

Proposal for Creative Writing Thesis

“Know Thyself: Autonomy and Entitlement in the Millennial Female”

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12/11/2019

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

”Y-להכיר את עצמך: אוטונומיה וחוש הזכאות אצל בחורה מדור ה

המחלקה לאנגלית

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12.11.19

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## Aims and General Description

I am blessed with an unprecedented degree of freedom. I am a Canadian citizen, an Ashkenazi Jew living in Israel and a woman born in the late 1980s. I am educated, self-sufficient, and my new-agey, liberal parents are encouraging and supportive. Ever since finding myself in the position of making my own adult decisions, I've made all kinds and gone through a number of significant iterations including doula, dropout, depressive, immigrant, performance artist and, most recently, writer. I am also, by dint of choice and circumstance, unequivocally single. Underpinning all of the things I have chosen to do is my wanting to do them and in the absence of any partner in romance or business, any housemate apart from my cat Charles, and with my family situated some ten thousand plus kilometers away, I get to observe my own ways of operating like a controlled experiment, choosing and living for myself with a minimum of outside influence. Through the collection of non-fiction pieces that will make up my thesis, I will explore the various facets of self that enable, hinder and complicate this freedom.

As I see it, time alone is the ultimate privilege. And I demand a great deal of it to proceed in my life-long project of getting to know myself, which I believe is fundamental to personal power. It is also a key ingredient in the kind of freedom I am after: the liberty to define myself for myself and to live the paradox of embracing and inhabiting my many identities while at the same time rejecting any one of them as an adequate descriptor. Furthermore, being a solo woman, even in today's Tel Aviv, is not a neutral status. It is deeply intertwined with issues of expectation, entitlement and safety. The broader culture in which I live still has lots of opinions about women and would typically prefer to have them chaperoned or monitored, paired off or otherwise 'solved' rather than gallivanting about tempting male desire or worse yet, exploring her own. Though I am more interested in exploring the bounds and creative potential of my own

freedom despite (potentially gendered) obstacles than analyzing those obstacles, assumptions and constructions, the collection will also seek to address how the gendered experience informs the kind of critical inquiry of self that the thesis documents as well as how self-confidence born of self-knowledge serves as a tool to overcome those obstacles.

This thesis is about me as a female, a millennial, an aging young person. It will be comprised of a series of short non-fiction pieces; some will explore aspects of self, identity and experience and how these intersect and inform one another while others will probe subjects which pique my curiosity, following a combination of research, musing and meaning-making where it leads me. The essays are both documentation of a process and part of that same process of interrogating selfhood via different lenses. And as I believe that a knowledge of self - as I understand it and as existing traditions have made sense of it - will expand my outward world as much as my internal one, through observing, speculating and overanalyzing in the pursuit of kernels of truth, I intend to grapple with the particular brand of existential questions that have dogged me since forever.

### Conceptual Background

Is it predictable or narcissistic that in culling my literary influences I see something of each author in myself? Even apart from more particular kinship, anyone who has done their writing work has successfully carved the solo time out from other obligations to sit and reflect on their own inner world. Perhaps I've been unconsciously looking for role models but in any case, my chosen literary lineage is all women but one. The following list of authors have penned a collectively vast and varied assortment of works, each of which offers me something of their own that is both fresh and familiar. The voices of these writers has contributed to shaping my perspective which, in turn, helps to shape my writing voice.

Eve Babitz was a self-described *groupie* in Los Angeles of the 1960s and 70s whose deceptively breezy 'fictive memoirs' relay a piercing clarity around social dynamics and a nuanced, withering self-awareness. *Slow Days Fast Company* offers studies of time and place that despite their languid poetry are rich and astute; Babitz gives us a buoyant California lightness to Joan Didion's darker depth (writing in and of the same time and place). Babitz knows who she is and she doesn't apologize for being beautiful, sexual, smart. She doesn't couch her ideas in caveats and qualifications but made her own rules and aesthetics in her writing. "You can't write a story about L.A. that doesn't turn around in the middle or get lost," Babitz introduces her artfully, organically meandering work, "I can't get a thread to go through to the end and make a straightforward novel. ... But perhaps if the details are all put together, a certain pulse or sense of place will emerge, and the integrity of empty space with occasional figures in the landscape can be understood at leisure and in full, no matter how fast the company."

