

**“A good blog is a continuing conversation.” How I Learned to Blog and Use Social Media  
as a Feminist Activist**

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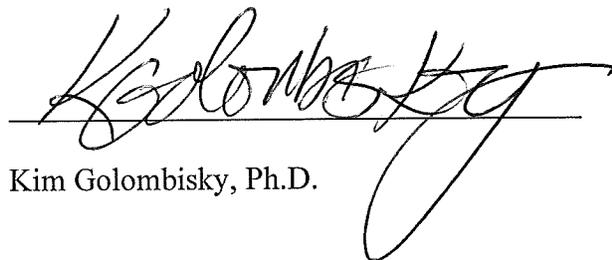
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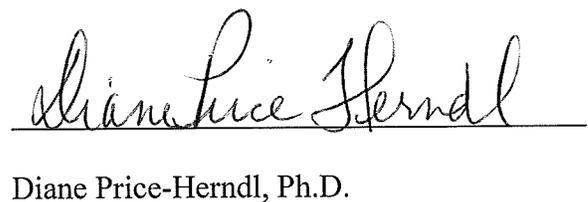
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## Abstract

Blogging has become a hot ticket to fast and lasting notoriety. Or has it? With what seems like everyone starting a blog, it is easy to get pulled into the idea that once you start writing you can become successful in a matter of just a few posts. As a feminist activist, I set out to discover what it takes to become a successful blogger with a social media presence. I spent several months writing and working with Matter of Cause, an organization looking to create change online. My narrative reflects the triumphs and difficulties of online feminist activism. As I worked on writing blog posts that reflected my views on pop culture, feminism, and sex positivity, I faced the hard work and determination it takes to establish a successful online feminist brand through social media.

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## How It All Began

*Hi Samantha,” the email began, “[a friend of mine] passed me your name and email. I run the blog for I Am Choice Community Changemakers.<sup>1</sup> We would love to invite you to write for our blog, ‘I am Choice.’ I know you have an active blog yourself, so we're also interested in sharing reposts.*

I was stunned. How on Earth did this editor find me, and why was she interested in my writing? I had been running my own blog, *A Feminist Life*, for almost four years and though the blog had grown with me, I never received any substantial interest in it before. I realized quickly that this opportunity would be a way to showcase my own work and allow me to grow as a writer. I responded to the editor, telling her that I would be more than happy to write for her website turned blog. I was so excited that I immediately began drafting a piece about heteronormativity and how the stereotypes of marriage and family feel as though they are constantly shoved down the throats of young people everywhere.<sup>2</sup> The editor of “I am Choice” accepted the piece and, thus, began a working relationship between me and the “I am Choice” team.

I submitted several pieces to the “I am Choice” organization before inquiring about an internship. I was approaching graduation, and I needed to complete an internship in order to graduate with my master’s degree in Women’s and Gender Studies. I contacted the president and founder of “I am Choice” about the newly established internship program. I was invited to meet with her in person. The interview process covered my views on politics, women’s issues, and

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<sup>1</sup> The organization would soon change its name to “Matter of Cause” and let go of the “I am Choice” slogan altogether. The website has also been changed to, [www.matterofcause.com](http://www.matterofcause.com).

<sup>2</sup> “Young People and the Pressure to Lead Lives of the Past”

LGBTQ rights. I positioned myself as a pro-sex radical feminist activist who often commented on sex, politics, and pop culture. I got the job because of my teaching and volunteering on comprehensive sex education. The president hired me following a second interview and explained that I would be writing about women's issues and sex positivity. Twice a month I would write pieces of my own choosing.

I hoped writing for the blog would teach me to use social media as an activist and to operate a website successfully. I was interested in learning how to publicize my work more effectively and at the same time how I could enhance my activism through online technologies. This opportunity with the newly named, *Matter of Cause* (MOC) would be a way to merge my passion for writing and my interest in technology-based activism. This narrative of my time with MOC reflects the triumphs and difficulties of online feminist activism. I write as a white heterosexual 20-something middle-class U.S. bilingual cisgendered woman with an invisible disability. As I worked on writing blog posts that reflected my views on pop culture, feminism, and sex positivity, I discovered the work and determination it takes to establish a successful blog and social media presence that works towards creating a place for feminist activism online.

#### “It’s a Matter of Cause”

*Matter of Cause* (MOC) was originally named “I Am Choice: Community Changemakers.” The mission of “I Am Choice” was to “spark, re-imagine, and cultivate community driven solutions for the issues people face” ([iamchoice.com](http://iamchoice.com)). The primary focus of the group was to organize opposition against the 2012 Florida Constitutional Amendment Six, dubbed “The Florida Abortion Amendment.” This amendment would have prohibited the use of public funds for abortions. Fortunately, because of the efforts of “I Am Choice” and other organizations, the amendment was defeated (Ballotpedia).

After the 2012 election the organization's future looked promising. During the 2013 Florida legislative session, the organization's leadership led a three-day awareness campaign, "Stop Hate, Stop 58," in response to Florida Senate Bill 58, nicknamed the "anti-religious hate" bill by advocacy groups.<sup>3</sup> The organization became so successful that within hours the "I am Choice" Facebook page had reached over 10,000 people and received national news coverage. In the end, the bill did not pass in the Florida Senate ([iamchoice.com](http://iamchoice.com)).

After its success, the organization's name became a problem. The word "choice" is controversial because it has become synonymous with abortion rights. Numbers of supporters and organizations became confused and believed "I Am Choice" only focused on issues of access to safe abortions and reproductive rights, which was not the case. Though the organization was gaining traction in the political world, it was not reaching the audience it cared to target. "I am Choice" wanted to connect with other progressive organizations within the Tampa Bay area by focusing on the impacts of national and local stories. Ultimately, "I am Choice" leadership decided a new direction and name change were needed. After some debate and careful consideration of word usage, a new name was found: Matter of Cause (MOC). The slogan became, "It's a Matter of Cause." Currently, the main focus is to grow the readership and reach of MOC's articles. MOC leadership wants to build a platform to unite diverse but likeminded individuals in the Tampa Bay area for the ultimate purpose of galvanizing a political force.

MOC is more than a blog; it's an organization that "brings knowledge to action" through progressive voices. Key for MOC is to bring many voices to its progressive political agenda. MOC wants to be the No. 1 place to go for a fresh perspective as well as a device to document the progressive movement from a grassroots point of view. The goal is to bring real-life accounts

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Senate Bill 58, visit: <http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2013/0058>

to topics important to the people of Tampa Bay. MOC also works to bring issues of equality to the ballot by moving these issues hard enough for other organizations around the Tampa Bay area to join MOC in support. Ultimately, then, through MOC leadership, these issues reach the Florida State Government.

MOC is growing and changing. MOC publishes articles based on what is happening in the news. Content relies on the writers and how their individual experiences shape their understanding of current events, though some weeks there have been themes to the pieces. For example, MOC emphasized women's history month. During the weeks leading up to March, MOC posted several articles that looked at women's issues. Some examples of the categories that writers can choose from include race, gender, and sexuality issues and rights. MOC's goal is to establish a dialogue between its bloggers and readers by covering topics important to MOC's readers. The idea is to let the voices and expertise of MOC's writers make connections with people.

#### Overview of Internship Responsibilities

As this was my first experience as an intern, I wasn't sure what to expect. In graduate school, I improved my skill as a writer. In addition, I had written for MOC before starting my internship. So I felt confident about my style of writing and its ability to fit the blog's intended audience. I was, however, apprehensive about helping MOC maintain an editorial calendar and lobby for specific legislation. Throughout my time with MOC, once a week I was responsible for one article that might cover some issue from a range topics such as feminism, women's issues, life, and sex. Despite some nervousness about non-writing assignments beyond my experience, I remained excited for the new opportunities this position would bring me.

Below is a brief overview of some of the responsibilities for which I was accountable during my time with MOC. The following is excerpted from my internship contract:

#### Intern Responsibilities

##### a. General Responsibilities

- i. Maintain confidentiality: Intern will come in contact with various information, processes, methods, and supporter information. None of this or any other proprietary information should be disclosed without written permission from company.
- ii. Work on days and times scheduled, as well as notify supervisor about any schedule changes.
- iii. Act in accordance with all guidelines and dress requirements as specified.
- iv. Complete all assignments, tasks, and projects within the deadlines and guidelines provided.
- v. Communicate and collaborate with other team members in developing and executing daily tasks, projects, and/or campaigns.
- vi. Provide feedback on internship during and upon completion.

##### b. Position Responsibilities

- i. Researching and drafting statements as needed.
- ii. Drafting, repacking, and editing content for blog.
- iii. Collaborate with team members on new ideas, strategies, and messaging for campaigns and overall direction of blog.
- iv. Oversee blog recruitment.
- v. Maintain editorial calendar.
- vi. Assist in expansion of online community and distribution of content.
- vii. Attend weekly meetings and post weekly updates in Facebook work group.
- viii. Maintain some general knowledge about current affairs as it pertains to women's issues (especially sexual assault on college/university campuses and reproductive rights in Florida).

