

Academic Labor

IJoC

Feminist Labor in Media Studies/Communication: Is Self-Branding Feminist Practice?

SARAH BANET-WEISER
University of Southern California

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ
Pitzer College

The neoliberal university, as well as the logic and strategies that undergird it, have an impact on feminist scholarship and working feminists. That is, the neoliberal subject so celebrated by the university—self-interested, entrepreneurial, self-promoting, individualist—is precisely the worker who is not always informed or shaped by the most fundamental goals of feminism that are committed to collective pursuits of justice and social and institutional critique and transformation.

This is a special issue on academic labor, where much of the focus is rightly on recent trends and practices that shape universities, ranging from increasing use of itinerant labor for staffing courses to managerial-style faculty governance to general adoption of a corporate or business model as the best way to organize institutions of higher learning. We believe these all to be crucial issues, but also want to call attention to how these reshifted academic labor practices are gendered practices. Changes in labor practices in the university accompany similar labor practices in other fields and are often theorized as consequences of neoliberalism, a political economic context in which “free” market logic governs institutions and individuals. But neoliberal labor practices do not have the same impact, feel the same way, or are accessible in the same way across gender, race, and class.

We hope to add to the conversation in this special issue by focusing upon the gendered implications of these labor conditions of the neoliberal university. Antithetical to our shared goals, current labor expectations are relentlessly individualist and entrepreneurial. Therefore, we will look to feminist epistemologies, practices, and politics that might provide a useful framework for critique and action.

As is true for many feminist media scholars, we have spent the last decades thinking through what feminism has meant for us as academics, what it could—and should—mean for future scholarship, and how to make sense of some of the ways it has shape-shifted in a time of cultural and economic transformation in the United States. Much of this thinking takes place within and around what we think of as academic and feminist labor—the gendered labor that frames and structures the academy as well as our own scholarship. As we continue to work on our own research (Alex as both a feminist theorist and a

media producer; Sarah as a scholar of feminist and media studies), mentor undergraduate and graduate students, work on feminist curricula, hiring, and promotion in our academic departments, and consider what it means to be a “good departmental citizen,” we have engaged in lively conversations with each other about the quickly changing contemporary academic context. In that spirit, we present here an informal conversation about some issues that we feel are important to our own research trajectories, as well as the state of feminist labor in the academy more generally, and, in particular, for those younger scholars who will be the feminist laborers of the future. We begin by introducing what we see as our positions and concerns and then conclude with two areas of tension for what Julia Lesage calls (in personal, inter-generational interactions with one of the authors) “media feminists.”¹

What is Feminist Labor?

Alex

I write this during my sabbatical from a tenured position at a costly liberal arts college. My awareness of the privileged place from whence I speak makes me feel rather cautious, self-censoring, paranoid, and awkward. And yet I recognize these feelings as oddly familiar—an affect that academia tries to force on us all, wherever we are positioned; a sensibility that works like clockwork to keep us in check, silenced, and isolated. While this familiar “imposter syndrome” is disproportionately felt by women in academia, as early as when I was in high school, it was feminism that allowed me a framework to name these feelings as socially manipulated conditions and a community and history from whence to break past them. Initially, feminism’s focus on personal empowerment and community solidarity allowed me to take on a posture of confidence, entitlement, and dignity, and it provided a place and a community from where I could anchor this nascent authority. Continuing to rely on (and contribute to) this community and its theories across my career in higher education, I have been fortunate enough for this promise of empowerment to more fully take root. I thank feminism and tenure for: mentors, colleagues, shared principles, affirmative action, academic freedom, and other decent and facilitating labor conditions.

