

Losing Confidence

Posted on [March 1, 2016](#)

Losing confidence: it can be a feeling of something gradually going away from you, being eroded. You sense the erosion. You might stumble, hesitate, falter; things might gradually unravel so you end up holding onto the barest of threads. It might be an experience in the present that throws things up, throws you off balance; or a memory of how you lost your way once before that comes back in a flash and catches you unaware. When you lose confidence it can feel like you are losing yourself: like you have gone into hiding from yourself.

Sometimes losing confidence is slow; other times losing confidence is sudden. In the conclusion to *Queer Phenomenology* I wrote of how disorientation “can shatter your sense of confidence in the ground” (2006: 157). Confidence can indeed shatter like glass. And when your confidence shatters, you are the one who ends up in pieces. In *Living a Feminist Life* I began picking up some of these pieces. I was writing about how you end up trying to put yourself back together again; how you can feel like a fragment of your former self. When your confidence is shattered it is not just you that feels different: the world appears different, those edges sharper, the wall harder, that ceiling higher; obstacles, those things that are in the way, appear larger, magnified.

Or when you have lost confidence in something or in someone, in a relationship, everything can come into focus; everything becomes significant; when she frowns, or turns away, or does not smile the way you expect her to: is that because she doesn't want you anymore, is she telling you something? Questions, a wavering, a hesitation: when something gets wrapped up in doubt you can end up wrapped up in yourself. And then perhaps when you are all wrapped up, your anxiety that she is turning away means she turns away: you have left her nowhere else to turn.

Are you then creating a problem by sensing a problem?

The question itself can make you lose confidence.

Sometimes: we learn about something from losing something.

Confidence can be the quality of something that is in the world: a gesture can be more or less confident; we sense the difference from how the arm moves in the air. If to lose confidence is a faltering gesture that gesture has ripple effects. A loss can be passed around, losing confidence in each other, in a situation; a “we” comes to be at the moment we falter.

In an [earlier post](#) I reflected on how an experience of violence too can have effects on one's confidence; you might feel smaller because of what has happened to you; you might try and take up less space. You learn to inhabit your body differently through this expectation that what lies ahead might be shattering. When you sense the world “out there” as a danger it is your relation to your own body that changes: you become more cautious, timid, you might withdraw in anticipation that what happened before might happen again. It might be your own experiences that lead you here, to caution as withdrawal, but it might also what you have learnt from others. You are taught or told to be careful: to be full of care as to become anxious about the potential to be broken. You begin to learn that being careful, not having things like that happen to you, is a way of avoiding becoming damaged. And you sense the consequence: if something happens you have failed to prevent it. Losing

confidence might be about the work we have to do to be; a loss of confidence that registers not only as [bodily fragility](#) but also in how the world registers as intrusion, as not providing a shelter or home.

Confidence might also involve [passing](#): some have to pass as confident in order to pass through a space; along a street or a corridor. Passing as confident means: appearing as if you are sure you have a right to be there, being upright or firm. You might be putting on confidence like armor, as if you can be defended by appearing to be what you do not feel at all.

Not all of us have to pass as confident to pass through; not all of us have to pass to pass through. We might say, for instance, all women are passing as women: we pass into or through the category “women” by being assigned her or assigning ourselves as her. But if you do not constantly have your legitimacy thrown into question, if you are not asked whether you are a woman, constantly, repeatedly, if you do not have the door shut in your face when you try and enter that room, then you do not have to pass as women in the same way. Passing is what you have to do because or when your legitimacy is in question. Trans women may have to pass in a way that some cis women do not: because of this constant questioning of legitimacy. To pass would not necessarily mean here to pass *as* women, as if trans women are not women: although the perception of trans women as not women has material life consequences. [Juliet Jacques](#) (2014) drawing on Julia Serano (2007) explores precisely this problem: how the passing narrative casts trans women as deceivers or as fraudulent. But sometimes, as Jacques herself notes, passing might be what you have to do to avoid being harassed. To pass as cis is to pass through without being detected: or to try to. Passing might then require *a certain kind of confidence*: the creation of an impression of having a right to be where you are; who you are. You experience a requirement to justify your existence in the manner of your existence.

