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**R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism**

Interview R-0893

Rebecca Traister

July 9, 2015

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## ABSTRACT – Rebecca Traister

Interviewee: Rebecca Traister

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: July 9, 2015

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Length: Approximately 128 minutes

Rebecca Traister is a journalist and author who writes about women in politics, media, and entertainment from a feminist perspective and helped found Broadsheet at Salon, one of the first national feminist blogs. In this interview she describes her parents' backgrounds, including her mother's from northern Maine and her father's immigrant Jewish roots. She discusses the complexities of gender relations in home where her mother succeeded in getting a tenure track academic career and father did not. Traister traces the development of her feminist consciousness, recalling her early attachment to the cause of abortion rights, and reading English literature through a gendered lens in high school, but says she did not see feminism as an active movement when she was young. She describes fraternity life at college, and how the publication of Katie Roiphe's book *The Morning After*, which dismissed the notion of date rape, was a source of early feminist anger. She describes other feminist turning points including a dramatic interaction with Harvey Weinstein when she was a young reporter. Traister discusses the founding of Salon magazine's Broadsheet, and the impact of the rise of the feminist blogosphere and the changes in journalism due to the wider array of outlets on the internet, as well as the relationship between activists and journalists. She discusses the tensions among activists especially on Twitter, and how that relates to earlier moments in the feminist movement. Traister reflects on why she turned to writing books. Increasing financial pressures on journalism and the implications for the quality of the reporting and writing. The interview also includes a powerful description of Traister's experience of September 11, 2001. This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

## **FIELD NOTES – Rebecca Traister**

(compiled July 9, 2015)

Interviewee: Rebecca Traister

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: July 9, 2015

Location: Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York

THE INTERVIEWEE. Rebecca Traister is a journalist and author who writes about women in politics and culture from a feminist perspective.

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in Traister's walk-up in a Park Slope brownstone building. Traister and I had met before, and had friendly chat before the interview started. She stopped at one point to eat a banana, and had a headache so took some Tylenol. A housecleaner came in at one point with a vacuum cleaner so we paused the tape. Traister got emotional describing her intense experience with 9/11.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

## **TRANSCRIPT – REBECCA TRAISTER**

Interviewee: Rebecca Traister

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Interview Date: July 9, 2015

Interview Location: Brooklyn, New York

Length: One audio file, approximately 128 minutes

### **START OF INTERVIEW:**

Rachel Seidman: This is Rachel Seidman and I'm here in Brooklyn, New York with Rebecca Traister on July--.

Rebecca Traister: Ninth.

RS: Two thousand fifteen. We are undertaking an oral history interview for a project called "Speaking Up, Speaking Out, Talking Back: An Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age." So Rebecca, I'm going to ask you to start by situating me in terms of your family; where they came from, what you know about your grandparents?

RT: Sure. On my mother's side, my mother grew up on a potato farm in northern Maine, very northern Maine, Aroostook County. Her father's parents built the farm. Her father, as a young man, was the second brother and served in World War II in the Air Force and was going to become a pilot, but then his older brother who was going to take over the farm was shot down over Europe on his last mission, leaving my grandfather to take over the farm that his parents had built, which he was very unhappy about. My mother's mother was born and raised in Portland, Maine and went to college at Colby and wanted to become a doctor. But in the thirties, there was neither money nor particular opportunity for a woman to become a doctor. She did wind up getting a graduate degree in biology at the University of Iowa. She took a train through that

famous 1936 hurricane to get to Iowa. She'd never left the state of Maine before that and was caught in the hurricane and everything and made it to Iowa and got her graduate degree and worked as a scientist for several years in her twenties before moving with her parents--her father worked for the New England Telegraph Company--moving up to the northern Maine town where she became the founding member of the biology department at the local private high school. When she was there she met my grandfather, this was before he went to war and he was working as a football coach. He'd gone to Bowdoin for college and he was working as a football coach. They married when she was in her mid-twenties, twenty-six, and then he went off to war. They married and he went to train in Arkansas and she was pregnant with my mother. She gave birth to my mother in Arkansas on the base where my grandfather was training and then he went overseas. She returned to that town Holton, Maine where she lived with her mother, her father had died. When my grandfather came back from the war and his brother was dead they moved onto the farm, which was in a slightly more rural area six miles away.