Nora Ephron was likewise not afraid to voice her own ideas in her personal essays, even concerning the banalities of daily life such as her wrinkly neck or her apartment... Like Ephron, my work spends some time in the more mundane soup of life: my crumbling apartment, my

languid cat, my bicycle-riding road rage. The precedent offered me by Ephron indicates that the shrewd and witty exploration of otherwise dull subjects is not only fun reading, but infuses familiar objects, places and scenarios with new meaning, depth and humor.

Like Ephron, David Sedaris is a master of conveying the hilarity of seemingly uneventful events. His self-conscious, self-deprecating essays are sharp, wordy and indulgent. In his essay collection *'Me Talk Pretty One Day'* he moves to France which affords him the distance, geographically, culturally and otherwise, to look back on and observe his homeland with fresh perspective. I share with him this immigrant's outsider status and outlook from which to observe both the place where I come from and the place where I'm living, a viewpoint that I feel adds richness and depth to my ideas and work.

As for Joan Didion, another west coast woman (like Babitz, Ephron and myself), I will single out just one aspect of her lyrical and incisive non-fiction writing. She has a profoundly self-reflexive bent: examining the work, the process, the craft and the purpose of writing through writing itself. In her essay collection, *'The White Album'* she writes, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live," and she seems to live by that, as do we all, whether more or less consciously. She grapples with the philosophy and technicality of stories, narrative and meaning-making, turning a skeptical eye on the stories she grew up on about her own family as well as the broader culture. This resonates with me and I intend to make my own study (in an ongoing way as well as in one particular essay) that unpacks some of the ways that 'stories' and 'story-telling' inform and are implicated in my own life and the lives of similarly middle class, self-aware millennials.

My 'lineage' also includes some select writers of fiction. First there is Alice Munro, the prolific, Nobel Prize-winning Canadian short story writer. Her writing is finely rendered with attention to detail, nuance and the inner lives of her characters. She writes almost exclusively

about women in rural Southern Ontario in some non-specific decade some decades ago, before computers and cellphones, going about their mundane lives, usually testing or reacting to the bounds of their domesticity. I appreciate her sensitivity, her clear articulation and her ability to revisit variations of the same characters, locales and themes again and again over time, always mining the old for the new, always finding and delivering something fresh.

Sally Rooney and Kristen Roupenian may well be Munro's millennial successors. Both are fiction writers portraying current scenarios that focus closely on relationships with all the accoutrements of today (texting, social media, online dating, etc). Both give great detail, precise and clean diction, and create complex, believable relationships on the page. While I'm not attempting anything immediately similar to these two writers, their particular sensitivity to the way people interact with one another is inspiring to me, feeling both precise - familiar from life, and new - bringing a kind of candid simplicity that is new to literature - and I hope it finds its way into my work as appropriate.

However, as my thesis will be in the domain of non-fiction, most of the writing I in some way model my own work after, is by non-fiction writers. Rebecca Solnit is a prolific writer on all manner of topics who, like Rooney and Roupenian, delivers a voice that is fresh and unique. Her book *Men Explain Things To Me*, a collection of essays beginning with the title piece which brought about the coining of the term 'mansplaining', goes from funny anecdote to delving into the systemic silencing of women on many fronts. I admire her particular talent for persistent, deepening inquiry into a subject and how through making connections, the topic expands to include farther-reaching instances and examples and more social phenomena are implicated. This can be felt in the structure of the book but is also part of its point: that seemingly unrelated issues actually share a misogynist impetus that aims to silence and belittle women. I also appreciate that

Solnit, who can rattle off a narrative section with smooth and natural dialogue, allots time and space to her musing, allowing it to make a complete journey: to find out where it's going, and reach the payoff of a well-deserved insight.

