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Feminists Face the Job Market: Q & A (Questions & Anecdotes)

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Elisabeth Rose Gruner is an assistant professor of English at the University of Richmond. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California/Los Angeles and works on Victorian literature and women writers. Her two-year job search ended happily after over one hundred applications, two dozen requests for writing samples, and six MLA interviews.

Feminists Face the Job Market: Q & A (Questions & Anecdotes)

When I began work on this paper I designed a questionnaire to be filled out by women who had recently been on the job market. It asked for fairly detailed information: titles of accepted articles, writing samples, and dissertation, number of MLA interviews, other interviews, campus visits, kinds of questions asked, etc. I had hoped, I think, to develop a magic formula--twelve writing sample requests divided by three interviews multiplied by two publications equals an 87% chance of getting a job, for example. But I had trouble developing the formula; no common patterns emerged. The first thing I *did* learn is that most (academic?) women (?) don't like filling out questionnaires. I gave fifteen to women I know personally and ten--after considerable badgering on my part--were returned. I left forty or fifty on a literature table at a conference on women writers; none were returned. Later, however, I began to think it wasn't the questionnaire that prevented responses; it was the job market itself, for when I posted an open-ended query on an international women's studies electronic bulletin board (twice), I received only nine responses--even after inviting people to "vent." In fact I received almost as many requests for copies of this paper as substantive responses to the query. *Many of us, it seems, want to understand the process of looking for a job; few feel we do, or want to talk about it afterwards.*

So the first step in preparing this paper was learning--relearning, really--that we don't *really* like to talk about the job market. It's too scary or, as one recalcitrant respondent acknowledged, it was "so unpleasant that I wanted to forget it as soon as possible." This, by the way, was from a woman happily placed in a good job!

I do believe, however, that *only* talking about the job market--and talking about it early and often--will help us demystify it, which is an important first step in empowering women candidates to take control of an often out-of-control process. Here I want to thank those women who *were*

willing to share their stories; their articulate responses were invaluable to me in shaping this paper.

As Paula Caplan notes, in *Lifting a Ton of Feathers*, women may be more likely than men to take what she calls the myth of meritocracy seriously: we believe that our failures are our own and exceptional. Perhaps if we hear how often the same unpleasant (and pleasant) things happen to others, we can get beyond blaming ourselves and begin to focus on change. Indeed, part of the unpleasantness of the process seems to have to do with its mysteriousness--even successful candidates can rarely point to what they did right or deny doing anything "wrong." I think, first, we need to work on our whole notion of "worth" and how it is defined and measured in the academy. To quote one of my respondents:

It has occurred to me that one hard thing about being a feminist on the market has to do with all the traditions of "worth." Part of identifying myself as a feminist has involved wanting to challenge the traditional hierarchies of "merit" that have been constructed to serve the interests of a tiny portion of the population. But being on the market put me right in the thick of these hierarchies--trying to represent myself on paper so as to look sufficiently worthy to merit an interview, and then in person so as to merit a campus visit, and so on. And creating the in-person appearance of worth involved more shopping and hysteria about clothes and hair than I engaged in even when I was a teenager.

I will pass over questions of clothes, hair, and related matters. But I should like to consider, as all of my respondents have, the issue of "worth" and what we can do to succeed in a system that defines it so narrowly--and so secretly. As another candidate remarked, "Knowing what to do 'differently' involves, in part, having a precedent for doing something 'properly.'" For most of us, "properly" is still an undefined or nebulous term when it comes to many aspects of academic life, including, especially, the job market itself.

Most of my comments will focus on two parts of looking for a job only: preparing to go on the job market and interviewing. My first set concerns preparation and includes, I hope, some myth-shatterers. Many of my respondents received confusing and even careless advice. One wrote to me:

My MLA experience is memorable--and, I'm sure, by no means extraordinary--for its series of small humiliations, many of which were connected to my status as a woman, on the one hand, and my commitment to feminist scholarship and teaching practice, on the other. From the time I entered the job market, I was made aware--by the job placement officer at my school

(who was presumably supposed to encourage me)--that my work was passé. If I had been a feminist in the 70s, I would have been "hot," but women's studies, he claimed, particularly in my field, were no longer the rage. Taking his advice seriously was my first mistake, because I found myself attempting to write a job letter which downplayed and apologized for my research.

