

OCCUPIED

The first time it happened I was in a stall in a public bathroom just off Wall Street in Manhattan. I was about to open the door when I heard two women talking about me.

“Did you see what Naomi Klein said?”

I froze, flashing back to every mean girl in high school, pre-humiliated. What had I said?

“Something about how the march today is a bad idea.”

“Who asked her? I really don’t think she understands our demands.”

Wait. I hadn’t said anything about the march—or the demands. Then it hit me: I knew who had. I casually strolled to the sink, made eye contact with one of the women in the mirror, and said words I would repeat far too many times in the months and years to come.

“I think you are talking about Naomi Wolf.”

That was November 2011, at the height of Occupy Wall Street, the movement that saw groups of young people camp out in public parks and squares in cities across the United States, Canada, Asia, and the United Kingdom. The uprising was inspired by the Arab Spring and youth-led occupations of squares in southern Europe—a collective howl against economic inequality and financial crimes that would, eventually, birth a new generational politics. That day, the organizers of the

original Manhattan encampment had called for a mass march through the financial district, and you could tell by all the black clothing and heavy liquid eyeliner that no one in that bathroom was on break from derivative trading.

I could see why some of my fellow marchers had their Naomis mixed up. We both write big-idea books (my *No Logo*, her *Beauty Myth*; my *Shock Doctrine*, her *End of America*; my *This Changes Everything*, her *Vagina*). We both have brown hair that sometimes goes blond from over-highlighting (hers is longer and more voluminous than mine). We're both Jewish. Most confusingly, we once had distinct writerly lanes (hers being women's bodies, sexuality, and leadership; mine being corporate assaults on democracy and climate change). But by the time Occupy happened, the once-sharp yellow line that divided those lanes had begun to go wobbly.

At the time of the bathroom incident, I had visited the Occupy plaza a couple of times. I was mainly there to conduct interviews about the relationship between market logic and climate breakdown for what would become *This Changes Everything*. But while I was there, organizers asked me to give a short talk about the shock of the 2008 financial crisis and the raging injustices that followed—the trillions marshaled to save the banks whose reckless trades had caused the crisis, the punishing austerity offered to pretty much everyone else, the legalized corruption that all of this laid bare. These were the seeds of disconnect that right-wing populists in dozens of countries would eventually exploit for a fiercely anti-immigrant and anti-“globalist” political project, including Donald Trump, under the tutelage of his chief advisor, Stephen K. Bannon. At the time, however, many of us still held out hope that the crash could catalyze a democratic revival and a new era of left power, one that would discipline corporate might and empower flailing democracies to address our many surging emergencies, including the climate emergency. That's what my speech at Occupy was about. You could look it up and weep at how naïve I was.

Naomi Wolf, once a standard-bearer of 1990s feminism, had intersected with the protests as well, and I suppose that's where the confusion

began. She had written several articles arguing that the crackdown on Occupy demonstrated that the United States was tipping into a police state. This was the subject of her book *The End of America*, which outlined “ten steps” she claimed every government takes on its way to outright fascism. Her evidence that this evil future was now upon us was the aggressive way that Occupy demonstrators were having their freedom restricted. The city was not allowing megaphones and sound systems to be used in the park, and there had been a series of mass arrests. Wolf, in her articles, argued that activists should defy restrictions on their freedom of speech and assembly in order to prevent the coup she insisted was unfolding under their noses. Not wanting to give the police an excuse to clear the protest camp, the organizers took a different tack, using what became known as the “human microphone” (where the crowd repeats the speaker’s words so that everyone can hear them).

That was not the only point of disagreement between Wolf and the organizers. For better or worse, the Occupiers had been very clear that the movement did not have a policy agenda—two or three political demands lawmakers could meet that would send them all home satisfied. Wolf insisted this was not true: she claimed the movement actually had specific demands and that she, improbably, had figured them out. “I found out what it was that OWS actually wanted,” she wrote in *The Guardian*, explaining, “I began soliciting online ‘What is it you want?’ answers” from self-identified Occupy activists. Disregarding the movement’s commitment to radical, participatory democracy, Wolf then turned the results of her haphazard surveying into a short list of demands and took it upon herself to deliver it to New York governor Andrew Cuomo at a black-tie event organized by *Huffington Post*, where she and Cuomo were both guests.

