Survival of the Prettiest: “Girl Code 101” and the Modern Woman’s Societal Battle

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2017 has been a landmark year for the cultural discussion surrounding sexual assault and sexual harassment. Perhaps most notably, the recent “#MeToo” movement has contributed to the toppling of powerful sexual predators in Hollywood, the media, the government, and more. Clearly, sexual assault and harassment have been and are still huge problems in our society, but people are talking about it, and that’s an important first step. The silenced have been given voices through this movement, and survivors are starting to be believed and to make real change. Blythe Baird is one those people. She has been a forerunner in the search for intersectional feminism since 2014, and tirelessly seeks to spread the word about the need for a change in the way society treats women through her viral slam poetry and published works. Baird’s poem “Girl Code 101” shows that modern life for women is like a war zone by illustrating concepts related to war through the use of such literary devices as metaphor, imagery, and diction.

The poem “Girl Code 101” includes several different metaphors that can be compared to the wartime concepts of soldiers and colonialism, as well as the modern women’s problem of victim blaming. Baird describes herself and her high school peers by saying, “15, we are the… / honorable / mentions in lush floral dresses. // 16, we are the public / school mannequins. // 17, we know the answer / but do not raise our hands.” One of the main points Baird is trying to make here is that girls today are taught to value being pretty over being smart. She characterizes the girls specifically as “honorable mentions,” and honorable mentions are not winners. One needs to stand out from the crowd in order to be noticed as a high achiever and considered to win something in high school such as an award or a scholarship, and standing out from the crowd is the last thing that high school girls tend to want. In striving for one unattainable ideal of beauty,

they choose to value looks over all else because society tells them that being beautiful is their most valuable quality. This helps to explain the phenomenon of knowing the answer but choosing not to raise hands that Baird describes.

Striving for a single ideal of beauty does more than teach girls to value conventional attractiveness more than anything else, however. It also makes everyone look the same. Baird characterizes high school girls as "public school mannequins," and examining what mannequins are made and used for offers insight into this metaphor. Mannequins are identical, blank canvases that stores as uniform backgrounds on which to project their products. In much the same way, high school girls in Baird's poem have become identical, blank canvases on which society projects its beauty ideals.

What is more, mannequins are not entirely unlike soldiers. In war, soldiers are purposefully dehumanized and made to be the same, at least externally. Their identities are stripped away because it is disadvantageous to stand out in combat situations. It is important to consider that "because de-individualization renders the individual more susceptible to situational influences, de-individualized soldiers can be influenced to do good or bad…[but] de-individualization most often leads to bad outcomes" (Baarda). Soldiers are trained to fulfill one specific task: to fight for their country. If our society is like a war zone for women, the high school girls in Baird's poem are the soldiers, and their "lush floral dresses" are their uniforms. By teaching girls that they must strive for one ideal of beauty, and that this is how their value will be measured, society ensures that they will become identical from the outside. They become soldiers whose one task is to, ironically, keep themselves down. They focus on looks because that is what they are taught to do, putting aside striving for excellence in school when pursuing higher education is what can teach them that they have value outside of what they look like. By

making mannequin soldiers out of young girls, the beauty industry and the patriarchy continue to sustain themselves, just as a country builds up an army to keep itself safe. This also ensures that women keep themselves down because "soldiers can commit mild transgressions…but very destructive behavior will follow if their loss of self-restraint is significant and the situational influences are strong enough" (Baarda). If the soldiers are well-trained enough, they can even go so far as to become self-destructive, as we see women and girls do in modern society by fighting to uphold ideals that harm them.