Another respondent wrote:

Principally, I would wish that there were some meaningful mentoring available in English Departments, for, at present, lesbian and gay graduate students are largely self-taught people whose inquiries (particularly at the beginning stages) into the sexuality of authors or texts are met with skepticism by people not well acquainted with the critical tools for conducting such investigations, and, to boot, often uncomfortable with the topic itself.

And another commented:

One thing . . . that bugged me over the course of the whole, long, dragged out ordeal of being "on the market" was having other people, mostly white men, tell me how lucky I was not to be a white male. Of the four people from [my institution] who got jobs last year, three were white males. This statistic really means nothing (except perhaps for serving my sense of self-righteous indignation), but it does seem to me that there is no "lucky" position to be in when it comes to the market.

Candidates at larger schools, particularly, have felt abandoned by their placement counselors when on the second year of a search (though Paula Caplan quotes Phyllis Bronstein as suggesting that an academic job search will probably take four years¹), when not doing a national search, or when not doing the "hottest" or "latest" thing--but, as the lesbian critic above noted, sometimes the "hottest" thing is something that makes counselors and advisors personally uncomfortable.

The most useful anecdote I received came from a job candidate who, noting that her department had no formal structure for advising students on preparing for the job market, organized one. She pulled together students, faculty, the department chair, and the dean for a marathon afternoon workshop that went from working up a cv to talking and eating at the same time in a luncheon interview. While the advice they offered was sometimes contradictory, it still helped, she said, to hear the range of responses and, again, simply to raise the issues. Of course some mentors already do this kind of advising

on an individual basis, as well as making the secondary calls and writing the extra letters that are now becoming the norm in many people's job searches.

One of my respondents offers the following advice to advisors:

Realize that in this market all job seekers--regardless of brilliance, experience, or "hot" scholarship--are going to have a great deal of difficulty finding a job. Given this, it's important not to undermine the confidence of any job seeker by suggesting that they are responsible for any lack of success--the job search itself will do nicely in the confidence-sapping department.

One final comment about advising. While the woman candidate who organized her own workshop is to be commended for her initiative and perseverance, some people have found even this step difficult, have even had their confidence undermined by simply asking for such help from their departments.

One respondent told this story:

A year or so before I expected to go out on the market, I and a (male) fellow graduate student asked our (female) graduate chair if the department would consider providing a series of what we called "professional development" seminars--how to turn a seminar paper into an article, to prepare for MLA, to interview, etc. She demurred, claiming that she didn't like to make academia seem so "professionalized," and further claiming that "cream rises," anyway. While I agree that one can't expect that such a series of workshops would actually have guaranteed jobs to the participants (which seemed to be part of her concern about professionalizing), I began to feel that perhaps I wasn't "cream," as I hadn't yet felt myself "rising" in the manner she seemed to be suggesting.

This was, I hasten to add, not everyone's experience; many of my respondents had feminist mentors and felt well-advised. It seems to me, indeed, that advising, like every other part of the job search, embodies all that is best and worst about our profession, from collegiality and common inquiry to ritual humiliation and hierarchy. My goal is for all job candidates to experience collegiality rather than humiliation--again, the process of getting a job is so capricious and secret that even the best advice can't guarantee one, but it can help a candidate feel that "failure" is not necessarily the result of some oversight or lack on her part.

My other set of stories concerns interviewing, mostly MLA interviewing. Here I got more responses, and more varied responses, than to any

other questions I asked. People who wanted to "vent" had a lot to say, but they offered encouraging stories as well. First, though, a point I don't think gets made enough: screening only through MLA interviews may in and of itself be to some extent discriminatory and biased, as one of my respondents pointed out:

This is my third year [on the job market] and I am really torn about going to MLA. Frankly, I resent the class discrimination that is involved; candidates are *expected* to spend \$700-\$800 to travel to the MLA, regardless of where it is held. When one is a graduate student from the working class or an exploited part-time faculty member who makes less money than a graduate student, how can this amount be scraped together for what is essentially a screening interview?

