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Andrew Rihn
Independent Scholar

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Dear Parents of the Child Who Yelled "Hey Runner" at Me...

Andrew Rihn

An epistolary essay, this open letter considers ways in which we read and write a body by way of public harassment, sexuality, and homophobia.

Dear parents of the child who yelled *Hey runner!* at me,

You probably don't remember me. In fact, we've never met. I was running through your neighborhood, as I often do. I live only a mile or two from your house, and it's nice to run along your quiet allotment streets rather than the noisy and dangerous main roads. It was late August, and I was running with my shirt off. I was on the sidewalk, passing your home. Children were playing in the yard. And that's when I heard it.

Hey runner!
Ewwwww!
Put a shirt on!

That was your boy. He must have been eight, or ten. Maybe even twelve. I couldn't tell. All I could think about at that moment was the disgust in his voice. *Ewwwww!* I wanted to respond, to confront him. My first instinct was to make eye contact with him, a direct connection, something unspoken. As I lifted my eyes, I saw a few other children playing with him. I also saw you.

You were sitting on your porch with a few other parents. Enjoying the seasonable weather, the sunset. Same as I was. You saw me going by, running. When I saw you there, unmoving and unsympathetic, I knew I could not confront the child, not even to make eye contact with him as I had intended.

What did you hear when your son shouted *Hey runner!* at me? Did you think he was being sensible? He called to me again.

Ewwwww!
Hey runner! Put a shirt on!

Another child chimed in.

Ewwwww! Put a shirt on!

And still you said nothing. Nothing of the contempt in their voices. Nothing of the viral nature of their calls as it moved from one child to another. I heard another child, a girl, begin to laugh. I couldn't make eye contact, couldn't even try to flash a little humanity their way, to make myself somehow individual, a person instead of a distant body, an anonymous figure. I couldn't. I kept myself running, pushed my chin forward and pressed on, hoping perhaps to demonstrate a little strength, a little dignity, in my retreat. You saw me.

I ran on, keeping pace, trying to not look affected by your children's calls. Their voices affected me with their directness, their lack of guile. They spoke to me.

*Hey runner! Hey runner!
Ewwwww!*

Their voices, so almost innocent. They were not thinking deeply; they were reacting. Reiterating. Repeating patterns of discourse, of discipline. Perhaps without knowing, they were assigning boundaries. They were enacting, with their words, their shouts, a form of policing, of punishment. They were creating a reaction in me as well, altering my thinking, my behavior. With their words they were effecting change in the world.

I ran on, wondering what they saw in my body.

Hey runner! Put a shirt on!

I wondered if in my partial nudity, they saw sexuality. Puberty was, for your children, looming on the horizon like a thunder cloud. And I wondered if in my body—fit, white, male, partially nude—they saw homosexuality. I thought about their reaction, their articulation of disgust. Their revulsion.

Ewwwww!

As I ran, block by block, back to my house, I wondered how they read the text of my body, how they assigned me a story, how they wrote back, call and response, re-writing my narrative, redressing the very appearance of my body in their neighborhood. I lost control of my own narrative; that is, my narrative was wrested from me.

White cismale, fit and youthful, partially nude—too often, this is given as the definition of what homosexuality looks like. The etymology of my body. Your children's shouts were a matter of fitness: my body fit the definition. A neoliberal dream, a one-man pride parade. A body moved beyond its own boundaries, my narrative redacted.

This is policing, too: categorization, containment, criminalization. And yes, even queer communities sometimes help write this definition; we have our own housecleaning to mind. Written by DC-based advocacy groups, queerness becomes a white male enterprise, fodder for venture capitalists. Gay men joke about being “pussy-phobic” instead of taking their misogyny seriously. Grindr accounts stipulating “No blacks, no femmes.” Cookie-cutter queerness, a syllabus for sexuality.

In their shouts, your children were wrestling with a cipher. They were reading from a one-dimensional text, a flattened image. Running home, my mind raced with definitions, with images, with the words and worlds of children.

And then.

And then. And then as I reached my house, I began to think about you. I stopped thinking about the voices of your children and began to think about the silence of their parents. The silence of you. I thought about your eyes, about how for a fleeting moment we saw one another. You didn't smile; you didn't wave. No encouragement for me, no apologetic eyes, no embarrassed faces. Your children shouted at a stranger, and you didn't even blush.

Hey runner!
Ewwwww!
Put a shirt on!

Kids will be kids, you may have thought. Perhaps. Perhaps you thought their words innocent enough. Perhaps you thought they were right. Perhaps you didn't think about them at all. Perhaps you didn't hear the homophobic undertone, didn't hear that history of harassment.

Or perhaps you did.

Hey runner!
Put a shirt on!

