Introduction

Claire B. Potter

Journal of Women's History, Volume 22, Number 4, Winter 2010, pp. 185-189 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

Roundtable

Women Gone Wild: Reflections on the Feminist Blogosphere

Introduction

Claire B. Potter

It is a great privilege to be present as a historian when technology is shifting the terms of our intellectual practice. Because of my belief that academic blogging is a game-changing moment for scholars and feminists, I was particularly excited when the *Journal of Women's History* asked me to organize this cluster of articles. Our call asked potential authors to think about "the emergence of blogging as a location for critical thought among women in the historical profession; historians of women, gender and sexuality; and feminist scholars who may, or may not be, historians." Among other things, we asked: "What role does self-publishing on the Internet play in a profession where merit is defined by scholarly review and a rigorous editorial process? Is blogging itself developing rules and practices that will inevitably produce intellectual and scholarly hierarchies similar to those that blogging seeks to dismantle? Does feminist blogging offer particular opportunities for enhanced conversation about race, sexuality, class and national paradigms, or does it tend to reproduce existing scholarly paradigms and silences within feminist scholarship?"

The call was properly printed, on actual paper, in the *Journal of Women's History* itself. It was then distributed in the online venues (list serves, e-newsletters, and wikis) that scholars now take for granted to support the work of conventional publication, conference organizing and the hiring of new faculty. But then it began to wander. Our call went up on Facebook, and a link (supported by Tiny.url) was tweeted on Twitter. Most effectively, perhaps, for several months, it was in view of an average 500 readers per day as a sidebar item on my own blog, Tenured Radical.[1] From there it was picked up by RSS feed and delivered to the desktops of Tenured Radical followers; by LiveJournal sites that re-post automatically from my blog; and by scholarly blogs that make it their business to collate academic announcements and history business.

Already, perhaps, you are beginning to understand the wild world that feminist bloggers inhabit.

Our call drew a lively and inventive set of responses, originating in several disciplinary and interdisciplinary locations, from which the four

© 2010 Journal of Women's History, Vol. 22 No. 4, 185–189.

articles by Jennifer Ho, May Friedman, Marilee Lindemann, and Ann Little were developed. Rachel Leow, with whom I was e-acquainted through our mutual work on Cliopatria (a History News Network blog) agreed to comment.[2]

And we were off.

The blend of old media, new media, and newest media that supported the production of this roundtable underlines the different forms of scholarly collaboration and exchange that digital communication now facilitates. Just as the circulation of email often replaces face-to-face meetings in the academy, electronic platforms now support traditional connections among scholars even as they facilitate new ones. Prior to assembling the group of bloggers who contributed to this roundtable, I had met only one of the participants (Ann Little) in person, and spoken on the telephone to a second (Jennifer Ho). While Rachel Leow and I were able to meet briefly in Cambridge, England in spring 2010 to discuss the framing of the round table, my relationships with Marilee Lindemann and May Friedman remain electronic for now.

As feminist bloggers, this group assembled in this roundtable has many differences but we have at least two things in common. We all view ourselves as intellectuals; and we are all committed to feminist blogging as a literary practice, or tradition, that we are also inventing. This process of invention can be boundary breaking on a number of levels, and therefore, puts us in a position familiar to feminist scholars as we trouble conventional forms of intellectual respectability. "Academic blogging" can appear to be a contradiction for many of our non–blogging colleagues in the material, or what Little calls "the meat world." There is also a significant generational divide about the intellectual value of blogs; too many historians even remain skeptical of electronic scholarship that *is* refereed and governed by editorial boards. Blogging, in particular, is an activity associated most strongly with the young and the self-absorbed: this can render middle aged scholar-bloggers like Lindemann and myself even more suspect to our colleagues, as if we were experimenting with the roller derby circuit rather than with a new form of writing. More troubling to historians of all ages, I suspect, is that even though blogging is beginning to consolidate around a collective sense of ethical practice, there are no rules, no style manual, and no peer review, all critical and defining features of respectable academic publishing.

As feminist bloggers, we break and make the rules ourselves. In this sense, our blogging practice occurs during a resurgent third wave of feminism, but recalls the perils, the excitement and the collaborative possibilities of second wave feminist intellectual activism. It also reminds us that the original "women's history" project carried similar burdens of explanation and provoked similar institutional anxieties.[3] As Little also points out,

concerns about what feminist scholars think and how we choose to say what we think, are often expressed aggressively in the comments sections of our blogs. Such comments are continuing and uncomfortable reminders of the struggle for authority that persists for many women, queers, and people of color who venture outside the rhetorical spaces allotted to us in the academy.

Our blogs fortunately give us the opportunity to explain, and speak for, ourselves. As that pioneering generation of women's historians understood in the 1970s, explanations can be burdensome, but they are also an important way to refine our thoughts and move our feminist practice forward. So in this round table we explain a few things and we invite you to join our conversation by attaching the web address (known as a "url") for every blog we cite.