It got stranger. Failing to connect with Cuomo inside, Wolf left the event to spontaneously address Occupy Wall Street demonstrators on the sidewalk outside and, while informing the crowd what their demands were and telling them that they were demanding them wrong because “they had a first amendment right to use a megaphone,” managed to get herself arrested in a burgundy evening gown, a melee documented by a

bank of cameras. This is what the women in the bathroom were referring to when they talked about how “Naomi Klein” did not understand their demands.

I had paid only peripheral attention to Wolf’s antics as they unfolded—they were just one of many bizarre things swirling around Occupy during that eventful fall. One day the camp buzzed with rumors that Radiohead was about to perform a free concert—only to discover that it was an elaborate prank and the band was still in England. The following day, Kanye West and Russell Simmons actually did drop by, entourages in tow, bearing gifts for the campers. Next it was Alec Baldwin’s turn. In this circus atmosphere, a midcareer writer getting handcuffed while unsuccessfully ordering around protesters half her age was barely a blip.

After the bathroom incident, though, I started paying closer attention to what Wolf was doing, newly aware that some of it was blowing back on me. And it kept getting weirder. After police across the United States cleared the parks and plazas of Occupy encampments, she wrote a piece claiming, without any evidence, that the orders had come directly from Congress and Barack Obama’s White House.

“When you connect the dots,” Wolf wrote, it all made sense. The crackdowns on OWS were “the first battle in a civil war . . . It is a battle in which members of Congress, with the collusion of the American president, sent violent, organized suppression against the people they are supposed to represent.” This, Wolf declared, marked a definitive tip into totalitarian rule—a claim that she had made before, under George W. Bush, confidently predicting he would not allow the 2008 election to take place (he did), and that she would make many more times in the years to come. “Sadly, Americans this week have come one step closer to being true brothers and sisters of the protesters in Tahrir Square,” she wrote. “Like them, our own national leaders . . . are now making war upon us.”

The logical leaps were bad enough. What made it worse for me was that, with Wolf’s new focus on abuses of corporate and political power during states of emergency, something she touched on only briefly in *The End of America*, I felt like I was reading a parody of *The Shock Doctrine*, one with all facts and evidence carefully removed, and coming to

cartoonishly broad conclusions I would never support. And while I was not yet confused with my doppelganger all that often, I knew that some people would credit me with Wolf's theories. It was an out-of-body feeling. I went back and took a closer look at the articles about her evening-wear arrest, and a line in *The Guardian* jumped out at me: "Her partner, the film producer Avram Ludwig, was also arrested."

I read the sentence to my partner, the film director and producer Avram Lewis (who goes by Avi).

"What the actual fuck?" he asked.

"I know," I said. "It's like a goddamned conspiracy."

Then we both burst out laughing.

In the decade since Occupy, Wolf has connected the dots between an almost unfathomably large number of disparate bits of fact and fantasy. She has floated unsubstantiated speculations about the National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden ("not who he purports to be," hinting that he is an active spy). About U.S. troops sent to build field hospitals in West Africa during the 2014 Ebola outbreak (not an attempt to stop the disease's spread, but a plot to bring it to the United States to justify "mass lockdowns" at home). About ISIS beheadings of U.S. and British captives (possibly not real murders, but staged covert ops by the U.S. government starring crisis actors). About the arrest of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, on allegations that he sexually assaulted a housekeeper in a New York City hotel room (the charges were eventually dropped and a civil suit settled but Wolf wondered if the whole thing had been an "intelligence service" operation designed to take Strauss-Kahn out of the running in French elections where he had been "the odds-on favorite to defeat Nicolas Sarkozy"). About the results of the 2014 Scottish referendum on independence, which the "no" vote won by a margin of more than 10 percent (potentially fraudulent, she claimed, based on an assortment of testimonies she collected). About the Green New Deal (not the demands of grassroots climate justice movements, she said, but yet another elite-orchestrated cover for "fascism").

