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### I'm sorry for everything

Hille Sennott

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*I'm sorry for everything*

Hille Sennott  
May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018  
Bachelor of Fine Arts  
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## Abstract

My work is rooted in the fact that women are practically conditioned to apologize for everything, and tells the intimate story of my life. By recording my apologies for several months and deeply examining my behavior, I noticed themes and made work based on these — work that exposed my private moments. I noticed a disconnect between times I needed to apologize, and this compulsive need to take on the blame for every little thing. I examine the feminine battle of soft and strong, eventually coming to the conclusion that there are occasions calling for both. Women are taught to take the blame, without even thinking about it, and therefore learn that we matter less than the commotion it would make to stand up for ourselves. This plays a direct role in rape culture, where female victims are blamed and often coerced into taking on the blame of their perpetrator. Women are expected to be submissive, to understand and reassure ‘it’s okay,’ and through my work, I argue against this expectation. I expose everything I apologize for, revealing how absurd the vast majority of these apologies are. Elements of handwriting, tearing, and hand-stitching reference the emotional toll this compulsive need to apologize takes, and how exhausting and infuriating it feels that this is expected. Overuse of the words ‘I’m sorry’ detract meaning from when an apology is truly merited.

Hille Sennott

Capstone II

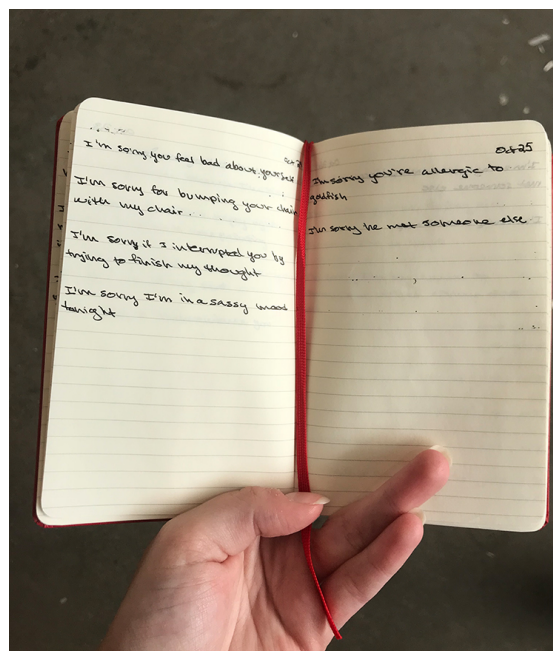
May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018

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Intimacy connotes sexuality and maturity, but it exists from the day we are born and lives in different forms, as love does. At its core, it is privacy and a form of sharing only understood by those involved. It is the experience of sharing a part of ourselves with another person, as well as our thoughts, feelings, and memories. These shared experiences often give way to love — how a mother feels for her child as she holds them for the first time, the self-love that grows from truly knowing and understanding oneself. The relationship we form with our deepest, truest selves is the most intimate and longest-lasting we will ever know. This relationship is built upon knowledge, understanding, and ultimately acceptance of who we are. We have this close relationship with our past selves, as well as our current ones. Part of growing is the recognition that we have changed from who we used to be. While I am proud of who I am now, I feel sad for the person I used to be. I have “buried the girl I had been because she ran into all kinds of trouble. I tried to erase every memory of her, but she is still there, somewhere. She is still small and scared and ashamed, and perhaps I am writing my way back to her, trying to tell her everything she needs to hear” (Gay 21). My work has unintentionally been a way of healing, of truly finding comfort in myself. I think back to the girl I was five, three, even one year ago — insecure, afraid to be myself, and not nearly as strong as I am today.

*I'm sorry for everything* tells the story of my life from last September through this past February, where I kept a written record of every single thing I apologized for. It chronicles

the good and the bad, the parts I readily share with others and the parts I comfortably keep hidden. These apologies live in their most raw form in a little red notebook, where some days take up multiple pages and others are represented by blank ones. This notebook functions in two ways — both as a work and by informing the others. Its small size references the intimacy of recording my daily apologies, while the pages of apologies communicate the way



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this project took over my life. Along with the rest of the body of work, it details my vulnerability — empty apologies I made in moments of weakness where I felt manipulated or unfairly blamed, as well as those loaded with remorse for my mistakes.

Each piece has the written text of my apologies, in some form or another, and this invites the viewer to witness my most private moments. They are invited into an exchange they were not a part of. They see the times where others have hurt me, the pain of my loved ones, and the times where I let myself and others down. They may or may not be someone I know, and both possibilities are frightening in different ways. Very few people know of all the experiences illustrated by this work and when the viewer is someone I know, they glimpse the parts of me I likely have not shared with them. Any relationship has the awkward and unspoken awareness of the things you do not know about the other. Though it is strange sharing my life with people I do not know, I feel less vulnerable to this audience where the lack of intimacy makes me more willing to share. The exposure of my

private life to them, as well as what they think about it, matters less than to those I share any closeness with.

