

Amanda Wray, Elise Verzosa Hurley

Feminist Rhetorical Praxis : Everyday Feminism as Public Agora

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AMANDA WRAY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, ASHEVILLE

AWRAY1@UNCA.EDU

ELISE VERZOSA HURLEY

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

EVHURLE@ILSTU.EDU

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Retoryka feminizmu: *Everyday Feminism* jako publiczna agora

Abstract

This essay examines the feminist rhetorical practices of the online digital media site *Everyday Feminism*. Focusing on the website's *social circulation* (Royster and Kirsch 2012), we contend that *Everyday Feminism* functions as a public agora where webbed cyberfeminist rhetorical practices (Blair, Gajjala, and Tulley 2009) have a unique potential to reach public audiences and circulate in various social networks in order to potentially educate and empower others, foster conversations, and build alliances across lines of difference, time, and space.

W artykule analizie poddano feministyczne strategie retoryczne występujące na stronie internetowej *Everyday Feminism*. Skupiając się na *społecznym obiegu* witryny (Royster i Kirsch 2012), autorki twierdzą, że strona *Everyday Feminism* pełni funkcję publicznej agory, gdzie cyberfeministyczne praktyki retoryczne (Blair, Gajjala i Tulley 2009) mają wyjątkową możliwość dotarcia do masowego odbiorcy i zaistnienia w mediach społecznościowych, po to, by edukować, udzielać wsparcia, inicjować dialog i budować porozumienia na granicy różnic, czasu i przestrzeni.

Key words

rhetoric, feminism, activism, social network, public discourse
retoryka, feminizm, aktywizm, sieć społecznościowa, dyskurs publiczny

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AMANDA WRAY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, ASHEVILLE

AWRAY1@UNCA.EDU

ELISE VERZOSA HURLEY

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

EVHURLE@ILSTU.EDU

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In June 2012, Sandra Kim launched an online magazine called *Everyday Feminism*, which has since grown into a feminist digital media site (www.everydayfeminism.com) that serves as an “educational platform for personal and social liberation” with a mission “to help people dismantle everyday violence, discrimination, and marginalization through applied intersectional feminism” (*Everyday Feminism* n.d.). The site reports 4.5 million visitors a month from 150 countries, provides an introduction to feminism (Fem 101), and publishes essays, narratives, comics, and videos grounded in intersectional feminist theories and lived realities through topically organized pages concerning privilege, trans and GNC¹, race, LGBTQIA², class, religion, sex, love, body, and violence. With a list of contributing writers and artists of diverse identities--female, male, non-binary, genderqueer, trans, lesbian, bisexual, polyamorous, disabled, atheist, black, indigenous, white, Latinx, and others--many of whom are social justice activists with academic/scholarly backgrounds, the content published in *Everyday Feminism* aims to make intersectional feminism accessible and applicable in the everyday lives of its readership--a readership comprised of numerous publics worldwide. It's important to note, however, that despite *Everyday Feminism*'s global reach, its content may not necessarily be transnational or international in scope. Readers of the site may find the following disclaimer on the “About” page: “Please note that as we are based in the US, our focus is on the US/Western world and we invite people from other parts of the world to draw lessons and use the information as they are relevant to their particular communities. We do not have the cultural competency or resources needed to be an international site despite having people visit from across the world” (*Everyday Feminism* n.d.). Thus, the website and its vision are situated as a diverse movement grounded in assumptions of democracy, academic and intellectual freedom, and a rich history of feminist activism.

1. Gender Non Conforming

2. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

Particularly notable about *Everyday Feminism*'s vision and communicative approach is its grounding in intersectional³ feminism, which does not focus exclusively on any one gender or identity category as much as it works for greater social justice for *all* people. Beginning in the 1990s, challenges to elitist notions of feminism as for and about white women resulted in calls for more inclusive feminisms that account for differential experiences in relation to intersecting matrices of oppression, such as those experienced by women of color, to name just one example. Thus, a focus on equity and inclusion in relation to various socio-political priorities began to punctuate feminist concerns, and current voices in the movement draw even more attention to expressions of gender as intersecting with sexual orientation and sex identity. Indeed, the feminist movement has grown more diverse and, thus, more representative of the unique identities of its participants. Such a move toward greater inclusivity--not just in who contributes to the website but also in the points of conversation across its platforms--enables a productive antagonism where individual entities articulate differences in order to identify personal investments and to understand one's positionality within a shared sense of struggle. Such an "ethic of dissensus," according to Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (2001), demonstrates "transformative praxis motivated by the obligation for the Other" wherein discourse is used with an "ethos of becoming," speaking with the intention for greater social justice, and also an "ethos of alterity" (2), speaking with an awareness of one's own insider *and* outsider positionality.

