Notes from a Feminist Killjoy

Essays on everyday life

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Contents

Preface: Letter to My Daughter . . . 7
Introduction: Some Notes for You, Reading . . . 9
Chapter 1: Notes on Rape Culture . . . 47
Chapter 2: Notes on Friendships . . . 111
Chapter 3: Notes on Feminist Mothering . . . 153
Postscript: Sometimes Refusal is a Feminist Act . . . 187
I don’t know how to do this, wee one. Let’s start there. Let’s start with a blank page because despite the tiredness of the metaphor there is something beautiful and expansive and awe-inspiring about a blank page. Let’s start with the page because starting with your little body in the world is too much for me right now. You are too tender. Let’s start with the page.

Before you were born, when we called you Fetus Maximus because inscribing personhood onto the cluster of cells doing their work felt wrong, because the time would come (too quickly, too often) when the world would inscribe its expectations onto your little body, because I couldn’t wrap my mind around you. Before you had a name and a gender and a heart that fluttered on a screen and dared me to disavow your possibility, I got a package in the mail in anticipation of you. In it, amongst the handmade quilt and the comically small slippers, was a book of envelopes. Each
of the envelopes was labelled with an occasion: first week, first tooth, first day of school. The idea was to write you a letter for each of these occasions and to collect them in the book to be given to you when the time was right. I liked this idea. I liked the thought of telling you about yourself, of being your archive and your witness. But I didn’t write a single letter. I couldn’t. When I tried to start I didn’t know how to begin. How could you be addressable as a “not-yet-you”? I didn’t want to write my story as though it was yours. But here’s the thing, babe, my story is your story. My body made your body, as bizarre and banal as that feels to write. We are each other’s indexes at a cellular level. And so, my girl, these essays are first and foremost for you. Their partialities, their tenacious vulnerabilities, their fallibilities, and their insistent graspings at joy are my small attempts to show you that it’s okay to try. It’s okay to want to make your voice heard, and it’s important to know your voice isn’t the only one or the most important one. When I write about having a gendered body in the world, I think, now, about your tiny infant body. I think, now, about the only kind of prayer I utter with fervency: May you be comfortable in your body and know it is yours. If your body doesn’t fit you, may we find ways to make it yours. May your body only know pleasure and empowerment. May we give you the language to say yes, to say no. May the world be gentle with you. May you not lose that unselfconscious you-ness we hear from your crib when you wake up, singing. May you know the fierceness of strong friendships with women. May you be kind. May you feel held. May you write your own stories.
I have a bitchy resting face.

You know what I mean: When I’m busy thinking or walking or going about my daily business, my natural resting expression is one that reads to others as bitchy—or mean, or angry, or sad. Perfect strangers have told me to smile, cheer up, or simply not to look the way I do. Much to my chagrin, my automatic response is often to flash a grimacing smile. My reaction drives me bananas. I continue what I’m doing while thinking of witty (& not so witty) comebacks. I imagine crossing my eyes and sticking out my tongue. On a few occasions, though, I’ve had an inverse response to the automatic smile: I’ve given the happiness-seeking stranger the finger.

Why?

Not because the stranger necessarily deserves to be told
where to go (though let’s be frank, often the stranger does). No, I’ve given people the finger or imagined doing so because there’s something incredibly condescending about telling a woman to smile. Whether or not this smile-seeker is well meaning or a creep, there exists in much of the Western world a long and entrenched history of telling women how to think, feel, and act. And how to look. This history is complicated. It’s varied. It shifts depending on your racial, gendered, ethnic, and class identity, but we can, for the sake of simplicity, call this the history of patriarchal culture.

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In my own case, I had to train myself out of that phony smile, which is like a nervous tic on every teenage girl. And this meant that I smiled rarely, for in truth, when it came down to real smiling, I had less to smile about. My “dream” action for the women’s liberation movement: a smile boycott, at which declaration all women would instantly abandon their “pleasing” smiles, henceforth smiling only when something pleased them.¹

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Essais. That’s the name of the series this book is published in—essais. This book is a record of me trying to write about feminism at the interstices of critical and literary theory, pop culture, and feminist thinking. At the intersection of those

methods and epistemological routes is me. I’m writing in the *I*. I’m inserting myself in a long and varied tradition of women and other marginalized people working from a situated position of knowledge. I’m also busting in on and turning over tables within the other long tradition of speaking subjects who use *I* without thinking twice about the privilege that entails. Me, I think twice, three, even four times about that privilege.

