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Into the Waves: A Mermaid's Journey

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ABSTRACT

“Into the Waves: A Mermaid’s Journey” is a creative piece about trauma, the identity of a name, and the waves of feminism. These topics are funneled through the lens of hybridity, which exists in this thesis through both form and content. This thesis is at once an entrance into the academic discipline of Women’s Studies and the creative discipline of Language Arts.

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Introduction

“Into the Waves: A Mermaid’s Journey” is the love-child of my desire to understand myself and my desire to understand the world. The function of this creative thesis is to interrogate academic configurations of feminism through the lived evidence of personal experience. By writing about my personal experience in this creative way, which blends the genres of non-fiction and fiction writing, I hope to bring attention to the power of personal narrative, which functions as a valid entrypoint to both personal and academic understanding, given how much personal experience can temper academic interests.

The primary nodes of this thesis include hybridity, feminism’s waves, the effects of trauma on understanding, and the power of naming. This piece offers hybridity formally and thematically, drawing attention to the complex, mixed nature of any experience or subject. Feminism’s waves appear as an extended metaphor for understanding academic feminism, serving as the main way I talk about the movement for women’s liberation from patriarchy. Trauma is the underbelly of the narrative, providing the desire to enter academia yet also disjuncting the narrative, and the power of naming exists as a possible response to trauma that can both empower and shatter identity.

The idea of the project was conceived following a traumatic event, which I understood as an example of violence against women. Following the event, I quickly wrapped myself inside the academic realm of Women’s Studies to attempt to learn even more. As a creative at my core, my instinct was to write about the traumatic event, and, as an academic, I wanted to write about it with the knowledge I had gained about sexual violence against women. I tried writing about it in different ways-- fiction, non-fiction, poetry, academic essays-- but they never seemed to tell the

whole story. With fiction, I was too far removed from the event. With non-fiction, I was too close. Poetry obfuscated the truth, no matter how pretty it was, and academic essays took me out of the equation entirely. I realized that, to write about this traumatic event, I could not confine myself to the desires of a singular genre. I had to free myself by listening to my desire to explore my trauma in a non-linear fashion that blends multiple forms of writing to create a hybrid form.

The literary exploration of trauma is a tool for self-healing and understanding. In an article titled “Narrating Gender and Trauma: An Introduction,” Beatriz Caballero Rodríguez writes:

Through the use of narration as a therapeutic tool, trauma sufferers may find their experiences echoed in the text, hence overcoming a common sense of isolation. The acts of writing and reading become a powerful healing tool. Through the power of stories, the ones we construct and tell ourselves and others as well as the ones we read, we create and shape our identity and, crucially, we also create meaning.

This thesis is an attempt toward creating meaning and self after the identity-shattering effects of trauma, serving as an entry into healing as guided through narrative practice. Not only is this creation of narrative a possible source of healing for myself, it can potentially offer a narrative that could be healing for others.

The narrative creates meaning by drawing attention to hybridity, which appears in both the thesis’s form and content. In terms of form, hybridity is “an umbrella term for all kinds of blending, mixing, and combining that occur in genres and texts” (Mäntynen and Shore). This hybrid form that blends the academic with the personal is not new by any means. The combinative form of nonfiction and fiction can sometimes academically be referred to as “autoethnography,” which is a term that suggests that one can write about a broad group of people through writing about themselves. In *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Carol Ellis

writes that one way autoethnography can be understood is through an approach which focuses on “personal narrative,” “where scientists view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative stories specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives.” She goes on to say, “the primary purpose of personal narrative is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis 45). In the case of this thesis, I am trying to understand myself and the aspects of my trauma within the cultural context of feminism, focusing specifically on the waves of feminism as my entrypoint into the theoretical. Other than being a description for a type of writing, hybridity can refer to all sorts of mixing. Treating something as a hybrid, or as a mixture of many things gives the subject of the work space to breathe, allowing it multiple definitions without relegating it to just one understanding. The autoethnographic writing of personal narrative in combination with some academic intervention in the thesis serves as an example of hybridity as well. The thesis is not only using autoethnography, but leaks outside of it by also using poetic form from time to time. Thus, even the method through which I use autoethnography is affected by deliberate mixing of form.

This focus on hybridity complicates both personal narrative and academic writing, conflating the two so that one cannot tell where one starts and the other begins. Hybridity in my form naturally emerged as a subliminal response to my inability to tell this narrative through just one genre, but became a way through which I could actively and deliberately explore the complex reality of a life after trauma. While a traditional, research form for this thesis could have gotten some of my ideas across clearly, it would have lacked the leeway that is necessary in telling a narrative about trauma, which doesn't work in linear heading, subheadings, and citations. Instead, this creative form allows me to explore different access points for healing, which is sometimes academic, but most times personal. The highly personal quality of trauma requires, too, a highly

personalized form for its recounting, which is why this thesis deviates from common research format.

Hybridity also takes form in the figure of the mermaid, who is half-human, half-fish, able to traverse both the sea and the land through metamorphosis. Historically, the figure of the mermaid (and her older cousin, the siren) emerged from sexual desire, having been the mistaken perception of the seacow. In “The Little Mermaid: Icon and Disneyfication,” author Finn Mortensen writes that her “constructions (...) can be found in the human need to understand sexuality and love.” In my project, there is a focus on Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” and Disney’s rendition of this story, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), as examples of how the mermaid’s female form functions in fairytale and folklore. In these two stories, and primarily in Disney’s rendition, the mermaid is, at once, depicted as both a young girl (no more than 16) and an object of sexual desire. Because the eponymous mermaid has a physically animated form in Disney’s version, it is clear that the mermaid is to be a figure capable of seduction; not only is she depicted scantily clad, with a bare midriff and cleavage to boot, her beauty is able to distract people from her silence. The mermaid is the figure with whom I explore the waves of feminism. A woman herself, the mermaid is also implicated in the narrative of feminism as a possible embodiment for women. The figure of the mermaid in this project stands as an analogy for many things, including myself, other women, and the way women can see themselves in other women and images of women. The mermaid also serves two other purposes in this thesis; she helps me travel through the waves of feminism, and serves as an avatar in telling my personal narrative.

The metaphor of the waves is the vector through which we encounter feminism as historically divided and divisive. It separates the movement of feminism into three or four (depending on whose definition is used) segments divided by time. I decided to focus on this

metaphor as a way the story of feminism is told. The definition of the waves I use is largely informed by Ealasaid Munro's article, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" which describes the first wave as focused on women's legal ability to vote and own property and the second wave as focused on women's domestic lives as a necessary area for political change. After this, things get complex. The third wave can be seen as reactionary critique of the essentialism of the second wave, developing concepts like intersectionality and using queer theory to redress inequities within the movements. Proponents of a fourth wave argue that the digital rendering of feminist exchange and activism is enough to say that we have entered a new wave or movement; opponents contend that we are in an extension of the third wave. However, no matter what wave of feminism is currently at large, the desire of feminism necessarily remains the same, which is to ensure the equality/equity of all people, focusing largely on how women have been mistreated by institutional desires. The metaphor of the waves can be problematic for a few reasons, but the main reason I'd like to focus on is how we tend to treat the first, second, and sometimes third waves of feminism as issues of the past. While this is not how the waves of feminism are intended to work, the separation of the movement into three or four discrete categories can give the illusion that the waves that have passed are over. However, the waves don't necessarily go away; in other words, while there are discrete waves of feminism, they all exist within the same feminist ocean.

My inscription of a mermaid travels through this ocean. She is also a response to my trauma-- she is a body that I have given the agency I feel my trauma has taken from me. Through a reimagining, or through a specific personal narrative, I have attempted to reclaim agency. This attempt at reclamation is informed by two key works of trauma literature, the first being Amy Berkowitz's 2015 book *Tender Points*, a disjointed narrative exploring the connections between sexual trauma and the rise of fibromyalgia. The second work, which informs themes of

namelessness, renaming, and reclamation in my thesis is Chanel Miller's 2019 book *Know My Name: A Memoir*, which is a more traditional essay-style memoir about her reclaiming her identity after being renamed and anonymized by the judicial system in a high-profile sexual assault case. These two books are part of the tradition of writing as a conduit to healing.

This thesis works with and through certain topics in order to create a complex narrative of my personal experience, and how that personal experience has then affected my academic experience. Specifically, it works through my personal identity as a cisgender, straight-passing female trauma survivor who has been affected by and hopefully can affect the waves of feminism. It is a personal project through which I've attempted to find agency by producing a somewhat cohesive piece about what I found to be an experience that made my life incohesive.