In this essay, we position *Everyday Feminism* as a rich site of rhetorical activity comprised of what Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala, and Christine Tulley (2009) call "webbed cyberfeminist practices" that harness the affordances of technology in order to create spaces "that do not neatly operate in standard academic communities such as classrooms or cultural centers" (2) but instead "operate on the invisible border between personal and professional realms... and are marked by personal concerns of the everyday" (3). Because the explicitly feminist discourse in *Everyday Feminism* concern issues that are both personal, informed by the lived-experiences of its contributors and readers, and political, informed by global, local, and cultural struggles for equity and justice, readers of the site are implicitly asked to think beyond "the tendency to consider Internet users as being either online or offline but not as simultaneously both" (McGerty 2000, 896). That is, *Everyday Feminism*'s content aims to make feminist concerns apparent, urgent, and relevant for everyone – and not just within the confines of the Web; rather, its

3. The term "intersectional" feminism was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6: 1241-99. Intersectionality is a feminist concept that acknowledges the many and complicated ways that identity categories (such as race, gender, color, sexual orientation, ability) intersect with one another to shape individual political, structural, economic, and social realities in unique ways.

published content makes salient that such issues have real, material, and embodied implications in lived practice.

In the remainder of this essay, we focus our analysis on *Everyday Feminism*'s social circulation, which Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) include in their schema for examining feminist rhetorical practices, along with critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and globalization (19). They define social circulation as a metaphor that "indicate[s] the social networks in which women connect and interact with others and use language with intention" (101). Examining *Everyday Feminism* through the lens of social circulation not only allows us to explore the rhetorical activities of its content but also the "rhetorical velocity" (Ridolfo and Devoss 2009) of its web-based mode of delivery.

Self-Reflective Praxis

Operating in the borders of the personal and professional, self-education characterizes much of the content of *Everyday Feminism*'s articles, prompting individual readers to examine their current practices in order to help them identify normalizing, exclusionary, and / or oppressive practices / ideologies. The language of article titles tend to employ lexicon from personal narrative, professional development, and self-improvement genres in order to both inform as well as build identification with readers (e.g., "Why We Need the Opposite of Rape Culture - Nurturance Culture," "How Our Bail System Can Ruin Your Life if You're Not Rich," "10 Personal Rights that I, As A Black, Non-Binary, Queer Person, Refuse to Compromise On," "8 Warning Signs Your Partner is Actually Really Sexist"). The strategic use of pronouns such as "we," "our," "you," and "I," not only implicates the reader but also suggests that issues of equity and justice concern everyone and that we all have a shared responsibility to work toward a more just world by, among other things, identifying embedded and inherited bias as well as personal investment in social status ideologies. While *Everyday Feminism*'s articles certainly situate both contributors and readers as accountable to a shared democratic struggle, many of the articles also hail readers to identify the ways in which they might individually contribute--even inadvertently--to patriarchal, oppressive, and exclusionary social conditions through normalized action, thinking, or language practices. The *Everyday Feminism* tumblr description, for example, describes their mission as: "We help people apply feminism to their real life in order to: Work through issues, stand up for themselves, find their own truth."

The emphasis on looking within is hailed in feminist and critical race studies scholarship as the most effective first step in moving toward critical consciousness. Wendell Berry (1989), for example, refers to racism as a "hidden wound" in our

psyche that unfolds with time: “Once you begin to awaken to the realities of what you know, you are subject to staggering recognitions of your complicity in history and in the events of your own life. The truth keeps leaping on you from behind” (6). Because critical consciousness is a journey of self-work that is perpetually *in process*, the potential remains high for individuals, especially those less practiced in self-reflexivity, to inflict unintended harm on Others and the movement. *Everyday Feminism*’s contributors may aim to inspire and instruct readers toward the deeply reflective and difficult self-work necessary to promote positive social change, and yet the constraint of articles to be read in a few minutes dictates a certain degree of superficiality. Critical engagement with feminist scholarship, for instance, is signaled as name dropping and invitations toward activism lack warnings about counterproductivity and unintended impacts. As Linda Martin Alcoff explains in “What Should White People Do?” those new to “white double consciousness” are at high risk for colonizing the movement with their well-intentioned desire to “check” the privilege of others (280). Acknowledging that such “whitesplaining” is a real threat to coalitional, feminist practices, several articles instruct those less marginalized on the importance of not speaking *for* but listening in an effort to work *with* (“5 Ways to Deal With Misguided [But Well-Intentioned] Allies,” “6 Ways Well-Intentioned People Whitesplain Racism [And Why They Need to Stop],” “Intent vs Impact: Why Your Intentions Don’t Really Matter,” and “10 Common Things Well-Intentioned Allies Do That Are Actually Counterproductive”).