In our era of extreme wealth concentration and seemingly bottomless impunity for the powerful, it is perfectly rational, even wise, to probe

official stories for their veracity. Uncovering real conspiracies is the indispensable mission of investigative journalism, a subject I'll return to in greater depth later on. However, actual research is not what my doppelgänger was up to when she floated her pulpy theories about Snowden and ISIS and Ebola. Nor is it what she was doing when she imagined plots in the appearance of oddly shaped clouds (which she has intimated are part of a secret NASA program to spray the skies with "aluminum on a global level," potentially causing epidemics of dementia). Nor is it what she was doing when she shared some truly remarkable thoughts on Twitter about 5G cellular networks, including this one: "It was amazing to go to Belfast, which does not yet have 5G, and feel the earth, sky, air, human experience, feel the way it did in the 1970s. Calm, still, peaceful, restful, natural." The observation sparked a transnational pile-on of the kind of howling mockery for which the platform is infamous, most of it pointing out that (1) Belfast had launched 5G by the time she visited and (2) in the 1970s Northern Ireland was in the grips of a horrific, bloody armed conflict that took thousands of lives.

It may seem hard to believe that all of this comes from the same author who wrote *The Beauty Myth* as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. "What little girls learn is not the desire for the other, but the desire to be desired," she wrote back then. "Girls learn to watch their sex along with the boys; that takes up the space that should be devoted to finding out about what they are wanting, and reading and writing about it, seeking it and getting it. Sex is held hostage by beauty and its ransom terms are engraved in girls' minds early and deeply with instruments more beautiful than those which advertisers or pornographers know how to use: literature, poetry, painting, and film."

There were major statistical errors in that book, a foreshadowing of what was to come, but there was also patient archival work. Wolf's online writing today is so frenetic and fantastical that it can be startling to read her early words and remember that this is a person who clearly loved language, thought deeply about the inner lives of girls and women, and had a vision for their liberation.

At the dawn of the 1990s, Germaine Greer declared *The Beauty Myth* "the most important feminist publication since *The Female Eunuch*"

(Greer's own bestseller, published in 1970). Some of this was timing. After the lost decade of the 1980s—when feminism was suddenly too earthy and earnest to make it in prime time—the corporate media were ready to declare a third wave of the women's movement, and *The Beauty Myth* lifted up Wolf as its telegenic face. She was hardly the first feminist writer to expose the impossible beauty standards imposed on women, but she had a unique angle. The core of Wolf's argument was that during the 1980s, just as the second-wave feminist movement had succeeded in winning greater equality for women in postsecondary education and the workplace, the pressure on women to meet impossible standards of thinness and beauty had increased sharply, putting them at a competitive disadvantage with men in their fields. This was no coincidence, she argued. "The ruling elite" knew, Wolf wrote, that they held jobs that would be at risk if women were free to rise unencumbered, something that "must be thwarted, or the traditional power elite will be at a disadvantage." The "myth" of beauty was invented, she speculated, to drain women's power and focus—to keep them busy with mascara and starvation diets instead of free to climb the professional ladder and outcompete their male rivals. In essence, she posed the heightened beauty standards of the 1980s as a backlash to the feminism of the 1970s.

Yet the feminism Wolf proposed in response was not a throwback to the radical demands of the 1960s and '70s, a time when feminism had been linked with anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and socialism and activists had built their own collectives, movement publications, and insurgent political candidacies that set out to challenge and transform dominant power systems from the outside. On the contrary, just as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair moved their respective parties away from policies that championed universal public services and redistribution of wealth toward a pro-market, pro-militarism "Third Way," Wolf's version of third-wave feminism charted a path to the center, one that had little to offer working-class women but promised the world to white, middle-class, highly educated women like her. Two decades before Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, Wolf published her second book, *Fire with Fire*, which called on feminism to drop the dogma and embrace the "will to power."

