

IF I BELIEVE YOU:
A FEMINIST AWAKENING

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If I Believe You: A Feminist Awakening

I was a strong child. As family members describe me, “You were always doing a job, making sure everything went according to plan.” Now, I smile in recognition. I was a determined child too, who in some cases, was fueled by being told I would not be able to finish the task I had set out to do. I can remember at a young age convincing my parents to let me buy a Nintendo Wii. They agreed that if I had the money to pay for it, Dad would take me to Walmart so I could buy it. We were up all-night counting change from my piggy bank. The next day, we walked into the store carrying Ziploc bags of quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies, calculated to the exact amount with tax already figured out. I was a determined child.

Now, I see that throughout our childhoods, we are impacted by everything which surrounds us. From television shows, movies, video games, the books we read, and the people who have shaped us as we grow up, we are influenced to perceive the world in a way which validates our own existence and interests. In creating our perceptions, we also create varying understandings of our world between different individuals. However, as we get older those perceptions, though shaped by many, shift to become personalized based on the individual. In my life, I would argue that I have been shaped most by mentors and the language and methods they used to help me to grow into the person I am today. Reflecting on these things, I begin to see the structures behind the language and the relationships these individuals shared with me. These are the relationships that have led me to the degree I am working towards as an undergraduate and culminate in this thesis.

As someone who has tried to become an advocate for others, I have had to learn and recognize the extent to which the systems in our world were created and have been solidified as

systems of oppression. I would argue that the system we see most as part of the power structure is language. As children, we were taught, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” As we get older, we begin to recognize that this statement is not true. Language is a system which is ingrained in our society and is used as a way for us, as individuals, to define ourselves and our world as it aligns with our ideas. Amanda Montell reminds readers that language is part of a system of oppression through our patriarchal, androcentric society (Montell 5): “every part of our speech—our words, our intonation, our sentence structures—is sending invisible signals telling other people who we are. In the wrong hands, speech can be used as a weapon. But in the right ones, it can change the world” (Montell 3). For Montell, because language is not tangible and is often unrecognized as an oppressive system, it does not get analyzed as thoroughly as other oppressive systems have in recent years.

Language is a system in which we are able to define all its pieces through grammar, yet, we are restricted by how language has been used historically and is accepted by our current society. In saying this, I wish to look at how the language surrounding sexual identity and gender has changed in recent years. “Every day, people are becoming freer than ever to express gender identities and sexualities of all stripes, and simultaneously, the language we use to describe ourselves evolves” (Montell 5). This can even be seen as the North Carolina Public School System is working on legislation which will allow students to have their preferred name and pronouns listed on school documents (Riley). In our day to day lives, we are beginning to see the continuous use and mention of pronouns on employee name tags and Instagram or Twitter bios. The dialogue surrounding gender and sexuality is changing as these topics have started to become part of our household conversations. After I started my Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality studies minor, I have had these conversations with family members who would have otherwise

never initiated these discussions through their curiosity, and I recognize that I would not have previously been comfortable initiating them either. As Sarah Banet-Weiser would argue, the movements of our present political climate like #MeToo and the continuous advocacy by LGBT communities are what have helped to bring these conversations into our mainstream and traditional media; however, she continues this thought by including the dialectic relationship between what she calls popular feminism and popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 4). In thinking of the dialectic relationship, we see that through the creation of one, we also create the other. This dialectic relationship requires continued creation of both groups seen through the recognition of their ideas and a perpetuation of these ideas in our society.

The language surrounding gender and sexuality has shifted as we have framed the definitions of gender and sexuality as socially constructed. We are also able to begin to look at how we are able to deconstruct and redefine these ideas in order to become more inclusive in the future. Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" looks at and adapts earlier theorists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, as they attempt to bridge the gap between understanding gender as performative and the phenomenology of gender. In the essay, we are able to see Butler's analysis of the temporality within one's gender and the performative aspects of the perception of gender. They write, "if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts" (Butler 520). This social temporality Butler describes surrounding gender then allows for individuals to recognize gender as a fluid identity rather than the binary that is often suggested to us. The phenomenological aspect of gender is what we see

through the “stylized repetition” of gendered actions. Gender, in this sense, is created through these actions, but also through the acceptance of one’s chosen gender by others.

In looking at Simone de Beauvoir’s work, we are often drawn to her idea “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes a woman*” (Beauvoir qtd in Butler 519). This is often recognized as the quote which starts the discussion of the phenomenological reality of gender construction as the use of the word ‘becomes’ suggests a transformation and choice within an individual to identify with different gender constructions. The operative indicates the linguistic choice and implications of “becoming” rather than “being”. In looking at this, we see how to ‘become’ represents the choice of the individual, rather than a general acceptance of one’s gender as it was presented to them as a child. This is then an emphasis of the phenomenology of gender as we are able to see it be ‘created’ through the continued repetition of one’s actions within a categorized gendered identity (Butler 520).

