



PROJECT MUSE®

Gender Nerds at Heart: An Interview on Bridging the Blogging/Academic Divide with Feministing.com

Naomi Greyser

American Quarterly, Volume 64, Number 4, December 2012, pp. 837-839
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/aq.2012.0053



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v064/64.4.greyser01.html>

Gender Nerds at Heart: An Interview on Bridging the Blogging/Academic Divide with Feministing.com

Naomi Greyser

Naomi talked with Samhita Mukhopadhyay, executive editor of the blog Feministing, and Gwendolyn Beetham, the blog's academic feminist, about translating feminism for multiple audiences, sustaining a blog without substantial funding, and seeing Judith Butler's work on PowerPoint slides at the United Nations. Feministing is "an online community for feminists and their allies" founded in 2004.

Naomi: What does the labor of “bridging the blogging/academic divide,” as Gwendolyn puts it in the description of her series, involve? In what other ways, besides through the “Academic Feminist” series, does Feministing seek to do that kind of bridging?

Gwendolyn: For a long time before the series was put into action, Samhita and I (and some of the other editors at Feministing) discussed bringing more academic work to the site. This is not only because both of us have an academic background and like to drop words like *intersectional* and *performativity* into everyday conversation, but because, like many feminists of our generation and younger, we cut our feminist teeth in a women's and gender studies classroom. As a result, even if a lot of the editors don't say so explicitly (and some of them do), much of Feministing's content is heavily shaped by feminist thought.

On the other side of things, while working in academia (I finished my PhD last year), I noticed the common problem that a lot of “junior” academics face—that is, a lot of the work that they were doing wasn't making it out into the world at large, whether it was because of the notorious hierarchies in the academic publishing world or the difficulties in translating into language accessible to a larger audience. And of course, there is the problem that, even when feminist academics do want to contribute to public conversations, the lag time in the academic publishing world can be one to three years (and sometimes more!), even for journals that publish online. We hoped that the

Academic Feminist could be a bridge where two things could happen: one, we could make explicit the ties to feminist theory that were already on the site, and two, we could help academics make their work available to a larger audience in a timely manner.

Samhita: Yes, Gwen is correct, we are all gender nerds at heart and started blogging in part due to our academic training in feminism. But many of us felt constrained by the academic setup, which works for some types of discourse and not others. We wanted to create something more fun and accessible—a new type of grassroots theory that young women of a variety of backgrounds could latch onto to inform their lives.

Naomi: Do you have any specific stories about times when activist analysis transformed academic work, or vice versa?

Gwendolyn: I've been saying for years that I want to write a piece on the different ways that Butler's theories about gender have been adapted around the world. I've been in discussions at the United Nations and seen Butler's name pop up on a PowerPoint! Seriously, it's crazy.

I've also seen a push back on the deconstruction of gender, especially from certain parts of the trans activist community, with some people saying "wait a minute, I think that 'gender fluid' does not represent who I am; I want to identify within the male/female binary." Although I think that some of the critique is based on a misreading of Butler's (and others') work from both sides, I nevertheless believe it's a good thing that the lived experiences of trans folks are leading to debates about how theory affects people's lives. In my opinion, that's what feminist research—and theory—is supposed to be about.

Samhita: The rigor and thoughtfulness that organizers often put to their work is generally rooted in some theory they may have interacted with in the past—whether that be feminist theory or ethnic studies or others. It's hard to separate, since the inception of many of these liberal fields was rooted in the activism of the 70s and 80s. As was seen in the 80s with the love of Foucault in the HIV movement, some of the most relevant and effective activism is in the conversation between theory and practice.

Naomi: How do you understand the potential for collaboration between academic and activist feminists, as bloggers, readers, and activists?

Samhita: Well, the opportunity is there, but the infrastructure is not. Since feminist bloggers don't have a ton of resources, we are not able to package our content in ways that are easy for professors to use. But many do anyway, since they realize their students are getting a lot of their feminist analysis from feminist blogs. I think beyond what we are doing at *Feministing* with featuring feminist theoretical work, there is a lot of space for dialogue between academics and bloggers about the state of current feminism and activism, and for taking stock of how far we have come and what is ahead. Some of this includes bringing bloggers to speak to women's studies students, but also cowriting pieces, maybe having bloggers guest lecturing seminars and professors blogging once in a while!

Naomi: How have readers responded to Gwendolyn's series in particular? How do you each understand the pleasures and challenges of writing for academics on a popular site, and of writing for such a broad and multifaceted audience on *Feministing* more generally?

Gwendolyn: There's been an incredibly positive response, particularly from the feminist academic community. But: I get a lot of really LONG answers, some in language that takes a bit of work to make accessible to a nonacademic audience.

Aside from the obvious difficulties with translation, I think that there is another problem that doesn't get talked about much: the problem of getting academic feminists' work out to a larger audience is also one about time and money. As we know well, if you have a career in academia, at least in the early years, you need to focus on publishing in venues that "count" toward securing a job or tenure, which leaves little space for "public intellectual" kind of work. Let's just say that publishing an interview on *Feministing* will not get you many points in your tenure review. However, I think that many feminist scholars are committed to making our work accessible to as many people as possible, so being able to get some ideas out there in interview form—which is not very labor- or time-intensive—is something that works well. (But it still would be great to be able to give the interviewees a stipend or something!)

Lately there has been some serious discussion about sustainability and getting paid for the work we need to do in the academic world, and there is starting (thanks to former *Feministing* editor Courtney Martin's efforts) to be a real discussion about it in the online feminist world as well. It would be great to start to merge these conversations.