Now, let's dive into the thesis itself. Hopefully, the water's warm enough.

Into the Waves: A Mermaid's Journey

In Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Ariel's silence after transforming into a human prompts Prince Eric to say, "Gee, you've really been through something." In this scene, Ariel is disheveled, having just been through the trauma of a change that's impossible to understand or explain, even with words, and Prince Eric pulls her into his arms, gathers her up, and says, "Don't worry, I'll help you."

Once upon a time, in a fantasy of my mind, I was a mermaid sitting on a rock at the shore, staring at the reflection of my body, seeing it as obviously sculpted from the template of media mermaids ingrained into my mind, Ariel and her sisters with their 36-24-36 measurements (how did Disney get a tail fin to look so much like the hint of an ass?), and wondering whether or not it was feminist that I imagined myself into this body, allowed to glide through the waves, feel the water against my skin, all in a seashell bra.

In a 2003 article, Jennifer Baumgardner writes that the Number One Question about Feminism is, “Can I be who I am *and* be a feminist?” This question was derived from a college-aged feminist asking if it was OK to wear a thong and if doing so would negate her status as a feminist. She goes on to say that college-aged women “are attracted to these articles of femininity or consumerism” (i.e., thong-wearing), asserting that “these young feminists came of age in a much more disposable, capitalistic time than did their Second Wave predecessors. They do not view rejecting consumerism as synonymous with rejecting patriarchy, but that does not mean they reject feminism.” Baumgardner suggests that the judgement they feel when it comes to personal actions is due to the fact that young feminists “don’t have a clear basis of feminism in their lives.” The article is optimistic, asserting that “The thong does not disqualify her” from engaging in feminist critique.

The seashell bra does not disqualify me from engaging in feminist critique in my fantasy. I absolve myself for imagining the seashell bra. I keep it on, remembering that I can allow myself to engage in feminist critique, even if I am subjecting myself to the desires of the male gaze because, *hey, they're my desires, too*. In my dream, I swim my way into the waves of feminism. In real life, I log onto Twitter.

Whether or not I like it, my work as a woman will always be affected by and will always affect the story of feminism. Baumgardner, in “The Number One Question” writes that the popularization of the phrase “the personal is the political” has become a way to judge a woman based on her personal actions, and I know that I am not exempt from this judgement.

There’s a lot to say about what women do for feminism simply by being women. While it may not be good, per se, to see women as tied inextricably to feminism, *knowing* that this is the case makes it easier to understand why a woman would feel unfeminist for wearing a thong.

While I agree that no woman should be marked as ineligible for feminist critique based on the underwear she’s wearing, I wonder, still, *why* a woman would *want* to wear a thong at all, and if she had a clear reason, *why* she would need to feel bad for it.

I'm a mermaid trying to swim from the second to the third or even fourth wave but it's not that easy because the numbers in this metaphor don't make sense.

The metaphor was coined by Martha Lear in 1968, who wrote in an article that society was now in a "second feminist wave." While it could be possible that she was aware of the weight of the statement, it seems unlikely that Lear was prepared for her metaphor to continue on for decades, extending into a new millennium with new technologies and new ideas. I conjecture that she may even have been unprepared for the phrase to be so divisive, perhaps having seen it as more helpful than harmful. Jennifer Baumgardner writes in "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does It Matter?" that more women were interested in the new wave rather than in the "first wave," adopting it quickly in favor of the already-existing "feminist" label, which was soaked in the seeming whiteness and myopia of the first-wave.

This seems to mirror the tension between the second and third (or fourth) waves. In "What Is Third-Wave Feminism?," Claire Snyder writes about how the third-wave emerged from a desire to depart from the second-wave, which had been painted by new feminists as undiverse and myopic, too.

In my mermaid fantasy, I want to find my sister mermaids and tell them about my new understandings of feminism. I want to float the idea of "#FreeTheNipple" past them, to see if we can make way for "#MeToo," which we obviously aren't ready for quite yet, seeing how our father, Neptune, treats us for having any emotions (how many times does a girl have to scream, "Daddy, I love him!" for him to understand?) and how Sebastian (the crab) was designated our male guardian to oversee us.

I realize quickly that my fantasy is tempered by media images. I realize quickly that my fantasy is tempered by the realities of patriarchy. I realize quickly that my fantasy has dissipated and that I've been pulled underwater, into the depths of the feminist ocean, where the waters are still but heavy.

Everything can be a story. We write the stories of everything everyday. We write the stories of our lives by being alive.

Every story starts with “once upon a time,” but not every story ends with “ever after.” Not even “happily ever after,” just “ever after.” “Ever after” suggests permanence in the state of a story at its end, which is impossible because, while things always begin, they don’t always culminate into a permanent state that could be called The End.

Nothing ever really ends, therefore, every “ever after” ever written, no matter if it’s happy or sad, has been a false ending.

For biologically living things, one could argue that we face a certain “ever after” at death (and, for humans, taxation; though to end a story with “taxed ever after” would be too close to home, wouldn’t it), which, I suppose, could mark the “end” of a material existence; but stories, which were never biologically alive don’t ever have a clear death. That is to say, living things (including people) die, but non-living things don’t.

That is all to say that stories never die. Stories never end. Stories keep moving even after we’re no longer reading them. The stories of things and concepts and ideas continue to be written. The story of technology, once written with the new technology of paper and pencil is backed up and saved to the cloud every time it’s edited. The story of womanhood, once sewn quietly into the seams of society is now plastered on the news with the scrolling headline, “#MeToo: How It’s Changing the World.”

Classically, stories are tangible-- stories are products, pieces of media, movies, books, music, any published thing that offers a narrative. But everything can tell a story whether it means to or not. Anything, in its *entire context* could tell the story of something else, because nothing is void of context and context is that which turns a feeling, emotion, or event into a story about one thing that is also about something else.

I’m trying to get at the interconnected nature of all things, how one movement here could affect that movement there-- how this feminist movement here could affect the anti-capitalist movement over there, how my movement in my everyday life affects the movement of the feminist narrative, and so on and so forth until things stop moving.

This interconnected nature of the world makes it difficult for me to tell the story of what happened to me. If I were to sit down with the intention *really, honestly* telling someone what happened to me, I don't know where I would start.

I see the traumatic event now as an event of the past-- its facts I see as packaged neatly in a memory that I've stowed away for recounting when necessary, such as in diagnostic settings or in trauma-bonded interpersonal settings. But I know that that isn't necessarily *the story*. The memory as an event itself is a personal artifact. The words I use to express them are my best interpretation of the facts as they were. I can tell you "what happened?" but I'm working on giving you the story.

I need the internet so much that I bring it into my mermaid fantasy. I materialize the internet for my SeaPhone (my imagined underwater Apple line), which gets Wi-Fi so long as I'm sitting up on that rock by the shore, because there's a Hilton by the beach. The internet I imagine is the perfect space; there are no predators, no creeps, no trolls.

That itself is a fantasy, too, because any woman who has ever been on the internet knows that it's an unrelentingly violent space if you present as a woman in any way. Female-coded bodies are subject to more gendered violence online.

On this, worldwide organization Amnesty International writes that “[a]lthough people of all genders can experience violence and abuse online, the abuse experienced by women is often sexist or misogynistic in nature, and online threats of violence against women are often sexualized and include specific references to women’s bodies.”

As such, the internet that exists outside of my fantasy is dangerous for me, and I know this because I've been on that internet and targeted on it. I was targeted to the point that I felt the only way to get away from it was to change my name, but I'm here, writing this, so maybe I'm not away from it--

I'm scrolling. Sitting on my rock. Tweeting, “The only reason mermaids exist the way they do is because of the male gaze.”

We are, at once, consumers, citizens, and creators of the internet.

At the level at which we are normally operating, we probably see ourselves as either consumers or citizens of the internet. Ironically enough, perhaps the most conscious activity that we do with the internet is consume it. We're generally aware of the fact that we're using the internet for entertainment's sake-- especially when it seems like most people have near constant access to the internet in one form or another. For the majority of people around the developed world, and maybe too in the developing, it seems that we're always attuned to the entertainment qualities of the internet through a close relationship with our mobile devices. Phones have become more than phones; they are *mobile devices*. They are items we can take with us. We had decided, as a society, somehow, at some point (otherwise how did it get to be this point?) that the internet was important for us to carry everywhere.

“OK,” we said, and took the phones with us everywhere. “And now what?”

