

Bad Feminist: Take One

My favorite definition of "feminist" is one offered by Su, an Australian woman who, when interviewed for Kathy Bail's 1996 anthology *DIY Feminism*, said feminists are "just women who don't want to be treated like shit." This definition is pointed and succinct, but I run into trouble when I try to expand that definition. I fall short as a feminist. I feel like I am not as committed as I need to be, that I am not living up to feminist ideals because of who and how I choose to be.

I feel this tension constantly. As Judith Butler writes in her 1988 essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all." This tension—the idea that there is a right way to be a woman, a right way to be the most essential woman—is ongoing and pervasive. We see this tension in socially dictated beauty standards—the

right way to be a woman is to be thin, to wear makeup, to wear the right kind of clothes (not too slutty, not too prudish—show a little leg, ladies), and so on. Good women are charming, polite, and unobtrusive. Good women work but are content to earn 77 percent of what men earn or, depending on whom you ask, good women bear children and stay home to raise those children without complaint. Good women are modest, chaste, pious, submissive. Women who don't adhere to these standards are the fallen, the undesirable; they are bad women.

Butler's thesis could also apply to feminism. There is an essential feminism or, as I perceive this essentialism, the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be a feminist and that there are consequences for doing feminism wrong.

Essential feminism suggests anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual feminist woman—hate pornography, unilaterally decry the objectification of women, don't cater to the male gaze, hate men, hate sex, focus on career, don't shave. I kid, mostly, with that last one. This is nowhere near an accurate description of feminism, but the movement has been warped by misperception for so long that even people who should know better have bought into this essential image of feminism.

Consider Elizabeth Wurtzel, who, in a June 2012 *Atlantic* article, says, "Real feminists earn a living, have money and means of their own." By Wurtzel's thinking, women who don't "earn a living, have money and means of their own," are fake feminists, undeserving of the label, a disappointment to the sisterhood. She takes the idea of essential feminism even further in a September 2012 *Harper's Bazaar* article, where she suggests that a good feminist works hard to be beautiful. She says, "Looking great is a matter of feminism. No liberated woman would misrepresent the cause by appearing less than hale and happy." It's too easy to dis-

sect the error of such thinking. She is suggesting that a woman's worth is, in part, determined by her beauty, which is one of the very things feminism works against.

The most significant problem with essential feminism is how it doesn't allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality. There seems to be little room for multiple or discordant points of view. Essential feminism has, for example, led to the rise of the phrase "sex-positive feminism," which creates a clear distinction between feminists who are positive about sex and feminists who aren't—which, in turn, creates a self-fulfilling essentialist prophecy.

I sometimes cringe when I am referred to as a feminist, as if I should be ashamed of my feminism or as if the word "feminist" is an insult. The label is rarely offered in kindness. I am generally called a feminist when I have the nerve to suggest that the misogyny so deeply embedded in our culture is a real problem requiring relentless vigilance. The essay in this collection about Daniel Tosh and rape jokes originally appeared in *Salon*. I tried not to read the comments because they get vicious, but I couldn't help but note one commenter who told me I was an "angry blogger woman," which is simply another way of saying "angry feminist." All feminists are angry instead of, say, passionate.

A more direct reprimand came from a man I was dating during a heated discussion that wasn't quite an argument. He said, "Don't you raise your voice to me," which was strange because I had not raised my voice. I was stunned because no one had ever said such a thing to me. He expounded, at length, about how women should talk to men. When I dismantled his pseudo-theories, he said, "You're some kind of feminist, aren't you?" There was a tone to his accusation, making it clear that to be a feminist was undesirable. I was not being a good woman. I re-

mained silent, stewing. I thought, *Isn't it obvious I am a feminist, albeit not a very good one?* I also realized I was being chastised for having a certain set of beliefs. The experience was disconcerting, at best.

I'm not the only outspoken woman who shies away from the feminist label, who fears the consequences of accepting the label.

In an August 2012 interview with *Salon's* Andrew O'Hehir, actress Melissa Leo, known for playing groundbreaking female roles, said, "Well, I don't think of myself as a feminist at all. As soon as we start labeling and categorizing ourselves and others, that's going to shut down the world. I would never say that. Like, I just did that episode with Louis C.K." Leo is buying into a great many essential feminist myths with her comment. We are categorized and labeled from the moment we come into this world by gender, race, size, hair color, eye color, and so forth. The older we get, the more labels and categories we collect. If labeling and categorizing ourselves is going to shut the world down, it has been a long time coming. More disconcerting, though, is the assertion that a feminist wouldn't take a role on Louis C.K.'s sitcom, *Louie*, amusing. For Leo, there are feminists and then there are women who defy categorization and are willing to embrace career opportunities.