Confidence: a manner of existence. It is not surprising that confidence leads us to the question of manners. Confidence derives from the Latin *confidentia* “firmly trusting, bold” (*com* plus *fidere*). The word confidence rests on faith or trust. To be confident can thus mean to have trust in an expectation.

Confidence could thus be understood as an orientation toward the future even if it is experienced in the present: to be confident in something is to be confident of something: that what you wish to bring about can be brought about. When I am confident in myself I am confident that I can bring something about. Confidence might then be registered as a bodily boldness that carries something forward; it can be the strength of a conviction or the appearance of that strength. To lose confidence can then be to lose strength not because you become physically weaker but because your estimation of what you can do has weakened; you are not sure you can carry that thing; it is too heavy, your arm hurts, you waver; it falls, you fall. Or if you are passing as confident, to lose confidence would be that moment that passing is revealed; to come out as faltering.

We can hear from these simple descriptions how confidence matters. So much feminist work has been concerned with gender as a mechanism for distributing confidence; *how girls are less confident in their own capacities than boys*. And yet even from this sentence we can see the problem of “zooming in” on confidence as an explanation of gender and power. It can imply that girls are their own obstacles, in the way of themselves; that if girls were just more confident a problem would be resolved (or even: a hierarchy dissolved). This confidence in confidence could be another way that women are made responsible for what happens to them; as if our task in challenging gender relations is to modify ourselves. We could be confident in what we can do but still not be able to do it; the world can throw something up that renders doing something impossible: possibility is not dependent on confidence alone, even if losing confidence can make something impossible that might otherwise have been possible.

We need to give confidence another kind of *embodied history*; we need to show that bodies have histories that

“go all the way down,” and that histories shape bodies and how they matter (Butler 1993).⁽ⁱ⁾ Feminist phenomenology teaches how a lessening of confidence happens somewhere between body and world. Iris Marion Young in her classic essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” describes how women often “lack confidence in their capacity to do what needs to be done” (2005: 34). As she goes on to note: “we decide beforehand – usually mistakenly – that the task is beyond us and thus give it less than our full effort” (34). Confidence even as a mistaken estimation of one’s abilities shapes an outcome; how a body reaches for something determines what can be reached. Because women are less confident, women might go for something with less conviction. When we fail, we have confirmed the estimation, however mistaken.

Gender becomes here a question of *estimation*, how some end up *underestimating* what they can do. Perhaps also: how some end up *overestimating* what they can do.

Under/over: gender as measurement.

We tend to work out how the sex/gender system works from those who register as an error message. Because of course, throwing like a girl is also an expectation: that we can tell girls are girls; that we can tell what girls are *like*, from how they throw. If a girl throws too strongly, too fast, too far, she is throwing like a boy. Then she becomes a crisis: her confidence would be unfeminine; her confidence would be *over-confidence*. Women who are confident are often judged as over-confident. In other words lacking confidence becomes an expectation; a lack can be how you are accomplishing something. Girls by throwing *badly* are performing gender *well*. Girl is being accomplished because of how she falters (although not all girls become girl). In other words throwing like a girl might be deemed a result of what she lacks, but *she is supposed to be lacking*; she is supposed to throw the way she does.

Sexism: a system for deciding whose confidence is warranted; whose not.

Sexism: a confidence system.

Sometimes we lose confidence because others do not have confidence in us in the first place. We can lose confidence before we acquire confidence, as if confidence was never ours to have. This loss of confidence can be mistaken in the sense that: we might be able to do what we are not confident we can do. Or maybe there is a past tense here: maybe we could have done what we assumed we could not do. Maybe now, given that assumption, given we have lived by it, through it, we cannot do it. A history of *underestimation* can shape what bodies “do do” and thus what they “can do.” A body can acquire the shape of a loss of confidence; a loss can be reproduced by being inherited.