Gender and gendered identity are not defined as inherent pieces of one’s being; rather, one must continue to assert themselves within stereotypical gendered roles in order to maintain a single gendered construction. “To be” is definitively different than “to become” because there is a transformation required for someone to “become” or create part of their identity that is not seen in the phrase “to be”. In this description, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (Butler 531). We see these variations of gendered identity and are taught to identify them within our society as early as childhood will allow. Stereotypes of gender are introduced to everyone from a young age. Even as children, these different characteristics of one’s identity are placed before us and described as gendered. We have allowed society to define our children as girly-girls or tomboys and sissy boys or

strong, which becomes the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles and characteristics that the future generations continue to see as ‘*correct*’ in our society.

Gender and the language surrounding it, as described in Butler’s essay, is not stable. Rather, we can understand that to have a gender and to act within gendered roles and norms in society, is to materialize the reality of one’s existence: “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler 523). This acceptance and creation of gender within an individual, however, is often only accepted by others if the portrayal fits within the expectations of gender as defined by society. Montell describes and analyzes the punishment one faces if one’s performed gender does not align with what others have socially assigned as one’s gender identity. She looks at the etymology surrounding “gender” as a term because the historical definitions helped to create our current understanding of what it means to have gender while also recognizing how the historic meanings have placed roadblocks to our understanding of gender currently. She writes:

It’s possible that people still confuse the bodily sense of masculinity and femininity (now understood as *sex*) and the cultural of identity part of it (*gender*) because these words have been used interchangeably for half a millennium. No one ever posed a semantic distinction between sex and gender until the 1960s when folks began to realize that our bodies and social behaviors might not be intrinsically linked. (Montell 61-62)

This analysis highlights the resistance to self-naming or self-identifying that the communities surrounding the LGBTQ+ rights movement and other allied counterparts have faced as we recognize the historical changes in our language. We see this resistance because of the reluctance outsiders to the communities have had in response to the reclaiming of gendered terms in these LGBTQ+ communities. Montell’s analysis also allows us to challenge these historical uses as

we continue to explore what it means to have gender and to create one's own gender identity in our societies.

Defining gender and identifying the gendered disparity within our society have been issues at the forefront of historical feminist movements. The most recent resurgence of these gendered issues has come largely out of movements like #MeToo which bring issues like sexual violence and assault to the frontlines of mainstream media and highlight how deep these issues are. The #MeToo movement has given individuals the opportunity to speak out against sexual violence and assault, highlighting the reality that these issues are common within any form of identification like sex, gender, race, class, etc. (Cole and Atuk 35). As Sara Ahmed points out, however, "...when you name something as sexist or racist you are making that thing more tangible so that it can be more easily communicated to others. But for those who do not have a sense of the racism or sexism you are talking about, to bring them up is to bring them into existence" (Ahmed 36-37). In bringing attention to the issues, we are creating the space for them to be discussed in society, while also inviting a backlash (Banet-Weiser 40). We see how language and defining something, naming it, gives power to the individual who described it but also makes it visible as a target.

To create the space for these conversations is therefore to question the economies of visibility. "The politics of visibility has long been important for the marginalized, and continues to be. To demand visibility is to demand to be seen, to matter, to recognize oneself in dominant culture" (Banet-Weiser 22). In recent years, we have seen how different communities are demanding to be seen within our society and to be heard by the power structures which have oppressed them. We have seen this demand for a right to be heard and taken seriously with the Black Lives Matter movement and movements like #MeToo. These movements have to create

space to be seen in our society, though this can also be described as taking the space which has been wrongfully denied or taken by others historically (Ahmed 9).

Feminism, as I have found it, welcomes that which is new and different. Feminism is a response to our world and the injustices and inequalities we see in it. I started my feminist journey with the language surrounding gender and sexuality; as I grow into my feminist identity, I continue to understand and shape my language to better fit my worldview. Feminism is a response to the remaining inequalities in society. As a written work, what follows is also a response. It is a response to my past, my present, and a hope for change in the future.

The creative pieces which follow are my replies to the many feminist theorists and authors who have inspired me throughout my undergraduate career and will continue to inspire me as I move out into the world. In writing this thesis, I was torn between the theories and philosophies which have shaped my feminist education as an undergraduate student and the creative writing which sparks joy in me as I find new ways to describe my past and present. I am both creative writer and feminist theorist. I chose to write in this hybrid form because it afforded me the opportunity to combine both aspects as I attempt to describe and define the ideas which have transformed my life most. The hybrid form allows for the images associated with feminism to be brought to life on the page in ways that a singularly analytical paper would not.

In thinking of feminist writers, we often see a connection between the analytical style and the creative opportunities within writing. Many feminist works we are shown throughout our education are that of fiction. We see the feminist awakening in texts like Edith Wharton's *Summer*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper" and *Herland*, and many more. My own work is preceded by those examples as well as recent texts like Amanda Montell's *Wordslut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English Language* and Sara Ahmed's *Living a*

Feminist Life, both texts which I find combine theory with the creative attention to language and imagery which other theoretical approaches lack.

In writing my thesis, I have worked through my feminist identity and the identities of those who helped to encourage me growing up. Throughout this exploration, there are moments where my voice is absent in an attempt to highlight the variation in feminist identity between individuals while also recognizing the variance in voices within an individual. My decision to include these other voices has been a recognition of the reality that those who have inspired me are also very different from me. Feminism embraces what is new and different. I hope that my work can hold a candle to the flame that these other voices have created in me.

