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It's No One's Fault, But I Have My Doubts

Sophia Hyrack

I registered for my first semester of college classes on the very last orientation date. There weren't a lot of first-year seminar options left, so I pulled the course number for Women Writing the World out of the catalog and put it into my schedule for one reason, really: Women, I thought, I like those. I knew I was a feminist long before I came to the Blue Butler Bubble, but I had been discouraged by my recently estranged father because I'd listened to him, for years, accuse my mother of raising me, their only daughter, to be a feminazi. This, to him, meant that I might become a woman unashamed of her capabilities and unafraid to control her own life, and these accusations were nothing more than a manifestation of his fear that the reign of his type of manipulative man was crumbling. He almost successfully bullied the women in his life into submission based on that fear. Therefore, if there was anything I was lacking in my feminist identity, it was confidence that my feelings on equality and empowerment were allowed. I hoped that a class of students who chose to learn about and discuss global women's issues would help me build that confidence. In some ways, I am now more in tune with my power as an educated, young, American woman. In many other ways, I have never been more frightened to be an educated, young, American woman. I am left with more to talk about, but also with things I wish I hadn't heard.

Perhaps my only active display of feminism prior to college was my pride in myself for being able to fearlessly exist in public. Be it in a crowded city, a classroom, the workplace, etcetera, I was typically unafraid. Shortly before I came to Butler, I was walking on a city sidewalk with two friends. We walked in a triangle formation, and I was the leading point. I thought they would appreciate my walking quickly as I knew that they were made nervous by the homeless men, the idle cars, and the alleyways. However, they ran to keep up with me and said that I was risking being ambushed by a man, I wouldn't have the chance to change my trajectory, and I would inevitably be kidnapped especially because I don't carry pepper spray. What? These same friends later wouldn't allow me to lead them up the stairs of a parking garage. Why? Hidden rapists. I'd always rolled my eyes at girls like this. How can you expect to make

it through life as a woman when you carry so much fear? I didn't realize, until this class, that I was simply privileged enough to not understand. Just because I had been able to escape the dangers of harassment in public does not mean that I should assume the same about any woman. Not my friends behind me, nor the girls across the world.

Most of the texts addressed in our class first semester brought attention to issues of sexism, aggression towards women, and human rights that were far away in terms of either geographical distance or time. It was not until the end of the semester, when we read *Everyday Sexism*, that I truly understood the magnitude of said issues in the here and now. According to Stop Street Harassment, as cited in *Everyday Sexism*, "41% of American women have experienced 'physically aggressive' forms of harassment or assault in public places, including sexual touching, being followed, or being flashed" (Bates, 160). I was not blind to the issue of harassment, but reading about stories of American women in recent years along with shocking statistics that supported their claims made me understand that our class is not just about other cultures. Oppression does not come only in the form of physical entrapment of women in their homes, but also in women's inability to exist in public without being harassed. While I have become an advocate for oppressed women across the world, I have also been able to better recognize oppression daily in my own corner of the world.

However, even after all of that, the Blue Butler Bubble still seemed exempt from societal evils. Every time "Have you ever experienced x on campus?" was asked of the class, I found myself at a loss for an example of sexism or predatory behavior. My experiences at parties and in academic settings with men have been shockingly courteous. In fact, I was all but formally asked for a one night stand, and I have been asked many times, by male students, how I feel about topics being discussed in classes. I still believe that we are strangely lucky on this campus to have a high percentage of respectful and educated students that are not blatantly anti-feminist. However, even after nearly a year in this comfortable setting, *The Hunting Ground* brought me nearly to tears. Had I been missing it? When I hear girls sloppily making their ways down my hallway very late at night on the weekends, could any of them be an Erica Kinsman? Had any of just been dropped off by one of our basketball players after being raped in his apartment? Could I be raped in a basketball player's apartment? I thought of the allegations that

came up earlier this semester regarding the mishandling by Butler's administration of a sexual assault. Do we need to file a Title IX complaint, too? I had spent the majority of this year thinking, at least it's not happening here, but after watching such an eye-opening documentary, how can you deny that it must be? Not even at Butler, it seems, are we safe from the idea that women, college women in particular, are disposable at the hands of men and at the mercy of their academic institutions.

At the conclusion of this class, I was left with a new outlook on safety. I was recently petrified beyond the ability to leave my car or the walk up 100 steps through the woods from I lot to campus. What I once considered to be my most powerful quality has been taken from me because of the information I have gathered from this class. Was I empowered by the texts with which we engaged, or have they left me to cower in fear for the rest of my young, vulnerable, trying-to-make-it-in-the-patriarchy life? I have attempted to use the information constructively. Maybe I'll avoid the parking garage stairs, after all.

My favorite class text, by far, was *I Am Malala*. In parts, it read like a Judy Blume novel. Malala was brave to present her story both from the perspectives of herself as a Nobel Laureate and of herself as a child, because she risked being taken less seriously. Her early ambitions to become a politician and speak out for the right to education were inspiring to me, and certainly inspiring to the rest of our class. The activities conducted during discussions about this book reminded me of one done at some point during our first semester for which we were asked to say what we want to be when we grow up. Why did I feel embarrassed when my response was preceded by words like doctor, missionary, and artist living in Korea?

"Cute mom" did not seem like the right answer. Of course I want more than just physical cuteness and children, but my choice to not divulge the extent of my life goals earned me uncomfortable looks of slight disgust from nearly everyone around the circle. As freshly educated, probably angered, feminists, it is easy for us to see traditional roles of women to be automatically oppressive. Even worse, we may feel that putting yourself in those roles voluntarily is anti-feminist. As a class, I feel like we all grew in our understandings of feminism over our eight months together. However, due to nothing more than the focus of this class being limited to global women's issues and perhaps the time constraint to just two semesters, a large part of my definition of feminism was

never discussed. Feminism, to me, is intersectional beyond just the inclusion of women of color. By no means do I feel left out because we did not cover women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, etcetera, but I do believe that discussion of related issues would have legitimized my goals. Perhaps my colleagues would have then understood that being “cute” as a mom is not easily achievable for me because society doesn’t like to see two women raising children together.

Perhaps my colleagues would have then understood that I have to manipulate science to have the opportunity to have my own children. Instead, we discussed many times that having children should not be a woman’s purpose. Much of our class does not realize that every part of my right to become something as apparently simple as a “cute mom” was won in a fight fought just as hard as the ones that won women the right to vote, African Americans the right to freedom, and girls the right to education. We admire that a persecuted Pakistani girl is on her way to becoming a world-changing politician because there was a time when she couldn’t have been. We admire that a black man was president because there was a time when he couldn’t have been. We admire that a young, female college student is in school to be a pharmacist because there was a time when she couldn’t have been. I want to be a successful, loving, and loved wife and mother. Admire my ambitions. There was a time, extremely recently, when they were impossible to achieve.

Perhaps I could have mentioned these issues in class. Perhaps, because I didn’t, that means that my confidence in myself as a feminist was not strengthened as I’d hoped. However, I can use what I learned in this class to empower women I meet that may need help strengthening their voices. Maybe it’s a good thing that I’m more aware of the dangers surrounding me, and I am thankful for my education and my expansion of knowledge of issues that truly do not discriminate based on location, race, or socioeconomic status.