Another metaphor from Baird's poem comes in when she is describing encounters with high school guidance counselors. She says that instead of raising their hands with the answers in class, girls are "answering / to guidance counselors, who ask us, // *Well, what were you wearing?* / Their voices: clink-less toasts" (Baird). In this scenario, Baird is describing a textbook case of victim blaming. The "what were you wearing" question is a classic for those who blame assaults on the victim and their choice of "slutty" clothing rather than on the assaulter and their undeniable accountability for their own actions. It causes feelings of shame to arise in the victim because she starts to question whether what happened to her was her own fault. In comparing the counselor's voices to "clink-less toasts," Baird is pointing out that the intention behind doing this is not only to blame the victim, but also to silence her. When someone is preparing to make a toast, it is a common practice to clink something against a glass to get everyone's attention. The counselors do not seek to bring attention to assault, however, so their toasts are "clink-less." In these cases, the stronger party is blaming and silencing the weaker party for the injustice committed against them, and this is a technique often seen in war. In a historical example, Japan still does not acknowledge war crimes committed against China during World War II, namely the Nanking Massacre. Japan controlled the story so much as it was happening that it is censored

from textbooks as a result of the stronger party silencing the true story of the weaker party (History).

A third metaphor from the poem comes in when Baird says, “we are the asses smacked / by boys who made welcome / mats of our yoga pants.” Here, Baird seeks to illustrate how yoga pants are a metaphor for welcome mats in the eyes of her male high school counterparts. It is another common argument in rape culture that if women are “showing off” their bodies, they are asking for them to be ogled and touched. The high school boys of the poem are justifying smacking the backsides of the girls because they are showing them off by wearing yoga pants, which they interpret as an invitation. The pants, however, are merely a flimsy excuse; the sexual harassment described here is akin to an attack in war, and the pants justification is just a cover-up for something that the boys wanted to do anyway, which is an idea not unlike colonialism.

Colonialism, which is when one country takes control over another to occupy it with settlers and exploit it for political and economic gain, often leads to war. It is an idea that I think compares well with Rubin’s idea of the lack of a concept for benign sexual variation in our society. Rubin states that “it is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation… One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way.” Rubin’s assessment of society’s ideas about sex here strongly correlates to one of the primary justifications of colonialism. When early English settlers in North America tried to convert Native Americans to Christianity, their justification was that they wanted to help the “savages” by civilizing them, but in reality they wanted to spread Christianity because Puritans believed theirs was the only correct religion. This is a parallel not only to the high school boys of the poem who use yoga pants as their cover story for sexually harassing girls, but also to Rubin’s assessment of our culture’s sexual discourse.

As Rubin says, people believe there is “one best way” to do something and that everyone should be doing it in that specific way. Missing this concept of benign sexual variation in our culture means we are also missing a “pluralistic sexual ethics,” so in this way, the lack of this concept leads to cultural confusion about what is right and what is wrong when it comes to sex and sexual assault. Rubin goes on to say that “One need not like or perform a particular sex act in order to recognize that someone else will… Most people mistake their sexual preferences for a universal system that will or should work for everyone.” At its bare bones, this is just as good of an argument against colonialism as it is for benign sexual variation. The concept that one person or group’s ideas are a universal system that all should adhere to drives the concept of colonialism, which has led to battles and deaths on countless occasions. In the case of the world of Baird’s poem, the casualties appear in a different form: that of the mental wellbeing of victims of assault. Breaking down and disposing of colonialist ideas in our society’s sexual discourse could help us form a set of sexual ethics that is both more inclusive and more clearly defined, and ethically clarifying sex in our culture could very well help us put a stop to sexual assault.

In addition to metaphor, Baird also employs vivid imagery and diction in her poem, which illustrates the concept of our society being like a war zone for women. One of these images occurs very early in the poem when Baird says, “We are the girls taught to survive / by using our bodies as Swiss Army knives.” This image compares girls’ bodies directly to weapons, and echoes the point about society making girls into its soldiers because it is the girls who are taught to weaponize their own bodies. It is also telling that the weapons Baird chooses for this image are not just knives, but specifically knives originally designed for the use of soldiers: they literally have the word “army” in their name. Baird’s image also highlights the idea of this being a survival technique. Girls are afforded little power in our society, but they are shown time and

again that being beautiful is a powerful thing because of how much value our society places on physical beauty. This therefore teaches them that what little power there is to be gained is most easily won by using their bodies, as the girls in Baird's poem do to get out of unpleasant things like detention, running the mile in gym class, or having to constantly wear their student IDs.