My work illustrates my constant battle of when to be assertive and unapologetic about the way I move throughout the world, and when to be as understanding as other people need. It makes me uncomfortable to tell of this battle, even though it is one experienced by countless other people, especially women. I am not stating that women are the only ones to feel this pressure, but I am focused on this viewpoint because it is the role I play and because of the connection between the female practice of taking the blame, male/female interactions, and rape culture.

I often found myself apologizing for showing sadness or anger when I had every right to. When my ex-boyfriend pushed me, I apologized for making him angry. He pushed me, and I apologized. Women are practically conditioned to apologize, to feel the remorse and responsibility of whoever has harmed us. The issue of turning the blame on the victim as a way to avoid conflict and not “make a big deal out of it” is reflected in rape culture.

According to *Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network*, only six of every one thousand rape cases results in incarceration of the perpetrator. Only 310 of every one thousand rape cases are reported, meaning that about two-thirds of cases go unreported. The remaining two-thirds of victims do not report because they fear retaliation and believe the police would do nothing to help (“The Criminal Justice System: Statistics,” 2010). We are taught to always apologize, so we learn not to stand up for ourselves. We also learn the dangerous lesson that our well-being and safety are less important than drawing attention.

Through the works I have made, I am demanding attention in a way I never have before. I have hand-written six months’ worth of apologies over and over in the hope of

communicating that this pressure to always take the blame is exhausting and infuriating. I could not put this feeling of drained anger into words until I read *Hunger*, Roxane Gay's heart-wrenching memoir of her body that tells of the pain of living as an obese woman in a world where we are expected not to take up space. When discussing the pain of women who do not meet society's strict, high expectations, she describes being "weary of all our sad stories — not hearing them, but that we have these stories to tell, that there are so many" (Gay 247). *I'm sorry for everything* is my sad story, because it tells of moments where I am weak and the absurd need women always feel to take the blame.

I am not the only woman who feels this compulsion to apologize. Roxane Gay writes of her experience in friendships and relationships where she tries to be the best version of herself for the other person. This refusal to admit her flaws causes her to "[apologize] for things [she] shouldn't be apologizing for, things [she is] not at all sorry for...[she is] apologizing for who [she is]" (Gay 254). She speaks of the widely experienced notion of apologizing not because we feel guilty, but because we feel we must apologize for our flaws. By apologizing for every little thing, without thinking, we detract meaning from the apologies that are deserved and heartfelt.

I find both inspiration and a sad comfort in how Roxane Gay and Rebecca Solnit are able to put into written word the daily experience of being a woman in a world dominated by men in ways that I cannot. *Hunger* is Roxane Gay's memoir of her body, from its normal childhood beginning to a brutal rape that caused her obesity as a way of disfiguring her body the way her soul was disfigured, and how her largeness is not accepted in a world where women are expected to fit certain standards. She tells of her intimate relationship with herself and the difficulty of being a woman with deep pain that is not given the chance

to be understood (Gay). In *Difficult Women*, Gay tells the stories of women who are thought of as difficult because they do not fit the norm of being feminine. They are strong-willed, stubborn, extremely intelligent, and unapologetically themselves (Gay).

*Men Explain Things to Me* is Rebecca Solnit's collection of essays on the dynamic of conversation between men and women, where men assume themselves to be more educated than women. Solnit recounts an experience she and a friend had while at a dinner party hosted by an esteemed and powerful man. They were discussing the book she had just gotten published and instead of recognizing her success, the man went on and on about a book coming out that year on the same subject that was expected to be unlike any written before. The other woman had to say "that's her book" several times before the man realized he was trying to explain the success of a book to its author, and that he had not considered it could be her work (Solnit 1-3).

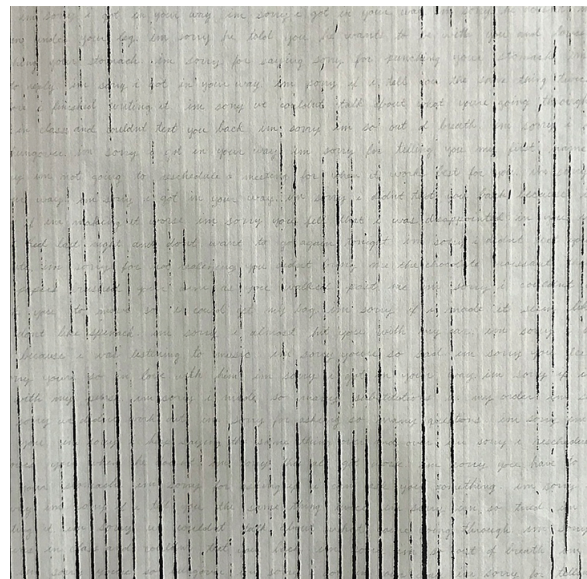
I find artistic and conceptual inspiration in the diaristic work of Sophie Calle and Nan Goldin. Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* exposes her painful breakup and invites over one hundred women to analyze the breakup email according to their skill or profession. She begs them to "understand it for [her]. Answer for [her]" ("Sophie Calle," 2009). It shows her vulnerability by opening up her heartbreak to others, but also her strength and determination in fighting back against the sadness by seeking understanding. This concept of the feminine experience of being both soft and strong is the driving source of inspiration for my work. Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is a many-year photographic record of her life. It is brutally honest in documenting all parts of life — her loving, close relationships as well as the ugliness of substance use and domestic abuse. The equal