I also was responsible for brainstorming ways to increase MOC's following. I read, watched, and listened to a lot of news sources because anything could be a story. Then I was to share and "like" the various posts on MOC's Facebook page through my own Facebook page, as well as ask my friends to do the same. Furthermore, I shared the articles on my own blog and even went so far as to join Twitter to promote MOC's work because MOC targeted likeminded progressives across the social media universe.

In the second week of March, I ended my internship earlier than the April 25 end date on my contract. I respectfully declined to continue to write for the organization because of editorial differences and my desire to take my writing in a different direction. During my brief writing career with MOC, I published nine articles and wrote an additional seven, plus an eighth that I eventually published on my blog, *A Feminist Life*. (See appendices for the texts of these articles.) I am proud of this body of work. In my mind, I left the internship amicably. I believe in MOC's mission, and I wish it continued success.

### Blogging, Cyberfeminism, and Social Media

During my internship, in addition to reading and writing about feminist issues in the news and on the political agendas of progressives, I also read what the scholars have to say about blogging, social media, and cyberfeminism. I was trying to get a handle on the relationship between my stance as a feminist and online communities such as the blogosphere and social media. I discovered that I can claim the label cyberfeminist. As a form of online activism, cyberfeminism influences my choices of topics to write about. Since my interests and expertise lie with comprehensive sex education, I also searched for some consensus on how to define "sex positivity" in an effort to write about it in an engaging way for MOC.

To begin at the beginning, the word blog comes from the saying “log your being” (Nardi et al. 43). Blogs are one of the fastest growing forms of social media and a useful tool to reach others (Cooke 646). Baker writes, “Blogs, or online diaries, are websites containing an archived series of reverse chronological items of content posted by the author” (Baker et al. 379). Blogging is sometimes viewed as a new grassroots form of journalism (Nardi et al. 41), which is why MOC chose to use this type of medium to gain readers as well as establish a platform to create political change. Blogs combine the immediacy of up-to-the-minute posts and latest features with a sense of the author’s personality, passions, and, of course, point of view (Cooke 646; Nardi et al. 42). Blogging also offers quick feedback and provides the ability to test an idea with very little risk (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Running a blog does not take much in terms of funding and can easily be published quickly and with very little effort (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Bloggers do not need to go through a publisher or spend funds on publicity. Posts can be published within a matter of minutes and most websites are free to run (Doctorow 1; Briggs 46). Cooke explains, “At the heart of blogging is the notion that the person is not a ‘respondent’ reacting to our stimulus, but rather a willing participant on a journey of discovery” (Cooke 646).

Because I do the majority of my activism online as a blogger to promote such feminist ideals, I consider myself a cyberfeminist. This form of feminism shaped my approach to my MOC work and the way I represented myself online through social media. Eudey writes:

Many suggest that "cyberactivism" is an appropriate term for feminist civic engagement online, but that "cyberfeminism" should be reserved for those forms of activism that not only utilize the Internet, but also include critical reflection of the ways in which sexism and other oppressions are components of the online experience. (Eudey 241)

Technology has had a large impact on what we do as feminist activists by providing the mechanism wherein many individuals can gather to connect in real and asynchronous time across geographic and socio-cultural distances in order to express their beliefs for a wider audience than anyone could have imagined less than a generation ago. Cyberfeminism picks up on the use of such communication technology, especially social media, and uses it to bring awareness to more people than ever before (Volkart ; Eudey 241; Nuñez Puente 334; Gillis 4; Paasonen 336).

Although not without its limits, electronic communication puts more people in touch with one another for sharing ideas and concerns.

I used cyberfeminism as a tool to enhance my activism by utilizing my social media outlets to connect with other likeminded individuals. So I began to focus on the topics I would blog about and how those topics would touch my readers. In the beginning of my time writing for MOC, I was assigned the task to define sex positivity. MOC was interested in creating a piece that could become a reference when MOC wanted to discuss topics relating to sex. Put simply, sex positivity is being positive about sex. The problem, however, arises because sex is a politically charged issue and different people define “being positive about sex” differently. Lack of consensus on what constitutes sex positivity causes difficulties, let alone debate, for and among scholars and activists alike (Williams et al. 273; Ferguson et al. 106; McElroy 3). If scholars and activists cannot agree, then implementing social change becomes even more difficult (Williams et al. 273; Ferguson et al. 106; McElroy 3). McElroy illustrates the problem: “The bottom line is that every woman has the right to define what is degrading and liberating for herself” (McElroy 3). I argue that a sex positive approach encourages a wide range of sexual expression that accounts for various sexual and gender identities, orientations, behaviors, and

presentations. Of course, this enlightened view of sex positivity requires access to health care services and depends on comprehensive sexual education (Williams et al. 273).

A message like sex positivity can be difficult to bring to readers because of its varying and sometimes competing definitions. However, using social media to promote these types of messages is an excellent way to begin dialogue among scholars, activists, and individuals interested in the subject. Yet social media users have to create their own audience (Leach 1). Using social media to broadcast information is hard work that requires a savvy understanding of how to use such tools. Also understanding how to use publicity effectively can aid in building a brand (Tagholm 1). Although social media offers authors the opportunity to connect with readers, said readers will connect with the author on their own terms to return, join, or abandon the site (Leach 1; Breakenridge 141). The viral aspect of social media makes it the contemporary analog to old-fashioned word of mouth—the elusive goal of authors and activists. An online “brand” grows from finding people who connect with and support the message and to share with their own networks of people (Cassell 1; Breakenridge 141). Unlike traditional mass media, social media are today the cheapest and easiest way to get publicity, even as you have to work at it consistently (Leach 1). Ladhani explains, “Social media will remain a critical component during major global events; when used to exercise free speech, share information online, and organize, they become a powerful tool for activists” (Ladhani 57).

Cyberfeminism via social media and blogging methods could extend my activism to an online audience, increase my reach among readers, and help MOC reach its goals. The simplicity of the concepts is deceptive. It is hard work to grow a following—from finding the topical sweet spot to networking in 140 characters or less.

## Sex Plus Benedict Cumberbatch Equals Readers

Originally, I was asked to write about content both relevant to my life and reflective of MOC's progressive viewpoints. I tried to produce material compatible with the organization yet also true to my own worldview. After all, I was writing about feminism and sex positivity, two topics that are important to me. In hindsight, I can share three major lessons I learned from my internship: the difficulty of defining sex positivity, the shock of working with an editor for the first time, and the challenges of developing a readership. I take these hard-learned lessons with me as I continue to develop my voice as a feminist writer.

My first experience with writing about sex came in the form of a piece critiquing Summer's Eve Cleansing Wash and a TV commercial for the product. Promoted as a vagina wash, this product moved me to inform my audience; vaginas are self regulating and don't require chemicals. My piece focused on proper washing techniques for the vulva and vagina (something lacking in the :30 second commercial). After my initial piece was published, I began to feel more comfortable writing openly about sexual issues. Soon MOC leadership contacted me about producing an article to describe what it meant to be sex positive so that the organization would have a piece that would reflect how MOC viewed sex positivity. It also would be a way to introduce myself to MOC readers and introduce them to my writing on topics about sex. I headed to the library for a literature review.

Using the research I gathered on the subject, I put together an article that I thought reflected both my understanding and MOC's. It turns out that my definition was just that, uniquely mine. The organization decided to step away from defining sex positivity and move on to other pressing topics. Later published on *A Feminist Life*, the piece I wrote shared my ideas about sex positivity as:

...[A] moving target that many scholars and activists alike cannot agree on. But I like to think of it as being positive about sex. It's a mentality that embraces all positive aspects of sexuality and the various acts of sex. There is no slut shaming or bashing of any kind about what people do to pleasure themselves. Sex is openly discussed. It also addresses the various myths associated with some sexual acts as well as myths about the body. I believe that a good sexual education is a must and that it teaches people from a young age about all the aspects of sex. Fulfillment and pleasure are on the top of my list as issues that need to be discussed in sex ed classes. Health is also an important matter when being sex positive. Knowing not only how to name the correct body parts but also knowing how the reproductive systems work, as well as how to pleasure oneself, is the first step towards being being sexually healthy. Lastly, I also believe that safety and consent is a big part of being able to control what happens to you before, during and after sex. Consent is extremely important and sets the tone for the rest of your sex life. Seeing sex as beautiful is a wonderful thing. ([afeministlife.tumblr.com](http://afeministlife.tumblr.com))

Even though I struck out with MOC on the subject of being sex positive, I did walk away with a solid understanding of the movement. I developed a definition that I will use in my future work as a feminist activist on behalf of sexual health and comprehensive sexual education.