Additionally, the website provides sliding scale, fee-based webinars and online courses so that individuals can “process through society’s messages to affirm your own self-worth” and to instill feminist praxis as an everyday practice (*Everyday Feminism*, n.d.). Current offerings include “Everyday Self-Love Course: Turning Self-Love Into a Daily Habit” and “Relationship Course: Turning Love Into a Daily Practice,” both of which aim to “provid[e] powerful frameshifts, practical skills and tools, and a supportive community of feminists” (*Everyday Feminism*, n.d.). Perhaps the impetus for these webinars is to allow readers – particularly those new to feminism – the space to privately learn about and wrangle with entrenched commonplaces, acting as a catalyst for new habits that readers may then leverage to shape actions informed by feminisms and social equality in their own lives. Courses cost \$97, though users can apply for scholarships. This intensive self-work provides learning modules, readings and exercises, one-on-one coaching sessions, group discussions, and access to a private Facebook group. A Compassionate Activism Program supports those at risk for burnout from the movement. The self-work of *Everyday Feminism* is apparent across its platforms and while there are calls for activism in many of the articles, the dominant message

is one of prioritizing *self* work as opposed to providing explicit direction about engaged, social activism in a local context.

Activism as Necessary

Enacting critical consciousness as an everyday social practice in one's life seems to be the primary focus of *Everyday Feminism* with few limitations being placed on what types of activism count as feminist. In fact, articles push readers to resist the tendency to elevate certain types of activism over another, and to conceive of feminist activism more broadly than just public protest. For example, in an effort to complicate "slacktivism," a term that implies online activism is less active, Sian Ferguson's "5 Really Important Reasons to Stop Dismissing Online Activism" argues that online activism can be more accessible to those with disabilities and that an online environment enhances the efficacy of offline activism by allowing different entities to share knowledge, pool resources, and build community (*Everyday Feminism*, 2015). Two other formative articles intending to deconstruct narrow interpretations of feminist activism include: "You Don't Need to Be Leading Marches for Your Activism to Matter" and "4 Popular Complaints About Campus Activism That Are Totally Misguided." While the website does not advocate one type of activism over another, the message is clear: Feminists *must be active* against social oppressions, and this includes deep self-work.

Closely aligned with the self-help agenda in other parts of the website, articles on activism address most frequently the reflexive work necessary when navigating feminist activism across personal and professional contexts (e.g., "3 Reasons It's Irrational to Demand 'Rationalism' in Social Justice Activism," "4 Ways Colleges Can Block your Activism [And How You Can Push Back]," "I Knew I Was a Girl at 8: Transitioning and Teenage Activism," "Trying to Avoid Burnout and Still Help Others? How Intersectionality Is the Key"). A clear emphasis is placed on building inclusive social movements (e.g., "4 Things We Can Do to Make Feminist Organizing More Inclusive and Empowering for All of Us," "Your Social Movement Needs to Be Inclusive of Neurodiversity - Here are 8 Ways to Make It Happen!," "9 Ways We Can Make Social Justice Movements Less Elitist and More Accessible," and "Building Allyship and Finding Room for Multiple Feminisms"). In a limited capacity, the site criticizes other social movements based upon perceived exclusivity and lack of feminist praxis (e.g., "4 Ways Mainstream Animal Rights Movements Are Oppressive" and "Beloved Asian Community: Here Are 4 Reasons Why We Can't Stand Behind Officer Liang"). By emphasizing intersectionality in how individuals ought to approach and engage in grassroots social organizing, *Everyday Feminism* aims to equip the increasingly diverse generation

of feminists to lead the movement through valuing productive dissensus wherein identifying differences functions as a strategy of alliance-building.

