

Water and Salt II

Notes on a Series of Public Performance

It is Day 3, Friday October 9th, 9:35 pm as I finally find a moment (internal and external) to stop, really slow down and feel the impact of the performances in Water and Salt II so far. I think that is the point of the 7-day repetition, the point of a performance for a week, of the lunch hour schedule. Like the omnipresence of the misogyny, catcalling, public ownership of bodies is constant, with little or no room to really process it, the performing is ongoing. It is sticky. It stays in my body, mind and the soul. It imprints. That is why I am using underwear from the day before. The shock and the pain and the violence of the day before is what I now have agency to address. And even that addressal is ambivalent. Today, my overwhelming feeling was shame. I knew this would happen, the shame of walking in a brown body, a female body, a body barefoot. To me the outfit is representational of nudity - a black unzipped dress, a red shawl sweater, and underwear (panties) for the next day's performance. I am unclasped, free but vulnerable. My skin exposed. My feet raw. I am on display but for the first time willingly so. I am a spectacle in my everyday streets, in downtown Chicago. I am watched but I am owning myself now. I am taking back the image my body presents. I am raw, but not for consumption. Not for devouring.

The bare feet really scare people. Today was the the day for shame so I was violently scrubbing the spot in the street just outside the Art Institute. This spot was where I was catcalled 2 days ago, mere minutes after Day 1, the first performance of the series of seven. This catcalling was minutes after I had set aside my unclasped red and black attire (but I was still wearing the same underwear in preparation for day 2). Today, was the day for shame because I needed to walk back to yesterday's site. Day 2 when I washed the underwear, I was overcome by nurturing. I had had that underwear for a long time - it was my period underwear, it provided so much comfort and body positivity, I wasn't sure I wanted to leave it behind, to sacrifice it to the public streets of Chicago. As I started washing, I used the salt and the water to really heal the underwear, I was thinking of the first time my body was grabbed without consent on a school bus, I was 10 years old. The person grabbing me was a 45-year-old man. I will never forget his face. But, I did forget it: the incident. I forgot it till I stopped to think about public ownership of female bodies, and how that included prepubescent female bodies. I forgot it till I asked other bodies to remember their stories. I wrapped the underwear in salt and I let it soak, I then left it out to dry on the bowl of water, it was on display. I stood up quickly and started to walk away. As I did, I felt on display, I felt like I had abandoned one of my deepest secrets, my confidants, something that brought me comfort, maybe even protection. I wanted to turn back. But that wasn't the plan. The plan was to take back ownership, to try, to try to set aside grief. To air the secret, to let the streets own what came with the bodies they own. To let be seen.

I did not turn back yesterday, but the image of my underwear, that specific one with its faded yellow, pink flowers and trimmed pink lace. and the viscosity of my

abandonment did not leave. I was ashamed. I was ashamed that MY OLD, WORN, underwear was sitting on a street corner. Watched. Ignored. I was ashamed of my project. I was ashamed of my audacity to try to take back what was perhaps, never mine.

Shame filled me, but so did urgency. I have struggled with slowness in these walks. I am consumed with a need to undo, to push back, to scream.

Silence and slowness and struggle.

When I finally reached, I told myself to try harder. To slow down. As I walked up, people made way for me on that block. I thought they knew, they had to have known: I was the crazy underwear lady. They made room, as though I might return to yesterday's shrine. I did.

I saw the underwear lying exactly in the same position. Untouched. Then, I stepped in, I poured some water on it and I decided to bury it into the glass bowl of water. I say goodbye, again. A cigarette butt had been put out on it.

I stood up and kept walking. Michigan Avenue. My feet felt different on this tar. I started to make fleeting moments of eye contact. I was getting braver despite my shame. I knew then that I was going to address my shame in public. I had decided to. My underwear on the previous day had been white. Days after my period and an inexplicable spot of blood. I had laughed in the bathroom, my body was a supportive if not dramatic collaborator.

But, shame was multifold. In a burst of action, I returned to the spot of previous catcalling (most recent) and tried to clear the floor of its words. In silence and with vigor, I attempted to erase memory. History is told not experienced. Experience bears heavier than any story told. I tried stand upright with the weight but also to drown the voices, the sorrow. To set into that piece of me, the white stained underwear, the stories that I had been told about my body and the bodies that came before me.

I walked up and as I left, quickly I realized, I was not free. I raised my hands again, gesturing the invisible, intangible burden we carry.

“Are you okay, young lady”

No, I wasn't.

I am not.

You shouldn't be either.

Day 4 was the toughest. I did not want to do this. I do not want to do this. The shame and the exhaustion was kicking in and it was kicking me hard. I was just going through the motions. I was going to walk barefoot, underwear in hand and then find a spot and stop there. Then I would unfurl the underwear like a flag, and wash it based on the emotion that took me over that day. The walk was crucial to the emotional buildup. It was meditative but not empty of emotion, in fact I think it was meditative such that it gave rise and subsequent room to rage (and other emotions).

My tiredness, physical, mental, overall and with the project on Day 4 (which was also a Saturday) enabled a slowness I was seeking in the days before. Although, I think the slowness was also an organic outcome of the excruciating shame I had washed off and left behind the day before. I decided to walk to Millennium Park. It was crowded and I was safe even if unnoticed in the crowd. I started what was the first of many futile but calming circular searches. Perhaps I was seeking, I was trying maybe to give myself more exposure, to be seen...to lean into the violence of being seen in my state.

It was the first day that I did not kneel to wash. That chapter was over. I returned wading through the sea of Chicagoans and tourists.

Day 5, Sunday was the day of rage. It so happened that as my walk got slower, it revealed that I was angry beyond belief. I walked in search of the shrine of the underwear from Day 1. I took a different route, but I got lost on my way there. The anger grew with each step. Again, I unfurled the flag, the pink underwear and its black lace on aired out in the open, emptied the water and the salt into it a swift motion, scrubbed it and threw it to the floor. I walked away. Still seething. Still meditating, even if on anger. On my way back a man who was walking with a women, asked me multiple times if I was okay. He was walking behind me and by now, I was without underwear and washing material, So I knew once again the concern came from my lack of shoes, the stance of my walking body. He passed me by, turned around and asked again. I nodded. I owed my accidental audience that much, I thought.

Day 6 was slow, slower than usual. On Day 6, I had no plan for where I was heading. I was losing myself in the walking. I chose to walk north on Michigan. I was an invisible spectacle, still wading through a sea, water filling my nose and lungs, unseen. It was the moment of realization: I was an invisible spectacle.

Day 6 and 7 were long performances. Instead of the usual 35 minutes, they were closer to 45 -50 minutes. I think in part because of the slowness that set in, in my movement but also the and to cycle of the emotions was changing. Day 6 I was being driven to the river, the natural water body for a cleanse. A taking back at that site. Again, I stood as I washed. I faced the river. It felt like a PRIVATE, PERSONAL, INTIMATE ritual, in the truest sense of all the days.

Day 7 was ghost town. I was lost throughout and ironically it was the day with a destination in mind. The Buckingham fountain. I wanted to go to the lake, but a public spot in the lake. I did not know that the streets would be barren and people at the fountain sparse. By now, I was to wash and squeeze and abandon. No other bodies

mattered but mine. I unfurled, knowing it was for a final time then, I scrubbed and I folded the underwear as though I had cut it half. This underwear was red. it had reindeer on it. It reminded me of children suddenly. Why did my underwear have reindeer on it? It did not matter, it was time to leave. So, I did.

I walked back again, a seventh time, palms open, raised and wet, sleeves and sections of my dress crusty with salt from the week of washing.