Next, subordinating my editorial independence to an editor also became a learning experience. It was a challenge because I was not used to working under others' guidelines, and now I had to be aware of how my writing reflected on MOC and its leadership. Even though it was a challenge to learn to write in a style that was unfamiliar to me, working so closely with an editor proved to be an excellent way for me to establish my voice as a writer. Although sex was

off the table, the opportunity to write about pop culture helped me to develop as a blogger. As a result, I produced a piece about male celebrities claiming the title of feminist. I started to write in a snarky, sassy, and comedic voice. One of my favorite pieces to write was about the top three male celebrities who have mentioned feminism:

As the stardom of Benedict Cumberbatch has grown throughout the last year with his hit TV show, Sherlock and starring in movies like Star Trek: Into Darkness and 12 Years a Slave, how can I not include him in the list? He's literally everywhere! Shrines of him are everywhere on tumblr and Instagram. Hordes of young fans call themselves "Cumberbitches" or "Cumberbabes." I have to be honest about something. Do you promise not to laugh? OK... I am a Cumberperson. There I said it- it's out in the open, finally. For most of you, you've now decided I am completely fan girl-ing out and can no longer take me seriously as a writer, but wait! Hear me out. When Mr. Cumberbatch got wind of his fans calling themselves "Cumberbitches," he saw to it that he set the record straight: there are no "Cumberbitches" just "Cumberpeople." Why didn't he like the clever name? He encouraged fans not to call themselves "Cumberbitches" in order to avoid using a word that is derogatory to women. When I heard that, I knew I had been converted. ([matterofcause.com](http://matterofcause.com))

This article gave me the confidence I needed to recognize how to translate my personality into a written form. I allowed myself the freedom to express myself without reservation. Ultimately, I found voice for "telling it like it is." Writing has since become a tool for me to express myself honestly without being so reserved in my tone and diction.

The Benedict Cumberbatch piece segues to my third lesson learned—about publicity. Promoting the articles and generating new readers remains a top priority for the continued

success of the organization. I helped gain new readers by funneling individuals to the MOC blog. I contacted several fan pages for the major stars mentioned in the article to promote the piece. My Cumberbatch piece was the only internship article I wrote that was successful at generating new readers for MOC through the social media tool, in this case Instagram. I still promoted all work via my personal blog, *A Feminist Life*, but the number of readers I funneled to MOC was very small. Yet, just by using the tag “Benedict Cumberbatch” on several social media outlets to promote the piece, I was able to reach MOC’s goal to gain more readers.<sup>4</sup> The piece earned the title of post of the week, with 1500 views (and still climbing), 58 likes, 21 comments, and 28 shares on Facebook.<sup>5</sup>

MOC’s strategy to get Facebook friends to share content was simple: share on your personal Facebook page every day and every time something was updated to MOC and then find five friends to share and “like” one article a week. The bloggers would then promote the articles on other social media websites, such as Twitter, Tumblr, or Instagram. The various Facebook friends helped promote MOC’s work, and it became a successful tool in gaining new readers.

Through this simple strategy, I have discovered that by using multiple social media sites one can generate new readers, but being good at working a social media forum can help keep and maintain the existing readership long term. MOC focused on Facebook and was able to steadily gain new “likes” and readers by promoting the articles via its Facebook page. The organization does have a Twitter account and tweets the links, but the primary focus is Facebook. This

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<sup>4</sup> A way to use key words to allow readers to easily find the article. I used “Benedict Cumberbatch,” “Ryan Gosling” and “Joseph Gordon-Levitt” to name a few.

<sup>5</sup> Metrics given by MOC leadership.

strategy has worked for MOC. I, on the other hand, am not as comfortable or adept at increasing reach via social media as I would have liked.

### Reflection

I enjoyed my time writing for MOC. The experience helped shape me as a writer. With guidance from the leadership, I found my voice and experimented with writing about topics I normally would have shied away from. Still, I could have pushed myself more when writing about controversial topics, such as LGBTQ rights, equal pay, and immigration. I conducted one interview with a distant cousin of mine about her menstruation artwork. But in retrospect, I wish I had made the effort to interview more individuals to bring their stories to MOC's constituencies. MOC's mission is to bring awareness to different voices around the Tampa Bay area, and I feel that I could have done more by reaching out to a variety of people.

Learning to use social media more effectively was a main goal of mine. Upon reflection, I used a lot of self-taught techniques. Some of the techniques such as using images I created for promotional purposes were successful. Others were not. My attempt to reach fan clubs on Tumblr or through Twitter was not fruitful. For the first time I created a Twitter account, even though I found it difficult to use the account to create any success. I researched strategies online to help me in my attempt to garner new readers, but my lack of understanding how the hashtags reached other Twitter users paralyzed my attempts. Given this failure, if I had it to do over, I would work more with MOC leadership to understand their views on how to use Twitter. I also would collaborate more other members of the organization on their strategies and tactics to promote their pieces. I will take these lessons with me to the next stage of my career, wherever that may be.

## Takeaways and the Future

Social media is a powerful tool to connect with diverse and differently opinionated individuals from all over the world. I think about working with MOC to write sex positive cyberfeminist articles as implementing activism in my own small corner of the world. I also learned valuable skills for promoting my work. Shareable content incites emotion, offers some value to the reader, facilitates a connection, or is in some way remarkable (Fosco).

While the definitions of being sex positive are still being debated, I have defined sex positivity for myself: being positive about sex includes an honest and inclusive approach to sex education, access to health care services for everyone, a code of conduct that requires consent, and an emphasis on sexual pleasure. As a result of working with an editor during my internship, I've improved at articulating these kinds of ideas in writing. Last, I argue that cyberfeminism is a viable approach to social media for changing people's ideas about issues regarding progressive social justice agendas.

That is easier said than done, however. It's not easy to write a connection between my ideas and my readers'. I have found that in the moments when I remained respectful to myself and what I wanted to say, I connected more with readers. Writing under an editor and publisher for an organizational mission was stressful, and learning to understand how to market myself via social media was intimidating. But now I do understand why using social media connects with people and that positioning yourself with a brand, if done well, increases followers and can lead to a new type activism. As a new cyberfeminist activist, I enjoyed sharing my pro-sex message with readers.

When I started this journey, I was a scholar who happened to blog. Blogging was something I did for fun. Now blogging is an outlet for my activism, for the change I wish to help

make real. Through my growth as a writer, I came to realize I am a pro-sex feminist, who uses cyberfeminist methods. Perhaps even more important, since this internship, I am not afraid to tell people, whoever will listen, that I am a writer. I am not afraid to produce work that is important to me or reflects my values as a feminist scholar.

### Acknowledgements

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## Appendix of Published Articles

Below are the ten of published articles written for Matter of Cause.

### **Young People and the Pressure to Lead Lives of the Past (Oct. 9, 2013)**

Last time I checked it was 2013. Listening to my peers you might think that we have all time traveled back to the much romanticized period of the 1950s. Friends of mine tell me their experiences of family members, friends and even strangers approaching them to discuss their marital status and reproductive choices – though more so the lack thereof. Since when did these factors become so important in today’s world? Perhaps the bigger questions are how do we respond to such attacks on personal choices and how do we move past these limiting questions?

I consider myself one of the lucky ones; growing up, my family rarely threw those questions my way. From adolescence, they told me I would get an education and I would go on to live a healthy and happy life. They never tried to define what that life might look like, but they were always there for advice. On the subject of children, they said it is a large and life changing responsibility and most importantly it was a choice rather than a foregone conclusion. To this day, I don’t feel the pressure to conform to what society would love to see me do. My family respects my life decisions and honors what I have achieved.

A male friend of mine who was married for a short while told me he gets asked all the time about whether or not he will get married again. He is adamant he’s asked these types of questions out of kindness. “My marriage was very brief, but I get asked quite frequently by friends and family when I will get married again and if I want children. I say yes I want children, but I say that I’m afraid I will not find a woman who will actually love me for me.”

Two other friends of mine, both of whom are from different cultures and both females, discussed how age played a big role on when they were questioned on their life choices. “When I was 23 my aunt told me that I was too old to get married and I would never find a husband. 23!” my Pakistani friend tells me. She is now married and discussing with her partner on whether or not they want to have children. The other friend, despite growing up in the supposedly more progressive American culture, receives similar feedback and has been told she is too old (late twenties) to get married by family. Despite the many studies that exist that point out the average age of marriage is pushed further and further back, they continue to be pressured to get married as soon as possible.

“I think people will judge and ridicule you no matter which road you take,” expressed a mother of three. She is a hard working woman who has a family and is constantly judged negatively because she married and had children. “Now I think I will tell them: ‘I’m married, I am adult, I live in a free country, I’ve done everything in a socially acceptable way- I’ll have as many kids as I want!’”