Calls to action are present on *Everyday Feminism* (“Transnational Feminism: Why Feminist Activism Needs to Think Globally,” “4 Things You Need to Know About Jurisdiction in Indian Country to Help End Sexual Violence,” “For Michael Brown and Ferguson: Facing White Fears of Blackness and Taking Action to End White Supremacy,” and “5 Reasons We Need Black-Only Spaces [And No, Reverse Racism Isn’t One of Them]”) though contributions that locate activism within a particular cause or social location emerge more frequently on social media (Facebook and Twitter). This makes sense given the sense of urgency that prompts a feminist to advocate for a particular action, particularly in relation to the kairotic opportunities presented by social media. The website provides some direct support for individuals who may wish to self-advocate on certain topics, parental leave, for example (“Your Employer Should Be Giving You Paid Parental Leave - Here are 3 Ways to Advocate For It”) as well as strategies for navigating marginalization as socially located (“4 Ways to Navigate Educational Privilege as a First-Generation College Student,” “5 Ways to Deal with Misguided [But Well-Intentioned] Allies,” “How to Recognize and Respond to Intimate Partner Violence”).

Even as the website attempts to conceptualize feminist activism broadly, the contributors often align causes of social oppressions across movements, attempting to encourage readers to be empowered and to seek justice even for issues that don’t seem to concern them. Discussions about homelessness, for instance, gesture to the reader’s *outsider* status by providing first-person narratives (“Cardboard Stories: Homeless People Sharing Who They Are” and “10 Stunning Portraits of Homeless and At-Risk LGBTQIA+ Youth in New York City”), though more articles provide instruction for how to more compassionately and humanely interact with those living on the street (e.g., “11 Ridiculous Questions We Need to Stop Asking Homeless People” and “3 Ways to Responsibly and Compassionately Respond to Panhandling”). Such articles attempt to make lived realities more visible by demonstrating how everyday oppressions can relate to unfair assumptions, stereotypes, and misinformation, thus prompting readers to individually self-check their privileges in relation to varying social positions.

Social Circulation and Rhetorical Velocity

While the social circulation of *Everyday Feminism* is certainly due, in part, to the ways its language invites readers into a self-reflective feminist activist movement, its format also shapes the ways in which readers can consume and uptake its

content. As a digital media site that can be accessed worldwide (assuming, first, that one has access to a device with internet capabilities) and provides a plurality of perspectives concerning intersectional feminism and social justice, *Everyday Feminism* functions as a sort of public agora where webbed cyberfeminist rhetorical practices have a unique potential to reach public audiences (through its published content on the website) and circulate in various social networks (via built-in interface widgets that allow content to be shared on social media applications), in order to potentially educate and empower others, foster conversations, and build alliances across lines of difference, time, and space. The website's use of multimodality, or multiple modes of communication (such as comics, numbered lists, academic articles, videos, tutorials, and others), serve to pique and engage readers' interest as well as attract a broader base of readers. Rotating headlines on the main website are further circulated through additional platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and tumblr pages, which allows *Everyday Feminism's* content to meet readers where they are in terms of the time they may be able to invest in reading and in the depth they want. For example, the numbered lists or "quizzes" to diagnose anti-feminisms in one's life (e.g. "6 Unexpected Ways I've Healed from Gaslighting Abuse and Learned to Trust Myself Again" and "11 Examples of Light Skin Privilege in Latinx Communities") provide a more digestible version of feminism, even for those who may not identify as feminist. In fact, these article titles and quizzes could perhaps function as a recruitment tool enabling individuals to develop their understanding of the intersectionality of social oppressions across multiple identity categories by reading one, and then navigating to any number of related articles hyperlinked on the top, bottom, and side banners of each article's individual web page.

Moreover, the numbered titles and pithy headlines are particularly attractive for Facebook and other social media users who may be reading on-the-go or otherwise constrained by time. For social media users, the ease with which they can read and identify the overarching message of the article through its title may also contribute to what Gerlitz and Helmond (2011) call "the Like economy" or the social practice of "validating and linking content on the web" (6). That is, readers can choose to only read the article title (and not the article itself), "Like" it, and subsequently drive the article's visibility in social media newsfeeds, thus merging the social value of its content with its informational value. In fact, the shareability of *Everyday Feminism's* content across multiple platforms contributes to its rhetorical velocity and how readers may choose to uptake the content and further disseminate it into various networks.