representation of the joys and sorrows struck me, as did the use of an ongoing body of work as a form of diary-keeping.

*I'm sorry for everything* lives within Third Wave Feminism, which defines feminism as a mindset instilled in women when they are young and emphasizes the existence of multiple forms of feminism. As described in *From a Mindset to a Movement*, “Third Wave feminism is “the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of [their] lives” (Cobble 158). My work would not exist had I not been raised in a feminist household ran by my parents — a mom who kept her own last name and earns more money than her husband, a man who happily works in an environment dominated by women. This project has shown me how “feminism is both ‘everywhere and nowhere’” (Cobble 167). Everyone who I explain my project to understands immediately, but I still find myself, and see other women, apologizing for everything.

I began this project with *September 9<sup>th</sup> – December 6<sup>th</sup>*, which is made from the apologies between those dates. It consists of four 38 x 38” sheets of rice paper that occupy much of a wall when hung together. Each sheet represents twenty days and is completely covered with the written text of the apologies I made in that time. I then printed over the text with a set of straight, vertical lines arranged uniquely to each piece. Each of the thin, black, embossed lines represent an unnecessary apology I made. The lines are meant to separate the time periods and alert the viewer to a difference between the sheets that can



*September 9<sup>th</sup> – December 6<sup>th</sup>*

only be quantified when reading the apologies up close. The neat, small cursive handwriting demands the viewer to come close, which speaks to the intimacy the viewer experiences as they access my private moments. Rice paper is an intentional material choice seen throughout the collection and was used because of its ability to connote both the soft and the strong that I examine within myself. The laborious process of writing the apologies over and over to fill the large sheet speaks to the weight and tiredness I feel when making and considering these apologies.

I often apologize in a rather distressed way for even the possibility that I am in someone else's way or too close to them for comfort. My record of this ranged from the general — 'I'm sorry I bumped you' — to the specific, such as 'I'm sorry for blocking the bread shelf.' These apologies directly reflect the way women are taught not to take up space, and *I'm sorry I got in your way* has a subtlety and delicacy that contrasts the idea of being in someone's way. I used blind embossment

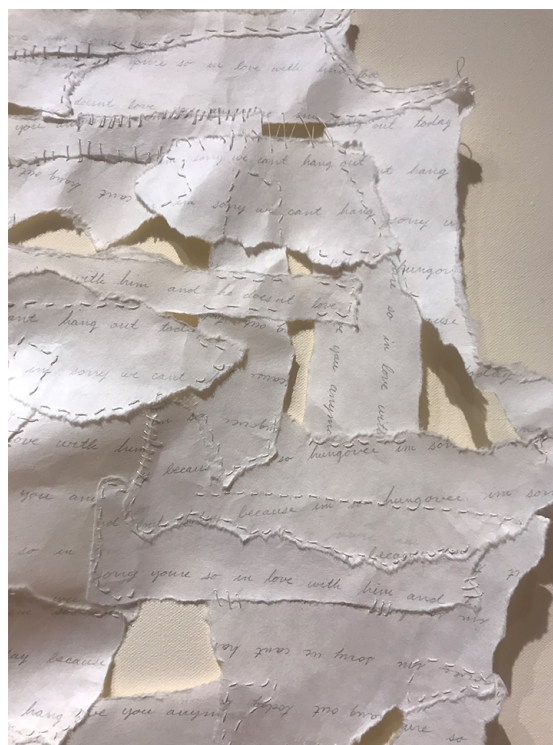


*I'm sorry I got in your way*

to imprint all the apologies I made in this context. The text is small and is illegible up until a few inches away. By requiring the viewer to exist in a very intimate space with the text, I am creating the uncomfortable closeness often felt when we are in the way. The small text consumes its sheet of Bristol board paper, which is an off-white to reference the human presence. The prints are hung in two rows of five, unapologetically taking up the space I so often say 'I'm sorry' for occupying.

