

# *The Cool Chick in Recovery: Understanding Brené Brown*

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The mind creates a distance in the self—often in the form of an irony—from its own desire, from the affective core of the self, and manages, by the same token, a distance from everybody else. A sometimes compelling but ambiguous aura, by communicating a relative absence of neediness, renders the other dispensable. And this is done partly through projection; at its most extreme, the neediness is evoked in the other people around and then treated with sadistic disdain, as though it were an obnoxious stranger. Hell is not other people, but one's need for other people.

—Adam Phillips, “On Composure”

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, I began toying with the idea of a little article about the vulnerability guru Brené Brown. I also had a brief and somewhat torrid fling. Like me, the man was middle-aged. The relationship ended amicably as the summer wound down, but it was still a rather wistful parting. “It’s too bad things couldn’t work out,” my friend told me on our last night together. “You’re a cool chick.”

As the days grew shorter I found myself haunted by this quaint turn of phrase, so evocative of North Beach and Greenwich Village. I was a homeowner in a red state, a tenured faculty member with expertise in, of all square things, popular self-help cultures. A single mom who owned and sometimes wore “mom jeans.” Was I a “cool chick”? Did I want to be one? And what exactly did that casual but very specific term imply?

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My ruminations on this matter advanced, almost against my will, when my car CD player jammed with Bob Dylan’s *Highway 61*

*Revisited* inside it. The album had been a favorite since high school, and the disc still played, so I listened to it in an endless loop as I drove to the mall for school supplies, to campus for the year's first faculty meeting, to the beach for one last sunburn. Both the album's opener, "Like a Rolling Stone," and the more lyrical "Queen Jane Approximately" feature a hipster alpha male dismissing his female supplicant with Dylan's signature vicious wit. A more light-hearted version of the same voice animates "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," whose wry narrator woos his lady with, "I just want to be your lover, baby/I don't want to be your boss/Don't say I never warned you/When your train gets lost."

But the tune that really caught my ear was the bass-driven blues "From a Buick 6." Though considered a throwaway by many critics, the song's lack of biting misogyny stands out against the album's more famous numbers. The verses catalogue the qualities the narrator admires in his lover, a cool chick upon whom he haplessly relies. In the song's first line, he explicitly contrasts her to his wife, a "graveyard woman who/Keeps my kids." By contrast, his lover focuses her attention on the narrator himself: "she keeps me hid" and "always gives me bread." When "I'm all cracked up on the highway," she's "ready to sew me up with thread." And, as the chorus reiterates, "If I fall down dying you know she's/Bound to put a blanket on my bed."

A chick is cool, "Buick 6" asserts, when she fills a traditional feminine caregiver role without being traditionally "feminine." The "soulful mama" of "Buick 6" is free not merely of children, but also of the annoying female habit of garrulity: "She don't make me nervous/She don't talk too much." Equally if not more important, in areas that signal sexual agency the cool chick assumes and asserts male privilege. The narrator notes admiringly that "She walks like Bo Diddley and/She don't need no crutch." Rather than rely passively on a male protector, she proactively "Keeps this 410/All loaded with lead."

By Halloween, I was over my summer lover and had ordered all of Brené Brown's books. My car stereo broke for good and I finally got Apple Music. Though clearly partial, Dylan's depiction had given me some closure on the cool chick question. Liberated from the

“graveyard” of motherhood, the cool chick pleases with her androgyny. She is caring, independent, and capable; a sexual free agent. The lead-in to “Buick 6’s” final chorus says it all: the cool chick “Brings me everything/And more.” Remarkably, she requires nothing in return. Who wouldn’t want to be her?

Well, Brené Brown, for starters. The cool chick runs like a thread across Brown’s books, which catalogue her considerable appeals (à la Dylan) on the way to critiquing her troubling limitations. That critique arises from Brown’s larger theories of shame and vulnerability, and within that context it makes a kind of sense. But the deeper I read into her oeuvre, the more impatient—and confused—I found myself becoming. I’d planned a “little article.” But understanding Brené Brown was harder than I’d thought.



A self-help writer in the tradition of Marianne Williamson (*A Return to Love*) and Sarah Ban Breathnach (*Simple Abundance*), Brené Brown is a Research Professor of Social Work at the University of Houston (where she also earned her PhD in social work in 2002). While working as a drug treatment counselor in the early 1990s, she began researching shame and empathy. Studying shame prompted her to wonder about shame resilience, and from there she conceived a form of self-actualized living she calls “wholeheartedness”—a state we attain when we move past shame to embrace our vulnerabilities and “let our true selves be seen and known.” “Wholehearted living” is the practice Brown explains, models, and teaches across her three *New York Times* bestsellers, her TED talks (thirty-eight million views), her blog and her Instagram (six hundred thousand followers), and her Daring Way™ training curriculum for therapists, coaches, and corporate leaders.

Brown’s distaste for cool chicks is part of her larger disapproval of cool, which she sees as a key weapon in what she calls “the vulnerability armory,” the cluster of psychic defense mechanisms we use to evade shame. Every gain in cool is a loss of wholeheartedness. What the

narrator of “Buick 6” experiences as his woman’s pleasing personality signals to Brown her fundamental and troubling dishonesty. “How did being perceived as cool become a driving value, and what [is] the cost of pretending things don’t matter?” she asks in *Daring Greatly* (2012), her second mega-bestseller (over sixty weeks on the *Times* list). Well, there are plenty of reasons, and the cost is high. Adverse childhood experiences and a corrosive media environment play a role. So does what Brown calls “the culture of scarcity”—the interlocking social and economic norms of neoliberalism (though she doesn’t call them that), which invite us to believe we are never good enough, thin enough, powerful enough, successful, smart, safe, or extraordinary enough. Together, these psychic and social forces fuel shame at our vulnerabilities and, with shame, self-hatred.

Few people are naturally equipped to cope with such feelings, and most of us learn early on that the best thing to do with them (and the fear they provoke) is to ignore them. Play through it, stuff it, “fake it ‘til you make it.” In other words, be cool about it. Those strategies can help get you through the day, Brown admits, but she believes reliance on them generates “feelings of fear, blame, and disconnection” that do not serve us in the long run.