She took her own advice. Rather than building power inside the

women's movement, as her feminist foremothers had done, Wolf launched herself like a missile into the heart of the liberal establishment in both New York City and Washington, D.C. She married a journalist who became a speechwriter for Bill Clinton and a *New York Times* editor; she consulted with the political operative Dick Morris, who played a key role in Clinton's lurch to the right; and she helped start an institute on women's leadership. It appeared that Wolf did not want to tear down elite power structures—she wanted to enter them.

The press could not get enough of Wolf, who, in her first decade in the public eye, looked very much like Valerie Bertinelli in my favorite childhood sitcom, *One Day at a Time*. Not only was she poised and beautiful as she shredded the beauty industry, but she also wrote graphically and boldly about sex and young women's right to pleasure.

Many excellent feminist theorists who came up before and after Wolf made powerful connections between intimate experiences—including rape, abortion, domestic violence, race-based sexual fetishism, illness, and gender dysmorphia—and the broad social structures that produced those experiences. The 1980s had been full of such books, many by Black feminists: *Ain't I a Woman*, by bell hooks; *Women, Race & Class*, by Angela Davis; and *Sister Outsider*, by Audre Lorde, among others. *The Vagina Monologues*, the breakthrough feminist play by Eve Ensler (now named V), was first staged four years after *The Beauty Myth* was published. These works contained personal revelations that helped weave together mass movements for collective justice in which the personal became political. What set Wolf's writing apart from these kinds of movement intellectuals was an apparent paucity of curiosity about the lives of women who were not her, and whose lives were markedly different from her own. This came up in her first book, which somehow managed to be a study of the impact of white, European beauty ideals without engaging with the particular and acute impacts of those ideals on Black, Asian, and other nonwhite women (let alone queer and transgender women).

While there were always skeptics—her rival Camille Paglia dismissed Wolf as a “*Seventeen* magazine level of thinker”—critiques of her work rarely reached beyond women's studies departments. And by the end of

the decade, Wolf was considered such an authority on all things womanly that during the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore, the Democratic Party nominee, hired her to coach him on how to appeal to female voters. Her widely reported advice was that Gore had to get out from under Bill Clinton's shadow and transform himself from a "beta male" to an "alpha male"—in part by wearing earth-toned suits to warm up his robotic affect. Wolf denied providing fashion advice, but the reports still sparked a torrent of mockery, including from Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times*, who wrote that "Ms. Wolf is the moral equivalent of an Armani T-shirt, because Mr. Gore has obscenely overpaid for something basic."

In the new millennium, something changed in Wolf. Maybe it was Gore's electoral loss (or George W. Bush's electoral theft), and the way some of the post-vote recriminations focused on her controversial campaign role. Perhaps it was something more personal—an unraveling marriage with two young kids (she has made reference to "a year of chaos, right after I turned forty"). Whatever the cause, Wolf's soaring profile dropped significantly in the early and mid-2000s. In 2005, she published a small book called *The Treehouse: Eccentric Wisdom from My Father on How to Live, Love, and See*. In this daughter-father version of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Wolf depicts herself as a prodigal daughter returning, after decades of rebellion, to the wise, paternal fold. Her father, Leonard Wolf, teaches her how to build an elaborate treehouse for her daughter—and how to live a good life.

During her time as a feminist intellectual, Wolf writes, she had valued hard facts and material change. This went against what her father, a poet and literature scholar with a specialty in gothic and horror, had taught her to value: "My father had raised me to honor the power of the imagination above all." Leonard, she writes, understood that "heart" mattered "over facts, numbers, and laws." At the time, this was taken by most reviewers as benign if twee advice about creativity—in retrospect, given the creative way in which Wolf would go on to play with facts, numbers, and laws related to Covid-19, it feels more like gloomy foreshadowing worthy of one of Leonard Wolf's favorite books of gothic fiction.