Who are "we"? Two of us are literary scholars, three are historians and one is a social worker and Ph.D. candidate in women's studies. Two of us are advanced scholars, two are just beginning their scholarly careers; and two of us bridge the "middle ranks." One of us is mostly a reader of blogs (in blog parlance, a "lurker"); one of us blogs as a deceased, campy, wire-haired fox terrier; one as a cowgirl on the range whose skirt won't quite stay down. Each author discusses the opportunities of and difficulties attendant to what Leow calls, in her comment, our "liminal" terrain as feminists, writers and scholars. Jennifer Ho's blogging keeps her "accountable to the advancement of knowledge by and about women and a commitment to ending oppression in whatever form it appears." May Friedman discusses the "collective production of knowledge" that she engages in as a consumer of blogs written by women who identify primarily as mothers. She sets her optimism about this phenomenon alongside a concern that blogging itself not only does not liberate women from the tug to "normal motherhood," but also might produce and reproduce oppressive expectations about maternity. Marilee Lindemann sees the feminist blogger as "the latest avatar of the self-divided, subversive" modern woman writer whose "thin disguises are at once protective, productive, and problematic." Ann Little connects her struggles for authority as a feminist in the blogosphere to the glass ceiling in the historical profession that women do not seem to be able to break through, even forty years after entering the profession in significant numbers.

Each of us sees her blog as a place where critical issues that become marginalized in more formal academic settings can be articulated and heard on the author's own terms. Not surprisingly, more than one of us has felt the uncomfortable chill of realizing that a post has provoked anger and boundary crossing among academic and/or non-academic readers. As an example of the dangers one normally does not encounter in academic

publishing, a post of mine that went "viral" provoked a storm of threatening phone calls and letters to the academic officers at my institution from a virtual community of conservative activists. They were alerted to my post and goaded on by a right-wing academic blogger who had a history of such attacks in the virtual and the "meat" world; he later went on to target Jennifer Ho, as well as non-blogging faculty at other institutions.[4] (In my case, his followers' demand that my employment be terminated immediately reminded me that academic conventions, particularly those that protect academic freedom, have their advantages. I suppressed a strong desire to reply to this man with a digital picture of myself in a cowboy hat, bearing the legend: "That's why they call me the *Tenured* Radical, son.")

History and literature scholars in the feminist blogosphere, because of the prominent status of these two fields in the cultural wars of the last two decades, might well be particularly vulnerable to these attacks.[5] They occur in the context of the emergence of an activist, non-academic conservative public, led by a neoconservative intelligentsia that longs to permanently reshape the academy to support its political goals. But it is also important to remember, as Ann Little does in her concluding piece, that these challenges to the authority of non-traditional academics are not just a problem that occurs when our ideas leave the university and cross into the world. Feminists who blog—as women, as lesbians, as people of color, as disabled subjects, as transpeople, as mothers, as postcolonial subjects, as gay men—are aware that our provisional status in the academy is often only more graphically articulated in a virtual world where we are not the only ones who have been freed from the normal rules of intellectual engagement.

In addition to their value as a general introduction to the wild rhetorical world of feminist blogging, these articles were also chosen because of the issues they raised *about* the blogosphere that would be of particular interest *to* feminist historians. They address the creation and interpretation of archives, the practice of intersectionality, the impact of blogging as a literary art with a history as well as a future, and the relationship between the practice of women's history and the contemporary status of women's intellectual authority. We are a diverse group but not, as Rachel Leow underlines, as diverse as we might be: aside from Leow's comment, our work did not embrace the feminist blogging networks beyond North America, or the full racial and ethnic diversity of blogging within North America. The tendency to become insular, to read and comment only on each other, and to succumb to the lure of the normative, as Friedman argues in her piece, is a tendency of the blogosphere that is to be resisted if we imagine that blogging can transform conversations among feminist scholars.

Left to its own devices and without accountability, as Ho, Leow, and Friedman argue, blogging must guard against mapping the world in ways

that are too familiar. Indirectly, but importantly, our authors remind us that as feminist bloggers we must not take our freedom, or the Internet's potential and actual diversity, for granted. As in many intellectual projects, it becomes apparent what this round table *might* have looked only after we have successfully completed the challenging task we set ourselves to begin with. In this sense, Leow offers us a conclusion in her final comment, but she also offers a starting point for the group of scholars who will inevitably decide to move this discussion to the next level. Where they will start is with the proposition that even as feminist bloggers break new ground and take their space, we must attend to how similar the virtual academic world is to the "meat" world of historical practice, where curricula, departmental tables of organization, and professional organizations can work to make critical knowledge visible in unprecedented ways and simultaneously obscure the voices still waiting to be heard.

And with that, welcome to our world.

Notes

[1]http://tenured-radical.blogspot.com/

[2]See: http://hnn.us/ and http://hnn.us/blogs/2.html

[3]Hokulani Aiku, Karla A. Erickson, and Jennifer Pierce, Eds., *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories From The Academy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[4]When a post is said to go "viral" that means that the post itself, or links to it, are being reproduced on multiple sites that take it beyond its original audience. People who swamp a post with insulting comments are known in the trade as "trolls;" people who use multiple aliases to deliver multiple comments as if they were being made by different people are said to be using "sock puppets."

[5]See Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: NYU Press, 1977); Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); and Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).