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Course: Writing & Rhetoric I, FA2015-52-1151-28

Instructor: Julia Fine

Assignment:

Write an alphabetic text essay about the core values that guide your daily life. Use Roxane Gay's "Bad Feminist" and/or examples from This I Believe as your model. Consider ethos as you write. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **What issue or value do you care most strongly about? Why?**
- **How does your personal identity intersect with your passions?**
- **Do you ever have trouble "living" your ideals?**
- **What universal principle is true for you?**
- **Is there a recurring challenge you have faced? How do you deal with it?**

I'M NOT A FREEDOM FIGHTER, I JUST PLAY ONE ON TV

I'd say I come from a family of contrarians—an ancestral lineage bundled with contradictions and a false self-image, because our fantasies are targets moving at a chronically unpredictable rate. Our self-image is particular, and very much groomed to our liking, as it adheres to our belief systems. What I mean is, who we think we are, when juxtaposed against who we actually are, lays bare a vast discrepancy. Though, this is a very common problem. Right? People thinking they're someone they're not? I'm not special because of this. This is, in fact, a unifier of human consciousness. When "things don't go as planned," we are forced to reconcile knowing that our ideal scenario is no longer a tangible reality ("you're not who you think you are," "you don't know as much as you thought.")

The only time you can get away with thinking you're someone you're not is when you're either famous or mentally ill. There's no real difference between the two, it's all a matter of cultural celebration. When a famous person goes to the MTV Video Music Awards wearing a literal meat dress, we call this innovation. When a psychically ill person screams for rain beneath the roof of a blue line train platform, we regard it as a break from reality. No matter what, there is an excuse. All publicity is good publicity.

When normal people have to confront a shattered ego, there is no audience. I don't say this to suggest my suffering is equivalent to that of the homeless or mentally ill. That'd be a lie, and I cannot believe it from even the most subjective stance. I find the comparison disturbing and am ashamed to have written it. But, I have a sick envy that a homeless person can receive external validation ("yes, you're screwed up"), because no one really thinks it's okay to sleep under a highway bridge.

It's hard to admit, but as of recently, I found myself having a break from reality. There was just me, and everything I know becoming everything I knew. A truth crawled out from the netherworld, the falsehoods evaporated seamlessly. I had to answer to myself, when I had no idea what the answer was. Maybe I still don't. I'm not who I thought I was, and in my eyes, no one else is, either. I have to confront these mental webs. I suspect I've already contradicted myself. I cannot help but feel self-indulgent and melodramatic. To make sense of these feelings, I find myself looking back on my family.

My father is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's a mouthful for a reason, namely genocide and dictatorship. It's one of those places I have to explain to my peers, repeat it a few times, then describe it on a map, and reassure other Americans that Congolese people wear clothes and have a language. This somehow leads me to becoming a

representative for all sub-Saharan African countries. No one is qualified for this. I usually just end up saying, “it’s one of those places that a nonprofit organization asks you about for a small donation to feed the starving children.” As far as Americans are concerned, it’s a late night infomercial.

In my father’s culture, you kind of live with everyone, and you share everything, even when there’s none of it. For him, what you will always have is family, and thus family is everything. Of course it is, it should be so in all places. I know this is a very common expression, but when your hometown doesn’t have running water, it rings especially true. So much of one’s pride resides in family. My father can easily name every matriarch in his family up to fourteen generations back, because that’s how much family means to him.

Congo, like many “developing countries,” has suffered from colonialism, then post-colonial efforts towards independence, leading them to a glorious path of neo-colonialism. And places like Congo get colonized for their rich, natural abundance. As my mother says, “Congo is cursed with mineral wealth.” What she’s talking about is that people have died for flat screen T.V.s, and will continue to do so. Diamond earrings, tungsten television, coltan smart phone—it all begins beneath their soil, mining to provide for capitalism’s direct beneficiaries (and victims), the American people.

My mother is from Michigan, as in Detroit; 1960s; Aretha Franklin. She hated her family growing up. She graduated from high school when she was sixteen, both as a form of rebellion and as a testament to her academic promise. She was accepted to Harvard and Yale, but chose Oberlin for financial reasons (yes, we’re still in debt). Afterwards, she joined the Peace Corps. She was stationed in Congo for twenty-seven months. What’s kind of cute about my parents is that they didn’t actually meet until my father moved to the United States.

Though my mother was in his home country, they met up years later in Illinois. They were in close proximity to each other all the time, across oceans, by coincidence or divine intervention. My mother had even met my father's best friend from high school before she met him. Fast-forward through a few movie dates and marriage at the Museum of Science and Industry, and I am born.