It seems that you’re judged no matter what decision or pace you make for your life, so how do we stop the bombardment? Besides ignoring these questions, I propose we start making these questions into dialogues. Start by turning the tables on them – learn why they feel the need to create pressure and educate them. Creating a safe and instructive environment to discuss your personal choices allows you the time to describe the problems with pigeon holing you into certain gender norms. I’m also a fan of this method because it takes the pressure off of you and

your decisions, and places the focus on the real issue: limiting the decisions of young people into stereotypical paths only serves to impede society's progress.<sup>6</sup>

### **My Feminism Doesn't Have to be Your Feminism (Dec. 30, 2013)**

Throughout my life I have struggled with the idea of being a feminist. I was lost in a sea of definitions that I could partially relate to and then some I had no connection to or could barely understand at all. I know I am not alone in this dizzying world of trying to define ourselves through ideas found in the media and even within the classroom. However, I have discovered throughout my time in academia, that one of the ways we can discover who we are is by listening and learning from definitions of the various theories, ideologies, and theologies that are out there. This is a huge undertaking, but it gives us a start to truly becoming enlightened about the world around us. Once, on the path towards self discovery, it is my belief that we must then learn to respect each other and the differences we come across.

I started this article with my admittance to struggling daily with defining myself as a feminist. Even as a feminist scholar, I still change my definition of who I am in relation to this social movement in every paper, article I write or discussion I have with people around me. In some circles, I see myself as a radical feminist; one who wants to overthrow patriarchy and have a revolution to change our society dramatically. Yet, there are times when I feel more comfortable being a multicultural feminist; one who sees that not all social challenges women face are universal. In today's world there is a multitude of cultural and social conditions which create struggles, that are unique to location and region based on different situations found within

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<sup>6</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2013/10/09/young-people-and-the-pressure-to-lead-lives-of-the-past-by-samantha-heuwagen/>

that specific culture.<sup>7</sup> I feel as though both those theories and practices can live peacefully within me and help create the change I want to see in the world.

As one of my fellow colleagues, Kiersten Downs a feminist scholar and activist for veteran's rights, discussed with me, she shed light on her struggles with defining herself within such small constraints of what the media portrays as "feminist." Kiersten told me, "Feminism gives me a way to understand the world I am living in," she says, "I found my identity as a scholar activist due to my feminist research. Feminism to me, is a method of positioning myself in this life through my own lived experiences as a woman. We learn from our historical past to assess and critically engage with the present."<sup>8</sup>

My dear friend and international scholar, Munazza Fatima, who comes from Pakistan, explains her belief in feminism as the idea that "feminism is the continuous struggle of getting equal to man in all aspects." she tells me over social media. "But sometimes I feel that men and women are not the same; they are really different creatures. The problems arise when men do not treat women as women- when he doesn't respect her. Then the woman begins to feel that she is suppressed by men and she raises her voice against such injustices and unnatural behaviors." Munazza lives her feminism by wanting respect and gaining equality, even with the differences she sees in her every day life. Another viewpoint from a family member of mine, who is a mother of three daughters, sounds a lot like the points Munazza is trying to make. This mother explains to me that her definition is very personal and not based on her identity as a woman or a mother. "My definition of feminism is that I should be given the opportunity to try anything and not be limited because I am a woman." she states. "Some things I will excel at and others I will

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<sup>7</sup> Okin, Susan Moller. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Ed. Joshua Cohen, Mathew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton: Princeton University Pr., 1999. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Follow Kiersten Downs on Twitter @biking\_usa

fail but not solely because I am a woman.” Even from two different countries, in two dramatically different cultures, these women are looking for respect and equality to live their lives.

The dangerous stereotype that only women can be feminist is shattered by the countless men who have decided to add their voices to the conversation, who in turn, stand up not only for women’s rights but stand up and announce they are proud feminists. A very close male friend of mine, constantly points out the fact there are no strong male feminist examples in the media and offers up his own definition of feminism. He may not look like what the media has decided a feminist should look like, but he is proud to break the mold and add to the feminist culture of the United States. He tells me, “The idea that society cannot tell a woman what to do just because she’s a woman- institutionally/culturally- has forced disparity between men and women is decidedly *not* ok.”

Since the feminist movement has grown and changed to focus on different aspects of issues we face throughout the world and on a more personal level, who is to say one definition of feminism can be right or wrong? A good rule to follow would be understanding that feminism functions to bring equality to all. That there is no single way to be feminist; it is an ideal to guide you through life.<sup>9</sup>

### **What’s in a Name? (Jan. 20, 2014)**

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<sup>9</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2013/12/30/my-feminism-doesnt-have-to-be-your-feminism-by-samantha-heuwagen/>

“Apparently it is very laborious and expensive for a man to change his name after marriage and free for a woman,” my partner says to me while discussing, yet again, if we should change our last names.

“Well,” I say, “this is just terribly sexist and upsetting.”

As I have mentioned before, I am getting married (you can read about it here on my personal blog). We’re a pretty untraditional couple that isn’t looking for the run of the mill wedding and most importantly, marriage.

One of the questions I get quite frequently is whether or not I will take my partner’s last name. Let me be very clear: I do not want to change my last name nor does my partner want to change his. We seem to have come to an impasse. We have, however, come up with a new name and talked about using a combination of our names, yet as we have recently discovered, it’s a legal and financial mess! It’s free for women to change their names, but if a man wants to, get ready to rumble legally. Depending on which state you are looking to make the name change in, you could pay \$100-\$150 just for the initial change, not to mention changing all other legal documents such as a driver’s license and passport. Best case scenario it costs \$100, if everything needs to be changed you’re looking at a large fee of \$500! Since it has been a tradition for women to change their last names, there are little to no legal implications for the name change. For men, they must petition the court, pay the same fees mentioned above, but end up paying more in legal fees than anything else. In fact, “only six states currently allow either partner to do a change a name under equal conditions when they marry. If you are a man looking to take your wife’s name, count yourself lucky if you live in one of these enlightened states: Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, New York or North Dakota.”

To me, it says so much about our culture and how society is arranged. How stuck are we in the past, that a person, regardless of gender/sex, can not have the option to change such a valuable part of their identity? What society expects is the man to protect his property (his wife) and one of the ways to claim and protect this property is to bestow his surname to her. We still live in a world that expresses the sexist and oppressive need to control women- all the way down to her name. But what is worse, is that men too are oppressed in the same system; it's just not as easy to spot. Everyone should be treated fairly under the law. Anyone should be able to change their name as easily as anyone else, but we are still dealing with systems that are chained in tradition.

As a couple, we have not let many people know about our choice to change our names. When does it come up, most people are shocked and offended that we are not walking down the traditional path. It's a personal choice. It is still a topic that we both struggle with because we respect our individuality and both our surnames. I like the sound of my full name and my partner enjoys his; we respect our love for the names we have been handed. Knowing now that it could be a legal fiasco to change his, we have even more stress to a situation that is already stressful.

Like I said before, it's a deeply personal choice to change a name or not. We're still dealing with it and hopefully by the time we get married we can come to an agreement that we are both equally happy with.<sup>10</sup>

### **Summer's Eve Cleansing Wash: So Many V's (Jan. 27, 2014)**

By now I am sure some of you have seen or at least heard of the Summer's Eve Cleansing Wash commercial. It's the one where a heterosexual couple is in the bathroom getting

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<sup>10</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/01/20/whats-in-a-name-by-samantha-heuwagen/>

ready for the day; the woman is doing her make-up while gabbing about something unimportant, but then she notices that her partner is washing his whole body with her Summer's Eve Cleansing Wash. A wash specifically made for a woman's 'V' – as the woman kindly reminds her partner and the viewers. He freaks out and attempts to do as many “manly” things as he can: welding metal, mowing the lawn, drinking a beer, and watching football. What a totally natural reaction to washing your body. I find a similar scene plays out when I use a soap designated for men on the label – painting my nails, doing pilates, and, of course, shopping!

It's ludicrous that a commercial in 2013 tells me in no uncertain terms that 1) I cannot use a product designated for the opposite sex and 2) that if I do find myself using a product designated for the opposite sex the only way to cleanse myself of such a travesty is to perform stereotypical actions of my sex.

Honestly though, the underlying theme of gender stereotypes is just one of the many flaws found within that commercial. Another factor that makes me angry, as a woman and a sex educator, is replacing 'vagina' with 'V'. As a sex educator, the simple fact of not using the word, vagina, to describe a specific body part is disheartening and demonstrates the need to reinvigorate society's lack of knowledge about their bodies and even being comfortable using certain expressions to describe these certain body parts. Saying 'V' instead of 'vagina' insinuates that it's shameful to talk about certain body parts and furthermore alludes to the vagina as something taboo!