Realization

I can remember the first time I recognized that my uncle was gay. When I was a kid, gay was a word that everyone used to describe things they didn't like or things they thought were stupid, and it was a word that I used too.

“That’s gay,” I recall saying at the kitchen island at my grandparents’ house, just loud enough that my sister could hear it. It was as if I knew I shouldn’t be using that word in the first place.

I remember seeing my sister’s shocked face as the word came out of my mouth. Her lips were half open in surprise. I had never shocked her before. “Don’t say that,” she whispered, leaning closer to me. Her breath warmed my ear as she continued. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

I thought I did. At least, I knew the meaning that everyone around me had given it. But what I didn’t know is how the use of that word had affected someone I loved. I didn’t know that people I knew struggled to come to terms with what it meant to be gay. I didn’t know that was the reason why we never celebrated my uncle’s partner's birthday like we did for everyone else. He was a member of our family, but he was never recognized through our birthday or Christmas celebrations.

“Our uncle is gay,” my sister said in her hushed tones. The rest of our family still sat at the table next to us, passing around their plates and laughing at whatever my dad had just said. Their smiles and laughter were like those of a model family. You would never have known that the table had once been divided or their laughter had previously been forced.

That's when she explained that not everyone had two uncles like we did. I stopped using gay as an insult. I tried and failed to get school friends to do the same.

Years later, someone joked in my Sunday School classroom, "It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." A sad cacophony of laughs came from the rest of my peers, and I stayed quiet. My arms were crossed and my legs were tucked up underneath me, as if I was trying to shrink into nothingness.

It was too early to argue, and I was too young to change their minds. My voice wasn't large enough to fit in the space left in the conversation. The topic felt too heavy to try to discuss as we reread the Bible stories we had already learned before.

"I don't know why anyone would choose to be gay," someone said nonchalantly at our high school lunch table. I was surrounded by people I thought I knew. Grace continued to ignore the looks on the faces of those few at the table who were shocked and angered by her statement. Their tense faces matched my own. Our lips were pressed together and our eyes narrowed.

I don't remember what she said next because I was too busy watching my friend whose brother had just come out to his family, a secret not many knew at the time. Riley was quiet and his forehead wrinkled as he opened his mouth, no words passing through his lips. He didn't know what to say and didn't know how to say it. His shoulders fell and he finally let out a sigh. He had given up.

"That's not how it works," I said eventually. A large break in the conversation followed. It was my turn to be stared at. "You don't choose to be gay." The bell rang, and we left for our next class, the conversation seemingly forgotten the next day as we sat at our same table.

My senior year of high school we sat discussing LGBT rights in my AP civics class, and our teacher encouraged us to speak with one another. My classmates admitted they only believed what they were saying because that's what their parents said. "It's wrong. It's unnatural. I would never let my child be that way," their responses to the questions continuing the cycle across generations. "Well, this is what the Bible says," they would start, ignoring the fact we weren't supposed to use religion as part of our argument.

When it came time for me to explain what I believed and why, I was exhausted and angry. My chest felt tight as I was called on, and my breath caught in my throat as I tried to figure out what to say. Or rather what I *should* say. In that dimly lit high school classroom, I felt I had to defend my loved ones and the loved ones of friends.

And so, I spoke as well as I could, knowing that the class was going to wrap up soon and the conversation wouldn't continue into the next day. "My uncle is gay," I said definitively, as if that would answer all the questions that I was being asked. "He's been gay his entire life, and my family has known he is gay my entire life and until I was about 8 or 9, I didn't know that this wasn't ordinary."

The classroom was silent. I waited for something to be said. I waited as they shuffled in their seats and fiddled with the pages in their notebooks. I noticed how they tried to be invisible. And I knew there was nothing that I could do to change their minds. The conversation closed as our class came to an end, and I left school that day wishing there was something I could have said.

But there was nothing I could have said to create the imaginary outcome I hoped for. The words might not have been there in front of me. The words might not have even existed, but I still felt as though I had failed them.

In 2016, I worked the presidential election. I was too young to vote, but just old enough to realize the damning effects politics have on us. I was silent as we watched the acceptance speech in class the following day. Anything I wanted to say was lost in the celebrations of others sitting near me in our class. “I can’t believe this happened,” I remember repeating over and over after our teacher asked for our responses.

I kept talking, the words seeming like nothing as I tried to think of something to say other than what I had already said. “I can’t believe this actually happened. How could this happen?” The room was growing louder around me, but I stayed quiet, time moving like molasses. My whole body tensed as discussions continued. I felt my heart beat faster and my chest tighten up. There was nothing that could stop my palms sweating and the tremble in my voice. My spiral continued until I heard Riley behind me.

“My brother and his fiancé cancelled their wedding,” he said so softly I wasn’t sure I was meant to hear it. Riley’s words shocked me, and I stopped breathing for a moment. “They weren’t sure they would be allowed to,” he admitted when I turned to him, both of our shoulders dropping as we shared a look of recognition: *this* had actually happened.

“It’s not going to be as bad as you’re making it out to be,” another classmate said, a smirk on his face. The final bell rang for the day, and I slowly packed my bags, then walked to my car trying to wipe the tears from my cheeks before they hit the tiled hallway.

Life is Good

in the voice of my uncle, Kelly Turner

I asked: will I ever wake up from this nightmare?