Trailbreaking female leaders in the corporate world tend to reject the feminist label too. Marissa Mayer, who was appointed president and CEO of Yahoo! in July 2012, said in an interview,

I don't think that I would consider myself a feminist. I think that I certainly believe in equal rights, I believe that women are just as capable, if not more so in a lot of different dimensions, but I don't, I think, have sort of the militant drive and the sort of, the chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that. And I think it's too bad, but I do think that "feminism" has become in many ways a more negative

word. You know, there are amazing opportunities all over the world for women, and I think that there is more good that comes out of positive energy around that than comes out of negative energy.

For Mayer, even though she is a pioneering woman, feminism is associated with militancy and preconceived notions. Feminism is negative, and despite the feminist strides she has made through her career at Google and now Yahoo!, she'd prefer to eschew the label for the sake of so-called positive energy.

Audre Lorde once stated, "I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my blackness as well as my womanhood, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable." As a woman of color, I find that some feminists don't seem terribly concerned with the issues unique to women of color—the ongoing effects of racism and postcolonialism, the status of women in the Third World, the fight against the trenchant archetypes black women are forced into (angry black woman, mammy, Hottentot, and the like).

White feminists often suggest that by believing there are issues unique to women of color, an unnatural division occurs, impeding solidarity, sisterhood. Other times, white feminists are simply dismissive of these issues. In 2008, prominent blogger Amanda Marcotte was accused of appropriating ideas for her article "Can a Person Be Illegal?" from the blogger "brownfemipower," who posted a speech she gave on the same subject a few days prior to the publication of Marcotte's article. The question of where original thought ends and borrowed concepts begin was complicated significantly in this case by the sense that a white person had yet again taken the creative work of a person of color.

The feminist blogosphere engaged in an intense debate over

these issues, at times so acrimonious black feminists were labeled "radical black feminists," were accused of overreacting and, of course, "playing the race card."

Such willful ignorance, such willful disinterest in incorporating the issues and concerns of black women into the mainstream feminist project, makes me disinclined to own the feminist label until it embraces people like me. Is that my way of essentializing feminism, of suggesting there's a right kind of feminism or a more inclusive feminism? Perhaps. This is all murky for me, but a continued insensitivity, within feminist circles, on the matter of race is a serious problem.

There's also this. Lately, magazines have been telling me there's something wrong with feminism or women trying to achieve a work-life balance or just women in general. *The Atlantic* has led the way in these lamentations. In the aforementioned June 2012 article, Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation*, wrote a scaring polemic about "1% wives" who are hurting feminism and the progress of women by choosing to stay at home rather than enter the workplace. Wurtzel begins the essay provocatively, stating,

When my mind gets stuck on everything that is wrong with feminism, it brings out the 19th century poet in me: Let me count the ways. Most of all, feminism is pretty much a nice girl who really, really wants so badly to be liked by everybody—ladies who lunch, men who hate women, all the morons who demand choice and don't understand responsibility—that it has become the easy lay of social movements.

There are problems with feminism. Wurtzel says so, and she is vigorous in defending her position. Wurtzel knows the right way for feminism. In that article, Wurtzel goes on to state there is only one kind of equality, economic equality, and until women

recognize that and enter the workforce en masse, feminists, and wealthy feminists in particular, will continue to fail. They will continue to be bad feminists, falling short of essential ideals of feminism. Wurtzel isn't wrong about the importance of economic equality, but she is wrong in assuming that with economic equality, the rest of feminism's concerns will somehow disappear.

In the July/August 2012 *Atlantic*, Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote more than twelve thousand words about the struggles of powerful, successful women to "have it all." Her article was interesting and thoughtful, for a certain kind of woman—a wealthy woman with a very successful career. She even parlayed the piece into a book deal. Slaughter was speaking to a small, elite group of women while ignoring the millions of women who don't have the privilege of, as Slaughter did, leaving high-powered positions at the State Department to spend more time with their sons. Many women who work do so because they have to. Working has little to do with having it all and much more to do with having food on the table.

Slaughter wrote,

I'd been the woman congratulating herself on her unswerving commitment to the feminist cause, chatting smugly with her dwindling number of college or law-school friends who had reached and maintained their place on the highest rungs of their profession. I'd been the one telling young women at my lectures that you can have it all and do it all, regardless of what field you are in.