My mother and her two siblings were raised on this potato farm. They were raised Baptist. It was an incredibly small town. They were taught to watch out for and not marry Catholics, there was no thought that there was anybody more exotic than that out there. As a result, my mother was very surprised when she came home with a Jew from college and found her parents were very angry about it. My father, the Jew, was raised in the Bronx by immigrant parents. His mother's family had come from what I believe is Minsk, his father had come over when he was two years old, I can't remember from where in Russia, in that migration, 1908 I think. Both of my father's parents were raised in New York. My grandmother worked for the Social Security Office, she was very involved in the Communist Party but then renounced after Stalin. Her brother remained very active and was in jail for a long time, his name was Phil

Frankfeld and he was always in and out of jail for his activities within the party. My grandfather was not a Communist, he was the first man in his family to go to college. He became an English professor--well, he went to City College and became a high school English teacher in the Bronx. He taught Stanley Kubrick. The first published Stanley Kubrick photographs are of my grandfather teaching Hamlet. They lived in the Bronx and did not have children until my grandmother was in her forties because they were in their childbearing years during the Depression and they didn't think it was a good idea. My grandmother had an abortion in the thirties because she felt it wasn't a good world to bring children into. When she was I believe, forty-one, she had my father. When she was forty-four, in 1945, she had my aunt.

My father grew up in the Bronx and he and my mother met at Colby. My father was a very academically ambitious but not actually very disciplined student. He had his visions but he was very interested in academic pedigree, he went to Bronx Science, he had visions of going to Harvard and when he didn't get in he sort of picked what he viewed to be the most faraway college in the world which was Colby College in Maine. He'd never been to Maine and so he went to Maine.

My mother, who'd been a rock star student, she went to a one-room school house in her early years, and then she'd been a straight A, super achieving student but had zero self confidence and hadn't even applied to college because she just, college wasn't something a lot of people did. Both her parents had gone to college, she had no confidence she'd get in, which was crazy because she was the top scoring person...she's brilliant. At some point her mother took her to Colby, her alma mater, and took her to the admissions office and it was much more informal then, and they said yes you can come in the fall. And so they wound up meeting at Colby College.

RS: How would you describe your family of origin that you grew up in?

RT: Well they were both academics. My mother became an English professor. They both went to graduate school and got PhDs in English literature. My mother—it was in the early 1970s—again, I’m getting into this in part because it explains some of the gender dynamics in the household in which I grew up. My mother was a great student and worked extremely hard and always did well in school. My father is a very brilliant person who did not buckle down in school. They got married in nineteen sixty—they just had their fiftieth wedding anniversary last week—so they got married in 1965. My father had wanted my mother to drop out of college when they got married. He was a couple years older and was moving back to New York to go to NYU for graduate school. She was, I’m so happy to say in retrospect, because what I know about my mother as a young person is she would’ve said yes, but she said no, I’m not going to drop out of college. She stayed in college. My father had gotten into NYU, he went to NYU to get his PhD in—[vacuum cleaner starts, tape pauses].

My mother got into Yale and she got her graduate degree from Yale where she was one of the first women and she got a job. They both got early jobs at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. But then my mother is the person who really got the tenure-track job.

RS: What year would that have been?

RT: Well, they just made a documentary about her at Lehigh and she just retired. I think it was 1972, maybe? It was 1972 or 1973; she was one of the first two women hired in Lehigh’s English department after a series of lawsuits had forced English departments to hire women. The story I was always told growing up was that she had gotten her job because she was a woman. There was a story of reverse privilege in my house. Because “oh in the early 1970s,” I was told

as a young person, “it was impossible for men to get jobs in academia because they were being actively discriminated against.”

RS: Who was telling you this?