Waiting was the hardest part,

to stop being afraid of speaking out.

The South has a way of resisting change.

To cherry pick [scripture] is to be hypocritical.

We were taught love and not hate,

preached and nurtured to love each other.

We asked for basic human decency:

be honest, have morals, show empathy,

value integrity, be a good human.

With my husband and best friend,

the best thing that ever happened to me,

I became the happiest and luckiest man alive.

Love is love.

And now, life is good. Life is still good.

Somebody Else

from a younger self

Queers might be asked not to make others feel uncomfortable, by not displaying any signs of queer intimacy. You might be asked to tone it down, or you might decide to tone it down to avoid creating discomfort. The availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment. Sarah Ahmed, 123

I wished I loved somebody else—
or found myself in someone new,
but life, it seems, had different plans
and then I fell in love with you.

I fell for your soft smile and see
your diamond eyes and warming heart.
Your laughter like a sweet reprise,
my care for you will be fine art.

I don't know how I could explain,
the feelings we were told were wrong.

I wanted nothing more for us
than proving we could both belong.

And through the years my life has changed,

as I have learned to show my love,
without the fear of others' thoughts,
being a thing to be scared of.

I no longer find I am someone
to hide their love. Instead, be proud—
our families have also grown
and to our life we have avowed.

Feminism

I first learned about feminism in my history classes. Those pages in the textbook were always less worn than the sections surrounding them, the waves of feminism often left to the last moments of the school year. It was a movement of the past, discussed as something which no longer needed to exist. We were assured that the world was better now, assured that the glass ceilings had been shattered.

I don't remember the first time I called myself a feminist or recognized that feminism wasn't a thing of the past. What I do remember is that my sophomore year of high school was the first time I said something along the lines of "Of course I'm a feminist" in class. Our history teacher had asked us out of curiosity, and I was the only one who spoke up. I didn't stutter: the words were loud and clear—even if the following moments were not. The class was so quiet we could hear the old a/c unit screech as it started up again.

I was sitting in the back of the room with my head held high. Everyone turned to look at me. Their heads tilted and their eyebrows furrowed. I had never wanted to be smaller than in that moment, to shrink down to nothing and hope that everyone would forget who I was.

"So, you believe that men can hit women?" The question startled me as I leaned back in my seat. My eyes widened. I didn't even have the time to take in what he had said before he continued. "You want equality! If men can hit men, why can't they hit women?" James's face lit up. He thought he had found a flaw in my belief.

"No," I replied, still not completely sure how this was part of his argument.

“Well then, you’re not really a feminist. You don’t want equality.”

“I don’t think you should be worried about who you can and can’t hit in the first place,” I said finally.

“But that’s what equality is,” he continued to argue.

“But it’s not,” I replied. Our conversation stopped as the teacher continued with the lesson. But his argument didn’t leave me. It was only a few days later that our teacher changed the seating assignment. The two of us were placed at opposite ends of the classroom. Without question, we were starting to be divided based on our beliefs.

A year later, we were leaving our AP US History exam, our whole class chatting about our essay questions. “Can you believe they had a whole question on the women’s rights movement?” James exclaimed as we walked to our cars to leave the testing site and go back to school.

I stopped in my tracks, causing everyone beside me to stop walking. They knew what was going to happen next. “Did it really deserve a full essay question?” he asked, unaware I was only a few steps behind him. Everyone watched my expression change from disappointment to anger.

“Why wouldn’t it?” I asked, leaning against my car door. He stumbled through a response I don’t remember. But I could hear *bitch* under his breath as our class sat at lunch together that afternoon.

After lunch, I sat for a moment longer as everyone else left for the day to go home. Riley turned to look at me, his head tilted as he tried to figure out what was going on inside my mind. I

gave him a soft smile and shook the thoughts from my mind before following behind everyone. I didn't think it was the right time to have this conversation.

The following school year, I was a junior in high school. It was this year when I realized that my feminist identity started with learning to appreciate myself and to speak up again. Since finishing middle school, I had stopped raising my hand to answer questions in class and stopped speaking up in general. I had never been comfortable in my body, never felt confident enough to wear the swimsuit, to wear sleeveless tops.

It was this year that I saw how uncomfortable I was in my body. I wasn't uncomfortable because of how I saw myself, but because of how it was seen by others. There was an instance where I had been diminished to nothing by someone I considered a trusted friend. *Big boobs and a big butt* was what he said, as my heart dropped, and all I could respond with was a bitter laugh. My worth had nothing to do with all the memories we shared. None of the conversations we had were worth anything to him.

I found the world of cosmetics and learned how to find joy in how I looked. I started to notice my vibrant blue eyes and the soft curls which framed my face. I fell in love with my rosy cheeks and bright red lipstick. I grew into acceptance of my body and learned to tame my hair. Eventually, this helped me to speak up when I no longer felt comfortable with the way the conversation was going. It offered me the confidence to start answering questions again, to offer my opinions when I wasn't asked for them.

My feminist awakening was jumpstarted in a Torrid dressing room. The small cubicle no longer felt like a prison and the clothes no longer appeared as punishment. In the dressing room, I finally found jeans which fit my body. In the store, there were pictures of models who looked

like me, something I had never experienced before. The workers looked like me and understood my frustrations in ways that other retail workers hadn't. I walked through the store's fixtures, knowing that there was something on the racks which would fit me. A proud smile stayed on my face as I continued to pick out more items.