My own personal reason I cannot stand this commercial is the huge problem of getting the 'V' all mixed up in what we are really talking about. The commercial insinuates that the 'V' is the vagina and what is being cleansed, because we all know that vagina's are stinky, icky places to be (the myth we have all been raised to believe). However, the 'V' isn't even the

portion of the body that should be washed by this product. It's meant to cleanse the vulva, the outside portion of the woman's reproductive system. The vagina is the portion that is the entry way or tunnel to the cervix and ovaries. You shouldn't even be washing the vagina because it is self-regulating for a reason and cleaning with anything more than water could create chemical imbalances that lead to yeast infections or worse- regardless of the pH level of a product.

So if you do buy or use products aimed at your various lady bits, please remember this: wash the vulva, stay away from the vagina! Happy cleaning!<sup>11</sup>

### **I Like Sex: Am I Sex Positive? (Jan. 31, 2014)**

My sex life didn't start out on the most positive of notes. Boys abused me, pressured me and confused me about the whole act of sex. The images I was given through the media didn't help either. MTV was showing everyone hooking up on the Real World or Laguna Beach- never with the same person twice, so I thought I wasn't "doing" it right. It seemed like everyone was having sex and enjoying themselves, so why wasn't I? It hurt a lot, I never got any pleasure and it was, quite frankly, boring. The images I was seeing made it look so easy and romantic, but I never felt like the girls in the movies.

It wasn't until I entered college that I started to understand what sex could be. It stopped hurting when I found out I was allergic to latex and I was given the opportunity to learn about my body and what I really enjoyed. Through a caring and patient partner and my own experimentation with the sex toy industry, I was able to discover new things about myself and my sexuality.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/01/27/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-sexpositive-summerseve/>

It got even better when I was given the opportunity to do some sex research. I was able to publish, “Gender Differences in the Interpersonal Context of Sexual Encounters of College Students,” as well as learn such fascinating things about other people’s sex lives, without it being awkward. I went from a blushing prude (yes a prude, a very severe conservative that thought all women should be covered up and keep their legs closed- oh how the tides have changed) to an open minded and excited sexologist in a matter of weeks. People were telling me about their fantasies and all the places they had sex, to the number of sexual partners and positions. I just could not get enough! It was then that I decided to continue my education. As a graduate student at the University of South Florida,<sup>12</sup> I currently study and explore sexuality and sexology. I was given the opportunity to assist with the class, *Human Sexual Behavior* and from there I discovered I wanted to be a sex therapist.

I also know now I really love and enjoy sex. I am a sex positive feminist that loves to bring knowledge and pleasure to everyone I meet. I am open about sexuality and how it ebbs and flows in our lives and I don’t see how what other people do to pleasure themselves involves me- have at it as long as it’s safe and consensual, go baby go! When I discuss my dreams for the future, it usually involves bringing orgasms to the world. Watch out Dr. Ruth<sup>13</sup>!

Yet, what does it mean to be *sex positive*?

There really isn’t a solid definition. It’s a moving target that many scholars and activists alike can not agree on. But here at a Matter of Cause<sup>14</sup> we like to say it is being positive about sex. It’s a mentality that embraces all positive aspects of sexuality and the various acts of sex. There is no slut shaming or bashing of any kind about what people do to pleasure themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://wgs.usf.edu/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.drruth.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/matterofcause>

Sex is openly discussed. It also addresses the various myths associated with some sexual acts as well as myths about the body. We believe that a good sexual education<sup>15</sup> is a must and that it teaches people from a young age about all the aspects of sex. Fulfillment and pleasure are on the top of my list as issues that need to be discussed in sex ed classes. Health is also an important matter when being sex positive. Knowing not only how to name the correct body parts but also knowing how the reproductive systems work, as well as how to pleasure oneself, is the first step towards being being sexually healthy. Lastly, I also believe that safety and consent is a big part of being able to control what happens to you before, during and after sex. Consent is extremely important and sets the tone for the rest of your sex life. Seeing sex as beautiful is a wonderful thing.

What do you think? Do you see yourself as sex positive? I would love to hear from you! Let me know if you have any sex related questions you want answered and we will feature your questions on the blog!<sup>16</sup>

### **True Confession: I am a Cumberperson (Why I Love Male Feminists) (Feb. 6t, 2014)**

I didn't need another reason to love feminism<sup>17</sup>, but fate gave me 3 more reasons to love it even more, and boy, are they hot! As of late there as been an influx of male celebrities claiming the title of feminist. Three of my favorites are Joseph Gordon-Levitt (we also have the same birthday!), the ever smoldering Ryan Gosling and the best Sherlock around, Benedict

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/655?task=view>

<sup>16</sup> <http://afeministlife.tumblr.com/post/75168203087/i-like-sex-am-i-sex-positive> (Because MOC did not want to post about sex positivity, I published it on [afeministlife.tumblr.com](http://afeministlife.tumblr.com). Later, this piece was accepted to the website, [projectunderblog.com](http://projectunderblog.com).)

<sup>17</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2013/12/30/my-feminism-doesnt-have-to-be-your-feminism-by-samantha-heuwagen/>

Cumberbatch. Can anything be more appealing than a man vocalizing their support for feminism? I think not.

Recently I was coaxed into watching Don Jon<sup>18</sup>, starring Mr. Gordon-Levitt. I knew only one thing: it was about porn. I wasn't sure I wanted to watch a whole movie about some guy *watching* porn. I was pleasantly surprised to discover it was so much more. From equality in relationships to love to sex, it covered a whole array of issues I stand for and champion. As the plot develops you see the protagonist for what he is: a broken flawed man that learns to respect himself, women, and the people around him. It had "Feminist" written all over it in big, oversized letters. Even the writer/director Gordon-Levitt, said that's what he was going for in his recent interview with Ellen<sup>19</sup>. I not only applaud his fabulous vision for the film, but also the fact he was not hesitant to describe himself as a feminist and how his own mother influenced him to be aware of the inequalities of the sexes. Joe, may I call you Joe? I feel like we're on that level now. I thank you for making such an interesting and rich movie- can't wait to see what you do next!

Then we have the hunk of burning love Ryan Gosling. Now we all know and love the Feminist Ryan Gosling<sup>20</sup>, but is he really a feminist? It's actually hard to tell with this one. The popular tumblr blog turned book depicts him as a feminism loving heartthrob, but he has never outwardly stated that he is in fact a feminist. Back in 2010, when he was promoting his movie, Blue Valentine<sup>21</sup>, he was enraged by the rating the movie received and pointed out the injustices that male to female oral sex gets in the movies<sup>22</sup>. He pointed out how female to male oral sex is

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2229499/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyVepk8ym4w>

<sup>20</sup> <http://feministryangosling.tumblr.com/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1120985/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://nypost.com/2012/08/10/ryan-gosling-super-feminist/>

predominately shown in movies and no one bats an eye. Well, I commend him on pointing that out and allowing his name to be associated with feminism, but I want him to yell from the dock, in the pouring rain, that he loves feminism as much as he loves Rachel McAdams in The Notebook<sup>23</sup>. A girl can dream, can't she?

As the stardom of Benedict Cumberbatch has grown throughout the last year with his hit TV show, Sherlock<sup>24</sup> and starring in movies like Star Trek: Into Darkness<sup>25</sup> and 12 Years a Slave<sup>26</sup>, how can I not include him in the list? He's literally everywhere! Shrines of him are everywhere on tumblr and Instagram. Hordes of young fans call themselves "Cumberbitches" or "Cumberbabes." I have to be honest about something. Do you promise not to laugh? OK... I am a Cumberperson<sup>27</sup>. There I said it- it's out in the open, finally. For most of you, you've now decided I am completely fan girl-ing out and can no longer take me seriously as a writer, but wait! Hear me out. Once, Mr. Cumberbatch got wind of his fans calling themselves "Cumberbitches" he saw to it that he set the record straight<sup>28</sup>: there are no "Cumberbitches" just "Cumberpeople." Why didn't he like the clever name? He encouraged fans not to call themselves "Cumberbitches" in order to avoid using a word that is derogatory to women. When I heard that, I knew I had been converted.

Joe, Ryan and Benedict, thank you for not only shedding light on feminism, but for being role models to your fans. With your talent you touch millions but with your words and actions of

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0332280/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1475582/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1408101/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2013-05-11/benedict-cumberbatch-youre-not-cumberbitches-youre-cumberpeople>

<sup>28</sup> <http://afeministlife.tumblr.com/post/50916150513/life-is-changing-everyday-he-just-kissed-one>

camera, you have the opportunity to change many lives. Keep doing what you're doing and I will keep watching!<sup>29</sup>

### **Holy Side Boob! How I Learned to Love My Body (Feb. 13, 2014)**

The fierce Ms. Tyra Banks would be proud of me. This past Saturday, I was photographed from every angle by the lovely Katie Merritt for a boudoir photo shoot. Now, don't get too excited, these were neither X rated nor anything found in the pages of Playboy, but elegant shots that examined my whole body in a positive and empowering light. But before I went full frontal and revealed my body for what it is – a beautiful vessel of love and joy – I had to learn to accept my appearance and embrace what it means to be sexy. Not only for the shoot, but for myself.