Now, at the same time that we are consumers of the internet, we are citizens of the internet. When the internet had just begun, it seemed as if its purpose was largely informative. It's apparent through the use of Geocities and forum-like sites that some people actuated a sort of virtual existence, but this wasn't a widespread phenomenon like it is now. Most of us are now closely linked to our virtual existences-- at least it seems like young people largely express themselves through digital social behaviors from profiles of ourselves across apps, caught in a dynamic of posting, liking, reposting, and commenting, ad nauseam.

Yet, there is no internet without the history of the internet. There is no inherent Geocity or Twitter profile. What would be a freak of nature, the internet's history is laden with human hands. It is a manmade creation, constantly being created by us as consumers and citizens of it. What was once a sprawling connection of web pages that could mimic connections between humans is now a sort of digital archive of the time of the internet, and it continues to be written by us. Everything we put onto the internet now will exist forever in its time capsule as a testament to our human history, available now through our virtual reality. We tweet over the graveyard of the internet, our words layering on top of the words that have preceded us. Every forum post from 2006 that hasn't been deleted probably never will be. These words, probably long forgotten by the person who first typed them. On top of data there is more data, and as our lives have become more and more digitized, with the rise of widespread use of micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter or Instagram, our lives have become our data, and we keep uploading, reuploading, favoriting, reposting this data, turning the internet into a working history of ourselves.

“OK,” we said, uploading our lives. When did we agree to this? “Now what?”

In my real world, outside of my mermaid fantasy, the internet is how I have engaged with the waves of feminism. A lot of my thinking has been prompted by internet trends of calling out inequalities between women and men. Not only that, but the internet had facts my school wouldn't give me. It's where people could freely discuss the wage gap, rape culture, and unfair dress codes.

Of course, this was only after I had been on the internet for a while. The internet only became this after I developed an interest in social justice activism, which was in my early to mid-teens.

As a young child, using the internet was heavily tied to using the computer, on which I preferred to tend to things that were more entertaining to me, like computer games (namely *The Sims*) which didn't require me to enter online space. However, when games became synonymous with the internet, the "Add a Neofriend" button on Neopets (which I couldn't click until I turned thirteen) was more interesting than any of the mini-games available on the site. In fact, while on the site between the ages of ten and twelve, I kept a list in my notebook of random people I had found on the site to add the moment I turned thirteen, and everyday I was thankful that I would be thirteen before the world was supposed to end on December 21st, 2012. I never added anyone on Neopets.

From inside the feminist ocean, I look up at where the water forms a barrier with the land and see my reflection in the surface tension. If I look long enough to stop seeing myself, I see past where the water breaks and see the lights of the land, the flashing billboards of Times Square, the screens in everyone's pockets.

I am aware that I am inhabiting a fantasy inside my fantasy. I've shifted from embodiment to avatar, from having the body that I have to having a body I gave myself. I've purposely taken myself out of my body to self-liberate, imagining myself as alien to what is happening on land by envisioning myself drowning, or floating.

How different is this, then, to my uploading myself online through an avatar? Through a profile of myself rather than as behaving as myself?

While I am still allowed to participate in feminist critique if I'm only wearing my bra underwater, I wonder if I'm still a feminist anyway, because I know that men are objectifying me if my cleavage is out, whether I like it or not. Am I a feminist, still, then, for liking, or even allowing, the attention? Or should I cover myself up? Or am I being sex-negative? Or am I liberated sexually? And if I were, wouldn't I be participating in the underwater form of #FreeTheNipple? Or are we just not that *progressive* yet in Atlantis?

That progressiveness is related to #FreeTheNipple is bizarre, because the real progression in terms of clothing is that we wear it at all. If anything, it is regressive to desire to go back to near-nudity.

But it's progressive in terms of the conversation of what women are allowed to do. And you know women can't ever #FreeTheNipple because even mermaids have to wear seashell bras.

Here I wonder how personal fantasies temper the existence of media fantasies. If we stopped accepting that even mermaids (fictional creatures) had to behave in accordance to societal laws, would we stop accepting that people (non-fictional creatures) had to, too?

Ariel wanted to be a human, so why do I want to be a mermaid? For what reason did I materialize in my own fantasies as a mermaid? The answer is in the nature of fantasies themselves, which are tempered always by media images. Our saturation with media infiltrates our fantasies, and all advertisements, brands, and ideas that are sold seep into the way our brains work.

This is why the omniscient voice from childhood advertising pops into my mind, singing, "Be who you wanna be, Barbie girl!" This is why I look like the mermaids from *The Little Mermaid* in my fantasy, and that is why I'm concerned my mermaid fantasy is not feminist-- because someone else drew the way I see myself.

But why wouldn't people want to be mermaids? Who doesn't want to be seen as beautiful, ethereal? Who doesn't want to be gathered up in someone's arms and validated, "Gee, you've really been through something. Don't worry, I'll help you"?

There are a few different ways that people talk about feminism, but explaining it through the waves seems to be a catchall. Martha Rampton, a history professor at Pacific University in Oregon defines them as follows in an article titled “Four Waves of Feminism”: “the goal of [the first wave] was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage,” “the second [wave] drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity, claiming ‘women's struggle is class struggle’,” and “in [the third wave] many constructs were destabilized, including the notions of ‘universal womanhood,’ body, gender, sexuality and heteronormativity.” Rampton goes on to say that “the emerging fourth wavers are not just reincarnations of their second wave grandmothers; they bring to the discussion important perspectives taught by third wave feminism.”

Even in attempting to describe the waves of feminism as a metaphor for the push of women’s freedom, the desires as posed by each wave appear to be different, separated into having specific goals for specific waves.

Additionally, there has been contention in recent years about whether or not we’re in the fourth wave. From this, I’d like to ask: why? And also, why not?

I ask why because I wonder what makes it necessary for the feminist movement to hold onto this metaphor. I understand that there is an ease in this categorization, but it divides feminism into fixed chunks of time rather than viewing feminism as the eternal fight for women’s liberation. It relegates some feminist actions, such as calling for suffrage, to historical, making these actions appear less revolutionary than what we see ourselves as able to do. Additionally, seeing the feminist movement as possible to separate into discrete waves ignores the reality of aquatic movement; waves dissipate to form new waves, but it’s all reconstitution of the same molecules of water.

I ask why not because if we are so bent on jet-skiing atop the waves of feminism, what does it matter that we’re in the third or fourth wave? We could be in either or neither, and it would all be the same feminist water.

Once upon a time, Hans Christian Andersen wrote to a friend about his short story “The Little Mermaid,” “I have not (...) let the mermaid's acquiring of an immortal soul to depend upon an alien creature, upon the love of a human being. I'm sure that's wrong! It would depend rather much on chance, wouldn't it? I won't accept that sort of thing in this world. I have permitted my mermaid to follow a more natural, more divine path.”

His story follows a little mermaid who anxiously awaits being fifteen so she can see how people live on land. Once she turns fifteen, she, naturally, develops a liking for a sixteen-year-old prince on land and saves him from death, which sparks in her a desire to learn more about humans. She learns from her grandmother that humans are granted an immortal soul when they die, whereas mermaids are relegated to dissolving into seafoam. Desiring this immortal soul, the little mermaid seeks the Sea Witch, who tells her that a way her soul can be immortalized is if it inhabits a space inside another's soul through being loved. Thus, the Sea Witch challenges the little mermaid to get the prince to fall in love with her so her soul can be inside his. The Sea Witch takes her voice as payment, as the little mermaid is said to have the most beautiful voice, and equips her with legs by splitting her tail in two, relegating her every step to a knife-like pain; but the little mermaid takes this in stride, winning the adoration of the prince who calls her his “dear mute foundling,” cherishing her until he finds the girl he believes saved him. The evening before his marriage, the little mermaid's sisters find her and give her a knife, telling her that they gave their hair away to make a deal with the Sea Witch, in which, so long as she can kill the prince with the knife and let his blood fall onto her feet, she can return back to the sea and live the rest of her three hundred-year long life before dissolving into sea foam. They let her know she has a few minutes to make this decision. The little mermaid takes the blade, goes into the prince's room, and throws the blade away into the ocean, throwing herself in after it, dissolving into seafoam. However, instead of being met with death, she is met with spirits who call themselves the “daughters of air,” who, though they do not possess an immortal soul either, can earn one through doing good deeds for three hundred years. Because of her suffering, the daughters of air explain, the little mermaid has been allowed to do good deeds for three hundred years to earn an immortal soul. Upon learning this, she, with her now-invisible embodiment, floats to the bride of the prince, kisses her forehead, and smiles at the prince before floating up into the air to join her new sisters in the element opposite from her original one. The story closes with a daughter of air explaining that they can get a year taken off their three hundred year sentence when they smile approvingly at a well-behaved child, but when they come across a child who is mischievous, they must cry, and for every tear they shed, another day is added onto their sentence.