Perhaps your children had heard you first, had learned to police their bodies, to avoid homosocial contact. Perhaps the boys learned to be real men, the girls to be real ladies. To play with the right kind of toys, associate with the right kind of people. Perhaps they picked up your discourse, like so many catchers' mitts or baseball bats. Perhaps they learned how language can be used to identify, compartmentalize, separate. How implication can discredit, how disgust can spur us to action.

Perhaps because you heard your own voice in theirs, you didn't hear any of that. Perhaps you fell a little bit in love with the tiny echoes you created. Perhaps all was right in the world, on your porch, as your words made their way out of your children's mouths. Reproduction, just like the good book says. You didn't have to name the situation, replaying it in your mind: this was good and right, the natural order of things. You don't have to name things like repro-sexuality or feel the violence of revulsion, the damage of innuendo.

Perhaps I'm imagining all of this; perhaps after I passed by, you spoke to your children, talked to them of strangers and bodies and difference. Perhaps you altered the words in your own voice, spoke in a different register. Perhaps you raise your children with empathy and solidarity. I don't know.

So I'm writing this letter, writing to you in hopes of... what? I don't know. Perhaps I'll publish this letter online, publish it in a journal read by interested readers. I'll publish it in a journal I doubt you've ever read of. And I'll just leave it there, even though I know your house, know your address, know where you live. I could have written this epistle by hand, delivered it on foot. Maybe we could have talked, face to face, voice to voice.

But that would have been in private, and the words of your children were thrust into the public.

Hey runner!
Ewwwww!
Put a shirt on!

Thrust into the public, and their words followed me home. Their voices stayed with me, replayed within my head, became part of my own private world. A private world, lived publicly. I've wrestled with them, heard them, silenced them, spat them. Now I'm writing them, re-writing them. Call and response. I'm considering the public and renegotiating how and where I engage with them. In my writing, I reclaim a little of the public.

The public—whose public? When I had long hair, carloads of men and boys would pull up behind me and yell *Bitch!* and *Slut!* with regularity, a regulatory power. Language may be slippery, but it is also effective: a means to identify targets, to target. A confession: there are times that I'm thankful I don't look more queer, more brown, more black—times I am thankful for my safety. A white, able-bodied, cismale has access to move shirtlessly through the world, access to negotiate the public in a way that few can. In Cleveland, I stood in the street during a protest for Tamir Rice

precisely because I don't look like Tamir Rice. Now that I have short hair, the men don't yell at me anymore.

I feel the shame in this, the unfairness from which I benefit. As I type, my heart races. I know it's not revolutionary to confess what others already know, what they can see on my skin, my face. Still, my body reacts. What will you think of me? I think about you reading this, think about my cowardice in privilege, think about the judgments you could make. Will you think less of me? My breath becomes shallow; I consider deleting what I've written. I anticipate audience; the public is also within me. A public world, lived privately.

*Hey runner!
Put a shirt on!*

I look at the words again: reconsider, re-envision. My words replace theirs, speak back to, take back from. The words—whose words? I write them down; do they become mine alone? I transcribe what I heard, or what I think I heard. What I saw, or what I think I saw. Our bodies, our words—I try to flesh them out. I hear the words in my head before I write them down. I heard the words long before I ever thought about writing to you.

I sit still at my computer, silently. I listen. Their words in my voice, your silence at my fingertips. I do this for what feels like days on end; am I dwelling on this? I am beside myself. I know that along the spectrum of street harassment, your children's taunts barely rank. I know that relatively few have the sense of safety and privilege I access when I enter the public. And I know not everyone has access to the reflection and rhetorical analysis I'm subjecting your children's words to. My words come from a restricted space, a place of privilege. Access to the public; access to publish. I know this. And yet.

And yet.

All my education, all my studying and reading and writing, all my knowledge about texts and language and power, they do not shield my experience. They cannot. My body continues to live in this world; my affective space continues to be affected. As I run literally and metaphorically through this world, my private body becomes public, and public language enters my private mind.

And so, dear parents of the child who yelled *Hey runner!* at me, we've got some productive contradictions working here. I'm writing to you with the knowledge you'll never read this. Your child told me to put a shirt on knowing that I didn't have a shirt with me to put on. Your silence spoke to me. Language certainly is an incredible

thing, yet also quite credible. Abstract, yet also quite real. Physically, your child's words were vibrations from his vocal cords to my eardrums. Hammer, stirrup, and anvil: the tiny bones inside my head shaking things up.

And now my words are typed: the tap tap tapping of my fingertips, the light from my laptop's screen. Words processed, saved, emailed, and reproduced: the light of your own screen as you read this. My words; your eyes. His voice; your silence.

I am still running. Running in different neighborhoods, running out of words. Are you still on your porch? Does your boy still yell at strangers, at neighbors? Do I stop? Do you respond?

Sincerely yours and mine,

Andrew

Andrew Rihn lives in Canton, OH. He is the author of several chapbooks of poetry as well as several academic articles. His interests include embodied literacies, cheap beer, and Gore Vidal. He currently works at a small bakery.