So she urges us to drop our cool armor and pick up new, truly adaptive ways of coping with vulnerability—because, as she astutely points out, it’s not like vulnerability is going away. A spiritual worldview can facilitate that evolution. In a nod to the New Thought “gospel of abundance,” for example, Brown suggests we focus on the plenty in our lives rather than obsess about the lack. But most of her books map out cognitive strategies for halting our flight from vulnerability. Reorienting our brains is difficult, but practiced consistently and mindfully, new mental habits (such as “redefining success,” “practicing gratitude,” and “setting boundaries”) will allow us to manage shame productively. We will open to the possibilities our vulnerabilities offer, rather than armoring up against them. Our cool facades will drop away, vestigial relics of an older, sadder time.



Like many pop psychologists, Brown's take on the self is ahistorical and logocentric: she sees our rough congress with the world creating brittle candy layers that vitrify over our naturally soft, sweet cores. In this model, cool is both a personal style—a layer—and a cognitive mode—a way of engaging the world that drives the layering process. This ahistorical take on cool is not surprising—but it is unfortunate. All of the cognitive and behavioral tics in the “vulnerability armory” have evolved within particular historical conditions, but few are as historically determined (or overdetermined) as cool. In *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*, Dick Pountain and David Robbins argue that cool evolved from West African traditions of emotional regulation and bodily presentation that were adapted to the harsh conditions of enslavement in the United States and the Caribbean. In this new context, cool was a survival mechanism. Its “ironic detachment and emotional impassivity enable[d] its bearer to withstand the domineering orders, abuse, and insults of the overseer without succumbing to either depression or to a rage that might incur flogging or even execution.” In a nod to the poet Thom Gunn, Pountain and Robbins position cool as “a posture for combat” in a world where true combat is too risky.

Such historicizing helps explain the relatively recent appearance of the cool chick. Cool couldn't become cognizable to whites (and thus available for appropriation by them) until the racialized social structures within which it evolved had loosened at least a bit. Its mainstreaming began, Pountain and Robbins observe, when white musicians saw their black counterparts deploying it to deal with the discriminatory behavior of white club owners. As with race, so with gender: the cool chick could not really appear until a rigid precursor social structure—in this case, the Victorian ideal of woman as “the angel of the house”—began to crumble under the pressures of post-World War II modernity.

Of course the cool chick has a longer lineage. Anti-maternal and sexually bold women were, ironically, relatively commonplace in Victorian popular culture—consider Cathy Earnshaw (*Wuthering Heights*, 1847), Lucy Westenra (*Dracula*, 1897), and the serpentine women who grace the prints of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) and

the poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882). Such women were monstrous, their claims to autonomy by definition perverse. Their close cousin is the *femme fatale*—a more decadent and dangerous incarnation whose racial otherness is frequently central to her appeal. The stylized bodies of *femmes fatales* like Lulu, Mata Hari, and (self-consciously, even cryptically) Josephine Baker make clear the degree to which “femininity” is an artifice, an arrangement of codes rather than a stable moral essence. As the twentieth century dawned, *femmes fatales* roamed the margins of the public sphere, destabilizing homes and families and, with them, the social order itself.

But this genealogy tells us only so much. The monstrous woman and the *femme fatale* lay claim to some male prerogatives, but unlike the cool chick, they’re over the top—too carnal, too aestheticized, too seductive. Defined by the feminine quality of excess, they’re hot, not cool.

No, the cool chick’s androgyny and restraint have their roots in a more obscure nineteenth-century image, the *gamine*. French in origin—and reflecting that country’s relatively relaxed attitude toward women in the public sphere—these feminine but boyish women began to appear in Anglophone popular culture around the same time as the *femme fatale*. They paved the way for the more well-known *garçonnes* of Coco Chanel, and the ubiquitous flappers who followed them. Though boundary blurring in appearance, the *gamine* was never dangerous: her sexuality was muted rather than exaggerated; her rejection of maternalism playful (winsome, even) not poisonous. She prefigured the scary “mannish lesbian” who stalked the interwar period, but any threat her gender-nonconforming body might have posed was mooted by her youthful, energetic mien. No explosive sexuality, no dangerous languor—the *gamine* was fun, a good sport.



Brené Brown’s work is best understood as the latest evolution of the twelve-step recovery movement, which began with the 1935 founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. Brown has been a sober member of AA since 1996, but she “never has felt completely in sync with

the recovery community.” She was high functioning and not obviously addicted when she joined AA. Like many women, she found the twelve-step focus on “powerlessness” counterproductive. And she was uneasy with the idea of addiction as a disease.

Unlike twelve-step traditionalists, Brown saw her desire to drink (and smoke, eat Twinkies, engage in destructive relationships) as rooted not in a disease over which she was powerless but in profound insecurities she could understand quite rationally: “I drank and smoked to minimize my feelings of vulnerability and to look busy when all the other girls at my table had just been asked to dance.” Self-consciousness, not alcohol as such, was her problem. “Vulnerability led to anxiety, which led to shame,” she explains, “which led to disconnection, which led to Bud Light.” In her 2010 breakthrough book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brown began to call herself a “take-the-edge-off-aholic” who needed not AA but “Vulnerability Anonymous.”

This shift to what she calls a “vulnerability lens” reflects Brown’s engagement with the feminist psychology associated with Wellesley’s Stone Center. In the mid-seventies, Stone Center thinkers argued that traditional theories of personality glossed over the specificity of women’s development, which differed fundamentally from men’s. Because attachment defines mother-daughter bonds in ways impossible for mother-son pairs, it forms the tap root of women’s sense of being in the world. Individuation and autonomy, long considered “normal” in theories of personality, were in fact masculinist constructions used to pathologize women’s foundational orientation toward connectedness.

Brown approvingly cites Stone Center founder Jean Baker Miller and her colleague Irene Stiver, who argue that “‘the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. . . the feeling that one is locked out of human connection and. . . powerless to change the situation.’” Cast out forever: the essential human fear. But pain, Brown argues, is inherent in connecting as well as in being denied connection. Authentic engagement with others makes us vulnerable to them and vice versa; unsurprisingly, discomfort and hurt ensue. She follows Miller and Stiver to argue that we “‘deal with the feelings that are inevitably present in our interactions

by turning to each other, or we turn away.” There’s really only one right thing to do in that situation, but few of us do it—it’s just too hard.

Alcohol helped Brown buffer both her connections to and disconnections from other people. But what increasingly interested her were all the nonalcoholic substances and practices—many sanctioned by modern life—people use to avoid the terrors not merely of being alone, but also of “turning to each other.” The vulnerability armory, she argues, is stocked with “banana bread, chips and queso, e-mail, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing and anxiety-fueled feelings of vulnerability.” Including, of course, being cool.