I write now to graduate students and junior colleagues who might understandably imagine that the dismantling of tenure, feminism, and other enabling conditions within academia demand new tactics and postures for our labor. My belief that senior feminists in the field need to make personal and professional connections with younger scholars was solidified when I attended a panel on feminist blogging at this year’s SCMS conference. It was an amazingly discomfiting experience where “feminism” brought us together, but current labor and cultural conditions and the neoliberal vocabularies associated with them, particularly the concepts of “self-branding” and “self-promotion” served to shatter any sense of cohesive community or commitment. A palpable sentiment of fear and anxiety organized the room (the kind I admitted to at the beginning of this article), but somehow our shared feminism did nothing to dispel it. Many of the feminist bloggers on the panel, as well as those in the room—primarily graduate students and women early in their careers—were looking instead to new goals and communities, ones organized by different vocabularies, practices, and terminology from those (dated words and acts?) with which I was

¹ Julie Lesage was one of the readers for Juhasz’s *Women of vision* (Minnesota, 2001), and she used this term often in her close, interactive, critical, but constructive reading of the text.

familiar. Where I understood that my individual efforts (at blogging) were somehow in synch with both known and anonymous feminists whose work was also dedicated to shared personal and institutional goals, most of the women in the room discussed these same practices within a dynamic of embattled isolation; a privatized struggle to be heard, seen, or known. How might we understand the changing nature of the academy and feminism to be at the root of this impasse in feminists' understanding, this shift in tone and affect, even as the essential activities stayed the same?

Is this a generational problem (my feminism is outdated), a political one (their feminism is tainted), an economic one (the practicalities of the job market trump ideology), or a crisis in feminist labor (the nature of our work shifts under new technologies, institutional structures, and decreasing job security)? It is this conundrum around which I [interacted—via our blogs—with many of the feminist bloggers on the panel](#) and in the audience after returning home from the conference. A long chain of interaction accrued on several of our blogs, indicating that the conversation was prescient and that people sought understanding. I wrote:

My feminist (academic) blogging might be understood or termed as “self-promotion,” or even “self-branding” (a term tossed about, uneasily, at the session). But I truly think of this very same practice (without fear) as a public engagement in thinking out loud, honing a voice, self-naming, community-building, and stake-holding . . . Feminism gives us all the tools we need to understand that economic conditions like a depression and an academy that sells advanced degrees to pay for itself, social conditions like patriarchy and racism and homophobia, and psychological conditions like anxiety, should not be suffered as a personal, debilitating and self-censoring problem, but should be understood and fought as political issues best addressed by being named, refused, refined, and remade within the power of movements and with the tools of technology.

Later, discussing the emotional impact of this event with Sarah, we both agreed that we had much more we wanted to share with our colleagues and learn from each other, even as such conversations seemed strained by the academic labor limits and hierarchies put into place by rank, place of employment, age, and name recognition (the very power relations feminism hopes to understand, challenge, and rearrange).

Sarah

I attended the same panel on female bloggers that Alex references and also came away feeling a bit discomfited. While she felt the anxiety in the room, I was more struck with some of the certainty that seemed to characterize parts of the conversation. Since I have been writing quite a bit about girls and young women and the increasingly normative practice (in the United States anyway) of self-branding, the turn in the panel to self-branding stuck with me. The panelists were all experienced bloggers, and all were either graduate students or junior faculty. As Alex says, there ensued a lively conversation, one that invoked a discussion of women and technologies, alternative forms of publication, such as blogging and video production, and whether they “count” for things like tenure—and if not, why not—and, most important, media production as feminist practice.

Interestingly, while parsing out how and in what ways blogging and uploading videos can be critical feminist practice, the conversation turned to self-branding. Some of the panelists mentioned that they also use media production online as a way to “self-brand,” especially since many of them were on the academic job market, and this was seen as a way of establishing an “on-line presence.” However, at times, it was a bit difficult to figure out what some of the panelists believed to be the differences between self-branding and feminist media practice—or even if those differences made a difference. This was the certainty I mentioned; that it seemed perfectly logical to speak of ourselves as “brands,” particularly in relation to the job market.

I’m troubled by the notion that the practices of feminist media production and self-branding seem to be increasingly intertwined.

As Alison Hearn (2008) has argued, self-branding is a practice whereby one constructs a narrative of the self using the logic, language, and strategies of branding—it means to transform the self into a branded commodity within consumer culture. Social media and other online spaces have provided particularly rich sites for self-branding because of the relative flexibility of the Web and its focus on visibility. While much of social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, have self-identified as valuable spaces for both self-expression and business, it seems to be that for many of the users on these sites, self-expression is a business.