The thing is, I am not at all sure that feminism has ever suggested women can have it all. This notion of being able to have it all is always misattributed to feminism when really, it's human nature to want it all—to have cake and eat it too without necessarily focusing on how we can get there and how we can make "having it all" possible for a wider range of people and not just the lucky ones.

Alas, poor feminism. So much responsibility keeps getting piled on the shoulders of a movement whose primary purpose is to achieve equality, in all realms, between men and women. I keep reading these articles and getting angry and tired because they suggest there's no way for women to ever *get it right*. These articles make it seem like, as Butler suggests, there is, in fact, a right way to be a woman and a wrong way to be a woman. The standard for the right way to be a woman and/or a feminist appears to be ever changing and unachievable.

In the weeks leading up to the publication of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, critics had plenty to say about the Facebook chief operating officer's ideas about being a woman in the workplace—even though few had actually read the tome. Many of the resulting discussions bizarrely mischaracterized *Lean In*, tossing around misleading headlines, inaccurate facts, and unfair assumptions.

As it turns out, not even a fairly average entry into the world of corporate advice books is immune from double standards.

Sandberg intersperses personal anecdotes from her remarkable career (a vice presidency at Google, serving as the US Treasury's chief of staff during the Clinton administration) with observations, research, and pragmatic advice for how women can better achieve professional and personal success. She urges women to "lean in" to their careers and to be "ambitious in any pursuit." *Lean In* is competently written, blandly interesting, and it does repeat a great deal of familiar research—although it isn't particularly harmful to be reminded of the challenges women face as they try to get ahead.

Intentionally or not, much of the book is a stark reminder of the many obstacles women face in the workplace. I cannot deny that parts resonated, particularly in Sandberg's discussion about "impostor syndrome" and how women are less willing to take advantage of potential career opportunities unless they feel qualified.

But Sandberg is rigidly committed to the gender binary, and *Lean In* is exceedingly heteronormative. Professional women, already largely defined in relation to professional men; *Lean In*'s loudest unspoken advice seems to dictate that women should embrace traditionally masculine qualities (self-confidence, risk taking, aggression, etc.). Occasionally, this advice backfires because it seems as if Sandberg is advocating, *If you want to succeed, be an asshole*. In addition, Sandberg generally assumes a woman will want to fulfill professional ambitions while also marrying a man and having children. Yes, she says, "Not all women want careers. Not all women want children. Not all women want both. I would never advocate that we should all have the same objectives." But she contradicts herself by placing every single parable within the context of heterosexual women who want a wildly successful career and a rounded-out nuclear family. Accepting that Sandberg is writing to a very specific audience, and has little to offer those who don't fall within that target demographic, makes enjoying the book a lot easier.

One of the main questions that has arisen in the wake of *Lean In*'s publication is whether Sandberg has a responsibility to women who don't fall within her target demographic. Like Slaughter, Sandberg is speaking to a rather narrow group of women. In the *New York Times*, Jodi Kantor writes, "Even [Sandberg's] advisers acknowledge the awkwardness of a woman with double Harvard degrees, dual stock riches (from Facebook and Google, where she also worked), a 9,000-square-foot house and a small army of household help urging less fortunate women to look inward and work harder."

At times, the inescapable evidence of Sandberg's fortune is grating. She casually discusses her mentor Larry Summers, working for the Treasury department, her doctor siblings, and her equally successful husband, David Goldberg. (As CEO of SurveyMonkey, Goldberg moved the company headquarters

from Portland to the Bay Area so he could more fully commit to his family.) She gives the impression that her movement from one ideal situation to the next is easily replicable.

Sandberg's life is so absurd a fairy tale, I began to think of *Lean In* as a snow globe, where a lovely little tableau was being nicely preserved for my delectation and irritation. I would not be so bold as to suggest Sandberg has it all, but I need to believe she is pretty damn close to whatever "having it all" might look like. Common sense dictates that it is not realistic to assume anyone could achieve Sandberg's successes simply by "leaning in" and working harder—but that doesn't mean Sandberg has nothing to offer, or that *Lean In* should be summarily dismissed.

Cultural critics can get a bit precious and condescending about marginalized groups, and in the debate over *Lean In* "working-class women" have been lumped into a vaguely defined group of women who work too hard for too little money. But very little consideration has been given to these women as actual people who live in the world, and who maybe, just maybe, have ambitions too. There has been, unsurprisingly, significant pushback against the notion that leaning in is a reasonable option for working-class women, who are already stretched woefully thin. Sandberg is not oblivious to her privilege, noting:

I am fully aware that most women are not focused on changing social norms for the next generation but simply trying to get through each day. Forty percent of employed mothers lack sick days and vacation leave, and about 50 percent of employed mothers are unable to take time off to care for a sick child. Only about half of women receive any pay during maternity leave. These policies can have severe consequences; families with no access to paid family leave often go into debt and can fall into poverty. Part-time jobs with fluctuating schedules offer little chance to plan and often stop short of the forty-hour week that provides basic benefits.