Is there a better primer on the cool chick than Howard Hawks’s 1944 film noir classic *To Have and Have Not*? Set in Vichy Martinique during the Second World War, the film features the nineteen-year-old Lauren Bacall as Marie Browning (known throughout the film as “Slim”) opposite Humphrey Bogart’s irascible Captain Harry Morgan (whom she, for reasons never made clear, calls “Steve”). With her smoky alto, sleek side part, and man-tailored suits, Marie epitomizes the cool chick’s aesthetic of androgynous restraint; she also powerfully enacts her sexual agency. She comes to Morgan’s hotel room in her bathrobe and, after a flirtatious conversation, initiates a kiss “to see whether I’d like it,” then tells the surprised—and initially passive—Morgan, “it’s even better when you help.”

The film’s most famous scene follows this exchange. Assuring Morgan that he need not play the traditional male role with her, Marie remarks, “you don’t have to act with me, Steve. You don’t have to say anything and you don’t have to do anything. Not a thing.” Heading out the door, she half turns and adds, “Oh, maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you, Steve? You just put your lips together—and blow.” After she exits, the camera lingers on Morgan’s face as he blinks repeatedly to collect himself. Then with a long, slow, wolf whistle, he shakes his head, chuckling as he pours himself a drink. Marie’s parting shot ranks thirty-fourth in the American Film Institute’s “100 Greatest



Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart in *To Have and Have Not*, 1944.  
Courtesy of Glasshouse Images/Alamy.

Movie Quotes of All Time,” confirming the power of the cool chick’s combination of nimble wit and assertive—but understated—sexuality.

In a less-renowned moment, however, the film reveals another important dimension of the cool chick: her hidden vulnerability. Prior to the scene in Morgan’s room, the Vichy police, investigating a shootout with the Free French, had detained and questioned Marie and Morgan, then taken all of Morgan’s cash. When the corrupt chief asks Marie why she came to Martinique, she tosses her beret on the desk and deadpans “to buy a hat.” In response, he slaps her face. Morgan, seated in the background, jumps out of his chair in protest, but Marie doesn’t flinch at the blow.

As they banter later in Morgan's room, Morgan returns to this moment, observing "that slap in the face you took. . .you hardly blinked an eye. It takes a lot of practice to be able to do that." Marie does not reply, but a remark a few beats later fleshes out her situation slightly. Though she had earlier told Morgan she was broke, she now offers him money so he won't have to take a dangerous smuggling job. It's only thirty dollars, she explains, "just enough to say 'no' if I feel like it."

The run-up to the provocative "you know how to whistle" is deliberately fast, witty, and light. It never affirms nor denies Marie's personal history of violence and predation, and Marie never explains (to the police or to Morgan) why she left the United States or what she's been doing since. Narrating vulnerability—abandonment, abuse, that you have traded sex for money—is for the melodrama heroine, not the cool chick. The astute man, however, sees what the cool chick does not herself disclose. A flash of vulnerability lends nuance to an unflappable and detached exterior. Perhaps more important, it flatters the male observer's sense of his own discernment. Her lover knows the cool chick's secrets. They are his to do with as he pleases.



Brown's first two books—*Women and Shame* (2004) and *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't): Making the Journey from "What Will People Think?" to "I Am Enough"* (2007)—argue that cool chicks are bred from a toxic media culture that instills a sense of inferiority and competition in women and taints their peer cultures. As middle schoolers, Brown observes, girls use coolness—like slenderness and beauty, whiteness and wealth—to include and exclude. Cool's relative indeterminacy makes it ideal for the endless social analysis that unfolds in slam books and at slumber parties, the places where girls learn how "picking someone apart or judging them [can be] a tool to connect and gain acceptance from other women." This uncritical participation in competitive hierarchies put in place by larger social forces has a name: "gang-think," Brown calls it. Cool as a weapon. As

any woman who has survived the eighth-grade girls' bathroom knows, that's how bitches operate.

Bitches in turn breed defensive cool, the posture Brown calls "too cool to care." The market glamorizes that pose with sunglasses, hoodies, and headphones. Popular music, which can announce identity, also helps to build walls around it. (Here, as elsewhere, Brown speaks from experience; a long time heavy metal fan, she admits that a favorite song is Whitesnake's "kick-ass-no-one-can-hurt-me . . . anthem 'Here I Go Again.'") What begins as a form of self-protection against bitches becomes an indifference deployed against every person in a teenage girl's life.

Brown's debt in her first books to the insights of "Girlhood Studies" pioneers like Jean Kilbourne (*Killing Us Softly*), Mary Pipher (*Reviving Ophelia*), and Joan Jacobs Brumberg (*The Body Project*) is also evidenced in her prescriptions for change. She promotes consciousness raising and critical media literacy as ways of resisting late capitalism's pernicious mandate to what some feminists have termed "effortless perfection." She calls on her female readers to recognize the ways their uncritical acceptance of standards of beauty, body image, and material success have sabotaged their own happiness, undermined their relationships, and contributed to social inequality. She encourages them to rethink their parenting. And she asks them, crucially, "who benefits from these expectations?"

But with *Gifts of Imperfection* (2010), Brown's focus changed. While she remained disturbed by cool as weapon, particularly the glorification of ridicule and judgment in reality TV and social media, her real concern became defensive cool. She stopped talking about "patriarchy . . . and capitalism" as the drivers of women's sense of inferiority, and focused more intently on personal psychological processes. Perhaps not coincidentally, she became a *New York Times* bestseller.

It would be easy, here, to argue that Brown's abandonment of feminism's structural critique demonstrates once and for all that the therapeutic sense of self is popular precisely in proportion to its disavowal of politics. That's certainly possible, and it did enter my mind when I first began to think about an article on Brown. But then

circumstances intervened—that lover, that Dylan song—and as I sat in my mom jeans making my Thanksgiving grocery list I wondered, will that argument actually advance anybody’s understanding of Brené Brown? Will it shed light on what she wants for her audience and what they, in turn, seek from her? Or does its appeal (to me, to my would-be readers) spring from its promise of intellectual superiority, of distance from the banal affective strivings of people who earnestly, uncritically, read self-help books? In short, do I want to write that article because it makes me feel cool? Or, to put it in terms that foreground the more recognizably psychoanalytic dimension of Brown’s logic, do I maybe want to write that article so I can avoid writing—thinking—about something else?