RT: Both of them. My father did not get a tenure track job. She was in her late twenties by the time she got her job at Lehigh University and they moved back east near Lehigh. My father did not have a job for a while; I think he did not have a job when I was born. He finally went back to library school and became a rare book librarian, a job he was very good at. I grew up with forty thousand books in my house. But he was very resentful because he very much wanted to be an academic and my mother had all these things in her life that he didn't have. She had research opportunities, she could do scholarship, she could be in the classroom—all things he loved. He felt that...the complicated dynamics that came out of that were very intense. Because, on the one hand, I think to make up for the slights and the resentments about who had the career that both had wanted, my mother did every--in part, coming from a different generation, my father coming from a Jewish household in which I think he had been treated very much as the first born Jewish son--my mother did every bit of domestic work. My father did not lift a finger. She washed every dish, she drove every carpool, she cooked every meal, she did every load of laundry. My father never lifted a finger. He sat. It's amazing now to think about what was normal in my childhood, my father just sitting reading a book through meal preparations, through meal clean up, through children going to bed, through teeth brushing, my father sitting reading a book.

As a result, my mother's career, which was wonderful, she was a beloved professor and retired last year after forty-five years, she did eventually publish two books but the scholarship was very slow for her because she was entirely on her own taking care of two children. Each



time she published a book, two times, there was mysteriously a marital crisis that followed immediately after. My mother was punished maritally for every instance of achievement or success that she had. She really took on the narrative of “I only got this because I was a woman, your father is so much smarter than me.” I don’t know whether it was defensive, I don’t know if it was to make her marriage work, but she very much adopted “he was the genius in the family” and this was a career he did not get to have but she did.

Anyway, we grew up in Philadelphia. He became a librarian at the New York Public Library soon after I was born. We lived in Bethlehem, which is where Lehigh is, that’s where I was born. My father commuted to New York City, which was about a two hour bus ride back and forth every day when I was young. My brother was born three years later. When I was four or five years old we were in Atlanta visiting friends, and my father had a pulmonary embolism. He was overweight, he smoked, and he did that multi-hour commute every day and he was hospitalized and almost died. After that, we actually had to move; he couldn’t do that kind of commute any more. He got a job at the University of Pennsylvania as a rare book librarian there, we moved to Philadelphia and my mother took on the longer driving commute to Lehigh. So I grew up in a suburb outside of Philadelphia.

In that time, I grew up in a blue-collar, largely Republican, Irish-Catholic neighborhood where we were very different from everybody else. We had liberal politics, my parents were white-collar academics, professionals, we spent a lot of time going to New York and we went to the theater. My brother and I were very different from the neighborhood we grew up in. I was very conscious we were the only Jews and we weren’t at all religious, but I was super conscious of it. I grew up feeling very different from everybody else in all those ways, at least through my elementary school years, then I went to a private Quaker high school starting in seventh grade.

There I felt the opposite—I was the only person who wasn't Jewish and who was definitely not rich and everybody else had money. It was an inverse experience at being different but I was much happier there.

RS: Once you get to high school, how would you describe you in high school?

RT: I don't even know how I'd describe me in high school. I was totally in the middle of everything. I was neither popular nor deeply unpopular. I had a very best friend to whom I was super tightly connected in that way that girls are when they're in high school. We did not have any romantic or sexual relationships with boys or with each other, but we transferred all that teenage passion and intensity to each other and were sort of obsessed with each other. So I had that relationship and we had a group of friends outside of that who were again, exactly in the middle. I was, socially, moderate in everything. I drank and smoked, but not too much. I told the truth to my parents, I was a good girl, but I also had fun and experimented but in the most boringly safe ways. I had jobs. I always had to have jobs, something I now feel like, I'm like "Get off my lawn, people who don't have jobs in high school. How do you not have a job?" I scooped ice cream, I waited tables, I bussed tables, I worked at Bath and Body, I babysat. I always had jobs. I was a very responsible high schooler.

I was very good in school. I was one of the couple of very academically--. I was not ambitious, I have never been great about doing the homework. I'm slightly more like my father, though I get good grades, I skate by with good grades, which is maddening. If my children were like this, I'd scream at them. I'm sure they will be. I am not always good about doing all the work but I sort of can get away with sounding reasonably smart about whatever it is. I was like that in high school; I wasn't stressed out about doing well, but I did very well in school.