Because *it was* assumed I could not, I did not. Because I did not, I cannot.

Feminism: we give a mistake a history. We talk about how *it was*.

We talk about how an assumption becomes a wall.

A wall: what stops you from doing something; what stops you from being something. A wall can feel internal, like a voice inside your own head that says don’t go there; you can’t do that. Even when a wall feels internal it does not begin there. You might have been told: you can’t do that. You won’t be able to do that. This lack of confidence might be attached to you being a girl, or you just being the being you are; not good enough, not smart enough, or just not, not enough; or too much, it is too much for you, you are too much; that too. You might be defiant in the face of this lack of confidence. I can do that. I will be able to do that. But if those words are repeated, you can’t do that, you won’t be able to do that; they can become a wavering of your own will, a

doubt; an uncertainty. A conviction I can transformed into a question: can I? When she is in question she begins to question herself. And maybe as you begin to question yourself, you don't put yourself behind yourself to protect yourself from the possibility of not being able to do what you had thought you could do. In other words that mistake might be to protect yourself from the consequences of having faith in yourself. And then you don't. And then you think I can't. Your effort acquires the quality of the fragility that is put into the world by an expectation. You waver, you fall. And you confirm the expectation. A confirmation can be the hardening of an idea: it becomes a thing. When you encounter that thing, you become that thing.[\[i\]](#)

I understand how expectations can be encountered as solid things: I have been there. We need to share our stories of being there. I didn't do as well at school as my sisters. And I would hear my father's voice echoing across his time: his lack of confidence in my own abilities. One time he said to my sister when she got an A-, it could be worse you could get B's like Sara. It could be worse: you could be worse; a B student. It is not even the letter, the grade, that matters; but the tone, the disappointment; the disparagement. When someone has a lack of confidence in you, someone who has authority, whose view you are supposed to respect, you can feel crushed. You meet their expectations in the lowering of your own glance; lower, less. Sometimes, we revolt against an expectation. Even then: how you are perceived as being shapes what you come to be: to revolt against something is to be shaped by what you are against.

And: that voice, that voice that speaks *with* confidence about not having confidence in this person or that person can be taken on by an institution. A voice that says she cannot do this; that lowers a general expectation of the capacities of some; that increases a general expectation of the capacities of others. Gender then becomes a system for distributing confidence in others. This is different from my earlier point: because I am suggesting that estimations of capacities are upheld by others before they are taken on or taken in. An institution too can be a series of gestures: someone can be carried forth by a conviction; an expectation, we sometimes call this reputation; others might be stopped by doubts in their capacities, a faltering that she might inherit, as she questions herself or as she has to work even harder to prove herself.

A perception can become a wall.

A wall can be what you perceive.

In [another post](#) I reflected on how sexual harassment works as a wall. You perceive that wall as a thing, but also as a series of actions that are confident; the words uttered in the seminar about her body, they are not even muttered because he is sure of himself; the touching of her body, often in the cold light of day, boldly, as if that touch is right; as if he has a right to touch. But those around you don't see it. Or they do not appear to see it. You are sure it is wrong, but others do not notice, or they dismiss it, or shrug it off. Maybe you too begin to feel that the wall is inside your own head. It is happening all around you; and yet people seem to getting on with it, you can end up doubting yourself, estranged from yourself. Note here: institutional confidence is what allows some gestures to become routine. And to lose confidence is to accept those gestures as routine.

Maybe you try not to have a problem. It is because we perceive this wall that we end up having to modify our perception.

This is another way that confidence is distributed. The more a worldview is supported, the less confidence you need to uphold it. There is confidence in the system. If you are trying to challenge that system you might need even more confidence than you would otherwise have needed. You face resistance and ridicule. The walls you come up against don't even appear to others. The wall you speak of becomes a phantom wall. You have to hold on harder, be firmer in your conviction, because your conviction brings you up against a world. You then need to

find others to share your confidence. This sense of confidence refers to trust, to secrets; those things we share that we do not (sometimes cannot) disclose.