You see, I am just one of millions of women and men who struggle everyday with poor body image – whether it be the slim woman worrying about what she ate that day, to the man playing football who keeps trying to gain weight in order to please his coach. I was tall and athletic looking, but it didn't match what I saw in advertisements. I also felt like I could not see my body the way it really was; similar to the mentality of someone who suffers from anorexia. I used to watch everything I ate, exercise like crazy, and fixate on every imperfection I found all over my body. I wasn't happy and I definitely didn't feel sexy. I felt like I could never amount to the women I saw around me; the skinny, flawless, models and actresses on television and plastered on Pinterest like goddesses gifted down from the heavens. I just could not be them, no matter how hard I tried and it ate me up inside.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/02/06/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-malefeminism-cumberbatch/>

No amount of reassurance helped. Not even with the ever-loving words from my partner and family. Neither did the countless saleswomen, with their positive feedback about clothing I was trying on, help me feel better about how I looked. Nor did the compliments from students who looked up to me. None of that helped me see the light and the beauty that was me.

What did help me realize my power as a woman was the ability to laugh. The simple joy of watching myself try to do a back bend and fail. The difficult handstand in Yoga, and falling on my bum, but still having the ability to try again. This elusive thigh gap - something I don't think anyone really has unless you want stand like a duck – doesn't happen for me. The way I look at it, is that my thighs are so much in love, they actually want to kiss and they kiss a lot. All of those simple ways my amazing body moves was just so funny and cool, that I started to see myself in a new light.

That's when I got the idea to pose for a semi nude photo shoot. I mean, why not? I worked hard to get where I am and I can now see a picture of myself and love it- instead of critique it. Luckily, my photographer was a trusted friend. She had the ability to make jokes and make me feel really comfortable. Always making sure I liked what direction the session was going in – which was pretty much heading in the direction of full on nudity. I didn't mind. "Oh, that is some great side boob!" she would keep telling me. Apparently, I do a great side boob. I was loving every minute of it! Laying on the bed half dressed and seeing myself as gorgeous and feeling good about myself was one of the best experiences in my life. All I kept thinking was, "Remember all the seasons of America's Next Top Model. Smile! Think happy thoughts! Don't hold your arms too close to your sides! When you're done, we can have Pizza Hut!" It was a blast!

It was a long road to enjoying the skin I am in. I still have moments of insecurity, but I think if I can stay positive and have a good laugh, I can overcome them. Now I have the experience of being openly naked – nudest beach here I come – and these wonderful pictures to look back on and enjoy. Who knows? Maybe I will be daring and send some in to Playboy after all.<sup>30</sup>

### **“TIME” to Get Married (Feb. 17, 2014)**

Praise the heavens above! Someone, somewhere created an app that will tell me when to get married...as if no one had ever tried to tell me what to do before. Thank goodness for this app, because before this point I have been getting my whole life wrong! Finally a machine is making life choices for me. Hopefully flying cars are right around the corner.

TIME has outdone themselves with their new app that tells you exactly when to tie the noose. I mean the knot. We now have an app that analyzes our Facebook friends to tell us exactly when we should be getting married. It takes friends who have posted their marital status and looks at the dates of their nuptials to determine how long you have until you're an old maid. The app gods take the average age and compares it to your pathetic relationship status. I had TIME calculate mine, and it's at 25.3 years which leaves me 3 months and 16 days to tie the knot. Thankfully our wedding is set to meet that deadline, or I would have had to reschedule. I will barely make it, but think of all the money this app just saved me!

How do you measure up to your Facebook friends? More importantly, who really cares? With all the societal pressure to get married that doesn't leave much room for real life. So sit

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<sup>30</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/02/13/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-selflovebodyimage-boudoir/>

back, enjoy whatever relationship status you have, and live a little. And make those boring married couples jealous while you're at it.<sup>31</sup>

### **Beauty in Blood: The Magic of Menstruation (Feb. 24, 2014)**

Who doesn't like to have lengthy discussions about periods? I mean, I look at mine and I always wonder if there is anyone else who is impressed by the amazingness that is a period! Any one? Luckily, I know I am not alone. My cousin, however many times removed, Jen Lewis was energetic about talking with me about feminism and her project on menstruation. She is not only a feminist, but an activist with a lot to say about menstruation.

"I feel like there is a lot of assigned social baggage to menstrual blood and we're at a point where it's time to step back and really take a detached look at it," she wrote me. Jen's art project not only started to spark my curiosity but soon it transported me to another world. The deep reds, scarlets and burgundies filled my vision. Was I really looking at blood? The beautiful patterns it was making in the art, was simply gorgeous and mesmerizing. This really was blood-blood could do that? I had too many questions and could not wait to hear what her explanation was. How did you discover this? How did it work? What is the response from the feminist community?

Jen told me about how she came to start using menstrual cups, like the diva cup, instead of tampons. I too use such a cup and recommend it to anyone that is on the fence about pads or tampons. Trust me your vagina and period will thank you- it really is more comfortable and way more environmentally friendly. "Using the menstrual cup is a much more "hands-on" approach

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<sup>31</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/02/17/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-timeappgettingmarriedpressure/>

to period care. Unlike a tampon or pad, the blood isn't being absorbed into anything. It's liquid, it's slippery, and sometimes it's going to get on your fingers or be "messy". The latter never felt gross or messy to me though; it was always just a little blood. You wipe your fingers, wash your hands, and no big deal. Used pads and tampons on the other hand completely grossed me out and always seem a little unsanitary. One day when I had a little blood on my fingers, the difference in how I regarded my blood in comparison to the messages in mainstream media dawned on me. Socially we consume and celebrate blood shed for entertainment in our sports, television/film, and video games. However, if anyone so much as mentions menstruation everyone is completely grossed out. I couldn't help but wonder, what made menstrual blood somehow different, grosser, more offensive than blood shed in violence or for sport?" Jen wrote.

How did she get the idea to create art out of menstrual blood?

"My job wasn't super engaging and I found myself spending more and more time in the bathroom 'drawing/painting' with the blood in the toilet. While avoiding work and playing with my blood, I started to wonder if there was any way to capture the cool patterns I was seeing. I was genuinely taken by the beautiful colors and designs, but was there anyway to convey that to other people? Eventually I asked my hubby, a lifelong artist and photographer, what he thought. Well, that sparked his interest and he started to research the best ways to capture fluid on film. We started in November 2012 and have been taking photos and video ever since."

If I was so amazed and impressed by her work, surely there were others who appreciated what she was doing? "By sharing something that is usually private, people are encouraged to open up and share something personal of their own. I have yet to meet a woman who does not have a menstruation-related story she is dying to share."

So women were open and almost excited to share their stories, but what about the men? “Men finally feel like they have a glimpse into the mysterious menstrual cycle and ask questions they normally avoid,” she wrote back to me. “The men I’ve encountered face to face have been incredibly supportive and interested. Sure they may make an audible gulp as the word “menstrual” pierces the air and they may be squeamish or sheepish at first. Typically there is an initial icebreaker joke or two, but eventually the guys are totally drawn into the image and engage in very thoughtful, respectful dialogues.” There is hope after all that men won’t blush or faint at the mere mention of “menstruation.”

For more information about Jen’s work, please visit [www.beautyinbood.com](http://www.beautyinbood.com). She is also an active member of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, contributing to the blog as a monthly “Menstrual Pin-Up” (no these aren’t gorgeous pin-up models with blood trickling down their legs, but rather one of our bloody close-ups).<sup>32</sup>

### **Making Changes: The Power of the Pronoun (Mar. 3. 2014)**

The world has gotten one step closer to becoming a better place. With Facebook allowing individuals to choose their own gender identity and pronoun options, to the media educating themselves on preferred pronouns of individuals, to many activists standing up for Trans and LGBTQ rights, the world is becoming a more open and honest place.

Author and activist, Janet Mock took to Twitter to defend herself after being bombarded and poorly treated on Piers Morgan’s CNN show. The CNN TV host didn’t understand how to communicate Janet’s story appropriately, nor did he give her the proper respect she deserved.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/02/24/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-beautyinbloodmenstruation-jenlewis/>

During the whole segment Morgan's team chose to air headlines on the screen using male pronouns to refer to Mock, and sensationalized her story by highlighting her as "a man before the age of 18;" rather than recognizing that she feels she has always been a woman, regardless of how she has looked or dressed. The use of male pronouns disrespected who she is and how she identifies. Mock then blasted Morgan on Twitter for by telling him to "get it the f\*k together."

