

# The Sexism of the Self

by Taylor Borthwick

In the chapter “Disappearing Acts” from her memoir *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, Rebecca Solnit discusses her struggles with power and autonomy as a woman. She remembers listening to a song, John Cale’s “Mercenaries (Ready for War),” and being struck by the powerful feeling it evoked in her, a sense of preparedness to face conflict and stand one’s ground. As “[t]he force of the thundering drum and bass and the howling, raging man’s voice” made her feel a “readiness for anything, an armor made out of attitude,” she recalls a sensation of being taken outside of her body, momentarily separated from her identity as a woman (74). The intensity of this emotional response makes it clear that these feelings of power, readiness, and pride were foreign to her as a young woman. Solnit describes a distinction she experiences between the female self and the powerful self; she may take on one form or the other, but never both at the same time. Although she “wanted to be rugged, invincible, [and] unstoppable,” she had never been shown “examples of women who were those things” (74). The two ways of existing “seemed like parallel lines that would run alongside each other forever” because being a woman inside a patriarchy made her feel weak and out of place (75). Since Solnit imagines her senses of womanhood and empowerment as parallel lines, one might wonder: Where, and how, could these two ways of being intersect?

The struggle for power and autonomy is a common experience of girlhood and womanhood. It is not uncommon for a woman to grow up learning that someone else owns the rights to her body – that instead of being self-governing, she is occupied territory. For Solnit, it seemed the only escape was to become “an unnoticeable nation, a shrinking nation, a stealth nation,” her body like “an army retreating, until it ceased to exist,” diminishing herself to exist within the jurisdiction of men (78, 81). Nearly a century earlier, in her essay “Professions for Women,” Virginia Woolf symbolized the expectations that diminish women’s power and autonomy as a “phantom” she called “the Angel in the House” (278). Woolf’s ‘Angel’ is a symbol of “that selfless, sacrificial woman in the nineteenth century whose sole purpose in life was to soothe, to flatter, and to comfort the male half of the world’s population” (Leaska). It was expected that maturing women would grow to fulfill this role in a household, moving toward invisibility so that instead of having their own hopes, dreams, and desires, they would focus on tending to the wishes of those around them.

Although Woolf was able to avoid this lifestyle with her family's support, the phantom she described still appeared whenever she began to write. When, for example, she sat down to review a novel by a male writer, the phantom came, telling her to sacrifice her own ideas in favor of flattering the male author, because to "'be sympathetic; be tender; flatter,'" and "'above all, be pure,'" were a woman's chief duties (Woolf 279). The phantom was a voice of internalized misogyny that made Woolf doubt herself, and thus, "killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer," because her hesitations regarding self-expression weakened her writing and self-esteem (Leaska). Ridding herself of internalized misogyny was not a simple feat, though, and despite her attempts to abandon this line of thinking, the voice "was always creeping back" even after she thought she'd abandoned it (Woolf 279).

As soon as Woolf begins to indulge in feelings of power – to cross Solnit's parallel lines – she is interrupted by this inner dialogue and reminded that her feelings are out of character with her identity as a woman. As a writer, Woolf asks us to understand that "a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible" in their daily life as part of the writing process "so that nothing may break the illusion" of the imaginative world (280). She claims that "both . . . men and women" novelists need to write "in a state of trance" (281). But when a female author "[lets] her imagination sweep unchecked," indulging in "the depths of [her] unconscious being," she finds her inspiration and creativity killed as she is "roused from her dream[-like]" state into one of "distress." Woolf claims this experience is "far commoner with women writers than with men." But what happened here? The writer was pulled out of her immersion in her work at the very moment her mind led her toward "something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say." She grew aware of "what men [would] say of a woman who [spoke] the truth" regarding her passions, and this reality "roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness." When she imagined a reaction to the topics she endeavored to write about as a woman, suddenly "she could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer." In this scenario, Woolf had initially lost herself to her imagination the way that Solnit "lost [her]self in the moment and the music" when she heard John Cale; however, as soon as either woman became conscious again of her expected place in society, the creative power found through art fizzled out. As Solnit writes, "to be [her]self was to be, it seemed then, outside that power" (74). Both cases describe the anguish of the female subject under patriarchy who, having dreamed of creative power, is brought back to reality.

No matter how deeply a woman believes she should abandon the constraints of internalized misogyny, they are hard to overcome in a culture where "all of us, female and male, have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action" (hooks xii). Further, when women and girls grow up with a set of rules and expectations to follow based on their sex, their experiences of misogyny accumulate and become normalized. Once Woolf's 'phantom' starts to form in their minds, women's

experiences of sexism are further complicated and distorted. As the phantom's voice becomes indistinguishable from a woman's own, the impacts of patriarchy run deeper into the self than most people acknowledge. Affecting women even when they are alone, internalized sexism can feel impossible to escape. It is harder to resist than the sexism of others, both physically and psychologically.

