What World is Made?: Gender and Affect in Three Life Moments

May Friedman

How can I write about the affective experiences of being a woman without resorting to essentialism or trite platitudes? If, as Eugenie Shinkle surmises, affect is "characterised in part by its resistance to sociolinguistic qualification; as a category, it resists critique and lacks a precise theoretical vocabulary" (75), can I use the imprecision of language to try to evoke the body, the "heartmind" (Loveless) of my experiences of femininity and that world that my gendered experiences create? If worldmaking is grounded in "affect, emotion, and perception" (Breger 232), how can I engage in the nuances of the construction of my own gendered world?

While my sense of myself as a racialized cisgender woman has shifted and morphed, there is no doubt that the strictures of womanhood have girded my life. They have implicated my body, my aesthetics; they have governed my relationships and engagements with others; they have journeyed alongside my professional roles and behaviors. In many respects, I have followed the "happiness scripts" that Sara Ahmed delineates (*Promise of Happiness*), and yet shame lurks in the fissures and tensions between my experiences of normative femininity and my authentic understandings of myself.

Ultimately, my experiences of womanhood are variegated and intersected, reminding me that there is no essential characteristic to womanhood—not biology, not family composition, not aptitude or character trait—but that, at the same time, every part of my life is imprinted by and through my experiences of gender. My world is a woman's world,

and also—each woman's world is distinct. How can I strain against the stickiness of affect to consider my experiences of femininity and womanhood in the specifics of key life moments?

Love

Is there a more gendered space than a heterosexual wedding? At the time of my own long-ago nuptials, queer marriages were still illegal in my jurisdiction, and so my massive, poofy wedding was about as straight a space as could be imagined. My ambivalence about gender roles was conveniently concealed under my enormous dress, along with my fat belly. My imminent in-laws, confused by our henna party days before, were soothed by this more familiar specter of white dress and black tie. Hundreds of friends and family members joined us to celebrate. Yes, we were celebrating love—love that has, against all odds, flourished for more than two decades—but also the spectacle of gendered behaviors.

What world was established through this performance, an imperfect performance at best? On the one hand, I was the exemplar of a particular version of womanhood: marrying young; in a ceremony and spectacle traditional to my culture, my community. I remember feeling relieved that I had avoided some kind of smothering shame by outrunning spinsterhood, a feeling that I recognize as bizarre coming from an educated woman in her early twenties at the turn of the twenty-first century. And yet—throughout my young life, normative femininity [read: marriage] was presented as a requirement (for that matter, so was shame). To consider a life that transgressed this framework was literally unthinkable; in some ways, it remains so.

These moments return to me in affective registers. My dress, his suit. The discomfort of my too-tight undergarments, raising welts on my flesh in an effort to constrain my bulges. The private knowledge of my ambiguous relationship with queer identity. The sweat and flush on my face as I was required, as an introvert, to interact, fully, enthusiastically, for hours. The dancing whirl of my macho uncle forcibly goose-

stepping me around the dance floor, his arm like a binding seat belt across my back. I am reminded of Isobel Armstrong's words that

> Affect . . . in an ambiguous, alternating force . . . belongs to a chain of discourse and breaks it: it alternates between being bound and unbound, attached to signification and rupturing it. It is essentially an energy of the "between" . . . Thus it has the role of conjoining and disjoining, making and unmaking . . . The concealing and revealing, exposing and masking process which belongs to affect is structurally tied to the possibility of meaning. (123)

This wedding was about signification, but also about rupture. I was rendered intelligible to those around me (in my approach to both womanhood and whiteness, albeit always imperfectly), but ultimately *un*intelligible to myself.

I wonder what I would say to that young woman—so long ago. Would I tell her to recognize this moment as the spectacle it was, to relish its irony and performance without getting too caught up in concerns about authenticity? Would I tell her to remember what really mattered in that moment—the birthplace of a family—rather than all the trappings and strangulations that the day held? Would I offer a more comfortable bra, at least—release for the body if not the mind? That unformed person, scarcely aware of the many discourses layered on the raced and gendered body whirling around that dance floor, might not have wanted to consider those constraints, but I believe that even then, my young self knew that for all the joy of the moment, something was askew.

Loss

My affective experience of gender does not center on what my body has or has not done, nor the parts it does or does not possess. At the same time, my experiences of womanhood have been marked by the particular taboos aimed at body functions, including the specificities of pregnancy loss. In particular, as a cis woman, my experiences of preg-

nancy and reproduction have been imprinted with gendered expectations. While in no way suggesting that the womb is the seat of womanhood then, I wonder how to narrate my own embodied experiences in the moment where my womb failed?

While I have borne living children, I have also experienced periods of grave loss. After a much-desired pregnancy was interrupted when no heartbeat could be detected halfway through gestation, I found myself in the awful position of having to figure out how to birth an unfinished being. Having birthed my living children at home, I was hospitalized, medicalized, subject to endless manipulation and scrutiny.

I was struck by both the mundanity and grotesquerie of loss. On the one hand, this was in no way a unique tragedy—as I already knew, pregnancies end constantly. Loss is a part of all life and certainly part of reproductive life. Despite the mundanity of the experiences, it was nonetheless spectacular—in the sense of inviting spectacle—in the affective realm. The chafe of the hospital gown that I bitterly resisted but was finally forced to don—the clang of the alarm I pulled when, unexpectedly, I gave birth while I was alone in the bathroom—the scarlet blood, the rough skin of my cheeks salted by tears. This was both more and less than a medical situation—a regrettable but uncomplicated series of procedures, but also the death of hope, of a particular version of myself as mother to this specific child, of the sibling my children had anticipated. At the heart of it was the womb, behaving in troublesome ways—clenching out tissue at the "wrong" time, then holding on to residue that necessitated surgical removal. My sense of myself as mother, as woman, as patient, as mourner, was all held in the womb at that time.