More than this, what got my attention in *The Treehouse* was one of Leonard's key life lessons—his directive to “Destroy the box.” According to Wolf, her father said, “Before you can even think about finding your true voice, you have to reject boxes . . . Smash them apart.” She stressed this point: “Look at what box you may be in and be willing to destroy it.”

Up until that time, Wolf, by her own admission, had been squarely in the feminist box. But two years later, she smashed it, coming out with the patriotically paranoid *End of America* in 2007. There was nothing in it about women's issues, and she appeared to have turned on the elite institutions that she had once worked so hard to access. She now had a new focus: the ways authoritarianism descends on once free societies, and the dangers of covert government actions.

Looking back, this is really when the problems started for me; the point when Wolf stopped seeming quite as much like her—the Naomi who wrote books about the battles waged over women's bodies—and started sounding, well, more like me—the Naomi who writes about corporate exploitation of states of shock. Am I saying that this confusion was intentional on Wolf's part? Not at all. Just deeply unfortunate.

And it wasn't just that one book. I had started writing about the Green New Deal in 2018. She did, too, shortly after, only with her special conspiracy twists. I began publishing about the dangers of geoengineering as a response to the climate crisis, with a particular focus on how high-altitude simulations of volcanoes that were intended to partially dim the sun risked interfering with rainfall in the Southern Hemisphere. She was busily speculating on social media about chemical cloudseeding and covert mass poisonings. I based my writing on dozens of peer-reviewed papers and managed to get access to two closed-door geoengineering conferences, where I interviewed several of the key scientists involved in lab-based research on sending particles into the upper atmosphere to control the sun's radiation. She started taking photographs of random clouds in upstate New York and London, prompting the environmental magazine *Grist* to declare, in 2018, that “Wolf is a cloud truther.”

I always know when she has been busy—because my online mentions

fill up instantly. With denunciations and excommunication (“I can’t believe I used to respect Naomi Klein. WTF has happened to her??”). And with glib expressions of sympathy (“The real victim in all this here is Naomi Klein” and “Thoughts and prayers to Naomi Klein”).

How much does this identity merger happen? Enough that there is a viral poem, first posted in October 2019, that invariably shows up in these moments, and that been shared many thousands of times:

If the Naomi be Klein
 you’re doing just fine
 If the Naomi be Wolf
 Oh, buddy. Oooooof.

As in any doppelganger story, the confusion flows both ways. Wolf maintains a large and seemingly loyal following across several platforms, and occasionally I have noticed her correcting people, telling them that she is flattered, but no, she did not write *The Shock Doctrine*.

For most of the first decade of the confusion, my public strategy was studious denial. I would complain privately to friends and to Avi, sure, but publicly I was mostly silent. Even when, in 2019, Wolf started tagging me daily in her tweets about the Green New Deal, clearly trying to draw me into a debate about her baseless theory that the whole thing was a sort of green shock doctrine—a nefarious plan by bankers and venture capitalists to grab power under cover of the climate emergency—I did not engage with her. I did not try to address the confusion. I did not join those mocking her.

I thought about it, but it never seemed wise. There is a certain inherent humiliation in getting repeatedly confused with someone else, confirming, as it does, one’s own interchangeability and/or forgettability. That’s the trouble with doppelgangers: anything you might do to dispel the confusion just draws attention to it, and runs the risk of further cementing the unwanted association in people’s minds.

In this way, confrontations with our doppelgangers inevitably raise existentially destabilizing questions. Am I who I think I am, or am I who others perceive me to be? And if enough others start seeing someone else

as me, who am I, then? Doppelgängers are not the only way we can lose control over ourselves, of course. The carefully constructed self can be undone in any number of ways and in an instant—by a disabling accident, by a psychotic break, or, these days, by a hacked account or a deep fake. This is the perennial appeal of doppelgängers in novels and films: the idea that two strangers can be indistinguishable from each other taps into the precariousness at the core of identity—the painful truth that, no matter how deliberately we tend to our personal lives and public personas, the person we think we are is fundamentally vulnerable to forces outside of our control.