Solnit likewise admires this quality in Virginia Woolf, examining her work *A Room of One's Own* as identifying the necessary “practical forms of freedom and power” that is, money and privacy, and reflecting on Woolf's tale of Judith Shakespeare, that “dinner in taverns, streets at midnight, the freedom of the city are crucial elements of freedom, not to define an identity but to lose it.” (*Men Explain Things to Me*) I am excited by this freedom to play with ideas and follow them where they need to go, taking the time and space and the word count required to do so. Woolf herself offers this bit of liberating poetic rumination:

“I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self- defense . . . Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object—a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is “herself”? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know.”

Woolf understood the work and the existential threat - to self and to society - of a woman's freedom. And real freedom for anyone, ‘being oneself’, is as slippery as objective Truth. But I hope to convey a journey of self-exploration, like the writers I admire, that is both fresh and familiar, from the banal, the everyday and the known, into the outlandish, the surprising and the unknown.

### Shape of Project

My thesis will be made up of a series of personal essays. Each should be able to stand on its own, independent of the others, but is enriched by the context of the collection. Some will be more narrative essays, grounded in events and conversations with more of a story arc, while others will explore topics that are of interest to me, through research and meditation on the subject and how it figures into my own life.

Following, I offer a sample of potential essays that will make up my thesis.

*Megillat Esther:* This essay delves into my ongoing relationship with my difficult neighbor, Esther. Weaving in various interactions and confrontations that challenge my Canadian proprieties, the dynamic between us morphs from antagonistic to cautiously congenial over time.

*First Date:* This essay recounts a Tinder date from its tentative beginning to its possibly predictable ending. On the way, the essay charts the preliminary get-to-know-you rituals of two seasoned Tinder-users alongside my inner voice which is constantly evaluating my date, and some of the less obvious dynamics present throughout the evening.

*Disconnect:* This essay tells the story of another off-kilter ‘romantic’ encounter with an acquaintance on an ill-advised desert camping trip. Shortly after setting off, I found that my travel companion drove me nuts: tiresome, narcissistic and lacking any real self-awareness or sense of humor, I spent the rest of the weekend trying to make the most of the desert.

*Picking:* This essay explores my worst longterm habit, the medically dubbed ‘dermatillomania’. Here I unpack my compulsive skin-picking alongside musings on the idea of the ‘abject’ à la Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French philosopher. It is a solo act, ritual, experience, vice that I will further examine in terms of existing purification rituals as well as ideas of control, vanity and temporality.

*Cut:* This essay examines my thoughts on (male) circumcision in its (mostly) Jewish context. Through variously personal anecdotes I flesh out some ideas about masculinity, judaism, family and intergenerational inheritance.

*Beginnings and Endings:* In this essay, I will look at some of my own associations with and baggage around beginnings and endings through personal experiences and anecdotes. These will include a first boyfriend that I never heard from again (a ‘ghosting’ episode), my Holocaust-survivor grandmother’s protracted goodbyes at the end of my visits as well as my propensity for starting all manner of undertakings and then quitting and how all of it contributes to my self-image.

*Breasts:* In the tradition of Nora Ephron (*A few words about breasts*, Esquire magazine, 1972) and Eve Babitz (*My Life in a 36DD Bra, Or, The All-American Obsession*, Ms. Magazine, 1976), I will write up my own experience of a life with breasts and inhabiting a female body. This will be based on a combination of anecdotes from my own experience as well as spending some time in the murkier feelings associated with a body that is sexual, visible, and my own.

*Stories:* This essay will explore my many associations with stories and ‘stories’. It will examine the paradox of my love of reading fiction and fear of writing fiction, ‘stories’ as the kind of narratives we impose on experience to try and delineate and make sense of our own lives, and the falsehoods we tell ourselves to maintain denial or justify bad habits. I intend to look at the culture of stories within my family and society and what functions they serve.

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