

Bad Feminist

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My favorite definition of a feminist is one offered by Su, an Australian woman who, when interviewed for Kathy Bail's 1996 anthology *DIY Feminism*, described them simply as "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 it. 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 prude, 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. Depending on whom you ask, good women bear children and stay home to raise them 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, the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be a feminist, and 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,¹ 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, disappointments to the sisterhood. She takes the idea of essential feminism even further in a September 2012 *Harper's Bazaar* article² 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 dissect 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—and that in turn creates a self-fulfilling essentialist prophecy.

I sometimes cringe when someone refers to me 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 deeply embedded in our culture is a real problem, requiring relentless vigilance. For example, in an essay for *Salon*,³ I wrote about Daniel Tosh and rape jokes. I try not to read comments because they can 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 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?" His tone made it clear that to be a feminist was undesirable. I was not being a good woman. I remained silent, stewing. I thought, "Isn't it obvious I am a feminist, albeit not a very good one?"

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 interview⁴ 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*, or that a feminist would be unable to find C. K.'s brand of humor amusing. For Leo, there are feminists and then there are women who defy categorization and are willing to embrace career opportunities. In a July 2012 *Guardian* interview, critically acclaimed performance artist Marina Abramovic, when asked how she felt about being invited to lead a woman-only lecture, said, "I really had to think about it. I am very clear that I am not a feminist. It puts you into a category and I don't like that. An artist has no gender. All that matters is whether they make good art or bad art. So I thought about it, but then I said yes."⁵

Again, we see this fear of categorization, this fear of being forced into a box that cannot quite accommodate a woman properly. Abramovic believes an artist has no gender, but there are many artists who would disagree, whose art is intimately shaped by their gender, such as artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, for whom feminism was a significant influence. In a 1982 *Time* article on Bourgeois and her Museum of Modern Art retrospective, Robert Hughes wrote, "The field to which Bourgeois's work constantly returns is female experience, located in the body, sensed from within. 'I try,' she told an interviewer, with regard to one work, 'to give a representation of a woman who is pregnant. She tries to be frightening but she is frightened. She's afraid someone is going to invade her privacy and that she won't be able to defend what she is responsible for.'"⁶

Trailblazing 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 negative energy.⁷

For Mayer, even though she is a pioneering woman, feminism is associated with militancy. Despite the 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,

*When I say 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 womanness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable.*⁸

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 post-colonialism, the status of women in the Third World, working 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?"⁹ 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 by the sense that a white person had yet again appropriated the creative work of a person of color.

Around the same time, feminist press Seal Press was taken to task for not devoting enough of their catalogue to women of color, which made senior editor Brooke Warner and other white feminists defensive. Warner went so far as to respond to a

comment made by blogger [Blackamazon](#), on her eponymous blog, saying, "Seal Press here. We WANT more WOC. Not a whole lotta proposals come our way, interestingly. Seems to me it would be more effective to inform us about what you'd like to see rather than hating."¹⁰ In addition to assuming a defensive posture, Warner also placed the burden of her press's diversity on women of color instead of assuming that responsibility as a senior editor. To be fair, Warner was commenting on a blog and perhaps did not think her comment through before posting, but she is neither the first nor will she be the last white feminist to suggest that the responsibility for making feminism and feminist organizations more inclusive lies with women of color.

The feminist blogosphere engaged in an intense debate over these issues, at times so acrimonious that black feminists were labeled "radical black feminists" who were "playing the race card."

Such willful ignorance and 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 toward race is a serious problem in feminist circles.

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, Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation*, wrote a searing polemic about "1 percent 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:

When my mind gets stuck on everything that is wrong with feminism, it brings out the nineteenth 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, you see. Wurtzel says so, and she is vigorous in defending

her position. 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 this movement.

The very next issue of *The Atlantic* included Anne-Marie Slaughter writing 12,000 words about the struggles of powerful, successful women to “have it all.”¹¹ She was speaking to a small, elite group of women—wealthy women with very successful careers—while ignoring the millions of women who don’t have the privilege of, as Slaughter did, leaving a high-powered position at the State Department to spend more time with her 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.

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 these articles tell me that there’s no way for women to ever get it right. These articles make it seem like there is, in fact, a right way to be a woman and a wrong way to be a woman. And the standard appears to be ever changing and unachievable.

Which leads me to confess: 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 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.

When I drive to work I listen to thuggish 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. “P poppin’ til you percolate / First booty on duty no time to wait / Make it work, with your wet T-shirt / Bitch you gotta shake it til your calf muscle hurts.”

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 lose my mind. 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 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 waste 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 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 if 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. 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.

And while I may be a bad feminist, 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 politicians such as Missouri's Todd Akin, who reaffirmed his commitment to opposing abortion, drawing from pseudo-science and a lax cultural attitude toward rape: “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 on the rapist, and not attacking the child.”¹²

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.

I'm the kind of feminist who knows it is complete hypocrisy that actress Kristen Stewart is being publicly excoriated for cheating on her boyfriend Robert Pattinson even though, if you believe the tabloid stories, Pattinson cheated on her for years. Being a bad feminist allows me to get riled up when I read that Stewart could be dropped from the *Snow White and the Huntsman* sequel while, say, Chris Brown, a known abuser with anger issues, is still performing at awards shows and selling albums, adored by a legion of ardent fans.

I'm the kind of feminist who looks at the September 2012 issue of *Vogue*¹³ with the Edith Wharton photo spread and knows there's a serious problem. Wharton is my favorite writer. I also love *Vogue* or, perhaps, hate to love *Vogue*. This

photo spread would normally thrill me. But. Jeffrey Eugenides portrays Henry James, Jonathan Safran Foer portrays architect Ogden Codman, Jr., and Junot Diaz portrays diplomat Walter Van Rensselaer Berry. Wharton is portrayed by model Natalia Vodianova; she is gorgeous, and *Vogue* is a fashion magazine, but a great disservice is being done.

The editors of *Vogue* are, apparently, unaware of the famous, talented, contemporary women writers who would be excellent choices for the photo essay. Zadie Smith released a book in September. There's also Karen Russell, Jennifer Egan, Aimee Bender, Nicole Krauss, Julianna Baggott, Alicia Erian, Claire Vaye Watkins, and the list could go on forever.

This disservice rises, in part, out of a culture that assumes women writers are less relevant than their male counterparts, that women in general are simply not as important, that their writing is not as critical to arts and letters. This disservice rises out of a culture where Jonathan Franzen lost the Pulitzer rather than Jennifer Egan winning the award.

All too often, these seemingly smaller issues go unchecked because there are so many more serious issues facing women.

There's more to the problem. Too many women, particularly groundbreaking women and industry

leaders, are afraid to be labeled feminists, afraid to stand up and say, "Yes, I am a feminist," for fear of what that label means, for fear of how to live up to it, for fear of feminism as something essential, for fear of the punishments—both obvious and indirect—that come with openly owning feminism or doing feminism wrong.

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.

I also want to be myself. Bad feminism seems like the only way I can both embrace myself as a feminist and be myself.

No matter what issues I have with feminism, I am one. I cannot nor 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, therefore, a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all.

* Roxane Gay's work is published or forthcoming in *Best American Short Stories 2012*, *Best Sex Writing 2012*, *New Stories from the Midwest 2011 and 2012*, the *Oxford American*, *Ninth Letter*, *Indiana Review*, *NOON*, *Brevity*, and others. She writes regularly for Salon, The Rumpus, and the *Wall Street Journal*. She is the co-editor of PANK and teaches writing at Eastern Illinois University.

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