Baird goes on to say that "male kindness is so alien to us / we assume it is seduction every time." For me, this conjures the image of a scene that was recently detailed to me by a friend. She had gone out one night with a few friends and met a man at a bar. They got to talking and he seemed very genuinely interested in getting to know her as a person. They had a lot in common and she was enjoying the opportunity for an intelligent and fun conversation. As soon as it came up that my friend had a boyfriend, however, she could virtually see his eyes glaze over. He turned around and walked away while she was still in the middle of a sentence. Apparently he had merely been faking interest the whole time, and faking it very well; as soon as he realized there was no chance for a hook up, he left immediately.

This kind of scenario is all too familiar for young women today. In fact, there are countless stories with even worse endings, where the man ends up berating the woman or calling her terrible names for "leading him on" when all she is really guilty of is having a conversation with a man while not being single. This is the kind of image Baird is attempting to evoke, because experiences like these are the reason why women are so suspicious of male kindness, and why true instances of it where the man does not expect anything in return seem so foreign to us. Additionally, this situation is comparable to the false flag maneuver in war. Historically, false flag operations consisted of pirate vessels flying the flag of a friendly nation in order to approach potential victims under false pretenses. It was used with the intent to deceive in order to gain the

victim's trust before revealing their true intentions. This is a near perfect metaphor for what happened to my friend.

One of Baird's most poignant images comes when she admits to herself and to the audience that "misogyny has been coiled inside of me for so long." Here, the use of the word "coiled" in particular seems to characterize misogyny as an insidious parasite, living snake-like within her for years to the point where it is completely internalized. This paints internalized misogyny as a danger, and rightly so. As Baird goes on to say in the poem, it causes her to forget she does not deserve to face the judgment and guilt society pushes on her for her own experiences with sexual assault. This is dangerous because a victim blaming herself for a sexual assault is not only categorically incorrect, but can also cause intense psychological damage from which it can take years of hard work to recover, if she recovers at all. It is also important to consider that "living in a culture of objectification partially accounts for the higher frequency of negative health outcomes from which women are more likely to suffer (e.g., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction and sexual violence)" (Roylance). Internalized misogyny can literally make women sick in any number of ways as well as more prone to be involved in sexual violence, so its dangers really cannot be overstated.

The danger of this image inspires the next section of the poem, which reads, "Give me a God I can relate to… // Give me one accomplishment of Mary's / that did not involve her vagina. // Give me decisions. A wordless / wardrobe. An opinion- / less dress. // Give me a city where my body / is not public property" (Baird). The anaphora of these statements provides a dramatic effect that demands our attention. It also puts the reader in mind of a prayer, an entreaty, a supplication. Baird is begging for something better than what she's been given: the image of an unknowable white man in the sky for a God; the mother Madonna as the ideal image of a

woman, valued solely for the one thing she can do that men cannot; a lack of agency in society, and a wardrobe misinterpreted as a mouthpiece, speaking words she does not intend. The image of her body as "public property" is also arresting, putting one in mind of predatory men who think they can do whatever they like with her body.

Baird's plea calls to mind the quote of unknown origin that states, "There are no atheists in foxholes," which uses war as an example to show that when confronted with danger, humans will turn to call on a higher power, whether they profess to believe in God or not. I think this idea certainly holds up in this poem, but only to a certain extent. The above series of sentences certainly reads like a prayer, and she does discuss elements of Christianity. Baird does not expressly say that she does not believe in God, but rather that she longs for femininity to not be synonymous with weakness; she wants a God she can relate to, "commandments from a voice / both soft and powerful" (Baird). In this case, while Baird does not come off as an atheist in her metaphorical foxhole, she is undeniably unsatisfied with traditional Christianity.

Baird chooses to end her poem with an anecdote about catcalling. She says, "Once my friend and I got catcalled / on Michigan Avenue, and she said / *Fuck you,* while I said *Thank you* // like I was trained to" (Baird). Baird specifically chooses to use the word "trained" here, which again recalls the idea of soldiers. Soldiers must undergo special training before they can be expected to perform their tasks, and society, too, trains women to internalize misogyny so that the patriarchy can maintain its position of power. As Baird points out, it is more instinctive to reply to catcalling with thanks than with rejection, and this is purely out of self-preservation. As women, "we convince ourselves that there is protection / in being polite" (Baird); it is far safer to appease catcallers with a smile than to curse at them, because their reaction is a potentially

dangerous unknown. Society therefore rewards women who stick to the status quo by thanking catcallers with safety, or at least the illusion of it, but this is not without its consequences. Objectification involves a woman being "reduced to the status of a sexual object, whose only value resides in her attractiveness and sexual availability. Through the process of objectification, women are stripped of their humanness, and reduced to a body alone" (Roylance). Accepting that kind of abuse, harassment, and loss of identity and humanity without complaint is to accept that women deserve to be treated as objects, as "less than," and that is exactly what internalized misogyny looks like.