Andersen's fairy tale seems closer to one of Aesop's fables than a story of female empowerment, complete with the moral: *you should be a good child*. The mermaid in his original story is seen as a role model for recognizing the value of a human life, eschewing her own desires for others. If you wanted to criticize it, perhaps you could ask why her life is relegated to pleasing others.

Completely ignoring the history of this short story, Disney made a rendition of it, resulting in the 1989 movie *The Little Mermaid*. They recast her as a princess, adding her to their line of role models for young girls, adding her likeness to a costume possibility for next Halloween. They pulled The Little Mermaid out of the more natural, more divine path as Andersen intended for her, and made her story contingent on the fact that she found true love.

Not only did Ariel win the movie by finding true love, she changed her embodiment for true love. This is a narrative that a lot of women know: *you have to change to find love.*

For a woman like me, then, who is always searching for love, I've experienced constant change. Of course, what searching for love suggests is that it isn't already there, and maybe that's the product of an upbringing, or a lack of gratitude, but in order to see as much love as possible, I have changed multiple times.

In my life, I've gone by at least three names and have had at least one alter-ego. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of reality, I've never been able to transcend my body. There is a lot to say, though, about calling someone (the self) by a different name leading to treating someone (the self) in a different way.

I suppose I'm trying to write the story of my body, and I suppose I've skirted around the story by writing instead about the body of the mermaid. In my real-life actions, I've skirted around the story of my body by changing my name, over and over again, trying to start the story anew with bits and pieces of stories that never ended.

When I say I've been looking for love, I don't think I mean that I've simply been looking for another person. While that can be one specific manifestation of my search, I believe I've looked for love in places outside of other people, which is perhaps one way to say that I've looked for love inside myself.

When you decide you no longer love yourself, the next logical step seems to be to change yourself. This desire to change is thankfully neatly housed into a genre called "self-improvement." Knowing that you can improve yourself might be key to never getting better, because if you know you could *always improve*, then when do you stop *improving* (read: *changing*)?

As an ambitious perfectionist (whether or not my efforts have amounted to this being a fair assessment, I don't know), I realized from a young age that the project of life was necessarily the self, always subject to fine-tuning, refining to *improve*, to become *the best*, always *working* toward *perfection*.

You can change almost anything about yourself in the name of self-improvement. You can make yourself smaller if you're too big (a diet), you can make yourself bigger if you're too small (an exercise routine), you can make yourself beautiful if you're not beautiful enough (falling in line with beauty standards as prescribed by mass media for empowerment, because while the beauty standards are pushed onto us against our will, it benefits us materially to travel along the axes of such standards, optimizing the self to look *more like something else, anyone but myself*).

I want to give myself a hug, though when I try to imagine myself, I fail to latch onto the right version of my embodiment, having forgotten what I looked like before I started editing myself, before I started inserting myself into new embodiments, rebranding my persona in the digital age through different Twitter profiles, recreating a learned sexiness through a presence on hookup apps, desiring legs so smooth you could mistake them for the flatly-laid scales on the soft curve of a mermaid's tail.

Lots of things can make a person want to improve herself.

I use “improve” very loosely here, mostly meaning it as change, because there’s no way to know whether or not one’s quest for self-improvement is working toward improvement until she can look back at it and decide that it’s not, and *now*, she is going to start the real self-improvement, the one that comes after the last wave of self-improvement, and so on and so forth (doesn’t this remind you of everything, and isn’t the progression of everything created by humans a mirroring of how humans are?).

There are moments that can make her realize the self-improvement that she thought would be the end to all self-improvements is actually not working out. These moments are dissolutions of self, moments where, perhaps, she performs an *ego death*, realizing that she is not the person she is trying to be. These moments can be moments as simple as misspeaking (performing kindness wrongly), though all the moments fall under misbehaving, *doing the wrong thing*, and, quickly, she optimizes herself, corrects herself so she is no longer behaving in that way that was construed by her (and who else?) as wrong, as a *misbehavior* (and there is no specific word for a *good* behavior, is there? There is only the thing and the negative of the thing).

She rewards herself for this self-improvement, aware now that she is behaving herself, and because she is behaving herself, everyone else seems to behave, too, until one day, someone loses control of his own behavior and affects her, causing her to believe herself to be misbehaving, setting her on an eternal quest for control by changing everything about herself to differentiate herself from the person she was on *that day*, in *that moment*, bringing in a new wave because the last one wasn’t working anymore.

Trauma makes a person change.

I'm not harping on the fact that

trauma changes a person,

I'm harping on the fact that

trauma makes a person change.

Do you see the difference?

In the moment of the traumatic event, you become nameless until you can give yourself a name again. She's not Emily Doe, she's Chanel Miller.

She's not the girl who was affected by someone else. She's Elaine Wang.

There's the story of the person with my birth name and the Chinese name that was never legitimized as my middle name. Just a first name referring to the "appearance of God." I went by this name for two stints in my life and have spent the most time with this name, willingly or unwillingly. People don't normally refer to me by this name or call me by this name because they know it's triggering for me. Sometimes, my family slips up, but I can't blame them.

Then there's the story of the person with the name I adopted when I started high school in a new state, which was actually the nickname of one of my close friends from the old state. It's a rendition of a rendition, which was stolen, borrowed, or carelessly misappropriated. Maybe when people who haven't known me since high school remember seeing me they might refer to me by this name, but almost no one I currently know personally is aware that this was a name I had. I used it for three years and went back to my birth name in my last year in high school because I got too tired of saying, "Actually, I go by--"

Then there's the story of the alter-ego, a hyper-sexual, precocious anime girl rapper I played on Soundcloud with a name referencing my youth and online state of existence, something like Internet Infant but somehow more sexy. I played her from the age seventeen to nineteen, bought a few schoolgirl costumes, and released about fifteen songs under this name as an experiment in sexy self-objectification, or, maybe, sexual empowerment. I deleted my account after my traumatic experience and someone reuploaded my music.

And now I'm Elaine. I had my first birthday when I turned twenty-one, and I just had my second one this year.

When I think about what happened to me, I can't help but wonder *how*. There is the *how* now, which is *how do I tell the story in a meaningful way?* and the *hows* from the past: How could this happen to me? How could I let this happen to me? How could these things happen in the world at all?

I've attempted to write about the event in the past for Women's Studies courses that asked for a "personal narrative." I've recounted the event in the essays. I make it clear that the events repulsed me and made me incapable of movement. The last time I wrote about the event was two years ago, right after it happened to me, and in the pieces, I'm optimistic about my future as a new scholar of Women's Studies. I explain that my movement to Women's Studies is my movement to understand.

I was younger when I wrote that. Just two years younger, but it makes all the difference because I feel I might understand less. This is perhaps partially due to the complicated nature of the metaphor of the waves. While I entered Women's Studies as a way to understand, it gave me more to question, as I soon realized many of my feminist icons were those people who shaped conceptualizations of women's writing, a recuperated literary subgenre canonized from the 1970s Women's Movement forward.. I was also interested in feminisms that were outside of what seems to be popular feminism now, like psychoanalytic feminism or maternal ethics. I entered the feminist academic discourse from a perspective that I didn't realize was dated, but the only reason I didn't realize was because the ideas still seemed so relevant.

When I changed my name to Elaine, my best friend's mom asked me if I had chosen "Elaine" after Elaine Showalter. I said no, but that I greatly admired Showalter's critical work, knowing her as one of the forewomen of "women's writing."

My interest in "women's writing" is probably what made me change my major to Women's Studies. Prior to changing my major, I had only ever taken one course in the discipline called Women Writers and Their Worlds. I thought of feminism almost solely through the action of writing, and I quickly learned I was misinformed by my incomplete feminism.

One of the first texts I was assigned as a new scholar of Women's Studies was a *Vox* article titled "The Waves of Feminism, and Why People Keep Fighting Over Them, Explained." At that point, I was aware already that we were definitely no longer in the second wave of feminism and now in the third or maybe even the fourth. I have no idea how I came to know these things before studying feminism academically, but I would venture a guess that Wikipedia had something to do with it.

I read the article, which quickly supplied me with the basic tenets of the metaphor that keeps feminism afloat. I became aware that, per the title, I was now a woman caught up in the waves of feminism. Soon, I would be part of the fight over them, too.