I might add to this comment my observation that while some departments cover airfare for a job-search visit to the MLA, they usually do so only once per graduate student; those who search twice or more must hope to be supported for delivering papers or must go into debt. Since women are disproportionately represented among adjunct faculty, the question of the MLA convention as a screening mechanism becomes an important feminist issue. It deserves more attention than I can give it here, but I should like to raise the question before moving on to specific tales of the convention and its aftermath.

Now for the good news: many candidates find the interview process quite positive. I have heard in conversations and from my questionnaires responses like the following more than once.

When I first went to MLA, I didn't know what to expect and was, consequently, a nervous wreck. In fact, I don't think I kept a meal down during the whole three days, nor did I sleep well--the nerve-factor was overwhelming. Add to this the fact that by the time I got to MLA for my three measly interviews I was really beginning to second-guess my right to be in the academy--I'd been turned down for so many jobs already, I couldn't imagine that I was worthy of the ones I was interviewing for. Oddly, the interview process itself laid that fear to rest. I found my interviewers for the most part cordial, interesting, interested people--they treated me with respect, courtesy, and best of all, curiosity--as if, indeed, they could imagine me as a future colleague. While I didn't get a job that first year, I felt much better about myself as an academic, a teacher, and a scholar, because I'd been to some extent validated in these interviews.

The issue of "worth" keeps coming up. Many of us, of course, share the values of those who interview us, to a greater or lesser extent, and many other respondents reported similarly pleasant experiences at their MLA interviews. Finding common cause with future colleagues is an important first step in thinking about the kinds of "worth" or "merit" we want to reward, but we must recognize that other "worthy" candidates may not be interviewed.

In fact, many feminist candidates found the worst thing about the interview process was that they were too often quizzed on whether they could "handle" canonical male authors, especially if their dissertations and/or research interests lay with women or noncanonical authors. Such questions often lead us into a kind of apologizing that no one wants to do, and many wondered whether men working on noncanonical authors were similarly quizzed. Can we make equations of "worth" here? Is one Tennyson worth three Felicia Hemanses, for example?

But beyond the rather simple issues of canonicity--most of us do manage to convince interviewers that we know the "great ones" or that our noncanonical authors are "great"--there are still some very unpleasant interviewing experiences, most of them having to do with illegal or at least distasteful questions. Here are some examples to mull over:

Two years ago I had an interview with a small prestigious liberal arts college. . . . The interview was to take place in the convention hotel's restaurant which, due to the hotel's layout, was difficult to find the entrance to. My husband, wearing his MLA nametag, stepped out of the elevator with me, with plans to make sure I found the place for the interview and then to make his way to the lobby to wait for me. One of my interviewers, standing outside the restaurant, happened to see us together. My first interview question: "Was that your husband I saw you with?" I admitted as much. Then, "Is he in literature, too?" "Does he have a job, and would he mind your moving cross-country?" I hastened to assure both interviewers that, in fact, I was further along in my graduate program than he was, that I was the only one of us "on the market," and that he would certainly go wherever my job took us. One interviewer--male--then persisted with, "Well, but will he be willing and/or able to commute to a job in . . . [the closest source of other schools who might employ a spouse]?" At this point, I felt as though I ought to be objecting to the sexist tone of the interviewer, but I was too anxious to get the position to risk offending my interviewers.

Most such stories have to do with academic spouses or their absence. One interviewer asked a candidate

when I could move. . . . After telling him that I would need two weeks' notice for my current employer and one week to pack up and relocate, he looked at me puzzled and said, "What, no attachments?" Perhaps I'm being sensitive about being a non-coupled woman, but . . . I thought this question was illegal to ask on an interview.