I probably was anxious, socially, somehow, and this was probably tied up in my relationship with my best friend. I was anxious to not be the super smartest person in the class. I didn't apply--. I went to a prep school where everyone aimed for Ivy League schools and I did not want that, for some good reasons, which was I was turned off by that culture of elite competition, but for some bad reasons, which were that I actually didn't want to achieve more than my best friend, who was not aimed in the same direction. We both wound up going to Northwestern. I was tracked to the degree that we were tracked in that school, which was some ways with the other kids who were very smart. I went to France on an exchange.

RS: Did you connect your not wanting to be a stand out student to your gender, or to--.

RT: Not at all. I don't think.

RS: Your mom?

RT: No, I'm sure there were certain influences that I wasn't aware of that had to do with my mom and achieving too much could--. It's probably true that if my relationship with Judy, who was my best friend, maybe I was acting out of some fear. That was very much keyed to what it was about, I didn't want to do better than she because, and I don't know why.

RS: Yeah, what would have happened?

RT: [Pause] Our paths would have diverged. At that point in high school, and again, I think some people have this with their high school partners and some people have it with girl friends, and there's a long history of that and I've written a lot about that in this book that I've just finished, but I definitely had it with her. Again, it wasn't romantic and it wasn't sexual, but it was very important that we were twinned and that our tastes mirrored each other. There was no room in that instance of friendship for difference or divergence; we had to be the same. We had to share every perspective and every opportunity and I didn't want to have, I didn't want to go in

a different direction from her and that really did pull me. It's okay. I didn't love college, but it's not like I think my life would be much better if I'd gone to Yale.

RT: You said earlier that "we had liberal politics." Were you a particularly political person?

RS: I was very interested in abortion. Not for any personal experience of it, but because I went to the 1992 March on Washington with another friend of mine, Abby. 1992? Actually, there was one in 1988. That was the one I went to with Abby when I was in eighth grade. When I was in ninth grade I wrote a term paper--. My uncles were singing in midnight mass in New York City and we went and it was a Catholic Church and I wore a pro-choice pin into the Catholic Church and I wrote a paper about it. I know that was in my mind at that point.

RS: Did you know that story of your grandmother at that time?

RT: No. I knew, probably at that point, that my mother had had an abortion. My mother had had an abortion in between me and my brother because she hadn't known she was pregnant and there were the swine flu inoculations and they asked you if you were pregnant and she said no and got the inoculation and then realized she was pregnant and she didn't want to risk that something was wrong so she had an abortion. I probably knew that at that point. I think I considered abortion to be something very dramatic when I was a young person. I don't think I had any sense of what it meant economically. There was a sort of dramatic element to my attachment to that issue. I liked going to the march, I liked being angry about this thing. I didn't have a sex life, I didn't have any sense of what a reproductive life was really like—I was very young. I'm not sure what precipitated my attachment to it, I don't think it was a personal connection. I was already in high school, in my English classes, I was certainly reading things with an eye toward gender. I remember writing papers about *Pretty Woman* and *Galatea*; I was

interested in women in literature, and abortion seemed to be the contemporary issue that I could attach that interest to and exercise some sort of feminist engagement.

RS: Do you remember a particular teacher or somebody who was encouraging you to think about these things?

RT: In high school? No, I remember lots of teachers who were very beloved to me but nobody who was necessarily pushing feminism.

RS: Or using a gendered lens on literature?

RT: Well they all were—it was a Quaker school and it had extremely liberal politics. Feminism was something that got talked about by everyone but there was anybody who awakened me particularly to this.

RS: When you went off to college, did you develop an activist life?

RT: No. I was the opposite of an activist in college. I mostly wanted to survive college. It's interesting, my first year there, I developed a private and academic interest in gender stuff. My first year I lived in a dorm, again following Judy. At Northwestern there are two sets of dorms, one for arts kids down at the south end of the campus. The other tends to draw more engineering kids but it's also right in the middle of the fraternity quad, and Judy wanted to live there and I went there to live with her. We weren't roommates, but we did live next door to each other. It was right in the middle of fraternity culture at a time when—I think that now it's died down a little, I don't know, I know some schools are so nervous about getting sued they're banning parties, but this was not that point. At that point, it was a very active fraternity culture and we were on the ground floor with doors that were always open in an all female hall. It was a co-ed dorm but for whatever reason an all-female floor, and they called it the virgin vault. It was nightly onslaughts of drunk people coming in. It wasn't like everybody was getting raped, it was