I keep alluding to wanting to tell a traumatic story but it's becoming clear that I'm not telling the story in its entirety, instead bringing it up to the level of theory by suggesting it may have something to do with feminism, or perhaps the internet. Maybe this avoidance can be seen as a silence, and maybe, then, you could deduce, "Gee, you've really been through something."

The waves of feminism keep crashing up against the rock from which I get Wi-Fi and I realize I have to tend to them by diving back in.

Once upon a time, I started writing a story, and I didn't know how it was going to end, so I started over a different way. And I kept starting over. And I kept starting over, typing triumphantly the phrase "once upon a time" over and over again to see if it would somehow manifest a convincing "ever after."

I realize my fantasy has been bogged down by my pragmatic concerns regarding feminism so I'm going to try to start it over again like I always do. Today, I'm permitting myself to wear my seashell bra, and I've imagined it to be even more lavish, bedazzled with pearls that happen to catch just the right amount of sunlight from beneath the surface of the water.

Under the sea, there is no literature, which means there is no theory, because there are no books, because pages get wet. But there is music, and I sing my siren song into the night, and someone must hear it because I hear a *CRASH!!*-- above.

I swim up to investigate the effect of what I've done, and when I get back up there, I see my real body from inside the fantasy, washed ashore. I wonder why it made such a loud noise when only one woman was affected, and I wonder if my fantasy is broken.

It's hard to use your brain to fantasize when it's been wracked by trauma. Trauma seems to hide in every nook and cranny of the brain, unknown until you travel to the right synapse, and you realize your mind is ruined forever.

That my brain keeps running up against theory even when I attempt to write myself away from it into the body of a fictional creature is a manifestation of my brain running up against trauma, because, conveniently, I've found my trauma inside of theory, which I've used to process real life events. Women's Studies as a discipline has been useful in terms of my trauma, but it isn't always there that I find my theory.

I've always been bookish, which means I've always been curious, looking for answers by reading inside of theory, jumping from one to another. From philosophy, I jump to English, from English, I jump to Women's Studies, and I complete the cycle by always returning back to the starting point, but I don't always remember where I started, this confusion compounding the feeling that things are difficult.

This library is perhaps material proof that nothing exists inside a vacuum, and that one concept is sometimes only one shelf away from another.

So I want to keep reading, want to keep going from discipline to discipline to book to book to librarian, "Could you help me understand this thing by helping me find these books, and the librarian says, "Sure, but you'll probably also need this book and this book and this other one and perhaps also this DVD."

Is the answer to not understanding just learning more to not understand?

Applying theory to trauma can be terrifying. This is because theory can make surreal events, such as trauma, into a lived reality. My version of theory attempts to explain what is real through studying and coming up with names for things that are happening. Theory is the reverse-parent of all actions, naming phenomenon and seeing what it does.

In other words, reading theory as an explanation for trauma proves a theory true, and if a theory is true for one, it would be ridiculous to believe that a theory would not be true for others. If a theory is true for my experience of womanhood, it would be ridiculous to believe that a theory would not be true for others' experience of womanhood.

Once upon a time, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) wrote, “theories of socialization would predict that with repeated exposure to the array of subtle external pressures to enhance physical beauty, girls and women come to experience their efforts to improve their appearance as freely chosen, or even natural.” This is one of the findings that supports *objectification theory*, which has been helpful for me in understanding my trauma.

Objectification theory helps me understand my own actions when it comes to my traumatic event, which was the kind of thing that made other people say, “Why didn’t you take better care of yourself?” and “Aren’t you aware what kind of people are out there?”

To which I could say, “Because no one was really taking care of me,” and “Yes, and they were the people you will keep letting off the hook, Officer.”

Did I choose to want to be a mermaid? Is it natural to want to be a mermaid? Or did I just watch *The Little Mermaid* and realize the mermaid got everything she wanted?

Examining my desire, it doesn't seem to align with my ideology that I would want to be a mermaid when she is an obvious fetish projection of sailormen. Not only is she a fetish projection, she's oppressed in similar ways as a woman outside a fetish; that is to suggest that the woman who is desired is a woman who is subjugated, unfree to even question why she is in a seashell bra.

But the seashell bra doesn't disqualify me from participating in feminist critique, so I swim back down and finally find King Neptune. He asks if I've found someone to love, and I tell him that I have, and that his name is Theory, and I want to become a human so I can marry him.

You know how the movie goes. That doesn't happen until I sell my voice to a witch who wants to use my voice for selfish reasons when I just want to sing.

Once upon a time, Disney appropriated Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" and created Ariel, the little mermaid from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and marketed her towards children, subjecting young eyes and minds to the subliminal sexiness of multicolored seashell bras (complete with a pushed-up cleavage effect).

It's a classic argument: Disney princesses are a false image of what women should look like and they have been bad role models who present impossible body ideals. In a 2019 *Vogue* article titled "You're Not Crazy—Disney Princesses Have Insanely Small Waists (and Looking at Them Is Not Great for Kids)," author Michelle Ruiz gets to her point in the title, ending her article with a plea, "Disney, there are millions of little girls' eyes on you. Please, give them a princess who looks like a woman they could actually grow up to be."

While I would extend a similar plea to Disney, I would prefer that Disney not exist at all, and all mass media to wipe itself of institutions born from whiteness and patriarchy. I would prefer that girls not need to look up to *princesses*, whose titles immediately relegate them to the role of the *daughter* of the king or the *wife* of the prince.

Of course, I know this can't be the reality. It doesn't seem like Disney princesses as role models for young girls are going anywhere anytime soon, so it seems that the only thing we can do is ask Disney that they at least be *good daughters, good role models for our daughters*.

If Disney won't listen, then what can we do?

On Disney's unrelenting desire to continue marketing passivity and sexiness, Peggy Orenstein suggests in her book *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* that girls can transcend relegating themselves to the desires of a princess by being skeptical of them, and girls should be brought up to be skeptical of such things for success. She gives an example of such skepticism through telling a story of her own daughter questioning why "Mulan has to be gentle *and* strong but Shang is only strong." This skepticism to Orenstein is necessarily what would allow "girls to see themselves from the inside out rather than outside in," which she claims would bring them closer "to their true happily-ever-afters."

This is pragmatic parenting advice: *teach your daughter to be critical of everything so she can work toward happiness.*

However, what if happiness for a girl is found in attempting to embody her favorite Disney princess? Do we tell her in the moment that her desire is wrong? Or do we make like Orenstein and wait, hoping she'll figure it out to our liking one day and turn against who she thought were her role models?

Part of our reliance on Disney princesses to be role models may be in part due to our reliance on what appears on screens to mirror reality, and this phenomenon may be due in part to the fact that we mirror what we see on our screens.

In “More than Just Child’s Play?: An Experimental Investigation of the Impact of an Appearance-Focused Internet Game on Body Image and Career Aspirations of Young Girls,” researchers Slater, et. al conducted a study in which eighty young girls played one of two games. The control group played a game that was neutral and the experimental group played a game that was “appearance-based.” From here, the researchers found that “girls in the appearance game condition selected significantly thinner figures for their ideal figure.”

What we see on screens affects our brains in ways we may not even be able to understand. What this study reveals is that people (in this case, girls) *are* affected by images and the way they interact with them. It reveals the ethos of Fredrickson and Roberts’ claim: the media we consume informs the ways we treat ourselves. Screens affect us.

Once upon a time, I celebrated my sexuality, seeing myself as possibly one day as sexy as Ariel, as if sexiness were some sort of ideal. I empowered myself by outfitting my chest in bras that were priced excessively, bras that promised the perfect lift without too much lining, without too much of the stuff that isn't real. Once I achieved that perfect lift, I snapped a photo to commemorate the glorious achievement of cleavage. Though I had achieved it before, I waited until I was 18 to memorialize it, knowing that, even though I had been exposed to images of cleavage between bra cups, such as in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and media literally anywhere else as I was growing up, the action was somehow inappropriate and sexually overcoded.

I showed the photo to my boyfriend at the time and he told me he didn't like it, that it wasn't very good, and that I shouldn't take a photo like that again.

At eighteen, I was just beginning to learn how men could bring women down by insulting them, making them feel like they're worthless. At eighteen, I thought the best way to liberate myself from the controlling voice of my boyfriend was to spite him. At eighteen, I thought the answer was to take all of the things I had ever learned about being a worthy woman and flip them on their head, to see how much I could play with them to my advantage, to see just how far I could go, to see how far my body could take me.