Like so much of my experience of womanhood, this moment lives between the body and the mind, in the interplay between physical sensation and emotional reaction. I found myself feeling all the shame of a failed body, the trauma of a loss, in ways that were inarticulate but deeply held. I felt an overwhelming sense of abjection: the "rejection of bodies, or aspects of bodies, that threaten cultural norms about how human bodies should look and behave" (Rice 197), even as I acknowledged that this was terribly, painfully normal.

How do we acknowledge the complicated and messy terrain of the uterine environment without resorting to essentialism—to hysteria? How can I acknowledge that my womb is an organ like no other, even now as it enters retirement? How can I understand myself as a woman independent of biology and also acknowledge my uterus as it does its work, succeeds, and fails at giving life? The complexities of womb and woman elude words and one another. All I know is the steady drip of blood.

Labor

I am a reluctant and uneasy scholar. Throughout my childhood and young adulthood, my only consistent ambition was motherhood; all other possibilities seemed ancillary. Perhaps the same gendered training that dampened my ambition is also partially to blame for my rampant imposter syndrome, the overwhelming and abiding feeling that I am getting away with something by taking a seat at the table. Somewhere in the blend of children and academia, there is a specific embodied discomfort—the frequent exhortations of "I don't know how you do it!" suggesting, somehow, that I can't be doing it very well.

In this space, which is meant to be sterile and driven by the mind, I nonetheless feel my gendered body deeply. I remember Ahmed's reflections on the embodiment of feelings, "Emotion is the feeling of bodily change. The immediacy of the "is" suggests that emotions do not involve processes of thought, attribution or evaluation: we feel fear, for example, because our heart is racing, our skin is sweating. Emotions involve appraisals, judgements, attitudes" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 5). I remember the flush on my cheeks as a colleague asks, not for the first time, "HOW many children do you have now?"; the shame in my belly when I reveal, yet again, that I am not the departmental assistant; the rise of pride and anger at the backhanded praise when I say something sensible at a meeting. I think often of a shirt I once saw that read, "Lord, give me the confidence of a mediocre white man." In the absence of that confidence, I ache, I long, I fear. Shinkle writes that

> [a]ffect is transformative precisely because of its ability to move between the intimate, the idiosyncratic and the individual, and the public or institutional. It is in the *mattering* of perception that images become political: paying attention to the affective and embodied dimensions of image perception can lead to new ways of understanding how such images can embody not conformity, but political divergence. (85, emphasis in original)

In other words—my shame and anger *matter*; may have transformative potential. A consideration of my emotional and embodied responses elicits more information about racism and sexism, about institutionalized normative frames. In this emotional register, I may find pathways for survival on both personal and institutional levels, remembering that "it is about finding ways to exist in a world that makes it difficult to exist" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 239).

On a more mundane level, I see the ways I am enacting stereotypically feminine and maternal behaviors in my academic roles. I am responsible for a high degree of emotional labor on behalf of my students and, sometimes, my colleagues. I am in service roles that are heavy on workload and light on prestige. Some of the most painful moments of awareness come in the ways that my identities as woman, mother, academic rub together, sometimes coherently, sometimes in tension: the ways that my students very sweetly feel entitled to my time and care, for issues both academic and personal. The extent to which consciousness-raising work is built into my life—as a fat brown mother, I see-saw between feeling like helping people grapple with issues of privilege and oppression is the most important activist work I do and feeling sick of being everyone's Mammy. COVID has made these tensions more palpable, especially in the intersectional realm of gender. I gaze at my brown skin on the zoom screen and remember, again, why I don't think I "look like" an academic. Despite tenure, I feel the desperation of blending parenting and work at this moment, of turning off my video to attend to a child's leaky nose, feeling the endless and impossible ache of being a woman, a mother, and a worker at the present moment.

What is the politics of recognition when brown, first generation students need me, see themselves in me, but my established white colleagues do not? What counterpublic is created in the tensions between recognition, power, and the body?

What World is Made?

If emotional work is ultimately ineffable, then perhaps my experience of navigating womanhood can only be conveyed in the affective register. The world that is created is, in Claudia Breger's words, filled with "plural, sensory and conceptual truths" (235). Perhaps my commitment to convoluted life writing, arts-based approaches, and storied care is bound up in my need to bathe in complexity—rather than reducing gender, relationships, loss, livelihood into the realm of essentialism and truism. In thinking through my experiences of womanhood and affect, I reject the supposition that femininity is the seat of emotion—that women have big feelings. Rather, the "work of affect" (Breger 234) offers a lens into the productive potential of worldmaking, the creation of a world unspooling, in process, rather than the construction of a static and unyielding thing. Instead, I note that my own relationship with womanhood is an assemblage, like my body, that is scarred, stretched, and ultimately imperfect, rife with contradiction and rupture.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness.* Duke UP, 2010.
——. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh UP, 2014.
——. *Living a Feminist Life.* Duke UP, 2017.
Armstrong, Isobel. *The Radical Aesthetic.* Wiley Blackwell, 2000.
Breger, Claudia. "Affects in Configuration: A New Approach to Narrative Worldmaking." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 227–251.
Loveless, Natalie. *How to Make Art at the End of the World*. Duke UP, 2019.

Rice, Carla. *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. University of Toronto Press, 2014.

Shinkle, Eugenie. "Uneasy Bodies: Affect, Embodied Perception and Contemporary Fashion Photography." *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012, pp. 73–88.