It would have been useful if Sandberg offered realistic advice about career management for women who are dealing with such circumstances. It would also be useful if we had flying cars. Assuming Sandberg's advice is completely useless for working-class women is just as shortsighted as claiming her advice needs to be completely applicable to all women. And let's be frank: if Sandberg chose to offer career advice for working-class women, a group she clearly knows little about, she would have been just as harshly criticized for overstepping her bounds.

The critical response to *Lean In* is not entirely misplaced, but it is emblematic of the dangers of public womanhood. Public women, and feminists in particular, have to be everything to everyone; when they aren't, they are excoriated for their failure. In some ways, this is understandable. We have come far, but we have so much further to go. We need so very much, and we hope women with a significant platform might be everything we need—a desperately untenable position. As Elizabeth Spiers notes in *The Verge*,

When's the last time someone picked up a Jack Welch (or Warren Buffett, or even Donald Trump) bestseller and complained that it was unsympathetic to working class men who had to work multiple jobs to support their families? . . . And who reads a book by Jack Welch and desperately feels that they're being told that they have to adopt Jack Welch's lifestyle and professional choices or they are lesser human beings?

Lean In cannot and should not be read as a definitive text, or a book offering universally applicable advice to all women, everywhere. Sandberg is confident and aggressive in her advice, but the reader is under no obligation to do everything she says. Perhaps we can consider *Lean In* for what it is—just one more reminder that the rules are always different for girls, no matter who they are and no matter what they do.

Bad Feminist: Take Two

I am failing as a woman. I am failing as a feminist. To freely accept the feminist label would not be fair to good feminists. If I am, indeed, a feminist, I am a rather bad one. I am a mess of contradictions. There are many ways in which I am doing feminism wrong, at least according to the way my perceptions of feminism have been warped by being a woman.

I want to be independent, but I want to be taken care of and have someone to come home to. I have a job I'm pretty good at. I am in charge of things. I am on committees. People respect me and take my counsel. I want to be strong and professional, but I resent how hard I have to work to be taken seriously, to receive a fraction of the consideration I might otherwise receive. Sometimes I feel an overwhelming need to cry at work, so I close my office door and lose it.

I want to be in charge and respected and in control, but I want to surrender, completely, in certain aspects of my life. Who wants to grow up?

When I drive to work, I listen to thug-ish rap at a very loud

volume even though the lyrics are degrading to women and offend me to my core. The classic Ying Yang Twins song "Salt Shaker"? It's amazing. "Bitch you gotta shake it till your camel starts to hurt."

Poetry.

(I am mortified by my music choices.)

I care what people think.

Pink is my favorite color. I used to say my favorite color was black to be *cool*, but it is pink—all shades of pink. If I have an accessory, it is probably pink. I read *Vogue*, and I'm not doing it ironically, though it might seem that way. I once live-tweeted the September issue. I demonstrate little outward evidence of this, but I have a very indulgent fantasy where I have a closet full of pretty shoes and purses and matching outfits. I love dresses. For years I pretended I hated them, but I don't. Maxi dresses are one of the finest clothing items to become popular in recent memory. I have opinions on maxi dresses! I shave my legs! Again, this mortifies me. If I take issue with the unrealistic standards of beauty women are held to, I shouldn't have a secret fondness for fashion and smooth calves, right?

I know nothing about cars. When I take my car to the mechanic, they are speaking a foreign language. A mechanic asks what's wrong with my car, and I stutter things like, "Well, there's a sound I try to drown out with my radio." The windshield wiper fluid for the rear window of my car no longer sprays the window. It just sprays the air. I don't know how to deal with this. It feels like an expensive problem. I still call my father with questions about cars and am not terribly interested in changing any of my car-related ignorance. I don't want to be good at cars. Good feminists, I assume, are independent enough to address vehicular crises on their own; they are independent enough to care.

Despite what people think based on my opinion writing, I very much like men. They're interesting to me, and I mostly wish they

would be better about how they treat women so I wouldn't have to call them out so often. And still, I put up with nonsense from unsuitable men even though I *know better* and can do better. I love diamonds and the excess of weddings. I consider certain domestic tasks as gendered, mostly all in my favor as I don't care for chores—lawn care, bug killing, and trash removal, for example, are men's work.