I want to dive back into the ocean but I want to enjoy it this time.

What is safe from the male gaze (and what is safe from my female gaze, watching the male gaze carefully, seeing where it goes to make sure my eyes never meet it?)?

I want to hear the sirens singing in the night at the surface of the sea without remembering that they are doing it to trick men with their sexuality (why is that an option for women, and is it empowering?).

I want to craft seashell bras with my mer-sisters while we listen to our fishy friends make music without remembering that there would be no reason for the seashell bra without the gaze of the patriarchy (shouldn't we be able to enjoy beautiful things?).

I want to see a pearl necklace spilling out of a treasure chest lodged in the sands of the deep sea without remembering that "pearl necklace," is the term for a sex act in which a man ejaculates across a woman's chest (how could we turn something so beautiful into something so objectifying?).

I want to do beautiful things (without second-guessing myself through remembering what would make things the opposite of beautiful).

Under trauma, everything is to be theorized. If I see my brain as something to be inspected or analyzed, perhaps I can see it as a subject in an experiment, in which some third party is making me play an appearance-focused internet game, watching to see how I'll feel about myself and my body afterwards.

The appearance-based internet game goes like this: when people give you more attention, it feels like love and a reward because the internet works in the currency of small, tappable heart icons.

It goes like: when other people have thousands and thousands of hearts and you have none, you wonder what gets more hearts.

It goes like: when even famous women seem to be rewarded more for revealing their bodies (see: The Kardashian sisters, Emily Ratajowski) and their bodies become objects of desire to be liked, to be given hearts (see: The Fappening, see also: what does it mean to be double-tapped, or to have your heart tapped)--

when even famous women are largely reduced to nothing but their bodies and they are celebrated for these things and celebrated for having certain opinions *especially because* their bodies *look like that* (see how people respond to Kim Kardashian's desire to be a lawyer, see how people respond to Emily Ratajowski calling for equality in America)--

you wonder if you could be seen as smart and sexy at the same time and post a half-naked selfie and watch other people tap your heart.

The appearance-based internet game goes:

Men are always looking at you

the comma hangs there, and a faint voice from the feminist ocean goes:

So how are you going to look at men?

In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey offers a perspective of film which relies on our “world” being “ordered by sexual imbalance,” causing “pleasure in looking” to “[be] split between active/male and passive/female.” As such, the male’s active perspective determines the gaze of the narrative. Mulvey goes on to explain that this is often done by the appearance of the female object, often in an erotic position.

That is, our world, due to imbalances in media caused by a history of men making our content, has relegated women to being passive, often in a sexual way. This is reinforced by there being pleasure for men when looking at women in this manner.

This set of ideas is what informs the concept of the “male gaze,” which might be one of the first feminist concepts any woman learns, and they learn it like this:

Men are always looking at you,

the comma hangs there, and a faint voice from the feminist ocean goes:

So how are you going to look at men?

I don't remember when I learned about the term "male gaze." I must've been in my late teens by the time I heard it in the context of feminist theory, but before that, I always knew it existed.

Before the "male gaze" was the "male gaze," it was just another problem that had no name. Before the "male gaze" was theory, it was just another surreal reality, one in which women forever feel a pressure from the invisible, omniscient gaze of a man, who is ready to tell you how to be a woman through the wage gap, rape culture, unfair dress codes, media depictions, ad nauseam, assigning an intangible pressure on girls until they *go wild*, in one way or another.

You'd think there'd be no appearance based internet game under the sea, but somehow I've created one in my mind (and perhaps here I'm drawing attention to the nature of the word *internet* being able to describe a *net* from which we *interact*-- and where are nets but in the ocean?). I envision my mer-sister with a shinier bra getting more likes on her Sealfie (haha), envision my mer-sister with a thinner waist, though we're drawn so similarly I can barely tell unless I'm squinting (but why was I squinting anyway), getting married before me (though, if you take the I out of it, "married" becomes "marred"), and envision myself opting out of the game, finally swimming in tears to the sea witch, who, for all she's about to put me through reminds me that no one can see me crying when I'm underwater.

The sea witch gives me the opportunity to withdraw from the game by asking me to play the same game on the land. I can trade my bulbous tail in for real hips, and instead of fetishizing my tail, men on land will find a way to sexualize my legs, something I believe most women have so they can walk-- and swim with them, too.

Of course, you've seen the movie; so, for receiving the opportunity to read a book on land and for people to be able to see my tears, I gave up my voice. The Sea Witch told me I could only have it back if I can find the best Theory to describe what it is that I think is going on in the world.

The Sea Witch inside the feminist ocean is the mermaid who makes it difficult for other mermaids to be the mermaid she wants to be.

For me, she's the mermaid who says that if you don't have "intersectional feminist" in your Instagram bio, you're not a real feminist. She's the mermaid who tries to convince you that sexual work can be, and, because it can be, is necessarily a form of empowerment. She's the mermaid who makes you resent remembering that Sea Witches are mermaids, too, and feminism is for all mermaids.

What's worse is that when you think someone else is a Sea Witch, it's likely they think you are one, too. To her, I'm the Sea Witch who doesn't seem proud to be a feminist. To her, I'm the Sea Witch who is prudent, who doesn't want to see women liberate themselves sexually. To her, I'm the Sea Witch that makes her resent remembering that Sea Witches are mermaids, too, and feminism is for all mermaids.

It's a big ocean, but it's all the same water.

Once upon a time, I felt like I permitted myself to follow a more natural, more divine path, skewing away from finding empowerment from an alien creature (a human in Ariel's case, a man in mine) and seeking empowerment from my own body. Somebody, somewhere told me that empowerment came from baring the body. Somebody, somewhere tweeted "#FreeTheNipple" and I saw that statement when I was fourteen and thought that it was *true, women's bodies should not be sexualized, and sexual women shouldn't be punished.*

So I waited until I was eighteen, like the little mermaid waited until she was fifteen, to participate, thinking as I contorted my body to make my waist look slimmer that *this is empowering and there is nothing wrong with this*, not knowing that at twenty-two, I would be thinking, *why was that an option for me, and was it empowering?*

On land, I walk up to a newsstand in Times' Square (this is where they keep history) and read the *Time* headline: "Katie Hill is the First Millennial Lawmaker to Resign Because of Nudes. She Won't Be the Last." So, when I read again that a Millennial Lawmaker Resigns Because of Nudes, I'll remember-- oh, right, Katie Hill Wasn't Going to Be the Last.

I remember this like a mantra. The next time this happens, I'll remember the ominous sound of *Time* telling me that Katie Hill wouldn't be the last. This is something I'll have to keep in mind. She won't be the last. Next time, when this happens again, I'll be more prepared.

Land seems scarier. At least we can't read the newspaper under the sea, the ink just runs into the water.

Once upon a time, the mermaid lost her ability to speak agency into existence because of a man.

I wish *Time* would re-title its article, “Katie Hill is the First Millennial Lawmaker to Resign Because of Nudes. She Should Be the Last.” Instead it offers no hope, and in fact reinforces the behavior by suggesting that she wouldn’t be the last. As such, it seems like *Time* is aware that there’s a problem (that someone has to resign because of *nudes*, which most women have taken or considered taking) without suggesting that anything should be done to take care of that problem.

Without knowing much else about the rest of the article, just a glimpse of that headline alone could be enough for any woman who’s an aspiring lawmaker to know that, if she has taken any nudes or sent them to anyone, ever, that could be the end of her career.

Then, should the response from the aspiring lawmaker be, “I should never take a nude photo again,” or “Women should be allowed to take any kind of photos they want without having their bodies held against them”?

Do you remember when Jeff Bezos had nudes leak? I doubt you do, but if you do, then I wonder how often you think about it.

How many more times do we have to point out the differences between the lived experiences of men and women for there to be significant change in what appears to be the global suffering of all women?

How many more times do we have to ask, “Why didn’t *he* get punished for the same reasons?” to hear a resounding, “Because *he’s a he.*”?

How many more times do we have to ask, “Well, how come *her* life can’t be like *his*?” before we realize it’s a problem that the response is, “Because *she is she* and *he is He.*”?

I could keep trying to name the problem. I can come up with theory on theory on theory for why we behave in these ways and ways and ways. Theories for why we allow ourselves to get caught up in the waves, or theories for why a woman would want to wear a thong, but theories aren't answers. Or at least they're not answers that I want, because after I'm given my answers, I just think *what now?*

Not just *what now?* But *what do I do now?* Now that my mind knows one thing, how can I make it perform another? And how convincing will my performance be if no one else is part of this play? Or if no one else is playing this appearance-based internet game?