There were problems before I entered the picture. My mother's family wouldn't accept my father because of his ethnicity, and he had already been isolated from his people, his cultures, his customs. Turning to your lover, in this instance, would not instill confidence or faith to know that everything will be okay. Immigrant living had already proven to be a challenge. Once I was born, my grandmother, my father's mother, died. I suspect this is when my father broke from his reality, now having to assess what was real, and or what could remain. Healthcare is virtually nonexistent in Congo. The reason she got typhoid was actually because of a botched operation, involving kitchen knives and a plastic bowl of blood transfusions. (No, not AIDS, lest we forget that due to modern medicine, typhoid is not only treatable, but preventable.) My father left when I was six months old for a little less than a year, to mourn, which is somewhat contextually specific. To westernize things, one mourns for a parent like a Victorian widow mourns her husband. You mourn for a long time; you love and respect your elders no matter where they are. In Congo, life does not involve emotional thresholds and allotted time frames. You live fully.

But it's kind of hard not having your dad around when you haven't even formed a consciousness of him. I suppose I'm contradicting myself again, as I can't recall what I don't remember. But this is a central theme between me and my father: our lack of familiarity. My

mother told me that when he came back, I didn't recognize him. He had to reintroduce himself to his single, infant daughter.

Being born, I became the glue to these two contrasting worlds. I was relatively successful at this when I was young, and ignorant to the circumstances. My grandfather died, my father's father. Everyone says it was from his broken heart. We're romantics, all of us. My father left again, then came back. A pattern was being established. Then, we all left. We were going to live in Congo. Developmentally, things got a little funny. My first year began in the U.S., where I was being conditioned by its customs and absorbing its culture. This continued on a completely different continent. When I had finally adjusted, a war broke out. We were moving back to America.

At this point, I am two and a half. I can never tell how much my early life experiences have affected me. I'm deeply repressed. There are no memories, just flavors and triggers. Still relearning English, I was enrolled in nursery school a year later. My parents had never been more proud of me. I was the only quadrilingual three-year-old in the district. I can't help but speak about these forgotten years as if was an exotic pet. That's all it ever sounded like. Their experiment was a success. But now that we had settled as best we could, I focused intensely on assimilating. In Americanizing myself as best I could, I feel a thorough one-half of my ethnicity has eroded into my subconscious. There was a significant period of time when I wanted the sweatshop clothes, the tungsten flat screen, the coltan smart phone.

I obviously had no idea what I was talking about. I went to private school on a scholarship, and my parents worked at its neighboring university. These are very materialistic environments. I was young and wanted to fit in. Simultaneously, the "first-world" continued to dish challenges for my parents and how they'd raise me. We didn't live in a state of lush

abandon, surrounded by rainforest landscape and eco-friendly self-sufficiency. We weren't the clandestine, jet-setting martyrs we once knew ourselves to be. We weren't a remarkable, international family out to make a difference, walking the precariously thin line of privilege and sacrifice, a line people didn't really think even existed.

I've moved many times since, but all within the Chicagoland area. I inevitably became the American I now know myself to be. I try to redeem myself on a daily basis. I live in constant guilt. I only buy thrift clothes, I listen to violent, obscure music, and I work as independently from consumer culture as I can. I am a proud cliché. I make every attempt to conserve energy, to clean up the environment, to give back what this weird and wonderful world has given me since day one. But by now, I am a disappointment. I've rebelled like all American teenagers have. There have been times when I've denied my parents any authority, which, believe it or not, is culturally specific; the socially acceptable moodiness of adolescence in American culture is not fathomed in Congolese culture. Hilariously, my father would rather I dress well, achieve success in Academia, and make every effort to speak at least two other languages fluently. I should at least try and fit in, right?

It doesn't have to be this way. I don't have to turn out this way. At this point, I am privileged enough to create my own problems. I can chase my own tail. When I feel my iPhone vibrate in my pocket, it serves as evidence of this cultural separation. My self-image shatters on a loop. It's now become an incessant reminder of the privileged, American millennial I really am. The weight of the device, which is supposed to be an equalizer, an instrument which, hypothetically, everyone can afford and use to their advantage, makes me feel like I'm watching a documentary on blood diamonds and child soldiers—an inaccurate, Westernized one.

Speaking of documentaries, I'm a film major. I've been obsessed with movies forever. I've known what I want to do with my life for a long time. What am I supposed to make of the fact that the one thing I love doing comes at the expense of other people's lives? People I forced myself to disconnect from, only to now grasp at straws for some kind of reconnection? It would be so wrong to say I "feel" Congolese, because in some ways, it's as distant as ever. It's all so distant. I don't feel much of anything. My mother is Italian, Polish, and Jewish, and I really couldn't tell you anything about that, either. My self-identification makes an attempt to circulate in a stagnant atmosphere. Overall, I seemed to have failed my predecessors, not living up to the expectations set before me. All I have is myself, my own culture, my own values. I still can't phrase what they are, I've been trying to figure it out for awhile, now. I get anxious thinking I will die an apathetic traitor to the people I owe everything to. I don't know if I'm being ridiculous. Nothing in this moment can compel me to think otherwise. I'd be ignoring all the evidence.

If anyone asks you whether or not people change, I assure you they do. The question is whether or not they've changed for the better. A lot has changed for me: I'm in college, my mother works two jobs, and my father left us. This existential crisis has been twenty years in the making. But, I hear acceptance is the first step to recovery.