François Brunelle, a Montreal artist who has been photographing hundreds of pairs of doppelgängers over decades for a project called *I'm Not a Look-Alike!*, put it like this: “Someone, out in this world, is looking at himself in the mirror and seeing more or less the same thing that I am seeing in my own mirror. Which brings us down to the question: Who am I exactly? Am I what I see in my reflection or something else that cannot be defined and is invisible to the eyes, even my own?”

In the dozens of books that have been written about people who encounter their doubles, doppelgängers consistently signal that the protagonist's life is about to be upended, with the double turning their friends and colleagues against them, destroying their career, or framing them for crimes, and—very often—having sex with their spouse or lover. A standard trope in the genre is a nagging uncertainty about whether the double is real at all. Is this actually an identical stranger, or are they a long-lost twin? Worse, is the double a figment of the protagonist's imagination—an expression of an unhinged subconscious?

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story “William Wilson,” for instance, the reader begins by believing the “detestable coincidence” that there is another person with the same name, birthday, and general appearance as the pompous narrator. Suspicions quickly emerge, though, that the coincidences are a little too perfect. By the end, it is clear that the double, who could not speak “above a very low whisper,” never existed outside the narrator's paranoid, self-loathing subconscious and that, by killing his “arch-enemy and evil genius,” William Wilson had killed himself. The same fate befalls the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture*

of *Dorian Gray*, which tells the story of a vain and lustful man who, after having his portrait painted, makes a demonic deal to stay young and beautiful forever. As Gray holds on to his youth, the face in the painting grows older and uglier, a kind of virtual doppelganger. When Gray tries to destroy his gruesome double, he is the one who ends up shriveled and lifeless on the ground.

The whole mess puts me in mind of my dog, Smoke, who, every evening at sundown, sees her reflection in the glass of our front door and begins to bark ferociously. She is convinced, evidently, that an adorable white cockapoo doppelganger (dogpelganger?) is bound and determined to gain access to her home, eat her food, and steal the affections of her humans.

“That’s you,” I tell Smoke in my most reassuring voice, but she always forgets. And this is the catch-22 of confronting your doppelganger: bark all you want, but you inevitably end up confronting yourself.

Not Me

There was another reason I didn’t bother much with correcting the record for the first few years of my doppelganger trouble: with the exception of the Manhattan bathroom incident, getting confused with Naomi Wolf appeared to be a social media thing. My friends and colleagues knew who I was, and when I interacted with people I didn’t know in the physical world, her name did not come up; neither were we entangled in articles or book reviews. I therefore filed away Naomi confusion in the category of “things that happen on the internet that are not quite real” (back when we were silly enough to do that about all kinds of things). I told myself that I was not being confused with Wolf, but that our digital avatars were getting mistakenly swapped—the thumbnail-sized photos of us, and the tiny boxes that prescribed the parameters of our speech on those platforms, just as they flattened and blurred so much else.

Back then, I saw the problem as more structural than personal. A handful of young men had gotten unfathomably rich designing tech platforms that, in the name of “connection,” not only allowed us to

eavesdrop on conversations between strangers but also actively encouraged us to seek out those exchanges that mentioned us by name (a.k.a. our “mentions”). In a way, it was perfect that the first time I heard my name confused with Wolf’s was in an eavesdropped conversation taking place in a public restroom. When I joined Twitter and clicked on the little bell icon signifying my “mentions,” that was my initial thought: I was reading the graffiti written about me on an infinitely scrolling restroom wall.

As a frequently graffitied-about girl in high school, this felt both familiar and deeply harrowing. I instantly knew that Twitter was going to be bad for me—and yet, like so many of us, I could not stop looking. So perhaps if there is a message I should have taken from the destabilizing appearance of my doppelganger, this is it: Once and for all, stop eavesdropping on strangers talking about you in this crowded and filthy global toilet known as social media.

I might have heeded the message, too. If Covid hadn’t intervened.