that everybody was having bad experiences that they thought about in a million different ways. Not one of them, not one of us ever filed a complaint or pressed a charge. That moment was, in my memory, the peak of backlash. It was the year after Katie Roiphe's book *The Morning After* had come out. I hated that book. I've often said that Katie Roiphe is the reason I became a feminist because of my anger at that book. It was kept at fraternity houses as a talisman, as a "this thing [date rape] isn't real." I was very aware and very angry but I did not have any engagement with activism on campus. I had friends who actually founded feminist groups that I didn't participate in. I went once to watch the Take Back the Night march which existed in an anemic form at that point. It was a very, it was not a political campus at all. No one cared. No one cared about feminism. That was true, even in my liberal high school, I said our teachers would talk to us about feminism, we were used to looking at books with a gendered lens, but there was no student embrace of feminism. It was even somehow severed from if you went-- [interruption, person comes in.] I have a very distinct memory from high school from an English class, it was a night class that we took when we were seniors. Again, it was a prep school and very precious in lots of ways and when we were juniors and seniors our English classes moved to the evenings and we would come in and do specialized English classes.

RS: Was it a boarding school?

RT: No, we would just go to school at night because somehow that was more fun and take a specialized seminar and this one was on bildungsroman and we were reading *Jane Eyre* and I remember one of my friends raising her hand and literally saying about Bertha, "I'm not a feminist but isn't it weird that he kept his first wife locked in an attic?" I do remember sitting there and being like "I feel like that's a scenario where you could be a feminist. [laughter] I feel like it's not a controversial thing to notice as a strange thing happening to a woman in a book."

So I was aware of it, but it never felt like feminism would reemerge. It felt like it was an antiquated thing and that it was over, and every social message I got was “you might have these critiques, you might have talk about it academically, but this is not something that anybody is really identifying with.” I joke often in speeches when I talk to students, but it was really true, that in college it felt like you could go to the vegan LGBT potluck and you could ask that crowd “anybody a feminist?” and not a hand would go up. Feminism was just not something that people were, you know, when I was in college. That was from 1993 to 1997. I never had any sense there would be an application for this lens in any professional or public life or even in my own identity. I cannot tell you if I’d call myself a feminist in those years. I just don’t know.

RS: I’m trying to think about the national political scene. When was Clinton elected?

RT: Clinton was elected the last year I was in high school. I didn’t get to vote for him. I was still seventeen when he became president. I had no engagement as a young person really, with Hillary. I knew who she was. I was vaguely interested, she reminded me a lot of my mom and she reminded me of my aunt. But I didn’t have any sense of connection to her. When I was in college, my senior year, my roommate in my American Studies program wrote, it was the year after their reelection—it was 1996, 1997 was my final year of college—my roommate was writing her honors thesis on Hillary Clinton and we went to see her in Chicago speak with Jessie Jackson. We met her, and deep in the recesses of my world I have a photo I took of her looking [gestures] one of those crazy Hillary photos. We went to meet her and shake hands with her in a rope line. I’ve said before, but at that point, my roommate was writing a thesis on her and she felt very distant and academic and of another time then. I didn’t have any sense of personal engagement with her at all.

The other things that were happening in that period when I was a young person—Anita Hill was when I was in high school. It's very interesting because I happened to be on the farm with my very conservative grandparents in Maine the weekend of the Anita Hill trials. I was watching them while we were making cider with a group of people and I was watching the trials, the hearings, with my grandparents on their little television and they-- I really absorbed, I didn't really believe it, but I also didn't question it, they were like "This woman is crazy, this is a travesty, she's trying to bring this great man down." I wasn't so engaged that I thought "No, that's not the case." I just absorbed that might, maybe what was happening. It didn't engage me particularly. I was vaguely aware after that it was the "Year of the Woman" and I was very interested in Murphy Brown. I was very interested in presidential candidates for politics, but not gendered politics. As far as women in politics go, I remember very distinctly when Pat Schroeder dropped out of a presidential race that I now know was in 1987 and cried. I knew that was a bad thing, both that she hadn't been able to raise the money, that she dropped out, that when she dropped out she cried. I understood in some way these were not a good combination of events. Earlier than that, I'd been very excited about Geraldine Ferraro, but that was in a period of years where I just thought that being a Democrat—and that was 1984 and I was still in elementary school and I was nine years old—and I just thought that being a Democrat in my neighborhood and community and even part of my family because my grandparents were staunch Republicans, that that just meant being womped right and left. Mondale-Ferraro, which is an example of that, it just meant losing all the time. Politically I was engaged but not really engaged. To this day I often remember when, as an adult who is now very politically engaged, probably in the midterms, wherever the last big drubbing that democrats got, probably in 2014, I remember going into my workplace and people not caring and me being like "how can you not care about