I've been told before that I ask good, "praxis-based" questions, but I've never heard a single good, "praxis-based" answer to any of my questions. To my questions, "What can I do?" I've been answered, "Just keep it on your mind." "Just be aware of it."

And I'm aware of it now, but what else can I do but *know*? What can I *do*?

"Just be aware of it."

And I am aware of it. I'm aware that people experience injustice and I'm aware that as a person, I will, too, experience injustice in some way, especially in this female body.

"Just be aware of it."

And I am. What now?

I miss the water. I got lost in the library and it took me a whole day to get out because I kept getting distracted by the books, kept finding myself unable to choose the *right one* to appease the Sea Witch.

I'm getting close to accepting this as impossible. I'm getting close to having to return to the feminist ocean, getting close to diving back into the waves. I'm daydreaming, on land, about getting back into the water, breaking the surface tension of what separates me from the sea, you from me, daydreaming a new daydream because the other one got too real.

The realest fantasies we have are our memories. Memories are fantasies of the past, moments from which we've harbored taste, scent, sight, touch, and sound to form, dissolve, and reform.

When forming these memories, we are using what the mind can do to reformulate data into an event. We do this consciously when we're divulging a memory to a friend-- maybe the smell of something reminded you of what a moment looked like, and you throw yourself back into your memory, rebuilding those moments, hearing again the laugh of a friend long lost, or tasting again a dish you could only have once.

Formation of memory treads the space between the liminal and the subliminal. When concepts tread this space, it simply means for me that they will be impossible to understand. When psychological concepts tread this space, it simply means that we have little control over them, that they are liminal things we always have the capability of experiencing that could fall away at any moment, becoming subliminal if you do not have control of the brain.

Subliminal formation of memory occurs in the moment before you begin divulging the memory. It occurs when you smell what it is that made you remember the event, the rest of the senses filling in as you step back into the memory. This can be pleasant if the memory is pleasant, but what if the *feeling of being seen* (the feeling of eyes, putting something I wrote “out there”) *is too much today, oh God, I swear, if you look at me, I’ll scream*. And I’m catatonic, silent, my liminality affected by my subliminal reckoning of the male gaze.

My adventure on land takes me back to the shore, because no matter who you are, you will want to escape your reality, sometimes by going to the beach. The tourist brochures in the Hilton by the sea recommended the beach, so I decided to go check it out. The smell of the seawater reminds me of the ocean, back into which I want to dive.

In my fantasy, all I've wanted to do is get away. When I was a mermaid, I was displeased, having heard concepts that made me want to detest my mermaidhood. I no longer wanted to be subjugated to the oppressive underwater world I made for myself so I let the avatar of my body in my fantasy make a deal and get on land. And now I've made it back here, on the shore, because I remembered in my fantasy that everything's the same everywhere, especially in my mind. My fantasies only go so far as my mind does, and I only know so many things. I only know so many things, and all I'm certain of is that I'm beleaguered by theory and trauma, trauma and theory.

I want to write the story of something that happened to me, and it's the kind of story that you can't just tell people. There are some stories in life that are like that-- stories that you can't *just tell people* without first asking, "Can I tell you something?"

Can I tell you something?

When I was 20, nude photos of me were posted online without my consent with identifying information. This led to the photos (and, of course, my identifying information) being shared and spread across multiple pornographic websites.

The person who posted the photos made it clear that I was being "exposed." There were instructions attached to my photos to continue spreading the photos with my identifying information, sometimes urging people to contact people in my personal life about me being nude online, even though I didn't make the photos public myself. The photos were also often shared and reposted with sexually vulgar, sometimes racially violent comments. It made me feel ashamed. It made me feel afraid. It made me feel like I had no agency over my body.

It made me feel like I was no longer the person I once was. This feeling manifested in my real life through a legal name change and a major change to Women's Studies.

This is the dry version of this story. This is the version that I can tell people without breaking down into tears. This is the version that clearly and concisely describes the traumatic event and the feelings and events that followed, a neat paragraph and a half shaped summary of "what happened to me."

After I tell this story, some people say, "You should write about it," to which I wonder *how*, because I know I'm too scared to tell the version that makes me cry, and that's the only version that I would ever think to write.

Trauma changes a person.

Trauma changes the little mermaid into a little, voiceless human.

Trauma changes Chanel Miller into Emily Doe.

Trauma changes me into a fearful, nameless avatar, what I believe to be an empty representation of what a person could be.

Trauma makes a person change.

Trauma makes the little mermaid yearn for an immortal soul.

Trauma makes Chanel Miller want to tell her story.

Trauma makes me desire wholeness.

People change because of trauma.

The little mermaid attains an immortal soul because she swims past her trauma and throws it into the sea.

Chanel Miller tells her story from inside of her trauma, declaring, commanding, *Know My Name*.

I tell my story from inside of my trauma, asking loudly from beneath the water, “Does it matter what my name is, or am I still who I was before all this happened?”

I accept that “wholeness” is not acquired by having a body or name that can explain everything, accept that transience is the natural state of the body as it constantly adjusts, call it “self-improvement” or “homeostasis”--

It is what it is, and it is all water, which you cannot always control.

Once upon a time, I tried to take agency of my body by giving it back to the world at age 19, uploading countless semi-nude to nude snapshots of myself to a private Twitter account with the explanation that I was “reclaiming my body” after my self-esteem plummeted due to a bad relationship. Then, the pictures were published online without my consent by someone who I foolishly let access the photos. Then, I renamed myself to try to forget it.

Fantasy can only take you so far until you have to face reality. In reality, I am not a mermaid, though I have envisioned my avatar in my mind as such. In reality, I’m barely Elaine, and only have been Elaine for less than two years. In reality, some people see me, and in their minds, I’m a human woman, still bearing the name my parents gave me. I know this because some people still call me by my old name, and I struggle with telling some people my name has changed *just in case*. In this case, even in my mind I inhabit a dual existence because not only do I remember that I was the person I once was, but other people do, too, and I wonder what parts they’re thinking of when they call me by my old name, and what parts they’re thinking of when they call me by my new name.

From the shore, I tweet from my iPhone, “Reality and being are insane” and inside my mind, the feminist mermaid fantasy finally fizzles out, for I have spoken, and now I’m inside a different ocean, back in the ocean in which I’m caught in the net. My internet, as I’ve imagined it, is no longer a safe haven, because I’m remembering when it wasn’t for me, and reality hits me in full force when, in my fantasy, I receive a dick pic in combination with a sexually explicit message of what someone, some guy “would like to do to” me.

I want to write about my traumatizing event as a woman, not as a mermaid.

Where I don't want it to go is where I don't want to go in my own mind. I don't want to go back to being twenty, turning on my computer after lunch with an old friend, and seeing that someone had posted a nude photo of me onto a public post of mine. I don't want to go back to driving to the police station in tears, shaking while gripping the steering wheel, becoming hysterical in front of a police officer asking me, "What cam site were you on?" and responding through hiccups, "I already said I wasn't a camgirl." I don't want to go back to driving away from the police station and going to the women's resource center immediately after, where I was told they would connect me with an officer who would be more sympathetic to women's needs. I don't want to go back to seeing that Facebook had been hiding messages from strangers for a month, and finally seeing that people had been sending me messages about my nude photos online, asking me for more, asking me to show more, telling me to give up my life and do porn. I don't want to go back to not being protected by Pennsylvania's revenge porn law, and having to live through the sexual messages turning into violent messages after attempting to get the photos removed before the police decided my case was worth investigating further. I don't want to go back to finding that people were imagining my gruesome death through Tumblr, Twitter, and various porn sites. I don't want to go back to this not being enough to bring me legal justice. I don't want to go back to my case being dropped.

I don't want to go there.

I want to be a mermaid.

But I'm there now.

I'm looking in the mirror and all I see is a woman, a human woman who feels she has been silent for too long. A human woman who feels like what happened to her should not happen to anyone else and a human woman who feels like the only way she can help is by turning outwards and saying, "This is something that happened to me and this isn't something that should ever happen to you."

I don't know who put the pictures of me online. I mean, I know, but I don't know him personally. He's someone who had been following me online for a long time, for years, saving pictures of me whenever I posted them. I know he did this because he uploaded an entire folder of photos I'd posted online throughout the years, from when I'd had my multiple accounts in different stages of "private." When this person requested to follow my private account, I thought nothing of it, for he had been following me for years online, and, in this current online culture, people follow people, so I let him in. It was normal to be posting explicit photos, especially at age 19 on a private account. All the other 19-year-old girls online were doing it. All the 19-year-old girls online are still doing it now. I just got terribly, terribly unlucky.