One candidate, asked if she had children, responded brightly, "No, do you?" Treating such questions as if they are conversational rather than substantive may work, but other questions are more difficult to parry. For example: "I am applying for a post-doc at [an Irish university] and was told by a current fellow (female, Catholic) to say I was Catholic (I'm not) as the university is rather anxious to redress its Protestant bias." Or:

Over drinks [after a somewhat awkward MLA interview] they asked me some illegal questions--whether I had someone who would be moving with me who would need help finding a job. I told them that my husband was applying to [professional] schools and that several of them were in commuting distance of [their city]. They suggested two other schools he might consider. . . . [On the campus visit] the faculty seemed very uncomfortable with our ambitions of being a two-career family. They kept telling me how difficult it would be, and seemed to think that [my husband] should make career decisions that would commit him to [their city] for life. (Specifically, they expected him to go to [a local] law school, which has open admissions and couldn't actually take him for two years. . . .) This was a real change from the MLA discussion, when they were positive about commutes to [several other cities]. But when they found out that I might be commuting at first, rather than [my husband], they were less sanguine about it. And at our final discussion during the campus visit, the chair told me that she wasn't sure that I could be as committed to the department as she thought I'd need to be. This pissed me off, partially because they had changed tunes so abruptly, and partly because I thought that they were being unreasonable. [My husband] and I were considering coming to a different part of the country altogether, and while we were certainly open to settling there, we weren't ready after two days to promise to spend the rest of our lives there. This, I had a feeling, was what she wanted me to promise. But it was an interesting spin on the two-career thing--suggesting that my husband should immediately declare himself career-secondary and surrender any aspirations of his own.

We might note, here, that we can't assume women are feminists; these unpleasant questions, raised to a female candidate by a female chair, implicitly measure the husband's "worth" against the wife's. Whose career is primary? Whose should be? Is a husband's career an impediment to a wife's, or vice-

versa? This balancing act few of us can avoid, perhaps, but isn't it one that we should at least be allowed to negotiate on our own?

These stories, which come both from MLA interviews and campus visits, raise for me one of the crucial questions of the job search: what are the sanctions against illegal questions and what can we do about such questions? Paula Caplan suggests that women politely redirect them and then document them, but she doesn't say to whom such documentation might ultimately go. To whom might a candidate report such questions? A lawyer? The MLA? Other interested women professors who might be in a position to speak to the questioners?

One last two-career story: one respondent went on the market as half a couple; she and her husband applied for jobs separately but--at different and appropriate times--tried to negotiate for two jobs in the same department. On one occasion, my respondent reports:

We were invited to a cocktail party so that the search committee could meet me. At the party, the head of the search committee, when he was introduced to me said, "So, you're the encumbrance on [your husband's] career." Honestly, I'm quoting. After MLA, this same man called the house to speak to [my husband]. I told him [he] was on his way home and would be there in fifteen minutes. He said it would be fine to leave a message. After I told him that I'd prefer he speak to [him] directly, he continued to insist I take a message. The message was that they would have brought him to campus, but I was "an encumbrance" and they were not going to be considering him further. This was the message I had to give my husband.

This story actually does have a happy ending, that is, two jobs--but many other stories may not. Indeed, whether the questions are illegal or simply rude, the issue is the same: power. One respondent thus suggests that advisors help empower their students with awareness:

[They should] prepare women candidates for the sexism that is still likely to exist in interviews and campus visits by helping them to think out appropriate--and "safe"--responses to likely questions. If sexism in the profession can be acknowledged by advisors, beyond the abstract "deploring" of it, it might give women candidates the courage to respond to it.

I seem to have come full circle, back to advising, perhaps the best place to close, with the advice that departments provide and job seekers demand the kind of help they need to face the difficult process of looking for a job.

Notes

1 While a four-year job search may sound unthinkable, Bronstein and Caplan may derive their estimate from the sciences, in which postdoctoral fellowships and research positions antedate academic jobs yet figure in the timeline of the job search. Nonetheless, my (admittedly unscientific) survey suggests that up to three years is not at all uncommon, and some of my respondents did take up to four years to land tenure-track positions in English and foreign languages. Often they spent some of this time in one- or two-year positions or in part-time work, some of it perhaps before completing their dissertations.

Works Cited

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