this?" I remind myself of a day when I was in college and a sophomore and it was November of [19]94 when Gingrich basically cleared out everybody in Congress and I remember going into my English seminar with my beloved, favorite, favorite English teacher and we walked into the seminar room and she's like "I'm so depressed." I was like, "why?" She was like "because of what happened last night." I remember just saying "of course" but not having any idea. I have to remind myself that I was that person, that person that did not know anything when we lost congress. I just didn't know. I was a smart, engaged person. I just didn't care.

RS: So what happened? Several of my interviewees have recounted transformative moments—yours was more a--.

RT: I mean I had, the connection to politics...the connection between politics and feminism frankly probably came with Hillary, which is crazy now in retrospect that it would have been so late. My interest in politics grew as I got older and again, as a kid, I'd been interested in politics in that I cared about Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro. I cared about being Democrat, it was a very big part of my identity because there were so few around me, all that. But my understanding of it obviously deepened and my understanding that it meant something deepened.

2000 was a crucial moment for me in politics. I was a young reporter, it was my first job in newspapers and I was at the New York Observer and I was up all night when they couldn't figure out who won the election. And then I was horrified by what happened afterward. I had friends at that point who worked for Gore, and that was a terrible moment of disillusion and also real engagement, like oh my god this is something terrible happening to this country. As far as feminism goes, when I first graduated from college I worked for Harvey Keitel, who was an actor and I was his personal assistant for about a year and a half. Then I went to work for Talk

Magazine, which was being edited by Tina Brown, the former editor of The New Yorker and was being financed by Harvey Weinstein who was the head--.

RS: Hang on for a second. Why did you go work for Harvey Keitel?

RT: Because I needed a job. I had no idea what I was going to do. Nobody in my family had ever done anything but go to graduate school. I didn't know what I was going to do and I decided I wanted to work in film but I didn't know what that meant. I wanted to come to New York, I came to New York, I looked for jobs in film and nobody wanted to hire me. At that point Miramax was a big New York film company and lots of young people were working for it, Judy's sister knew somebody working for Miramax who knew that Harvey Keitel, who is not affiliated with Miramax, needed an assistant, I said sure and went to go interview with him. He asked me "Do you speak Italian, do you drive, do you cook?" I said "Yes!" and he said "Great," and the next day he gave me his keys and his bank cards and everything and then I was Harvey Keitel's personal assistant.

It was all very random and it was a very weird job. It made me extremely aware of gender. That's not actually something I want to talk about, but there were lots of things about that job—nothing traumatic that happened to me, but a world that I observed—that was extremely ugly and that I think really sharpened my awareness of what it meant to be female in the world. I wasn't unhappy doing it, it was a very interesting job; I lived in Italy with him for a while, where we lived next to David Bowie. I met the most famous people, I ate in the best restaurants, I traveled around the world. It was in many ways an ideal first job, but it was also a window into an extremely unhappy, ugly world of unhappy movie stars, lots of them, not just Harvey Keitel, and the ways in which women are treated badly become very visible.

After I had done that for about a year, I wanted to do something else. Because I worked in the movie world, because Miramax was financing Talk magazine, I heard about somebody's hiring an assistant, so I went to work for Talk magazine for about a year before it even launched as an assistant to an executive editor. That was quite boring, I mean it was interesting because it was Talk magazine and Tina Brown and I was working for a woman which was horrendous—not working for a woman, but working for that woman was not a good thing—but it was an interesting experience. When I was there, I met young editors and writers who thought that I could write. They said “You should go get a job as a reporter or a fact checker,” so they helped me get a job at the New York Observer which was a weekly, quirky newspaper and I got a job there when I was twenty-four or twenty-five as a fact checker and then I slowly worked my way up there.