Lauren Bacall is often equated with her screen persona, but like the narrator’s lover in “Buick 6,” Marie Browning is a product of the male imagination—specifically, that of director Howard Hawks. She emblemizes what critic Molly Haskell has called “the Hawksian woman”: an “honorary man” who uses her “sensuality [in] a kind of gamesmanship that [is] the equivalent of a man’s self-deprecating bravery.” Hawks’s interest in such women and the way they defy cultural and cinematic conventions is what makes him an interesting director. But to acknowledge that Marie tells us more about Hawks than about the cool chick herself raises another question: does “the cool chick herself” even exist?

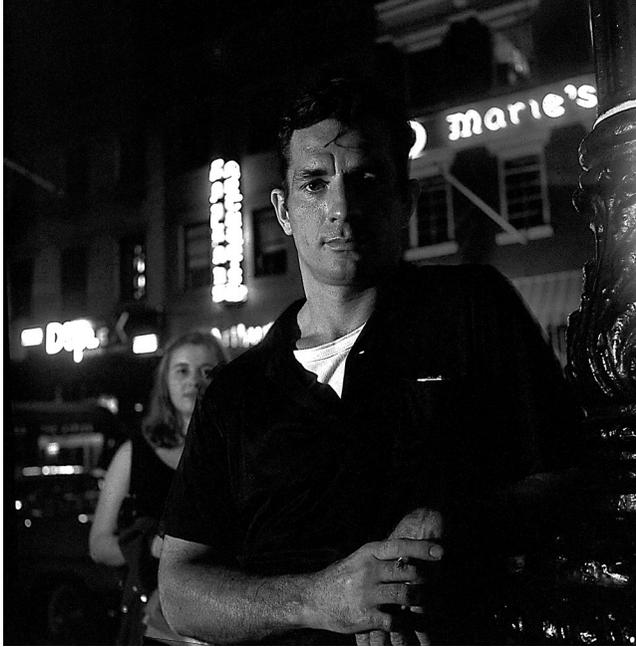
Where better to pursue this inquiry than in *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir*, which narrates the experiences of Joyce Johnson and her friends, including her lover Jack Kerouac, at that wellspring of cool, Greenwich Village in the 1950s? Male and female Beats, Johnson argues, were united in their desire to escape the resurgent Victorianism of postwar white middle-class America and to live instead with intellectual, artistic, and sexual authenticity—a vaguely defined but overarching “freedom.” But as she notes somewhat ruefully in her introduction, “young women found the pursuit of freedom much more complicated” than men did. The risks of challenging “the old male/

female rules” were still too high for the average woman. The cool chick emerged as a compromise formation.

Johnson’s narrative begins with a brief account of Detroit socialite Edie Parker. She lived with Kerouac during the war, and they married hastily in 1944, after he was jailed as an accomplice to a murder in Riverside Park. Parker claimed she was pregnant to help him beat the rap; her family paid his bail. He dumped her in Grosse Pointe a year later, where she wrote Allen Ginsberg letters pleading “for a list of books ‘like the ones you first read’” in the hopes, Johnson says, that “by becoming an imitation Allen. . . she c[ould] prove herself worthy and get Jack back.” The “needy” girl. A cautionary tale.

But if Kerouac’s ex taught Johnson what not to do, his other lovers and muses—“mysterious *fellaheen* women, primeval and of the earth”—represented a pinnacle she could never attain. Upon meeting Alene Lee, the American Indian/African American woman on whom Kerouac based the character of Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans*, she notices the “terror for Jack in the power of such beauty.” Lee “understood him with alarming tough intelligence” (Ginsberg later called her “a peer”) and she “embodied his sexual fantasies all too well.” Johnson (néé Glassman) knew she could not compete. She was a nice Jewish girl who played the piano well. She just happened to be drawn, like Kerouac himself, toward a world larger than her own.

So as early as high school, sneaking out to Washington Square Park, Johnson assembled what she called a “downtown disguise” to pass in that world. A black dirndl and flats, Mexican belt, and “copper earrings [that] clank reassuringly. . . in the slightest breeze” allowed her (unironically) to manage her fear of being seen as inauthentic by the folk singers, intellectuals, and labor organizers clustered around the park fountain. Blending into the crowd, she got what she came for: big ideas, innovative rhythms and language, frank expressions of sexuality and power. Sure she had native intelligence and talent, but since when did that buy a ticket out of Squaresville? To play in the wide world, Johnson learned, she had to be “cool and clever as any double agent.” The costume got her there all right, but along the way it did begin to chafe.



Joyce Johnson with Jack Kerouac, ca. 1958.  
Photo by Jerry Yulsman. Courtesy of Globe Photos.

Kerouac was part of the problem. Despite his drunkenness and promiscuity, their relationship was rooted in a version of traditional domesticity. To him, Johnson explains, “I [was] ‘Joycey,’ which no one had called me since I was little . . . I was everydayness, bacon and eggs in the morning or the middle of the night, which I learned to cook just the way he liked.” She dried him out, bandaged his wounds, handled his publisher. She was fine with that, but longed for more. For all their frustrations with tradition, Beat women remained too constrained by it to go on the road themselves, so she proposed to Kerouac that she quit her job and meet him in San Francisco. But he was noncommittal: “do what you want, Joycey, always do what you want.”

Questing after freedom was one thing, but “it was disconcerting,” Johnson wryly notes, “to be left so free. I wanted to be wanted.” The escape from domesticity supposedly created a space within which

women and men would remake emotional connections along authentic, egalitarian, and existentially honest lines. But like most Beat men, Kerouac was accustomed to the sex and the concierge services domesticity had long entailed. And many Beat women, like Johnson, still wanted the emotional connection domesticity had promised since the advent of companionate marriage in the early Victorian period. They were killing it in their black Danskins, tattered copies of Rilke stashed in their shoulder bags. But at the level of male-female interaction, Johnson concedes, they “had no usable models for what we were doing.”

Critique is easy; innovation is hard. Beneath the “downtown disguise” squirmed an emotional traditionalist. For Johnson, the persistent desire to be wanted—not just sexually but emotionally, existentially—was a “shameful thought.” The cost of revealing it would be catastrophic. (Cf. Edie Parker, needy girl.)

“Harden your heart,” advised Johnson’s friend Hettie Jones, wife of the poet LeRoi. Don’t let them see you vulnerable. So she kept her “shameful thoughts” in check, performing an emotional reticence she didn’t really feel in order to keep a foothold in an intellectually and politically compelling world. To the black beret and cigarettes she added the Gallic shrug, the insouciance, the affectless “sure, man; it’s cool.” And it worked—until it didn’t. She broke up with Kerouac in 1959, when “the confusing distance in him,” combined with his worsening drinking, finally became unbearable.