This idea corresponds closely to the ideas stated by Gilbert and Gubar in "The Madwoman in the Attic." The essay reads in part, "Given this socially conditioned epidemic of female illness, it is not surprising to find that the angel in the house of literature frequently suffered…from literal and figurative sickness unto death" (Gilbert). Gilbert and Gubar are pointing out that there is a trend in literature for those women who force themselves to attain the unattainable ideal of the angel in the house to also frequently be sick, and for their illnesses to eventually be the death of them. This works well as an analogy for the internalized misogyny Baird describes. Internalizing a corroded sense of self-worth is every bit as damaging as striving to be a perfect angel, and both lead to women's destruction. The article goes on to ask the question, "Implying ruthless self-suppression, does the 'eternal feminine' necessarily imply illness?" (Gilbert). I think that in the case of the application of this idea to "Girl Code 101," it absolutely does. Baird's poem is full of anger about all of the damage that internalized misogyny has caused to her and her peers; trying to live up to the impossible standards the patriarchy imposes on its "soldiers" often leads to low self-esteem, mental illness, and even self harm and suicide. This interestingly serves as a foil to how real soldiers are rewarded for living up to the

masculine ideal of being strong and excelling at combat. They tend to survive and avoid physical injury in war, whereas women who live up to the eternal feminine ideal suffer illness and death.

I think that Baird's catcalling anecdote also corresponds to Beauvoir's mythic archetypes about women. Beauvoir says the following about pairs of mythic archetypes about women:

> As group representation and social types are generally defined by pairs of opposite terms, ambivalence will appear to be an intrinsic property of the Eternal Feminine. The saintly mother has its correlation in the cruel stepmother, the angelic young girl has the perverse virgin: so Mother will be said sometimes to equal Life and sometimes Death, and every virgin is either a pure spirit or flesh possessed by the devil. (Beauvoir)

Here, Beauvoir details the inherent duality within each archetype imposed on women. Whether we look at the archetype of the ideal mother or the ideal girl, there is always one version that is deemed "good" and one that is "bad." This concept is perfectly illustrated in Baird's catcalling story, in which her friend acts as the bad archetype by replying with "fuck you," and Baird herself acts as the good archetype by replying with "thank you." As Beauvoir says, "it is obviously not reality that dictates…choices between the two opposing principles of unification." In this case, Baird is fully aware that it is her instinctual training in internalized misogyny that drives her choice to accept her role in this situation as a sexual object, and her acknowledgement of this is what makes the closing of her poem so powerful.

In conclusion, Blythe Baird's poem "Girl Code 101" not only serves as an accurate depiction of what living in rape culture is really like, but also portrays how that process is akin to a patriarchal war zone for women. Through her metaphors, Baird shows readers how the modern problem of victim blaming affects real girls in a way that is concerningly similar to the ways in which countries have blamed and silenced victims of war crimes throughout history. Her

comparison of her high school peers to mannequins aligns perfectly with the concept of soldiers, where the soldiers are modern women and girls losing a lifelong battle against the patriarchy. Baird's descriptions of "business school boys / who learned to manifest success // by refusing to take no / for an answer" (Baird) illustrate the concept of colonialism, which has historically started many wars all over the world. Baird's poetical imagery only heightens the comparison to a war zone by making us vividly picture women's bodies weaponized and trained, male kindness as a false flag strategy, and the dangers of internalized misogyny. Her plea to "Give me a God I can relate to" (Baird) is a rallying cry for change, a battlefield bugle call signaling to all modern women soldiers that it is time fight and smash the patriarchy once and for all.

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