It's called "revenge porn." In my case, perhaps it's difficult to see where the "revenge" comes in, as I certainly don't believe I have wronged the random person who put the photos of me online in the first place. My situation in terms of the paradigm of revenge porn has been quite bizarre-- I can't pinpoint why "revenge" is being enacted on me, as I don't believe I have personally wronged the person who posted photos of me, as I don't remember a single interaction with him. This difficulty to see the clear "revenge" comes from the idea of how "revenge porn" usually happens, which is when a scorned ex-lover posts nude photos of someone to embarrass them. There was no scorned ex-lover here, just a woman and a scary internet force. For this reason, others refer to this sort of event as "non-consensual pornography," but I've come to realize how my experience with revenge porn was certainly one of revenge.

The "revenge" in revenge porn doesn't simply refer to one person taking revenge on another. As a form of violence that largely affects women (though men are affected too), this event is an example of how men are trying to exact "revenge" on women by controlling who gets to see their bodies and how. The "revenge" enacted on me was on behalf of all men who then reaped the pleasures of my body, finishing and commenting, "Poor girl, you should give up now and do porn. That body will only last you so long," before moving to the next woman, and the next, and the next.

This is why I entered the feminist ocean, so I would never have to come here again. I entered at the tail end of the third-wave and got into the torso of the fourth-wave. Instead of saying, “this happened to me,” in the academic feminist ocean, I can simply cite:

In “Risks, Risk Factors, and Outcomes Associated with Phone and Internet Sexting Among University Students in the United States,” Dir and Cyders report that as of 2012, “Approximately 13–68% of young adults (aged 18–24) report engaging in sexting, defined as the act of sending sexually suggestive or provocative pictures or messages via mobile phone or social networking Internet sites.”

According to “The Data And Society Research Institute” as cited in the article “Cyberbullying, Revenge Porn and the Mid-Sized University: Victim Characteristics, Prevalence and Students' Knowledge of University Policy and Reporting Procedures,” Connor, et. al report that “nearly one in 25 Americans are either threatened with or are victims of non-consensual image sharing,” and their study showed that, at a mid-sized university, “male–female revenge porn was by far the most common type reported” by the students, none of whom had reported experiencing revenge porn themselves.

The Pew Research Center also reported that as of 2018, “nine-in-ten American adults use the internet” and “the share of Americans that own smartphones is now 81%,” which is a huge increase from the 35% reported in 2011.

I can simply cite, but I can’t help but wonder how all of these things work together to write the story of revenge porn, how what the Pew Research Center reports affects sexting rates and, therefore, rates of revenge porn. I can simply cite, I can simply see, or I can cite, see, and speak all at once, and make a comment about how the exponential rise of internet use is likely also causing an exponential rise of assault on the internet.

Then, I can do what I do best and ask a praxis-based question: What do I do now?

I'm coming out of the water to show you this, which is the photo presented on Wikipedia's entry for "Sexting."



Figure 1. Screenshot of Wikipedia page for "Sexting"

I've noticed that the two primary female figures of the ocean are the mermaid, a passive being desiring a different form, and Venus, goddess of love and passive water principle, born of blood and semen turned into sea foam from cast-off genitals.

The mermaid is a half-embodied, hybrid creature of the sea, affected forever by narratives of being "little" and "looking," whereas Venus is a double-embodied, dual-existence hyper-human made of the combination of sea and land, both below and high up, with all the agency in the world to affect the current of love everywhere.

Can't a girl simply want to swim?

Switching the mermaid out for Venus is perhaps another form of giving myself a new name. Aren't they both just women caught up within the waves?

Why is taking sexy pictures and enacting sexy self-objectification an option for women?

Because it can be empowering, as women have suffered a history of sexual displeasure, a history of sexual desires being formulated as clinical insanity (as history tells us, vibrators were prescribed for hysteria), a history of erasure of sexual pleasure (questioning the mythology of the female orgasm). It can be empowering to declare, through the meticulous attention paid to the sexy presentation of the body, that a woman finds herself sexy, and she's not afraid of her own sexiness.

Was it empowering to take the nude photos of myself?

In hindsight, no, but in the moments I was taking the photos, I felt pretty good about how I could make my body look, crafting myself as if I were painting a nude of Venus. Remembering the history of the female nude, I can see the empowerment in recasting the self as the painter of the female form, rather than allowing men (Botticelli, Bouguereau, Cabanel) to control her appearance.

The men were accurate sometimes, though-- I've explicitly seen my body as Venus's body. On a good day, I feel like Bouguereau's Venus, pleasantly plump and lush. On bad days, I feel like any Venus between the one of Willendorf and de Milo, on one end of the spectrum feeling fat in an unruly way, and on the other feeling armless, without agency. I inhabit other forms of Venus, too: I look at the world through a mirror and become Rokeby Venus, I see myself as erotic and become Sleeping Venus, I find myself exposed and tired and become Cabanel's Venus, lying on the beach with my arm slung over my eyes, angels flying around me.

Are you ready to tell your story?

No, but I'll try.

It's the morning and I'm at the beach. Everything smells like seawater here, and the breeze picks up in time with the sound of the waves. The sun is bigger than ever, radiating its heat onto my bikini-clad skin, making me sweat at 11AM.

I'm walking on the sand toward the water and it's burning the soles of my feet. My boyfriend is leading me over rocks that trip up my legs, clumsy since childhood, *I must never have gotten used to my woman body, the full length of my legs*. We set up chairs and I ask my boyfriend if I can go in the water; he tells me I don't have to ask.

I step carefully towards the waves. At this point, my feet are so used to the heat of the sand that when the waters of the Long Island Sound beat against my toes, they hurt like kicking against knives for just a moment until they adjust, the water now cooling my skin that I hadn't realized was burning until something else made me aware.

I take another step into the water, and take a few more steps, thinking about how my grandfather once advised me against the discipline of philosophy because he had heard of someone thinking so hard at the beach that she wasn't paying attention to the world around her anymore, unknowingly walking into the deep end of the water and drowning and dying.

I turn around and look at the shore, where the people look so much smaller and the sand looks so much bigger than before, then I turn back around and look at the water of the Sound, aware now that it has become big, too, wondering when I became waist-deep in the water, noticing that, from all the way in here, it doesn't look like the waves are going toward the shore, but rather moving in all directions.

I look out at where the sky meets the water and envision it as the spot where the little mermaid met the daughters of the air. Looking at the world like this, it's nothing but water in all directions except up, until I turn around once more and see, truly, how small people and land have become, and, remember I am a human woman with the capability of speaking my desires. The waves carry my voice as I shout with a smile toward my boyfriend and anyone else listening on the shore, "Come into the water with me!"

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ACADEMIC VITA

Elaine Wang

Education

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA | Class of 2021
College of Liberal Arts. Schreyer Honors College.
Bachelor's Degree in English with Women's Studies minor
Master's Degree in English Creative Writing.

Relevant Work Experience

Tutoring at State College Area High School through VIPS Program | Spring 2014.

Tutored two elementary students in assorted topics, including science, math, and English.

DC Social Justice Fellowship at Pennsylvania State University | Spring 2017, Maymester 2017.

With a small cohort, learned constructivist theory in preparation for two weeks of teaching students (juniors and seniors) at Anacostia High School in Washington, DC in early May, with a focus in social justice topics relating to health and wellness.

Pre-Student teaching at State College Area High School | Spring 2018

With Kate Walker, acted as aid in Advanced Placement Literature (seniors) and College Prep English (juniors) classes. Created/taught a lesson as a synthesis activity to complete speculative fiction unit in AP Lit, along with completing the opportunity to work directly with a variety of students, including students with varying socio-economic statuses.

Private Tutoring | Fall 2018 - Spring 2019.

Privately tutored a middle school student in all school subjects.

Hemingway Letters Project | Summer 2019 - Fall 2019.

Completed archival work at the Hemingway Letters Project at Penn State.

Leadership

Philosophy Club at Pennsylvania State University | president, Fall 2019, vice president 2018-2019, web-team coordinator 2017-18, member 2017 onwards.

Yang Gang at Pennsylvania State University | vice president, Spring 2020, member Fall 2019 onwards.

Skills

Conversational in spoken Mandarin Chinese. Proficient in Adobe Photoshop.