I found myself excited to leave with bags full of clothes and looking forward to coming back soon. My feminist awakening was invigorated in a dressing room, but continued in the classroom.

In 2016, we talked about the qualifications of the candidates for the presidential election. The gendered elephant stood in the room, even as we refused to acknowledge it. "I just don't see a woman as president," someone finally said. The voice surprised me, the soft tone mixed with the southern twang as she said what others had been trying to avoid. Katie's words repeated themselves in my mind.

"Why?" Our teacher questioned. Someone answered, but I couldn't listen to what was happening anymore. The clock ticking on the wall was all I could hear as I tried to think of how I could say what I felt I needed to say. The classroom seemed smaller now, despite our class shrinking in size.

"It's a man's job," James said after a couple of minutes, his voice louder than others. I flinched at the sudden shift in volume.

"It's not," I interrupted, the words tumbling out of my mouth before I even recognized that I had responded. Another student agreed, but I was the one our teacher asked to elaborate. "It's hard to see something other than what we've already seen as a possibility," I started. "We don't see women in office because historically they haven't been in office all that long."

The conversation progressed and I didn't care where it went. My jaw was clenched tight and my eyes were half shut. I was drained from what little I had added. I felt hopeless doing what little I could in an effort to explain what I knew, what I thought. I rested my head on my hands.

I had spent the last year doing all I could and reading all the feminist literature I could get my hands on, but it still wasn't enough for me. Poetry, short fiction, theory—I read what I could find. I attempted to understand what I could with the resources I had available to me. I was introduced to the classics, but fell in love with the spoken word poetry of writers like Megan Falley and continued to reread her collection until I knew them well enough I could finish the lines myself: *“If you love someone, no part of them is revolting. Every bloody bit: beautiful.”*

It was that day in class when I recognized I was speaking to accommodate everyone around me. I had forgotten that they weren't speaking to accommodate me. They weren't afraid that what they were about to say would lead to an argument they wouldn't be able to win. They weren't afraid that they would have to defend their opinions on their own. Their voice belonged to the echo chamber and mine did not.

This was the start of my feminist journey. These moments piqued my interest and led me to where I am now. Feminism is how I snapped—into reality and into the person I was meant to become.

Bossy

Confidence, within the call-and-response dynamic of popular feminism and popular misogyny, is in scarce supply: if women have it, it apparently means they are taking it away from men. Sarah Banet-Weiser, 93

To be a bitch is to have confidence:
but taking the lead is mistaken as a power trip,
as they ignore her competence.

Confused by their astonishment,
she worries over censorship—
to be a bitch is to be confident.

Qualifications dismissed as fraudulent,
her work treated as an internship,
and they ignore her competence.

She's no longer the apologist,
though her truths are still seen as angry quips—
to be a bitch is to be confident.

Her knowledge seen as pompousness,
she's judged by her relationships

and they ignore her competence.

She finally sees the consequence,
of gendered identity in her workmanship.

To be a bitch is to be confident—
do not ignore her competence.

Ms.

in the voice of my history teacher, Lori Baucom

*We are built on differing opinions,
founded on disagreements; we make
connections with what we know—
make connections with what is real.
History is what happened:
the good, the bad, the ugly.
I'm still learning, but I try—
I try to show the voices that were left out,
try to show your opinion can be—
no, should be—inclusive.
I'm trying to evolve and change and grow
from the sheltered world where I didn't see
the overall context. To have a different awareness
of the world, to relate to what they [students] know. Dive in,
dive into what could be the truth.
What I thought has changed,
I'm still learning.
To teach, we must listen to see the world.
To see is to know how to make the connections.
To know is to recognize how things affect your life.
My job is to make students feel like they're included,*

to educate them so they have the tools to learn more than I can teach,

to educate them so they know:

to see the world is to make a difference.

Killjoy

The feminist killjoy appears here: when she speaks, she seems wound up. I appear here. This is my history: wound up. Sarah Ahmed, 37

This is my history:

ruined family dinners

and silent car rides.

Caged by the impression you create—

wrapped, tightened in creation. Speak

these issues into existence. The problems

are left unrecognized by the establishment

which has established these problems.

You grow into the role they have shaped for you,

named for you. You constrictor,

you wind around the issues you named.

You suffocate the issues you brought to life

and kill the joy they find in demanding

of others what will never be asked of them.

Feminist killjoy- unwind yourself,

uncoil your frustration and open

your mouth. Unhinge your jaw

and speak your truths.

When the world wants you wound up

and your mouth sewn shut—

appear as neither.

Open yourself to the world before you.

Feminist killjoy- take care of your joy:

the world will try to kill it too.

Housewife

I am suggesting feminism is homework because we have much to work out from not being at home in a world. Sara Ahmed, 7

The arms that built the house are the arms that will bring it down. Sara Ahmed, 88

The foundation is cracked.

The walls are concealed

by accepting the reality in which we live.

The construction is justified by the expectations
of the world we did not help create.

Society structures itself as a ladder.

Our effort to climb is an attempt
to dismantle the house we didn't build.