By her own admission then, Joyce Johnson was never a cool chick; she just wore the hell out of that disguise. When a drunken Kerouac called up his “Joycey” shortly before his death ten years later, his fondest memory was of her stoicism. He reminisced about how she had cared for him, slurring admiringly into the phone, “‘you never wanted anything but a little ol’ pea soup.’” It “wasn’t really true, of course,” Johnson remarks. She’d actually wanted quite a bit: at the Cedar Tavern, at the Village Vanguard, in her relationship with Kerouac even, “I was much more of an observer than I wanted to be.” But she had calculated the risk. In a world—and among men—that venerated “freedom” but did not yet offer it to women, her best bet had been to play it cool.



With *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brown began using her books to narrate her “recovery story.” This three-part genre explains to an audience the trajectory that *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the AA “Big Book”) describes as “what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now.” The state of Texas plays a central role in Brown’s “what we were like” chapter. Brown is a Texas native, “fifth generation . . . lock and load.” She likes to cuss (and does so regularly in her writing) and give people the finger while driving. Growing up in the Houston suburbs, she learned “when to wear white shoes, how to set the table, and why upstanding families use only white meat in their chicken salad,” as well as “how to spit, shoot a gun, and throw a Hail Mary pass on the third-and-ten.” She was trained, in short, to be what she argues is a specific type of Texas cool chick: the “low-maintenance girl.”

“Easy, fun, and flexible,” the low-maintenance girl is marked by her distance from the fussy and delicate Southern belle in the same ways and with the same pride that Texas distances itself from the rest of the Confederacy. Without compromising her essential femininity (those white shoes!), she embodies the state’s characteristic detachment and toughness, affective styles Brown sees embodied in the unofficial state motto “Don’t Mess with Texas.” Parents who uncritically identify with Texas, she explains, implicitly and explicitly teach children to disavow their personal needs and desires. Her own childhood was full of such lessons: “Need a bathroom break on a road trip? We’ll pull over when we don’t have to cross the highway to get to the gas station. Don’t like what we’re having for dinner? Don’t eat. Carsick? It’s all in your head.” At the root of this dynamic is a vision of feelings as wasteful excess. Growing up, if she got “so overwhelmed by emotion that tears or a look of fear breached [her] tough veneer,” Brown was “promptly and not-too-subtly reminded that emotions don’t fix problems—they make them worse.” Or as my own grandmother used to say, “crying never solved anything.”

As they internalize the devaluation of their emotions, girls learn first to separate body and mind, feeling and thought, then to ignore the more troublesome of the two. Success as a low-maintenance girl means “not asking for what you nee[d] and never inconveniencing

anyone.” These habits of mind were adaptive in the harsh conditions that characterized life in much of Texas well into the twentieth century, Brown argues. In the state’s contemporary suburban sprawls, however, such childrearing persists as a perverse form of nostalgia for a romanticized frontier past and as the unfinished emotional business of the parents themselves.

Brown recognized the stringencies of her low-maintenance girl existence fairly early in life. “From the time I was in ninth grade,” she recalls, “I wanted out of my Texan identity.” But her critique at the time was youthful and imperfect, informed not by Stone Center thinking, but by the popular culture around her. What she longed for was not emotional wholeness, but a cool upgrade—a repackaging of white shoes, chicken salad, and football into something more edgy. “I wanted to be just like Annie Hall,” she enthuses. “I dreamed about the day I could be a sophisticated New York intellectual. . . . I wanted to be erudite, stylish, and fashionably complicated.”

A classic provincial, longing to become a cosmopolitan, Brown was attracted not merely to a category of cool objects and mannerisms, but also to what Pountain and Robbins call cool’s “quality of worldly knowingness,” its suggestion that the cool crowd shares “some secret that is denied to members of respectable or mainstream society.” The Beats and their imitators were the original promoters of this dimension of cool. But as Thomas Frank explains in *The Conquest of Cool*, his history of marketing’s cooptation of cool aesthetics, by the early 1960s cool had “mutate[d] from the native language of the alienated to that of advertising,” weaving itself seamlessly into every aspect of mass culture. Brown was the perfect middle-American consumer: access to cool, she believed, would allow her to sever her ties to her shameful red-state roots.

Accordingly, through her twenties Brown tried out a variety of cool intellectual poses, what she calls the “Henry-Miller-wild-party” style, the “Sylvia-Plath-dress-in-black-and-smoke-cigarettes” style, and, most enduringly, the “hate-everyone-too-smart-to-care” style. It’s unclear whether those around her found her pretentious or annoying;

eventually she seems to have realized as much herself. That's when she joined AA.

But while she dropped the beer and cigarettes pretty easily, the addictive qualities of “worldly knowingness” proved tougher both to see and to relinquish. Her social-work training taught Brown to “hold open an empathic space so that people can find their own way,” and she seems genuinely to respect that scripted generosity. But the way she tells it, being a professional empathizer always kind of rubbed her the wrong way. Moving into graduate study, she discovered empirical social science, with its emphasis on objectivity and distance, “prediction and control.” Now *that* was knowingness worth working for. “I had found my calling,” she proclaims.

The academy, it turns out, has a vulnerability armory all its own, and graduate school updated Brown's weaponry. She loved the detached posture of the social sciences, which licensed her to scrutinize the private lives of others while revealing nothing—questioning nothing—about herself. Emotional “distance and inaccessibility,” she discovered, correlated with and “contribute[d] to prestige.” What had been her “hate-everyone-too-smart-to-care” attitude morphed into academic “professionalism.” Competition, status mongering, the pretense of objectivity. Modes of emotional disengagement that once had simply been the habits of a low-maintenance girl mind and/or the personal style of a pretentious pseudobohemian—suddenly these were workplace essentials. Brown finished her PhD at the University of Houston's School of Social Work in 2002 and was promptly offered a tenure-track job there. If it wasn't exactly Annie Hall singing “It Had to Be You” at Reno Sweeney's in the West Village, it still wasn't half bad.



In the male fantasy of the cool chick, if vulnerability exists at all, it exists on the man's terms. He may know about it, even enjoy it—but he doesn't have to deal with it. (“She don't make me nervous/She don't talk too much.”) The cool chick *sui generis* negotiates a similar power



Kathleen Hanna, ca. 1993.

Photo by Alice Wheeler. Courtesy of the artist.

dynamic. Sexual politics as usual make women vulnerable—and discourage them from laying claim to their vulnerability. (Don't make him nervous/Don't talk too much.) The price of the ticket to postdomestic “freedom” is the effacement of emotionality.