In Solnit's case, as sexism diminished her self-image and feelings of bodily autonomy, she found herself "toiling to appear" through her writing, as a means of gaining "a voice" (78). She felt that she needed "to deserve participation in the conversation," a seemingly difficult task that writing, reading, and intellectual endeavors helped her achieve (78). She felt driven to "redeem [her] existence by achievement" and was motivated "to keep going until [she] reached a better place" (84-5). Through the creative work of reading and writing, Solnit derives a sense of empowerment, but her creative mind also serves as a source of inspiration as she envisions a better world without sexism.

The importance of imagining a hopeful future is heightened when we take into account Solnit's battle with depression and other mental struggles, which she has endured throughout her life. Solnit has suffered a "sense of dread that held down [her] sense of hope and possibility," a "dread that nothing w[ould] change" on a societal level or in her personal life. Since the feeling "seemed to be made out of logic and a real assessment of the situation," it was difficult to find a way to have hope for the future (89). Writing became her means of generating a positive outlook. As she taught herself how to write "about hope," she developed tools for "pass[ing] along the ladders of logic and narratives" that would get her "out of these low places [she] kn[e]w well" (90). As part of this process, she describes repeatedly dreaming that she had the ability to fly. In one dream she encountered "a violent man on railroad tracks" before remembering that she "could metamorphose and [become] an owl with a moth's dusty wings" so that "when the man lunged for [her] and grabbed [her] feet, [she] flew low over the water to drag him through it in the hopes of shaking him off" (92). As the ability to fly allowed her to symbolically shake off the perpetrator, Solnit drew from her dreams to travel to "the beautiful spacious side of loneliness" in her intellectual and creative pursuits (93). Extending from the freedom found in her dreams, Solnit approached her writing as "an experience of not belonging to the ordinary world and not being bound to it" (93) – of being free to cross in solitude between the parallel lines of womanhood and power.

bell hooks imagines another way to cross those lines in women's creative lives. In the chapter "Come Closer to Feminism" from her book *Feminism is For Everybody*, hooks recalls her own struggle with mental health as a young woman, "uncertain about how [she] would find meaning in [her] life and a place for" herself in the world (hooks xiv). All adolescents grapple with finding a sense of purpose, and women and girls have a particularly hard time imagining that they deserve a voice. When representation

belongs to men in most areas of society, it becomes hard to imagine “that it even could, let alone should, be otherwise” (Solnit 86). It was during this period in hooks’ adolescence that she “began to resist male domination . . . [and] patriarchal thinking, realizing that she, too, needed to find a way to conceive of a hopeful future.” Where Solnit turns to her otherworldly dreams and writing, hooks “needed feminism to give [her] a foundation of equality and justice to stand on” in the world (xiv). She subsequently invites her readers to “imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction” (xiv). Theorizing about how we might achieve this world free of “sexist thought and action,” hooks identifies with “revolutionary” feminists who “wanted to transform [the] system” by bringing an “end to patriarchy” instead of “reformist” feminists, who merely make small adjustments to the current system to provide women with increased rights (xii; 4). Maintaining a collectivist vision is crucial to the revolutionary thinking hooks offers, as an avenue of hope and a path toward abolishing the forces that perpetuate sexism.

As hooks imagines “a world of peace and possibility,” where individuals can express themselves freely and “create beloved community,” Gar Alperovitz similarly emphasizes the need to “turn to a truly community-sustaining system” which would “value human life over and above” political influence (hooks xiv; Alperovitz 29). In his essay “A Social Capitalism,” Alperovitz, an historian, theorizes that many of the crises experienced in modern-day America, including racism, gender oppression, and class struggle, are symptoms of a failed socioeconomic system. He puts forward that implementing a new system will only be possible when a serious, mainstream conversation addressing economic and social injustices takes place. Both Alperovitz and hooks recognize the importance of community and conversation when envisioning large-scale change.

For Solnit, the imagination—reading, writing, dreaming—provides a way to exist “above it all, in the stratosphere, lonely and free,” in a place where she is “free of the weight of depression and expectation” and “of the weight of a body” (92). Yet her tendency to turn inward and roam in her thoughts is also isolating. Perhaps the community that hooks and Alperovitz call for could also quell the internal voice of sexism, encouraging women like Solnit to look outward as well as inward. Recognizing that their struggle against the Angel in the House is a shared experience, perhaps more women will rise above it. Our vision of the future is largely dependent on refiguring the voices in our heads.

Our ability to share our feelings with those around us is powerful. To be understood, reassured, and accepted can go a long way in helping us feel secure within ourselves and our position in the world, and perhaps the voices of love and community around us may speak louder than the inner and outer voices of sexism, shame, or complacency.

In addition, where individuals feel they lack ownership of their bodies and minds, a community can bring together and bolster them as individuals and a collective. In communities that focus on understanding the struggles we share, we may learn to uplift one another. Collective dedication to each other could help us mend our individual inner voices as we openly discuss social issues. If the line of personal fulfillment crosses over into the line of community-building, perhaps both personal and large-scale change can follow.

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## Works Cited

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