We will highlight your destruction,
celebrate as the walls come down.

Your house is built by those who were allowed
to create their world in their image.

Your house was built only considering the reality
you wish to perpetuate.

We will build our own house.

Feminism becomes homework,
it becomes housework,
and I become a housewife.

I am willing to clean the whole neighborhood
if it means finding a home which welcomes
all who enter.

Traveler

in the voice of my dance instructor, Melissa Zaleski

That's what we raised y'all to do:

expand your wings,

expand your horizons,

and move out into the world.

There is a great big world out there—

you have to look out for the world as a whole.

Teach them: look at everything,

based on what you value most.

I have been dismayed;

you can't only choose what is good for you.

Look out of the picture [...]

I'm hopeful we're going to get into a better place,

we're learning to adapt. Exposing ourselves

to the arts, we learn to thrive.

The arts bring us joy: to share the joy,

share it with the world.

To be realistic: it has made us stronger.

If you want to make something happen,

make something happen—

choose what you want to see and create it.

Bend and Snap

A snap is not a starting point, but a snap can be the start of something. Sara Ahmed, 194

Hazy memories of what you said that day—
sharp words: *Absurd*. And yet, I couldn't care.
I ask again and still you will not say,
your shadowed eyes still meet mine in a glare.
Admit, old friend, apologies, and I
will let go of the heaviness I hold.
With charming smiles, you never even tried
to listen; you discard what you've been told.
The words hold weight, they can only constrict.
You toxic boy with a frozen heart—lost soul,
you'll never know the pain that you afflict.
Forgive you now you've lost what you control,
but know that I no longer will depend
on broken bones I know will never mend.

Standards of Practice

Feminism: a history of willful tongues. Feminism: that which infects a body with a desire to speak in ways other than how you have been commanded to speak. Sara Ahmed, 191

One response might be to aim to reside as well as we can in the spaces that are not intended for us. Sara Ahmed, 9

We are told to cross our ankles,
told to sit up straight,
commanded to smile.

You'd look so much prettier if you'd smile.

We are told to pull our hair back,
told to fix our bra straps,
commanded to speak up.

I can't hear you.

All you need is confidence.

We are told to take a deep breath,
told not to cry about it,
commanded to stop being so emotional.

You just want attention.

It's not as bad as you're making it out to be.

Other people have it worse.

We learn what we can,
learn to focus on school,
and to do our best.

You talk too much.

We watch what we say,
watch to see how to brush it off,
and try to stop being so aggressive.

*You're too loud,
why don't you let someone else speak?*

We follow what we've been told—
we remember what we've learned,
figure out how to fit into the conversation.

Why don't you just be yourself?

We are stretched too thin.
In your mind, we fill a teaspoon with our power,
but we fill the ocean. We are a continuous cycle
of unknown power and unpredictable movements.

Move with us as we change the world.

We will speak out of turn and turn
ourselves into the space we deserve.

Gratitude

I was really young when my grandfather passed away, and any memory I have of him feels like a re-creation of the stories I've been told. Everything I know of him is a foggy image with idealized endings. But I still swear that I recall the days, weeks, months after he died when I would sit on the couch next to my nana, trying to fill a space that was much too big for me.

It was in those years that I saw how she would pause to look at the sunset every day and would turn the radio up anytime an Elvis song came through the speakers. She loved to laugh and sing and play piano if she could, something we share. She was a lady who never had a hair out of place, who always had her nails matching her lipstick.

Though Nana was later worrisome in my eyes, she hadn't always been. She was someone who had been strong and independent, even if I never knew that while she was still here. What I did know was that she was the one who would pick me up at school and let me have ice cream at breakfast. She was the one who let us plant flowers in her yard so we could watch them grow throughout the summer. But as we got older, her Alzheimer's progressed, and she transformed into the worried woman I knew.

If I ask anyone who knew my nana what she was like, they're all likely to mention her wit first. "Wanda always had a comeback for everything," and she did; whether it be sincere or sarcastic, she was never afraid to have her voice heard.

When she was younger, she was the only child in the family to move farther than a couple of streets away. She was brave enough to move out of her hometown and come into her own, and even stronger to come back when the time was right. As the second oldest out of five kids, she always tried to make things right for everyone.

If I ask my mom, she's likely to mention how headstrong Nana was. "She could hold a grudge," Mom muses, "that's where I get it, and that's where you get it too." She's not wrong. Nana refused to be walked over. She was a strong woman, who managed for years on her own and she was the one who stood by and cared for her sister when she was dying when no one else would.

The one thing that everyone brings up is her smile, a kind, gentle smile, accented by her rosy cheeks and high cheekbones. Her lips were outlined perfectly in her shimmery, pink lipstick. It's a smile that we share.

As a kid and even now, I would classify my mother as my biggest fan and supporter. Regardless of what I was doing at the time, both of my parents were there, but I recognize that as a stay-at-home mom until I was old enough to be in school, Mom was always doing something to help me or my sister. Her car was filled with dance bags and costumes. Her radio played the cd with my favorite song on it.

As we got older, she was reading our favorite books with us, listening to music interested us in that moment and allowing us to explore what was out there. My sister and I were introduced to music from all genres and time periods. I knew the lyrics to Jimmy Buffet and Dobie Gray. We grew up watching movies from before we were born. We would quote *Ghostbusters* and *Dirty Dancing*, all while singing along to their soundtracks.

