. WTF is necrophilia when analyzing Faulkner? CliffsNotes was not a very helpful fairy godmother. We were so frustrated that we ended up drawing a time machine on a napkin in a café, hoping it might bring us back to the nineteenth century to murder Hawthorne before he started penning *The Scarlet Letter*.

As a freshman full of malicious thoughts about murdering authors, I was happy. For the very first time, I thought studying, by which I mean cursing Shakespeare, was delightful. Time spent with the girls was full of laughter. Pure joy. What's this? A brand-new emotion. I was not pretending to be someone else. The girls caught me gawking at the boy working at the cafeteria. Then he kissed a girl. I was heartbroken for 3 seconds. They hugged me and told me that I could do so much better.

They cousined me. They sistered me. They mothered me.

I shook off my insecurities and started to establish my voice. I told them that I aspired to be a writer. One girl said, "Darling, no doubt, you will be the Taiwanese Tennessee Williams. Even gayer."

Allow me to tell you about my bitter days before the English Department. In middle school, my homeroom teacher called me a pervert for reading a boy's palm. I defended myself by telling her that I was predicting his future wife by reading the lines in his palm. She continued to say that homosexuals were all infected with HIV.

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In high school, it didn't get any better. It was a boys' school. Being different was not an option; honestly, it was a public hazard. Teachers told us gays and lesbians were all cursed by God. Bullies found out that I was writing poems on the pages of math textbooks and declared that I must have been gay. They shouted, "POETRY IS GAY!" One boy slapped me in the restroom and said, "Suck me." In English. He said that he picked up the phrase from some porn. I corrected his poor pronunciation and ran. He hit me again and threatened that the whole school would find out that I was gay the next day. I ran and ran and ran. I decided to kill myself that afternoon. I could not tell anyone about the burning sensation on my face. Not even my best friend knew about this. I just wanted to end this misery.

Since it was going to be my last day on earth, I wanted to have fun. I went to Blockbuster to get the VHS of *Out of Africa*. My sister cooked for me, and we watched some silly primetime TV dramas. She went to bed. I got a knife from the kitchen. I started watching Meryl Streep. Her Danish accent made me cry. I adored her. I wanted to have that kind of adventure. I wanted to go to Africa and become a writer. Just like Karen Blixen. The knife followed me to bed. The silver of the knife was shrieking. I suddenly remembered that I had not finished my novel. I had to know how the novel ended before I died. I plunged into the book and the words wetted my eyes. The book silenced the knife. I was ravenous for food by the end of the book. I tiptoed to the kitchen and started eating the leftovers. I continued to read by the refrigerator light. My gosh, how I loved eating and reading! I fell asleep on the couch. My sister's breakfast woke me up. She couldn't find the big knife. I was hungry again.

I never had to come out to my English Department girls. They just knew. Studying Jane Austen with them stopped my suicidal thoughts. I wanted to move to London and become a great Taiwanese novelist. One girl shouted in the most dramatic way, "Go, Kevin, go to London and get your Mr. Darcy! Don't forget to get me a Mr. Bingley who owns a river-view flat!"

I never went to London and never conjured up Mr. Darcy. I did become a novelist. Perhaps not so great. But: Alive. Writing.

Let's go back to that song from Avenue Q.

*I can't pay the bills yet 'cause I have no skills yet
The world is a big scary place
But somehow I can't shake the feeling I might make
A difference to the human race*

I was in Hanoi this summer to promote the Vietnamese translation of *Ghost Town*. As I was signing the books, one shy boy whispered in trembling tones into my ears, in English.

"Thank you, Mr. Chen. Because I read your book. I don't kill myself. Thank you." He ran away. Tears welled up in my eyes. This useless writer did make a difference.

I would like to wrap up with my girls here in Iowa City. Noelle could smell my queerness from my portrait published in the IWP social media pages. Mary Rokonadravu told me about her gay cousin in Fiji. "Gay as s**t. Just like you, Kevin." We laughed our heads off. I safeguard this kind of profanity, shared only by loving friends and family.

Always the girls. They help me discover and validate.

That my body exuberates queerness.

That queerness is my superpower.