The author then sat down with Steven Colbert and explained the issue. "They used very problematic language that showed their lack of understanding," Mock told Colbert. Janet Mock was upset because her power as a human being was taken away. Her message was about overcoming difference and giving respect to others, not assuming identities. Using proper pronouns is just one form of showing respect to others, especially those in the trans community, because it not only shows respect, but awareness. Proper pronoun use is imperative. A lesson this writer is still learning to do and use within their own writing.

Which leads me to my point: We have the power to pick our pronouns. Something Janet Mock was refused by countless others, even CNN. After all, we decide what to wear, how to act, what to eat, what we call ourselves- why can't we take it a step further and decide which pronouns we want to use to describe who we are as people?

Assuming someone's gender identity gets us into trouble and leaves us trapped in the gender binary; respect not only keeps us out of trouble but also allows for greater personal expression. Why not allow ourselves to ask someone, instead of letting our eyes do the judging? We live in a disconnected world. Using proper pronouns to define who we are allows us to make a connection to other people. We can start a dialogue, as Ms. Mock suggested, to create the change we want to see in the world. Help enlighten the various people around us by being

upfront about our decision to use certain pronouns for ourselves. Give power back to the individual.

I feel most comfortable using she/her pronoun. What do you prefer?<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <http://matterofcause.com/2014/03/03/matterofcause-samanthaheuwagen-transpowerpronoun/>

## Appendix of Unpublished Articles

Below are the articles I wrote for Matter of Cause, that never made it to print. This is my way of allowing the pieces their moments of glory. In the future I plan on using the ideas in these pieces as future posts for *A Feminist Life*.

### **Top 10 Reasons Why You Should Definitely Go to a Conference**

If you are in higher education, you can probably hear your advisor now: “There’s a conference deadline coming up” or “I think you need to present your work at this conference.” It’s a flooding of pushing your written work on the unsuspecting academic community. It can be daunting and down right scary if you are not sure what you are doing. For there are no road maps to ensure your hard work gets published or at the very least, how to present your work at various conferences.

Not to mention the hard working professional who wants a better job but doesn’t know how to stand out to a new employer. What better way to gain experience and network than to attend a conference related to your work?

Luckily for you, I have come up with some excellent reasons for you to think about attending and submitting to your work to various conferences, inside and outside your field of study, plus reasons why conferences can help you get your next job:

- 1.) Not only do you get an amazing CV or resume line when you present, you get the experience of discussing your work and the chance to talk to other professionals who can point you in directions you never thought of before! Ultimately making your work the best possible.
- 2.) You gain inspiration for future projects. Who doesn’t like to be inspired?

3.) Network, network, and then network some more. These are the students and faculty that you will be working alongside for the rest of your career in academia. Get to know them and -who knows- new projects and opportunities could come your way because of the friendships you create. You are able to meet other students and faculty from around the world working on projects similar to yours; who wouldn't want to make a new friend and add to your preexisting work?

4.) Not all conferences, but most, are free! In the last several months, I have been able to attend multiple conferences, present my work, and do it all for minimal price- which is of upmost importance when you are limited with funds as a student.

5.) See the world for a reason! There are many conferences around the world that are excellent excuses to get out of your comfort zone and learn new things, but also go on some pretty amazing adventures at the same time.

6.) Conferences provide the opportunity to practice your public speaking skills. Not only is this ability good for your overall career, it will help you teach, help you understand your work better, and give you more confidence- which is always a positive.

7.) Some conferences are attached to journals. Most then turn around and publish your work. Score! Free publishing credentials!

8.) You never really know what is happening in your field of study until you show up at a conference. It's a great opportunity to learn what others are doing and what you can do to add to your area of interest. How cool is that?

9.) The coveted "me time." Sure you'll be busy attuning different sessions and meeting new people, but it's a change of pace from your everyday life. A good excuse for a me focused vacation and a break from everyday obligations. Who doesn't appreciate a little me time?

10.)) Lastly, as I have mentioned before, you have the chance to make new friends. The last conference I attended, I was able to make some amazing new friendships. By the end of the weeklong conference, we called each other family and made promises to attend the same conference next year. You never know when you are going to meet new best friends, but conferences are the perfect opportunity to meet people just like you.

Hopefully, now you feel more confident now about your decision to attend various conferences in your area and beyond. It won't hurt to try! If you are looking for some local Tampa Bay conferences make sure to check out Publishing at Sea in Ybor<sup>34</sup> and 4th Annual International Business Conference<sup>35</sup>!

### **Confession: I Watch Porn, So What?**

Yesterday I decided to try something for the first time, no I am lying to you, I've tried it many times before: I went to watch porn. Not just for my viewing pleasure, but because I was actually interested in watching.

Everyone watches porn. No, stop, you know you do. Porn is one of those polarizing topics, such as abortion, that once mentioned people quickly form teams and very strict opinions. Sometimes I think that the porno I am watching is awful and in bad taste- no one actually makes sounds like that. And as a sex educator, I know it's very unlikely a woman is orgasming in such a position. Then other times, I think it can be liberating and exciting. I see things that I never imagined or tried before, of which I then make a note to discuss it with my partner during our next sexual tryst.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.allconferences.com/c/publishing-at-sea-tampa-2014-january-18>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.allconferences.com/c/4th-annual-international-business-conference-keynote-speaker-jeb-bush-tampa-2013-february-14>

I don't dare believe that all porn is created equal. There are some awful people out there that have created videos that are not consensual, filled with respect nor have the best intentions. But from what I gather from the various sex workers I have met and doing some research on the topic, most porn videos we watch are discussed well in advance and all parties are healthy and ready to get it on (in?).

With that in mind, I choose to think that porn is a good way to experiment and to see what is out there. From the media we get images of heterosexual couples doing it in the missionary position- hella boring if you ask me and definitely not the position for mutual pleasure (for most hetero couples). Why don't we talk about it? I am pretty sure I started writing this post to boost metrics for my blog because I knew if I said "porn" a lot of people would start to freak out (sorry, Mom and Dad).

But let's be honest with ourselves: if everyone is doing it, then why are we so afraid to share? I started, now you tell me why we can't have a water cooler discussion about the latest porn flick we watched over the weekend.

### **Female Condoms: A Guide**

**I get a lot of interesting questions from the class that I teach. Some are really random, but serve a purpose like when a boy will ask me about periods. Well, honestly, how else would he know about periods? The media doesn't show them for what they are... So I always try to answer their questions to the best of my ability. The other day, a quiet**

**student approached me and wanted to know about female condoms and how they work. Again, this is not a subject many people are comfortable discussing so I took the liberty to tell her what I knew in private. Yet, after reflection, I realized I may have not only done her a disservice but the community as a whole. You see, how many people know about female condoms outside of sex educators and very informed individuals? I didn't learn about such things until late in my undergrad career, so I think it's safe to assume there are many more people who have no idea about these types of condoms.**

**Going back to the students question, she wanted to know specific statistics and usage rates. As well as why we as a society do not openly discuss such a method. She also wanted to know about the quality of the condoms- were they better or worse than male condoms? Here is what I found when I began to dig a little deeper:**

**-Female condoms are about 75-90% effective, while male condoms are 98% effective. For various reasons this statistic can be true of female condoms because of human error, being comfortable putting it on, doing it right etc. Many factors can go into this percentage. Remember the only 100% effective birth control is one you are comfortable with and use regularly.**

**-Using this method can cause less sexual satisfaction. Friction, noise (apparently these things can make a lot of noise. However lubrication can help), lack of pressure on the clitoris, can cause the performance to not be satisfying to some partners.**

**- Do not use both a female condom and a male condom! Ever. Friction can cause rips and no one wants that!**

- Female condoms can be placed up to 8 hours before intercourse. That's is pretty nifty if you are looking for some action and want to be prepared before things really heat up.

As far as the quality of the condom, that was a little bit more difficult to find. I think it goes back to how the condom is being used and inserted. I did find some information on how the female condom is less effective than the male condom, but only slightly. I think because there is more room for error, the female condom has worse pregnancy and STIs rates than the male condom.

What do you think? Would you be interested in using a female condom?

### 10 Ways to be Sex Positive, Not Published

You are probably wondering why we here at Matter of Cause use the term Sex Positive. What is it? Where did it come from and how do you become Sex Positive? Well, here are 10 ways to be sex positive:

- 1.) **Consent** should be mandatory and ever present. Consent is a big part of being able to control what happens to you before, during and after sex.
- 2.) Always being **safe** while enjoying sex is not only important, but necessary.
- 3.) **Respect**: yourself, your partner and others.
- 4.) Embrace sex! Seeing **sex as beautiful** is a wonderful thing.
- 5.) Stay healthy. **Health** is also an important matter when being sex positive. Getting the proper medical care as well as regular testing for HIV and STIs should be a priority. Knowing your sexual health status, regardless of how many partners you have, is always a positive.