Our parents made sure we were introduced to all that we could by taking us on trips that showed us what it was like outside of our small community. We travelled when I was little. Our favorite vacations were cruises to Nassau and Freeport, Bahamas or The Grand Caymans, where Mom and Dad made sure we learned about the culture and history of those places.

Even now, my mom is the one reminding me that I can do it if I set my mind to it. At a young age, she shared her passions with me: reading, singing, and cooking. All these hobbies we share are the things that have helped shape me to the person I am now. Her lessons have come so much farther than our kitchen table in the house I grew up in.

I found many mentors in my education. My seventh-grade English teacher was so different from what I was used to in the classroom. She was nothing short of herself. She was the “crazy black lady” she lovingly referred to herself as, and her wacky teaching style begged for creative thought inside the classroom.

The first day of her class, we walked into a rhythmic poem which played from the speakers of her cd player, Ms. Wall clapping and moving as the rhythms progressed in Fleur-de-Lisa’s ‘cicadas’; the poem became more of a song with every passing line until we were all moving in our seats.

It was this year writing found me. And Ms. Wall was the one who helped me find writing.

“Now, Miss Carrie,” she would always start out with her critiques of my work before pointing out something that I did well and something I could have done better. Ms. Wall focused on the potential of our work as she critiqued. Her laugh dotted the conversation.

Ms. Wall encouraged creativity in a time when standardized tests had taken over. Our understanding of writing and literature was only hindered by our ability as professional readers, as she liked to call us. To be a professional reader meant to read between the lines and in turn, write between them as well.

She taught us how to question not only what was placed before us, but also why. Her whiteboard was never empty; instead, our discussions blanketed the front of the classroom. None of our questions were dismissed, and no stone was left unturned.

In eighth grade, my history teacher gave me a more accurate depiction of American history than had been given to me in the classroom before. Her lessons spanned more than a year would allow; but somehow, she managed to relate the world around us to what we were studying each day, a practice, I know she's continued in the years since I left her classroom.

Mrs. Baucom had us bring in current events each Friday to discuss the world we were living in. She related our history to our future and showed us how the world was continuing to change.

"History isn't always pretty," a lesson she reminded us of every day. Her teaching often centered around and focused on the differences between what we were taught before and what was found to be true in firsthand accounts and the writings of those who are often left out. We read translated histories from indigenous peoples that had been left out of all the previous history classes and highlighted the female voice when it was there for us to hear. We spent time learning about the women of the Jazz movement like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. We took the opportunity to read about Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan.

She encouraged us to keep going after we left her class, to find the answers we were still hungry for. She instilled in us a curiosity for what was outside the cinderblock walls of our middle school.

Throughout most of my childhood, I took dance classes. Ms. Melissa, my dance teacher and family friend, was a secondary parent to me. For all of my remembered childhood, her family was there for all my big events: piano recitals, birthdays, Christmas, and Easter. Her family was mine, and it was with her help that my love of the arts was cultivated. My appreciation for Classical music started in the dance studio and flourished as I started taking piano lessons. I fell in love with the haunting melodies of Frédéric Chopin and the floating rhythms of Erik Satie. For Ms. Melissa, the arts help individuals to flourish in the outside world. It gives us the drive to create and to find things within ourselves which bring joy to us and those around us.

At dance, we focused on working as a group and maintaining our relationships with our friends. Our goal wasn't to be the best in the class but to be able to work together to create our final performance. Art, as she taught us, concerned the community surrounding us. Without the support of the community, we would not be able to support the community in turn.

Mentors and role models come at many different times in our life and sometimes we don't recognize until much later all that those individuals did for us. I know I am still learning to recognize the lessons I learned from all of my role models.

The feminist awakening is fostered by those before us who have made the effort to educate us. My early feminist teachers are the individuals who I have already mentioned. They are the people who inspired me and pushed me forward into the world. While I didn't know it at the time, they were creating a hunger in me that could not be fulfilled without the continued education of other feminist teachers or without the continued effort on my part. Sara Ahmed

writes: “it is not an assignment you have been given by a teacher, even though you have feminist teachers. If feminism is an assignment, it is a self-assignment. We give ourselves this task” (7).

This is an idea which I agree with to a certain extent. We cannot be told to become feminists, but we can be taught to look at the world through different lenses. This is the work of the feminist teacher.

“To become a feminist is to stay a student” (Ahmed 11). I will continue to be a student by searching out the voices lost in our history books. Feminists continue to take the steps necessary to understand and accept the world as it is changing and growing into something new. The feminist journey is personal and feminist theory can frequently feel abstract, but both are needed to live a feminist life. Personal experience and feminist theory open the individual to consider what might be possible in their own lives and in the lives of those around them. It is in the personal community of feminists that we are able to foster the growth in theory in order to expand the minds of the next generation of feminists. “[I]f we start with our experiences of becoming feminists not only might we have another way of generating feminist ideas, but we might generate new ideas about feminism” (Ahmed 11). To explore what it means to become a feminist brings us to the return of what it means to “become a woman” (Beauvoir qtd. in Butler 519). Feminism, like gender constitution, is a phenomenological state. We become women in the same way we become feminists—we make the choice and continue to make this choice throughout our lives.