Many of the apologies I made fell on the ends of the extreme, from the truly genuine to the unnecessary with a retroactive element of humor or sarcasm. When compared to each other, these two types of apologies create an uncomfortable tension where the contrast makes the extremes even stronger. Heartfelt apologies felt more painfully raw, while unnecessary ones seemed more comical. *Eyes/someone else; Salty cantaloupe, sad conversations; Bullets and dates; Backup plan/anxiety; Bad hangovers and unreturned love; Allergies and overthinking; Sleepy/dead dogs* is a

large piece made up of seven smaller pieces, as indicated by the separate titles. Seven pairs of apologies, one from each end of the extreme, are literally pieced together to form the smaller pieces. For example, *Bad hangovers and unreturned love* comes from ‘I’m sorry I have to reschedule us hanging out because I’m so hungover’ and ‘I’m sorry you’re so in love with him and he doesn’t love you anymore.’ I wrote each pair of apologies over and over to fill a page. My handwriting signals the deeply



*Bad hangovers and unreturned love*

personal connection while the repetition of each apology in neat cursive communicates the toll it takes on me. I ripped each sheet of text and hand sewed it back together. Snippets of text are readable so the viewer can piece together what I am sorry for. The softness of the rice paper, its torn edges, and the hand-stitching evoke the feeling of raw humanity — that

this is something we all do. The contrasting fragility and sturdiness of the rice paper reference how saying 'I'm sorry' can be a strength or weakness depending on the context.

The most frustrating apologies I make are those to men while out or in conversation about hooking up. *Girls' Night/I'm sorry you expect me to always want this* captures my anger at the expectations made clear in these situations. I am angry that I feel the need to apologize when a man makes me uncomfortable, angry that he never apologizes for overstepping, and angry that buying a woman a drink equals her going home with you. This societally embedded practice of teaching women to apologize for the actions of men directly translates into rape culture. We learn that we are expected to take responsibility for the people who hurt us.

This piece is my attempt to deal with my strong emotions about what women are taught, and its rough quality expresses my lack of

emotional resolve. There are two sheets of white satin, each 9 x 4', covered with pink text. One

consists of the apologies from my perspective while the other puts the blame on the man.

The edges are frayed, the fabric wrinkled, the handwriting uneven and messy, accompanied by drips of ink that flew from the brush as I haphazardly wrote. The handwriting is of a different language here — it releases the aggression that is so often pushed onto me. It hangs in a corner so that the viewer is completely overwhelmed by both perspectives and



*Girls' Night/I'm sorry you expect me to always want this*

must switch back and forth between the two to read them while being forced to think about what their position might be in these types of apologies.

My final piece is a hand-sewn quilt made of several rice papers and fabric, titled *16 Weeks*. I chose the quilt form because it is an object of comfort and we are taught to use apologies as ways of easing awkward or uncomfortable situations. As we use a blanket to shield ourselves from the cold or to hide under when we are scared, we use apologies to guard our deepest parts. The quilt has sixteen squares, each representing a week of

apologies. I chose traditional patterns to clearly reference the quilt's presence as a feminine domestic object and practice. The color palette remains consistent with the other works of rice paper in neutral tones that reference human warmth, and pale pink to acknowledge the ongoing aspect of femininity. The changes in shade between the papers are subtle and, combined with the hand-stitching, commands the viewer to come close. Again, my



*16 Weeks*

commands the viewer to come close. Again, my cursive handwriting further emphasizes my personal connection. The text is distributed differently through each square to hold the attention of the viewer throughout. The quilt is 5.3 x 5.3', large enough to clearly be a quilt but not large enough to be used as an actual blanket. Any attempt to use it would be awkward and uncomfortable, just like these apologies truly are.

My work tells the story of my life, but it also tells of a larger, more universal one of learning to unapologetically be yourself. With the help of this project, “[a] different day has come...I harbor less hatred toward myself. I try to forgive myself for my trespasses” (Gay 283). I now find myself apologizing less. There are blank pages in my notebook, days where I never say I am sorry. Part of self-acceptance is the realization that there will be days when you mess up or when you do not like yourself, but that love allows for the recognition and allowance of these times. I no longer immediately, thoughtlessly take the blame for every awkward or bad situation I am in. I have the strength and openness to stand up for myself and to forgive myself when I do make a mistake. The necessary apologies I make hold more weight because they are not lost among a sea of those I do not mean. As awkward or funny as it can be, the truth is that feeling the need to always apologize is exhausting and sad. We all have our own sad stories to tell and even when we recover from them, they are a part of us. These apologies tell some of my sad stories. The reality of human emotion and existence is that we will hurt and we will hurt others, but what defines us is how we use this inevitable truth to grow.

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## Image List

1. *I'm sorry for everything*
2. *September 9<sup>th</sup> – December 6<sup>th</sup>*
3. *I'm sorry I got in your way*
4. *Bad hangovers and unreturned love*
5. *Girls' Night/I'm sorry you expect me to always want this*
6. *16 Weeks*



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