The rejection of such sexual politics—and a concomitant embrace of women's vulnerability—fueled Riot Grrrl, the political and musical movement that exploded across the United States in the early 1990s. In a flyer for an early show by Bikini Kill (ca. 1990), one of the first and most prominent Riot Grrrl bands, lead singer Kathleen Hanna urges readers to name and claim vulnerability:

Be a dork, tell your friends you love them . . .  
 Recognize empathy and vulnerability as positive forms of strength . . .  
 Don't allow the world to make you into a bitter abusive asshole.  
 Cry in public . . .  
 Acknowledge emotional violence as real.

In the speak-out tradition of radical feminists, Riot Grrrl insisted that recognizing and owning hitherto taboo issues were essential first steps toward wresting power from men. Vulnerability was one such issue. In her history of Riott Grrrl, *Girls to the Front*, Sara Marcus recounts how many of the earliest women in the scene had watched their mothers victimized by unfair divorce laws, workplace discrimination, and gendered violence. They themselves had been sexually harassed in straight jobs and as sex workers, and had experienced domestic violence and sexual assault from family members, boyfriends, and strangers. They knew vulnerability well. And in a woman-centered environment, they began to recast it as a source not of shame, but of power, as something to flaunt.

Of course, at a macro level patriarchy—and the violence it condones—was the prime enemy of vulnerability. But Riot Grrrl reserved a special scorn for the particular manifestation of patriarchal power called “White Boy Cool,” a mode of emotional detachment and sexual conquest that had evolved along with popular music. As black music moved from fringy dives into the American mainstream, the affective style of its originators moved with it, becoming simultaneously more complex and more banal since Kerouac (aping the jazz musicians he so revered) began putting it on for Joyce Johnson back in the fifties. With that movement came stylization, routinization, and, above all, commodification—the creation of what we might call a mass-market rock habitus. Oppositional in style, White Boy Cool was powerfully hegemonic in substance.

This dominance, Bratmobile band members Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman argued in the zine *Girl Germs* (ca. 1992), disenfranchised women by setting “cock standards of anti-sQUARENESS which make us deny and shame that part in us so dear” (formatting in original). To resist, women should “dare to be square”—to embrace all that

White Boy Cool deemed shameful. Such an embrace was dangerous: since men benefit when women identify against themselves and one another, men police cool norms, and nowhere is that policing more ruthless than in rock culture. Bratmobile mocks this dynamic in the poppy “Cool Schmool” (1993), whose rocker-girl narrator questions her relationships with emotionally ambivalent rock dudes:

We're so cool, yeah yeah  
 Yeah, we're so cool cool  
 We're so cool, yeah yeah  
 Fuck you too, cool schmool  
 I just want to be one of the boys  
 I just want to be your little fashion toy  
 Let's hang out and be cool, all right?  
 Let's go watch the girl fight tonight.

To be accepted, the narrator must be both an “honorary man” (“one of the boys”) and a desirable sex object (“little fashion toy”), while endorsing and enjoying (or pretending to enjoy) competition among other women (“the girl fight”) like the boys do. If she undertakes these contortions, maybe she'll gain a toehold in the scene—or maybe not. “I don't want to wonder if you're going to say hello/I don't want to wonder if you're going to walk away,” the narrator fulminates. She closes out with a bitter reflection on what her accommodation of White Boy Cool costs:

I don't know why you're always telling me  
 What's so cool about what I'm wearing,  
 When you can't even tell me how you feel  
 And you can't even be my friend for real.

In Riot Grrrl songs and writings, White Boy Cool emerges as a particularly insidious form of “emotional violence” against women. Understanding it as such, and resisting its allures, was an essential step toward freedom, as Bikini Kill's anthemic “Don't Need You” (1992) makes clear:

Don't need you to say we're good,  
 Don't need you to tell us we suck,  
 Don't need your atti-fuckin'-tude, boy,  
 Don't need your dick to fuck.  
 Does it scare you that we don't need you?  
 Does it scare you, boy, that we don't need you?  
 Don't need you, don't need you,  
 Us punk rock whores don't need you.

Unlike an earlier generation of radical feminists, Riot Grrrl never advocated separatism. Bikini Kill, for example, had a male guitarist, Billy Karren. But when male norms—including cool in all its affective and interpersonal manifestations—compromised women's flourishing, they were to be rejected. In their place, as Bikini Kill drummer Toby Vail explained in the second issue of the *Bikini Kill* zine (ca. 1991), women would “mak[e] new meanings of what it is to be cool,” meanings that “make real sense *to you*” (emphasis added).

In Brown's critique of cool, detachment and vulnerability appear as an either-or dyad: disconnection (the Stone Center's “turning away”) by default drives out connection (“turning to”). Riot Grrrl refused to privilege one over the other. It saw the two acts as mutually constitutive of a new cool chick identity, one that was protective but also generative. Disconnection, it turns out, is sometimes a necessary path to connection. “Don't Need You” demonstrates the payoff—the joy, really—of strategic detachment.

The key is collectivity. Unlike individual cool chicks, “us punk rock whores” explore together the empathy and vulnerability disallowed by White Boy Cool's elaborate schematics of approval and disapproval. We “don't need you” because we have learned to embrace a “cool that makes sense to [us].” And from that we have elaborated a community that promotes our alternative vision loudly, unabashedly, to great effect. “Does it scare you, boy/That we don't need you?” It probably should. Older incarnations of the cool chick afforded you plenty of convenience: “She brings me everything and more.” Well, roll over, Bob Dylan, and tell John Bonham the news.



What prompts people to tell their recovery stories? Twelve-step culture's *mutual*-aid dimension holds that such narratives let other sufferers know they are not alone. Its *self*-help dimension explains that the act of narration reminds you how your own recovery is a work in progress.

Licensure as a professional smart person came at a high price for Brown. The competitive culture of the academy mirrored—intensified—the hypervigilant, consumerist ethos of the posh Houston neighborhood where she lived with her husband and young children. Despite every marker of personal and professional success, she lived her life “fearful, judgmental, and alone,” exhausted from wondering “when can I stop proving myself to everyone?” Yes, her research engaged her, but her real concerns were “about what people think, about always being *better than*, and always being right” (emphasis in original). Dependent on external validation for her entire sense of self, she was what twelve-steppers call a “human doing” rather than a “human being.” Thus it was not just professionally but personally distressing when she could not find a publisher for her first manuscript, “Hairy Toes and Sexy Rice: Women, Shame, and the Media.”