Sometimes, a lot of the time honestly, I totally fake "it" because it's easier. I am a fan of orgasms, but they take time, and in many instances I don't want to spend that time. All too often I don't really like the guy enough to explain the calculus of my desire. Then I feel guilty because the sisterhood would not approve. I'm not even sure what the sisterhood is, but the idea of a sisterhood menaces me, quietly, reminding me of how bad a feminist I am. Good feminists don't fear the sisterhood because they know they are comporting themselves in sisterhood-approved ways.

I love babies, and I want to have one. I am willing to make certain compromises (not sacrifices) in order to do so—namely maternity leave and slowing down at work to spend more time with my child, writing less so I can be more present in my life. I worry about dying alone, unmarried and childless, because I spent so much time pursuing my career and accumulating degrees. This kind of thinking keeps me up at night, but I pretend it doesn't because I am supposed to be evolved. My success, such as it is, is supposed to be enough for I'm a good feminist. It is not enough. It is not even close.

Because I have so many deeply held opinions about gender equality, I feel a lot of pressure to live up to certain ideals. I am supposed to be a good feminist who is having it all, doing it all. Really, though, I'm a woman in her thirties struggling to accept herself and her credit score. For so long I told myself I was not this woman—utterly human and flawed. I worked overtime to be

anything but this woman, and it was exhausting and unsustainable and even harder than simply embracing who I am.

Maybe I'm a bad feminist, but I am deeply committed to the issues important to the feminist movement. I have strong opinions about misogyny, institutional sexism that consistently places women at a disadvantage, the inequity in pay, the cult of beauty and thinness, the repeated attacks on reproductive freedom, violence against women, and on and on. I am as committed to fighting fiercely for equality as I am committed to disrupting the notion that there is an essential feminism.

I'm the kind of feminist who is appalled by the phrase "legitimate rape" and by political candidates such as Missouri's Todd Akin, who in an interview reaffirmed his commitment to opposing abortion, almost unilaterally. He said, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down. But let's assume that maybe that didn't work or something: I think there should be some punishment, but the punishment ought to be of the rapist, and not attacking the child," drawing from pseudoscience and a lax cultural attitude toward rape.

Being a feminist, however, even a bad one, has also taught me that the need for feminism and advocacy also applies to seemingly less serious issues like a Top 40 song or a comedian's puerile humor. The existence of these lesser artifacts of our popular culture is made possible by the far graver issues we are facing. The ground has long been softened.

At some point, I got it into my head that a feminist was a certain kind of woman. I bought into grossly inaccurate myths about who feminists are—militant, perfect in their politics and person, man-hating, humorless. I bought into these myths even though,

intellectually, I *know* better. I'm not proud of this. I don't want to buy into these myths anymore. I don't want to cavalierly disavow feminism like far too many other women have done.

Bad feminism seems like the only way I can both embrace myself as a feminist and be myself, and so I write. I chatter away on Twitter about everything that makes me angry and all the small things that bring me joy. I write blog posts about the meals I cook as I try to take better care of myself, and with each new entry, I realize that I'm undoing myself after years of allowing myself to stay damaged. The more I write, the more I put myself out into the world as a bad feminist but, I hope, a good woman—I am being open about who I am and who I was and where I have faltered and who I would like to become.

No matter what issues I have with feminism, I am a feminist. I cannot and will not deny the importance and absolute necessity of feminism. Like most people, I'm full of contradictions, but I also don't want to be treated like shit for being a woman.

I am a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all.

Acknowledgments

Versions of these essays have appeared in *The Rumpus*, the *American Prospect*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Frequencies*, *Bookslut*, *Jezebel*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Salon*. I am grateful to the editors of these publications for giving my work a home.

My agent, Maria Massie, is the greatest champion a writer can have. Cal Morgan and Maya Ziv are wonderful editors, and Cal, in particular, was so persistent in making a space for me at Harper. You know you've found the right people when your editor understands your love of *Beverly Hills* 90210. Maya and I are BFFs now. I also want to thank Mary Beth Constant for her witty, instructional care with my words. A great deal of this book was written to the sound track of *Law & Order: SVU*. I'm not sure what that says about me but I must give credit where credit is due. At *Salon*, Dave Daley and Anna North have been so welcoming of my work and made a lot of exciting opportunities possible. Isaac Fitzgerald and Julie Greicius edited my writing at *The Rumpus*, and I will always trust my writing in their intelligent, compassionate hands. Stephen Elliott was the first person to open the door to my nonfiction at *The Rumpus*, and it has been a