Who do I think I am?

*

In April 2016, the Canadian magazine *The Walrus* published an article by Jason Guriel entitled “I Don’t Care About Your Life: Why Critics Need to Stop Getting Personal In Their Essays.”

In the essay, Guriel laments the hybridization of the confessional and the critical forms. The confessional—shorthand, in Guriel’s article, for shitty, navel-gazing writing—dilutes what might otherwise be pure critique.

(Arguments for purity make me cringe, usually, unless of course we are talking about water quality.)

Despite my training as an academic, which taught me that I could be a cool and impartial professional reader, writer, teacher, and critic, this article got under my skin. Reading

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it, I felt acutely uncomfortable. I felt seen (called out?) in a way that was vulnerable-making. It felt as though he was taking aim at writers who inspire me enormously, at me, and at the deliberate stylistic and genre choices writers make. I felt all the work I do to situate my own knowledge—as a teacher, as a reader, as a writer—was suddenly and impudently invalidated.

I don’t know J.G., but the Internet tells me he might like baseball, and the Blue Jays in particular, so we do have that much in common… And yet…

I was reminded of a similar feeling of vulnerability that occurred during the first week of graduate school: I was sitting outside smoking with a bunch of my fellow (male) students and they all got to talking about how much they hated Margaret Atwood. I didn’t hate Margaret Atwood. Nor did I hate her writing. And, as I sat there listening to these people talk confidently about how she was a hack writer and a bitch, I got quiet. I didn’t speak up. I most certainly didn’t stick up for Margaret (she doesn’t need my help, I thought), and I definitely didn’t talk about my favourite writer at the time (Eden Robinson, in case you’re wondering). Instead I sat, smoking, listening, and nodding like one of those dashboard bobbleheads.

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I’m not really known for keeping my opinion to myself these days, so why did I then?
And why did Guriel’s article bother me so much?

*

*Does. Why does it bother me so much?*

About a week after Guriel’s article was published, Mandy Len Catron published a response entitled “You Should Care About My Life: The First-Person Pronoun Isn’t Trivial, It’s Essential.” She says so many things that get to the heart of what’s wrong with Guriel’s stance.

Like: What do you mean by conflating the confessional with the narcissistic and lazy?

Or: Who is privileged enough not to see that all writing is deeply and inherently coloured by our subjective and individuated experiences?

And that so many writers—including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Timothy Tu, James Baldwin—write from the I perspective in radical ways because their experiences—their own I-positions—are marginalized.

Yes, I nodded as I read. Yes.

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No mention of women in either article, though.

No mention of women, save to imply that I-writing is feminized (because the confessional as a genre is a feminized genre save for the outlier/insider Robert Lowell, pretty much. Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell. Those poets who crack worlds open with their honesty. I learned in school to mistrust their realness and read it as excessive feminine blathering. I learned to read their writing through their suicides as evidence of some sort of weakness. Their poetry became a kind of cautionary tale about exposing too much of yourself. I exaggerate, but that’s the point, isn’t it?).

What gets under my skin about the *Walrus* article, then, is that it’s one in a long and tedious line of literary dismissals of the vital necessity of being able to say *I* in a public space… and of having your own authority over your life trusted. Who gets to say *I* without having to shore up that utterance with justification for the right to speak? To exist? Not women. Not women of colour. Not people of colour. Not queer people. Not trans people. Not differently abled

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4. Actually, I don’t exaggerate. See Karissa LaRocque’s “Easily Dismissed as a Mirror Image” (<http://gutsmagazine.ca/blog/easily-dismissed-mirror-image>) for a strong introduction to the ways in which confessional writers—especially Sylvia Plath—have been infantilized.
people. Not a hell of a lot of people, as it turns out. So why is the I so easily dismissed?

Because, I think, it’s risky. For the speaker. For the status quo.

*  

I’m taking a risk here.

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When I started writing this book I thought I was going to write a handbook. A how-to on Sara Ahmed’s concept of being a feminist killjoy, that irreverent figure who lights a match and joyfully flicks it into the dry hull of patriarchal culture.

There were going to be key terms and quizzes and ten easy steps.

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Turns out, there are more than ten steps.

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Turns out, this isn’t a handbook.