Those who I have called affect aliens – those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected – might need more confidence just to proceed. When you are less supported you have to push harder.

Less supported: we can think here of how actions require grounds. I referred above to a sentence from my book *Queer Phenomenology* about how disorientation “can shatter your sense of confidence in the ground” (2006: 157). When you cannot be confident that the ground is stable, your step falters. As I tried to describe in this book, this book that started me on some rather wandering trails of thought, by ground we can think not only of a surface upon which we tread but a support mechanism. Whiteness for example could be understood as a ground that supports those who can pass through it or into it. For those who do not pass into whiteness, you falter; your body is not supported. You might be stopped even by a question: where do you come from, as if to say, you are not from here. We learn from how questions fall. The loss of confidence in the ground is unevenly distributed because grounds are uneven: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world is more involved in some bodies than others as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience.

When your being is supported, when you go with the flow, you might not even notice the support system. I am rethinking here a support system as that which enables some to proceed with confidence. A flow is an effect of bodies going the same way. To go is to gather. A flow can be an effect of gatherings of all kinds: gatherings of tables, for instance, as kinship objects that support human gatherings. How many times have you been left waiting at a table whilst others are attended to right away? You don't know why, but it keeps happening. Maybe it is just what happens, but questions hover like clouds: is it because I am a woman, because we are two women together; because we are lesbians; is it because I am brown? You have been passed over so often you lose confidence that you even know what is going on; but it keeps going on. It is work: having to keep working things out. And you have to become insistent to be the recipient of a social action, you might have to announce your presence, wave your arm, saying: “Here I am!” Arms tire out; bodies too.

You have to get your whole body behind an action.

We can pause here and return to Iris Marion Young's description of “throwing like a girl.” She suggests that girls do not get their whole bodies behind the action: that is why girls throw less well. But one aspect of her account we could reflect upon is the extent to which it accepts that a girl when throwing like a girl throws in a way that is less good than a boy (in other words the extent to which it accepts the association of femininity and failure^[ii]). It might seem obvious that the girl's way of throwing is deficient: that the boy throws faster and further than the girl. But if we think of how the girl has to put so much energy into accomplishing things, because of the obstacles she encounters, could we not rethink her way of throwing as wisdom: she is saving her energy for more important things? Perhaps then what appears as a lack of confidence is just a sensible redistribution of energy: her action is more faltering, her attention wavering, because she is investing her time elsewhere.

Sometimes a girl throws like a girl because she lacks confidence in her abilities: though, as I noted earlier, this lack also becomes a style of feminine accomplishment. But it is possible that a girl throws like a girl because she deposits her desires, her whims, her wishes, her will, even, elsewhere?

Feminism: where else?

Although of course throwing like a feminist might mean something else entirely. This is a clue to what I mean by

this something else: those who identify themselves as feminists are more likely to be perceived as *overconfident*. We can refuse the underestimation of our collective capacities. But we are not confident about that refusal because we know too well how collective capacities can become objects of institutional desire.

We need to throw our confidence in confidence into crisis. Maybe what confidence is doing depends upon what values we are upholding.

Feminism: it can be about losing confidence (in a world say).

Feminism: it can be about gaining confidence (in a world say).

You lose confidence in the world that rewards you for compliance. But you also need to acquire confidence in order not to comply with that very world: you have to have confidence that you can survive the experience of challenging the system. And you are learning stuff along the way, about how the system works. And you can become bolder *because* of how you come to understand the situation. Consciousness can magnify problems, for sure, but consciousness might enable you to have confidence in a judgment: that this is wrong, that this wall is hard. Feminism can allow you to reinhabit not only your own past and your own body but the world as such. You might over time in becoming aware of how you have lessened your own space give yourself permission to take up more space; to expand your own reach. It is not necessarily the case that we take up this permission simply by giving ourselves permission. It does take time, to reinhabit the body, to become less wary, to acquire that confidence.