Grandmother

they taught me to speak up for myself; to speak out against violence and injustice. Where we find feminism matters; from whom we find feminism matters. Sara Ahmed, 5

I still get compliments on your smile—

our smile, and I wonder: *what made you smile most?*

The sherbet skies and yellow roses? The bell-like laughter
of your grandchildren? The songs we used to sing together?

“That hard headed woman,” they used to call you.

You were strong enough to find your way out,
and stronger yet to come back. You were the one
who taught me to swear—swear that I would never
allow myself to be silenced, but to wait
for the moment to speak my mind.

You were the one who taught me how to hold—
hold a grudge against those who wronged me,
but also, to hold myself to a higher standard.

It was you who showed me what it meant
to be a “lady”. Your pink lipstick and painted nails.

Your smiles and belly laughter. Your wit and humility.

Being a lady meant knowing yourself
and learning about those around you.

I know who I am because I knew
who you were.

Daughter

in the voice of my mother, Sandy Turner

Be both beautiful in word and sentiment.

Judge by the content of their character,

but love extravagantly and hope fervently

for they know not what they do.

Forgive often and fight for the powerless.

You are not powerless. I have nurtured you

and your compelling and undefinable

truths. There is nothing more courageous than compassion.

My girl with golden curls and her thoughts way up high,

explain the world as you see it,

and find the world you wish to create.

Listener

in the voice of my English teacher, Natasha Wall

Sometimes we have to do the thing we don't

want to do to propel ourselves forward.

[on protesting racism and sexism in the community]

We thought we were doing well,

we thought we were blending and merging

as much as we could. We were already brought up

in the idea of being separated [by race, sex, class]—

it's just the nature of the beast. It's there,

it's been there, it's in the textbooks.

We don't want to be lambs to the slaughter.

Understand how the system works in education;

I am a student, critical thinking is still important to me,

professional in your reading, between the lines

into a different environment. We were always watching,

I was always listening, being aware of who was [also listening].

I knew that it [social change] was real. They [the small town community] are aware,

they are very aware. I think that's why people are so afraid.

The future is what they [conservatives] are afraid of; they are afraid

only because of what they think it [social change] is.

No one knows what any of the stuff means,

*we're fighting ignorance and I don't have the drive
to do what other people are doing [attending protests and political rallies].*

[on loving teaching]

It took years, I had to beg.

I keep pressing education,

it allowed me to explore.

That was my job, and I love it.

Most of us [teachers] were pushed out [of curriculum-building].

The move changed my everything,

but I didn't change.

I would have been content fighting,

I would have kept fighting.

I always had to fight for equity.

All the time, I thought:

I'm going to teach kids who look like me.

The students remember me:

as a nurturer, more for a mother figure.

Now, it's just beautiful to hear something different.

Everything you want is out there;

there's a possible potential for change.

You are the people [this generation] who can make the change.

For my Mother

Caring is anxious--to be full of care, to be careful, is to take care of things by becoming anxious about their future, where the future is embodied in the fragility of an object whose persistence matters. Our care would pick up the pieces of a shattered pot. Our care would not turn the thing into a memorial, but value each piece; shattering as the beginning of another story. Sara Ahmed, 266

Your arms open without question
as you make sense of how
we fit into the world which left
no space for the people we once were.
You become aware of all intention:
acknowledging who we are as you allow
the child flown from your nest
to attempt to be like Nana—
to be like you.

Mother, who bore me
into my stubborn reality,
rejoice as I uncover my future.
I am no longer worried.
You taught me to care. You taught me
to create a new beginning from our broken endings.

Mother,

trust me to learn from the others

and one day, I will open my arms

as you have opened yours.

Stripped

The histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile. Feminism might pick up (or more hopefully pick us up) from the experiences that leave us as vulnerable and exposed. Sara Ahmed, 22

willfulness is assigned to girls because girls are not supposed to have a will of their own. Sara Ahmed, 68

She strips off her clothing. The pieces are stitched together by the features of her description: *quiet, afraid, demure, proper*. But also: *willful, angry, emotional, fragile*. The fabric leaves a stain on her skin. She is forever marked by the fabric of their design. The girl continues to strip, allowing layer after layer to fall to the ground as she searches for flesh she knows—for flesh she can recognize. She begins to shiver, and her fingers grow numb. She is naked, bare before the mirror. Scratches she doesn't remember inflicting brush the surface of the glass. She can't decipher where the mirror's scratches stop and hers start. Fabric burns litter her skin. The red sections show how she is subdued by the world which tears her down.

She stares at a mirror stranger who stares back, an image of herself she does not know. Her body trembles as she stands naked. Her head tilts as she tries to remember who she had been before. She watches as the stranger smiles, a smile on her face she does not know could exist. There is a moment of recognition. She reaches for something to cover herself. She wraps pride around her shoulders, pulls happiness around her waist, adorns her hair with confidence, and pulls willfulness onto her feet. She is determined to walk forward and face the world in the

clothes she has created. The clothes she wears now are coarse, tattered, pieced together from sections of excess fabric. The girl *was* scared, but she watches as the woman in the mirror walks away.

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