Clearly, social media are capacious, and certainly all people who use social media do not do so to self-brand. It is, however, an increasingly normative practice, one that is enabled by social media and one that relies on a particular practice of gendered labor.

The practice of online self-branding for girls and young women, including academics, including feminists, often relies on an intertwined set of dynamics, tapping into user interactivity, global neoliberal capitalism, and postfeminism. As a more specified and local practice, however, the conventions of blogging, uploading videos, and updating information on social network sites fit with the logic of self-branding. That is, posting one’s opinions, thoughts, status updates, and so on are part of media production and thus can be empowering as self-work, but because of the commercial and branded context of online spaces, this kind of media interactivity can also transform into self-branding. The market forces of global neoliberal capitalism and the context of postfeminism, in other words, do not just capitalize on participatory culture and notions of gendered empowerment, but also frame and shape what we’ve come to know as “participation” and “empowerment” in the first place. For me, feminist labor practices involve not only actual media production on social media sites, but also the interrogation of the logic and structures of these sites, as well as how this logic and structure in turn frame and shape our production and participation. Again, this doesn’t mean that all media production is about engaging in self-branding, but it does mean that feminist labor, like all forms of labor, takes place in a specific political economy.

This is an especially slippery terrain for feminists, because so much of feminist struggle has been about giving—and taking—voice, occupying space that has historically been inaccessible, and presenting oneself in confident, empowering terms. I don’t want to confuse self-promotion with self-branding, as I

think that promoting our work is vital for feminists in the contemporary context. But I believe that feminists can promote our work while simultaneously challenging the institutional and commercial structures in which our work so often finds a home. It is both of these practices simultaneously—self-presentation as confident and powerful and critiquing normative practices of self-branding—that I see as important feminist labor practices.

If feminist labor is performed within the strictures of the corporate university, we need to be vigilant about considering what this labor looks like and who is practicing it. So, in that spirit, we felt we should ask a few questions about some of the changing conditions of feminist labor as we see it. It will be noticed: We do not have answers to these questions. Our asking them in the first place is part of self-reflexivity, as we engage in feminist practices, including blogging and social media, and ponder what these practices mean in the contemporary environment. By leaving our questions open ended, we hope instead to generate a conversation across our varied positions about the gendered components of academic labor.

1. **FEMINIST VISIBILITY/EMPOWERMENT/IMAGE:** Feminism often seeks the gaining and maintaining of voice and visibility, empowering women to inhabit the agency, authority, credibility, and space from which to speak and be heard. We ask: What are the ends of this “to-be-looked-at-ness”? Where is our hard-found personal power best directed? Feminism helps us to understand self-empowerment as a part of larger processes that move in three directions: toward building community (enabling other’s voices and connecting varied forms of expression); speaking critique that is grounded in personal experience (the feminist adage of “the personal is political” is even more heightened in the neoliberal university); and making change accordingly. In academia, our voice enables each of us to speak our profound feminist-inflected textual and institutional analyses in ever expanding and varied forms. But this is a building dialogue that cannot be understood within the confines of isolated production. Meanwhile, our institutional power allows us to struggle for such words to continue to be created and then appropriately valued. Our personal empowerment also allows us to advocate for and mentor students and colleagues, as well as to transform ideas, curricula, and departments. How might we use feminist values of visibility to ensure that these usually unseen and undervalued acts of service, disproportionately performed by female academics, are better valued? It is a difficult time to get a job, a hard time to keep a job, and these are tough times to be noticed. How can we be seen and known without understanding ourselves as products or in isolation? How can we share our best work while connecting it to the work of others and to larger political goals?