As the title suggests, the book mingled Brown's research on shame with light-hearted stories of her own life as a new mother struggling to balance family and career. It poked fun at advertisements (for depilatories and instant rice, among others) that played on women's insecurities, urging readers to recognize them as so much BS. Brown shopped the manuscript for six months to no avail. Finally, a consultant advised her to remove the humor and emphasize her academic authority instead. Dutifully (desperately?) she stripped it down. Still no publisher. Frustrated, she self-published the book as *Women and Shame* in 2004, and it began to enjoy some success.

The same year, Brown's CV reveals, she left the tenure track to become a “Research Professor.” According to documentation from the University of Houston's provost's office, this title designates faculty who “are typically externally funded and will not be paid from the state teaching budget.” It's unclear what presaged this move, which is

not discussed in any of Brown's books. Whatever the reason, her "*better than*" self seems to have been unhappy with the change in status.

As Brown relates in *Rising Strong* (2016), a colleague referred to her book as "vanity-published"; was he right? Why hadn't "real" presses liked her work? Consumed with publishing shame and publishing envy, she armored up: selling her book at speaking engagements, she routinely pretended it had come out from an established house. How exhilarating, then, when at one such event, *Women and Shame* caught the attention of Avery, a high-end self-help imprint of Harper Penguin. Very lightly revised, it was published in 2007 as *I Thought It Was Just Me*.

This was the validation—vindication, really—Brown had been waiting for. She may not have been a New York intellectual, but she had a New York publisher. At last she could relax. She was smart. She was serious—she had proof! She had left behind her "vanity press" and become, in her words, "a *proper and sophisticated author* . . . who distanced herself from the unsavory ordeal of promoting and selling" her work (emphasis in original). She lined up babysitters for her book tour. She bought new clothes and rehearsed in the mirror what she would say when she went on Oprah. And she really, truly, believed that Oprah would call. And that's the big "reveal" in Brown's recovery story—the vulnerability equivalent of a three-day bender, the "hitting bottom" that closes out her "what we were like" chapter.

So what happened? Her book failed. As so many of them do, her serious, proper, and professional book landed without a sound and was remaindered within six months. But worst of all, when some twenty-something editorial assistant called to give her the news, that little ol' Texas gal had to ask what the word "remaindered" meant. It may not sound like much. But it ruptured Brown's sense of herself as a winner—as "*better than*" and cooler than everyone around her. She stood by her closetful of new clothes in the size she had dieted down to so she'd look good on TV. What does "remaindered" mean? How could she have been so stupid? About everything. "I felt it all," she recalls. "The powerlessness and the despair and the shame."

This led, in good twelve-step style, to what Brown calls her “2007 ~~Breakdown~~ Spiritual Awakening” (formatting in original)—a reckoning with the web of self-deception she’d elaborated over the course of her life. Through what the AA Big Book calls “a searching and fearless moral inventory,” she examined how her ambition and her work ethic—traits admirable enough on their own—had been corrupted by cool, becoming a corrosive competitiveness that cramped her life and made her miserable. And she realized the stark truth: she might study wholeheartedness, but she sure didn’t live it. Thus began her journey toward “what we are like now.”

In this, the trickiest portion of every recovery story, the narrator must demonstrate how her life is different from and, obviously, better than the way it used to be, without alienating audience members still new and tentative in their sobriety. To do this, the best storytellers construct themselves as only marginally different from their listeners in their humble, messy struggle with life. They acknowledge the persistent siren call of old highs, and attribute their newfound health, prosperity, and happiness to grace plus the support and example of others.

Brown is very good at this. When she dropped her armor, she explains, she saw the cool chick for the seductress that she was. Those brittle candy layers melted away, and within a year she had morphed into “everything I’d spent my life ridiculing, a middle-aged, recovering, health-conscious, creative, touchy-feely spirituality seeker.” Much of the time, she speaks with deadly lack of irony from that position—but a persistent tendency toward self-mockery helps to leaven her earnest loaf. Now an asset rather than a liability, Brown’s Texas twang authenticates funny stories she tells of herself as an adamantly uncool person, one who is still regularly consumed with envy, fear, and rage, and barely and imperfectly able to take her own advice on how to move past those demons.

This performative stance is compelling—and convenient. It allows Brown to efface the presence of her trademarked merchandise, multimedia consulting businesses, and ascension into the pantheon

of twenty-first-century “thought leaders.” By remaining unremarked, these achievements are rendered epiphenomenal. Fame and fortune become mere byproducts of the recovered—the wholehearted—life. Success is what happens when you see through cool’s false promises. And that, at some level, is the moral of Brown’s recovery story: once you stop fishing for a call from Oprah, you unleash the potential to become Oprah yourself.



Brené Brown and I have a lot in common. I, too, am from Texas, raised to be a low-maintenance girl. In my youth I, too, longed to escape the state and all that its flat vowels and flatter landscape signified. Now in middle age, like Brown, I have a respectful if slightly uneasy relationship to twelve-step recovery. And I recognize all too well the degree to which the competitive self-loathing endemic to academia has shaped me as a writer and as a person. Indeed, Brené Brown and I might be the same person—but for our different relationships to the cool chick.

And with that, should I turn to my life as a feminist? Shall I explain how Riot Grrrl imparted to me naturally, ecstatically, the critical consciousness that Brown rather mutedly called for in her first books? That would be a satisfying narrative, not least since it would position me as a poster child for the Left fantasy of what politics could do for the masses, if they weren’t always already hoodwinked by therapeutic culture. Stranger things have happened. But they didn’t happen to me.

By the time Riot Grrrl came around, I was married and in graduate school, locked down in the library reading E. P. Thompson, too busy and broke to travel to shows in somebody’s rattletrap van. And that van mattered. Riot Grrrl was a “scene,” a place where cultural production and consumption take place within larger, collectively elaborated structures of meaning, value, and power. Experience in the scene creates shared meanings among participants, and, as Larry Grossberg has argued, that sharing is what gives scenes—and the

musical forms at their centers—urgency and vitality. Scenes are lived collaborations. Bands sang about those collaborations, but you had to live the scene to be Riot Grrrl.

I know, because I bought the Bikini Kill EP when it came out in 1992 and, alone in my living room, listened to it at full volume, excited at the thought of losing myself among women rocking out after years of shows where I was the only girl at the front of the stage. But the music was literally not cognizable to me, and I could never draw it close enough to make it real. Instead, like many other women, I spent the nineties engaging with the artifacts and attitudes that got sucked out of the scene and remixed into the broader cultural stew of “post-feminism”—Doc Martens and baby-doll dresses; retro lunchboxes reimaged as purses; magazines built on the sexualized sassiness that the post-Riot Grrrl band Sleater-Kinney would mockingly refer to as “girlpower dot com.”