- 6.) Define sex for yourself. **Fulfillment and pleasure** are key aspects of what creates a healthy sex life. Knowing what works and what doesn't work for you is important and gets you the pleasure you are looking for.
- 7.) Celebrate sexuality and diversity! **Sex is a journey**. It won't be the same experience for everyone. Some people have a hard time with it, others do not. We have to be open and honest, not only with our partners, but with ourselves about the act of sex. Having **open conversations** with our sexual partners will allow you to stay safe and get what you are looking for in sex.
- 8.) Be open. Meaning **no judgement, no slut shaming and (no T) no shade**. Just because it doesn't work for you *doesn't* mean it's wrong.
- 9.) **Call out discriminatory and sexist attitudes**. To your friends, to your family, to random people on the street. It's unacceptable and stunts us all on this road to sexual freedom as human beings.
- 10.) Get an education. A **good sexual education** is a must. It can teach people from a young age about all the aspects of sex. This list encompasses everything that should be discussed and used in a sexual education class.

What do you think? Do you see yourself as sex positive? Stay tuned as we explore this vast concept of a sex positive attitude!

### **Full Frontal: Tights, Tassels and Pasties**

There have been many times in my life where I have been asked to do things, experience new places or try out a new product, all on account of a friend's suggestion. "You'll like it," they tell me. "It'll be fun," they remark. A lot of the time I go into these goings on with an open mind and everything ends up working out. I let the experiences change me or move me. I allow the

personal growth to happen and make me a better person. Not to mention all the amazing people I meet along the way. I am luckier than most and have had my fair share of adventures.

A friend of mine had reached out to me to go see a burlesque show at the Tampa Pitcher Show, feating the Hellcats. As a sex positive feminist, I have always been open to everyone and anyone embracing their sexuality and showing it off as they saw fit, but I had never ever been to a burlesque show. Images of speakeasies filled my mind and piqued my curiosity. “Actually, that does sound like a lot of fun,” I told her. She filled me in on the details and I went about the rest of my night fascinated and exited for what was about to unfold.

Now, for some of you that don’t know what a burlesque show is, let me enlighten you. It’s nothing like the movie, “Burlesque” featuring Christina Aguilera, trust me. Some shows feature women and men who portray the act of seduction. Whether it be through song, dance or intricate strip tease, these individuals focus on seducing the audience. They don’t just throw out their bodies in whatever manner, they show only so much (underwear and pasties stay on) and they do it to allure the audience into forgetting their problems, and just let them enjoy the human body.

Let me tell you: I had one of the most enjoyable and fun nights in a very long time! I enjoyed the witty banter of the MC to the lovely dances performed by the dancers to the company I kept. Everything was so lighthearted and entertaining that I quickly lost track of time and let loose for what seemed like the first time in ages. Yet, after every beautiful dance, I took a moment to question whether or not I was objectifying these wonderful women and if they were indeed having as much fun as I was.

After the show, I was able to speak with a few of the entertainers about how they felt. Almost every single one of them told me there were having the time of their lives and they really

enjoyed performing. One even told me that she hated her body and how she looked, until discovering burlesque. She said it was a sexual awakening - she was now proud of who she was and loved the sexual power she possessed. My mind was blown! They were happy, healthy and excited to use their sexuality in the way that made them, let me repeat, *them* feel good.

Through media and all their slut shaming practices, this is not the story we get from women who portray their sexuality in this manner. We lack this piece of women's voices and stories when we discuss women's sexuality. Not all women feel oppressed by showing their bodies off, some feel empowered and happy to do so. Some individuals are willing to write off performances like burlesque by simply objectifying these women and not listening to what the performers have to say. If these women feel empowered, happy and beautiful, then that is powerful. Not only for them, but for women as a whole. If you take away that power aren't you just as bad as the ones who are really objectifying women? Everyone wins if we all just stop judging. I know I will continue to support women who do what they love and what makes them happy.

And if burlesque dancing make women happy, wonderful!

### **Frozen Thawed My Heart**

I am not one for Disney movies. I don't like that the girls in the movies always go after their love interests and everything is beautifully wrapped up within a few hours. I understand it's fiction, but growing up I really believed in what those movies showed me about life and love. I thought once I found the right person, everything would fall into place for me. Trust, after growing up and learning some hard life lessons, I don't feel that way anymore. It took me along

time to come around to Disney and their recent releases, like “The Princess and the Frog” and “Frozen”. Both to me embody a little bit more feminism than the ones I grew up with.

In “The Princess and the Frog” we get a strong willed, hardworking woman, who does everything in her power to make her dream of owning a restaurant come true. Yes she falls in love at the end, but she didn’t drop her dream for him- they worked together to create her vision. Which is all we can really ask for in our life partners. In “Frozen” it’s more about the importance of family and how love can be many different things. Love, doesn’t always mean romance, it can be the love two sisters share to overcome an obstacle. Yes there is a romantic relationship between one of the sisters and her friend, but we see it stem from friendship, which is a very powerful message to young, inexperienced minds. Something I know I wished I would have seen more of while growing up.

I didn’t expect to like “Frozen” but I think it gave me a little bit more hope in Disney. If Disney creators can keep in mind that love isn’t just one thing, like we are constantly bombarded with through media, we have the potential to raise the next generation of young people with a better understand of what a healthy relationship looks like and what it means to love- it all it’s various ways, shapes and forms.

### **“You’re Ruining My Dream” What Happens When You Don’t Believe in The White Dress**

Surprise! I am getting married. It’s been mentioned before, but I am just going to come right out and say it: I am getting married this summer! I am lucky enough to have found a life partner who shares in my feminist values and loves me unconditionally. We are both excited to start our next chapter together! What we are not excited about is all this wedding mumbo jumbo. I knew getting married would cause problems for individuals who do not understand our desire

to not have a traditional gathering, but I didn't expect such a backlash to how we view the process or even the actual day.

One of our very first desires as a couple (when we started to plan for what we wanted) was that we wanted to have a killer honeymoon. We wanted to go travel for a couple of weeks and really have some adventures together-something that is really important to us. That was pretty much where the wedding planning stuff ended. Neither one of us ever dreamed of having a large wedding or even thought of what we really wanted out of a ceremony. So we were fine with just going to a courthouse to get the ceremony portion taken care of and then jet setting away into "happily ever after." What marriage truly meant to us was being together, loving each other and doing what made us happy as a couple to start our union off on the right foot. We knew the vows we were going to say to each other meant a lot and that is what we thought would be the most important. We didn't figure it would be important to anyone else, since they wouldn't be the ones within the marriage.

Yet, surprisingly enough to us, that is exactly where the problems started.

Once we made our desires known, I received tearful calls from various family members about how they wanted to be apart of the big day and that we would regret not doing something if we continued with what we envisioned. "It is not about what you want, it is about the family! You need to make this special for your family," said one relative to me. This sentiment was new to me, since I always thought weddings were about the couple and their pledge to be committed to one another. Then my sister's started asking about bridesmaid's dresses and things of that nature- all of which I had not planned on since we didn't want a bridal party. What made things even worse was when people got panicky about the notion of "untraditional" because it was all

new to them. If they were not going to have the staples of a “real” wedding, then why were we even getting married?

Therein lies the problem: there is no such thing as a real wedding or a guidebook to how to conduct such a wedding. In my very feminist, very humble opinion, the whole idea of a wedding should be something the couple plans together and creates together based on what they want or have envisioned for themselves.

As a feminist couple, we have decided to have a very small, extremely intimate wedding of 25 guests. We have decided to hold the gathering at one of our favorite hiking spots in Atlanta and are working with an officiant to create a ceremony based on equality and love with feminist flair. This ceremony will not only reflect our sentiments as a couple but will reflect our ideals of a romantic union and beyond. Then after that very personal, and might I add, quick ceremony, we will head to our favorite restaurant to have a cozy dinner with our family. This is what works for us and ultimately, this is what we want our day to be.

We have had to deal with family members being upset that they were not invited- parents, siblings, grandparents have been our rule from day one, we really do just want family surrounding us. We are still committed to having that killer honeymoon and keeping costs down (as you can imagine) has been tricky so we have had to let a lot go. No flowers, no table decor, no material good for the guests to take home that we all know get thrown out eventually- all superficial things that we have decided aren't important to us wont be present. We don't need things, we want memories and the love of our family around us.

We envisioned a special day that works for us and what we represent as a couple. A day filled with love not only for each other but for our family and for the celebration of what the day is ultimately about: a commitment to be the best life partners we both can be.

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