Finally, is our academic labor, which takes the forms of deep thinking, complex writing, and sustained and building critique, best suited for the quick tactics of branding? Speaking as professors who hire young scholars regularly, we support the idea that scholarship comes in different forms (including filmmaking and other sorts of media production). We struggle, as feminists often do, to include alternative forms of scholarship as “real” work. That said, we have never looked at whether or not a candidate has developed a particularly good self-brand when doing the serious work of hiring. However, if a person’s blog or website were a considered part of their academic project, or if the job asked for proficiency in these technologies, then these practices should be included as alternative forms of scholarship. One of the reasons we are

feminist academics is because we want to believe in and work toward a workplace where self-presentation is primarily rooted in the quality of one's work and not in the surface of one's interests.

2. ON-LINE PRESENCE AND/AS FEMINIST LABOR: What is the role of feminist labor in the process of branding oneself, or building an "online presence"? Labor, especially immaterial or unpaid labor, has been a dominant theme in critical media studies, as David Hesmondhalgh (2010) has pointed out. In an era characterized by digital media, user-generated content, and the cultural industries, participants in these practices are often involved in unpaid work or free labor. Hesmondhalgh rightly questions whether all labor necessarily needs to have a negative connotation, as a kind of work that is, by definition, alienating and isolating. To that end, he cautions scholars on how we might invoke terms like "free" or unpaid" labor.

What are some of the differences in "labor" as it is performed by women in the context of self-branding? Young feminist scholars at the panel discussed entering the academic "labor market," and they talked about the need to build a self-brand in order to be competitive in this market. How should we think about feminist labor in the neoliberal university, and how does this labor differ from earlier forms of academic individual labor? How do we parse out the different sorts of academic labor and how labor is connected to academic individualism? That is, in many ways, academics are particularly suited to individualist practices because of the kind of work we do, which does not mean that self-branding is inevitable. One way to engage in feminist labor is to continually challenge the individualism of social media and consciously use these flexible sites as rich contexts for community and dialogue.

How would it be useful to think about postfeminism as a backdrop for the academy? Angela McRobbie describes postfeminism as among other things, a context in which cultural discourses endow (particular) girls and young women with economic capacity, that girls and young women "now find themselves charged with the requirement that they perform as economically active female citizens" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 15). While McRobbie is examining post-feminism in a broader cultural context, we think it is worth thinking about as a context that shapes academic feminist labor. That is, many feminists (including us) critique postfeminism, but that doesn't mean postfeminist ideologies and practices do not at times permeate academic labor. The postfeminist ideals of visibility, self-empowerment, "mattering" in culture, and so on are often the ideals that female academics strive for in an environment that still frequently positions female academics as efficient service workers and "good citizens" rather than as researchers.

Feminist Labor is Collective

Alex and Sarah

We need to be clear in our thinking through feminism and the role of gendered labor in the academy that we are not trying to construct a nostalgic binary between feminist generations. Quite the

contrary, we are hoping for an expanded feminist conversation in the academy, one that recognizes collective labor and strives to challenge gendered divisions of labor as these continue to structure the academic world. What we are saying, however, is that the constricting form of the contemporary university—one that is organized around a business model, that does not recognize the varied ways in which gendered labor is the scaffolding for how university governance often works, and that transforms scholarship into products and scholars into individual entrepreneurs—is damaging to feminism and feminists. That is to say, the neoliberal university privileges individual self-interest over collective pursuits of justice, rewards self-promotion, and normalizes self-branding as the logical way to position oneself on the job market, and it relies upon temporary and adjunct laborers to teach and do service in academic departments. We attest that these labor practices are, by definition, antifeminist.

Certainly historically, there has been a way in which professors and students have always been individuated in the university; higher institutions of learning have long been about an individual's personal trajectory in gaining knowledge, at all stages. Yet, there is something different about the contemporary ethos of the neoliberal university, where this individual trajectory has a logic and practice that centers on personal fulfillment and gain. As feminists, we are dedicated to the theory and practice of intersectionality, which recognizes the multiple ways in which components of our identities—race, sexuality, gender, class—intersect, inform, and constitute each other. Intersectionality is also about feminist coalition, where feminist labor is performed not only for ourselves, but also for others, community, and justice.

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