Rhetorical velocity, according to Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss (2009), references "future time" wherein the ways in which texts may be recomposed by

third parties factor into the purpose of the piece, particularly with a strategic sensitivity to the “rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, recomposed, redelivered, redistributed, etc. across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (n.p.). Designed with rhetorical velocity and recomposition in mind, *Everyday Feminism*’s website explicitly asks readers to consider sharing content at the beginning and end of every article on the website, evidenced by the bright blue italicized text that reads, “Please take a quick moment to share here - thanks!,” and followed by a blue arrow directing readers’ attention to built-in buttons for Facebook, Twitter, and tumblr sharing. Once readers click on any one of these share buttons, they are then able to append their own message to the article title, thus further recomposing, redelivering, and redistributing *Everyday Feminism*’s content to their own personal social networks.

While many of these shares might be framed by personal narratives that relate to the specific issues discussed in the article, or personal messages urging audiences of their own individual social network feeds to read and consider the article’s content, the sharing mechanism also allows individuals to repost and redistribute content with which they might disagree or challenge. Although reader interactivity is limited only to the ability to share content through the built-in widgets on *Everyday Feminism*’s main website, readers may choose to engage in additional conversation through its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/everydayfeminism>), which requires they adhere to particular guidelines.

According to the “Comments Policy” page on *Everyday Feminism*, the Facebook page is explicitly for “people who want to incorporate intersectional feminism into their lives and support each other’s healing and growth, so that we can all become more self-loving and self-accepting people” (Everyday Feminism n.d.). And although the comments policy relays specific rules of engagement that prohibit flaming, harassment, silencing, oppressive, or otherwise disrespectful language, *Everyday Feminism*’s Facebook page is moderated and includes a disclaimer that “comments that threaten the community spirit will be hidden or deleted. Everyday Feminism reserves the right to to ban anyone who violate these policies and guideline, and without warning” (Everyday Feminism n.d.). One particularly interesting result of *Everyday Feminism*’s comments policy is a different Facebook page titled “Banned by Everyday Feminism.” According to the “About” section of their Facebook page, the community is “for all the ‘fake feminists’ who have been banned by Everyday Feminism. A place to discuss, debate... and even disagree. #moderatefeminism.” Community members of this Facebook group claim to have been banned from participating in *Everyday Feminism*’s Facebook page for various disagreements such as “suggesting that lung cancer is extremely rare in teenagers,” “suggesting that eating a burrito did NOT constitute ‘cultural appropriation,’”

and “suggesting that Disney princesses are different from real-world stereotypes” (Banned From Everyday Feminism n.d.). The Banned page has twenty-one “Likes,” and a repeating sentiment in the page’s language is feeling surprised for being banned and feeling misunderstood by *Everyday Feminism* editor, Kim. One poster suggests, “it was a ‘didn’t actually read my comments’ situation.” Although *Everyday Feminism*’s Facebook page aims to be an inclusive community and the rhetoric presented through most of their contributors presents difference and dissensus as a point for further conversation, the Facebook page censors posts based upon perceived threats to inclusivity. Note especially, the contrasts in “intersectional feminism” versus “moderate feminism” in how the Banned group constructs itself in opposition to *Everyday Feminism*, which feels reminiscent of ongoing critiques of the “waves”⁴ of feminism and suggests that there are entrenched hierarchical values readers and social media users must negotiate and navigate. The Banned page indicates that it, too, blocks users who engage in bullying, personal attacks, or any form of hate speech, but it attempts to distinguish itself from *Everyday Feminism* by calling for disagreement and speaking back on issues of critical, feminist importance: “Banned by Everyday Feminism is NOT an echo chamber for like-minded individuals” (Banned From Everyday Feminism n.d.).

Although this essay does not provide adequate opportunity for a detailed discussion of *all* rhetorical practices and activities that take place in *Everyday Feminism*, we agree with Mary Queen’s (2009) assertion that websites are dynamic, involving “a series of evolving rhetorical actions, rather than stable artifacts” (268). Thus, what we have attempted to discuss in this essay only encapsulates *Everyday Feminism*’s website and its various platforms at the time of our writing (March, 2016). Because webbed cyberfeminist rhetorical practices are always in flux and ongoing – presenting themselves and responding to numerous, multiple exigencies – there remains much more that can be examined with regard to *Everyday Feminism*. We’ve attempted to showcase the ways in which *Everyday Feminism* uses language and other modes of communication with the intention to get users interacting with and enacting feminism online (via sharing and re-packaging articles for other users) as well as in their own lives. In so doing, we urge others to further examine the rhetorical activities of feminist web-based media – including both its potentials and limitations – when considering how, why, and for whom rhetoric works in the public sphere.

4. For an extended critique of the “wave” metaphor for naming eras of feminism, see: Tarrant, Shira. 2006. *When Sex Became Gender*. New York: Routledge.

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