The culture industries’ inexhaustible capacity for cooptation limited the impact that Riot Grrrl could have—on the broader culture and on my own life. But to be fair, I could never have been Riot Grrrl anyway: I was just too old. The seventies and eighties had already shaped me and my feminism, and they did so along lines more reminiscent of Joyce Johnson’s life than of Kathleen Hanna’s.

Growing up in the same Texas culture as Brown, I absorbed all its suspicions about vulnerability—absorbed them and had them complicated by a single, Second Wave–feminist mother. The economic and political hardships of being a woman alone in the world animated my house growing up: women’s liberation was real, but it hadn’t yet altered the fact that men make the rules. Change would be made slowly, within a tightly constrained space. Thus my mother took me to the closing when she bought our house—and I watched my grandfather cosign her loan. I typed her name on her graduate school papers as “J. Travis” because “If professors see a woman’s name they don’t take the writing seriously.” Such a sense of exigency fueled a critical consciousness, certainly. It also created new incentives—demands, really—to be a low-maintenance girl. The fripperies of girlhood (Barbies, curling

irons, ballet lessons) had no place in our house. They were manufactured by men to make women dissatisfied with themselves, plus they were too expensive. It went without saying that the affective style they represented was also too costly.

So my life was stocked with other cultural resources. My mother was a film and video librarian, adept at scrounging Dallas in the age of *Dallas* for scraps of progressive/bohemian culture. I knew *Free to Be You and Me* early on, and moved in due course to *Fear of Flying* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Carole King's *Really Rosie* transitioned me into her "real" albums, along with those of Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell. Women's cultural production received pride of place in our house. But even there, women were outnumbered by men: by high school, I owned more Dylan albums than all albums by women artists combined. And I spent my weekends absorbing male directors' fantasies of women at the retro movie house.

*Annie Hall* played in regular rotation there, and, as it did for Brown, it fueled my sense of New York as a space of pleasure and freedom. But it's the Howard Hawks retrospective that ran the year I turned fifteen that sticks in my mind. Reagan was about to be president. I lived in a town that worshipped him, along with big hair, money, and football. Men guarded the gates of culture, bitches policed the bathroom door. I was a flat-chested scholarship girl with one crossed eye. What I needed was a posture for combat.



When my daughter went to her father's for Christmas, I sat down and reread the complete works of Brené Brown. I still found her, like most recovery authors, cheesy and frustrating, but I also liked her—I liked her swearing, and her music fandom, and her vexed relationships to academia and the state of Texas. Because I liked her I wanted to believe that her life began like mine, dimly aware that she had limited options, that she was young and marginal, and that she needed something that would help her negotiate structural imbalances of gendered and sexed power (in the moment, on the ground) in ways that could

keep her alive and fighting. We'd shared a desire to see through the facades so essential to life in bourgeois Texas, ca. 1979. That desire was life changing, and it put us both on the cool chick path.

When Brown describes her youth in retrospect, it appears as a series of empty hipster poses. Perhaps mine began that way too; few adolescents are entirely "authentic." Unlike Brown I never cared for Henry Miller. But I did work—first consciously and awkwardly, then with greater fluency—at parlaying an interest in music and film into access to musicians and filmmakers. I found the places and the people that saw being smart and feminist as an asset rather than a liability. Knowing Dylan's complete catalogue, busting the curve on the exam, making the first move on a first date—I guess those were some Johnson-like "disguises." They were also the substance of who I was: desires and ambitions produced by the daily grind of temperament and personality against material and political circumstances. I went to college in New York, and saw my tacky Texas roots become a source of exotic intrigue—not Annie Hall by a long shot, but maybe not so different either. So I chose to play it cool again and again. I went dancing downtown, got an Ivy League degree, found academic publishers for all my books without a hitch. Things that didn't quite pan out for Brown worked very well indeed for me.

When a recovery story is on the agenda at a meeting, newcomers are instructed in the key twelve-step interpretive protocol of "don't compare—identify." If you are a professional critic, that means reading against the grain, and it comes hard. But my frustration with Brown's story challenged me. When I looked past her cheesiness and commercialism and her clueless ahistoricism, when I looked at the bones of her critique of cool, I saw her logic playing out in my summer lover's parting words: yes, I was a cool chick. You know why he thought so? He damn sure never saw me in those mom jeans.

And that's what Brown understands. Her work prompts every cool chick to ask whether she has maybe played it cool too often, whether, by communicating what Adam Phillips calls "a relative absence of neediness," she has perhaps "render[ed] the other dispensable." That's food for thought. Cool worked for me. But, like Brown, I know the



The author, 1983.

Photo by Jacob Gendelman. Courtesy of the artist.

costs of being the low-maintenance girl, the smartass, the one who never asks for help. Cool can be a way of evading intimacy and the discomfort it entails. It is overused and commodified and it can be habit-forming and destructive. In our private lives, as in our lives as writers and teachers, cool can impede the habits of mind that are ultimately most productive: humility, curiosity, a freakish originality. Like any affective mode—or any drug—cool has its limits and should know its place.

But to banish cool entirely? Drop your armor, Brown proclaims at the end of *Rising Strong*, and you change not just your life but also the world. Openness and empathy, respect for our shared human vulnerabilities—cultivating these traits will dissolve racism and income inequality and end sexual violence. Now that goes beyond cheesy. Believing that kind of thing is only possible if you write power out of the equation. Brown's willingness to do just that is the reason why popular therapeutic culture is so reviled by Left intellectuals.

Twelve-step meetings, however, close with the useful reminder to “take what you like and leave the rest.” Although she frustrates me, I like Brené Brown, even if (in fact, maybe *because*) she needs to think a little harder about history. If she did, she might realize that the cool chick lives for a reason, and that she lives within what Joyce Johnson reminds us is feminism’s “never-to-be-completed work of transforming relationships with men.” Change will be made slowly (thanks, Mom), within a tightly constrained space. Meantime, cool can level the playing field of sexual politics, if only temporarily. It can open up space to operate, to strategize. And when it does, it creates opportunities for pleasure as well as power.

So, sure, Brené: I understand. The cool chick is a defense mechanism—in the best sense of that term. Maybe what you notice are her brittle candy layers, or some maladaptive “armor.” But when you see the cool chick whole, you will see her also, ineluctably, as a witness to a decision made against long odds that yes, there is a self in here, and she deserves defending.