Confidence can be needed to hold onto a view that puts you at odds with those around you. But what about the confidence that allows us to hold onto a view that is shared? Sometimes in order to become a feminist we need to lose confidence in a view that we have been encouraged to hold dear: we might need to acquire confidence that we can go on without that view. Sometimes we need to lose confidence or even our trust in a world that diminishing what it is we can be. Sometimes a new thought, a starting again, requires losing confidence.

[I once put it like this](#): to lose confidence is the gift of a new thought.

Feminist confidence: the process through which we validate and support each other in our project of dismantling a world. We have to have a certain confidence to do this kind of work: to use words like “sexism” and “racism” for example. A feminist movement thus requires that we acquire feminist tendencies, a willingness to keep going despite or even because of what we come up against. We could think of this process as acquiring feminist confidence: to be feminist and do feminism is a bold gesture. If we tend toward the world in a feminist way, if we repeat that tending, again and again, we acquire feminist confidence. We still have to lose confidence to acquire that confidence.

The acquisition of feminist confidence, to become that sort of girl or woman, the wrong sort, or bad sort, the one who speaks her mind, who writes her name, who raises her arm in protest, is necessary for a feminist movement. But of course being the wrong sort does not make us right. Much injustice can be and has been committed by those who think of themselves as the wrong sort: whether the wrong sort of women or the wrong sort of feminists. There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to tamper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already.

We falter with feminist conviction. As we must.

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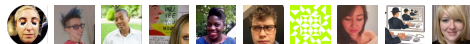
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[i] In *Living a Feminist Life* I stress that we need to think of sex *and* gender in these terms: as embodied histories (recent attempts to bracket biological sex from history by some trans exclusionary feminists needs to be challenged by feminists). Judith Butler (1993) taught us to think of "girling" as a social mechanism. A baby is born: we might say "it's a girl!" or "it's a boy!" Even before birth: we might watch on a screen to see whether it's a girl or boy, where it is a girl and boy is decided by virtue of the absence or presence of a penis. The attachment to gender rests from the very beginning on phallocentrism: on the penis as the decider of the future, two sexes as two paths; the sexual binary as fate, as fated, as fatalism. Even when we critique the sex-gender distinction, even when we learn from feminist critiques of this distinction (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990), we know that that distinction works often as a form of sequencing: *as if from sex, gender follows*. We could call this sequencing "gender fatalism," as implied by the assumption that "boys will be boys." Sex is thus given as an assignment; homework. No wonder mere description (it's a girl, it's a boy!) provides the basis of a task (being boy! being girl!), as well as a command (you will be boy! you will be girl!). To receive an assignment is to be given a sign: boy or girl. This "or" too is doing something, registering as opposition; one or the other. A sign: what means or denotes something. Right from the very beginning matter and meaning are deeply entangled; it is not matter (sex), *then* meaning (gender). You are in being assigned x or y also being assigned to a group; an assignment is what you *receive* from others that will determinate how you are positioned in *relation* to others. We are more than these assignments right from the beginning. This is after all feminist hope: we do not have to live by other people's assignments.

[ii] Of course losing confidence does not always refer us back to ourselves. We might lose confidence that we can do something because we don't have confidence in something or even someone. I remember when I had an old car that would struggle to start on a cold winter morning. I had little confidence it would start. I have no doubt that lack of confidence registered in my desperate effort to get the car to start; that losing confidence might have had something to do with how it would not start. When we lose confidence, our estimation of things can be confirmed. A loss can be a loop.

[iii] See also Ulrika Dahl (2015) for an important queer femme critique of how feminists associate femininity with failure.



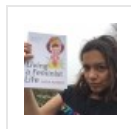
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March 1, 2016 at 3:38 pm

Yes!! I am feeling you so hard through this post! Thank you so much for sharing your brilliance, your vision, your own faltering. May peace attend you.

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March 8, 2016 at 11:05 pm

Brilliant! I'm sharing with all budding feminists

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April 24, 2016 at 12:03 pm

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