The New York Observer was both a great experience, it was like a 1940s news room in an old, falling down town house on the Upper East Side and there were a lot of old school editors and some people still phoned their columns in and they set the type and still carried it in a suitcase to the printer. On the night of September 11th, they carried it across the bridge. They walked it across the bridge to Queens to the printing plant. It was an incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience of working in a very old-fashioned kind of newspaper run by an incredibly charismatic editor, Peter Kaplan, who is now dead. But it was also the ultimate boys' club. It was old fashioned in a million ways. There were lots of young women there, many of whom I became friends with, but it was not a wonderful place for women. It seems silly, I love a lot of these people, but there was an enormous amount of sexual harassment, just an enormous amount of sexual harassment and sexual objectification. It was all in the name of like “don't be

humorless about it.” It was a very irreverent newspaper, it was the place that published Sex in the City, though that had been before I started working there.

One of my most scarring memories from the Observer is the editors gathering around. They wanted to do some story at Columbia University and I can’t remember what it was about but they needed to have reporters to go up and talk to young men at Columbia, undergraduates. So they stood in the newsroom, and I don’t remember how they said it, but what was clear was that they were choosing the most attractive young women to be the reporters to go up to Columbia and get the guys to talk to them. And so it was these three guys in their fifties, sitting, practically picking for a soccer team, but it was like “who’s cute enough to go to Columbia?” It was this terrible feeling of you don’t want to get picked but you also don’t not want to get picked. That was just one thing, I remember being like “this is egregious and horrible.” And I had a very specific experience that was very gendered, that was actually my first professional feminist moment and it’s kind of a boring story.

I became a film reporter. The philosophy there was you hire a lot of young people, you drum into them that you don’t really care what they think, they have to learn how to report. It’s wonderful, it’s how I learned to be a journalist. So they gave you things that you don’t really care about or aren’t naturally good at. They made me report on real estate, they made me do the gossip column which meant I had to go out five nights a week to these dumb premiers and like, ask Reese Witherspoon about getting divorced. It was an experience of going up with a tape recorder and asking horrible questions of celebrities and then having to produce a column that had anything interesting in it. It was terrible and frightening but it was very good for me. And then, once they had really had me reporting on something, the beat they gave me was the film industry which was financing stories, who was paying for this movie, some profiles of people. I

had what was my first really great story around the 2000 election—it was the night before the 2000 election.

I was writing on how there was a movie called “O” which was an update of Othello which starred a lot of actors at the time, teenage Othello with a lot of actors who at the time were very popular. Miramax was holding it, Miramax wasn’t releasing it. My story was suggesting that it was because of Harvey Weinstein’s involvement in the Gore campaign because Harvey Weinstein wanted to be an ambassador somewhere. This was the scoop, right? I couldn’t get Harvey Weinstein to return my phone calls so I went to a party with a male reporter who was covering the gossip column at that point. He also happened to be my boyfriend. My editor and this male reporter said “Come with us, Harvey is hosting this party you can get a quote for this story, that’s all you need, you’ll close the story tomorrow.” I had to get him to respond. We went to the party, I asked him the question, he gave a non-response, I turned off my tape recorder and got ready to go. Then he came back, and he’s a very-- I don’t know if you know anything about Harvey Weinstein but he’s a famously brutish, violent, hot tempered, very old-fashioned movie mogul. He came back and he started screaming at me “You can’t use that, you can’t use that.” I was a young person but I stood my ground and said “Harvey, of course I can,” I identified myself as a reporter and you didn’t say anything,” and I held on to the tape recorder. He started grabbing for the tape recorder and he started screaming at me and calling me a cunt. I did the only thing I could think of which was to turn the tape recorder on to get him saying it. He screamed into the tape recorder “I’m glad I’m the fucking mayor of this fucking shit piece of town.” It was a big drama, his people were pulling at him and everything. Then, the male reporter I was with, my then boyfriend, came up and calmed everything down and said “Harvey, I’m here covering this party.” Harvey was screaming “Who let you in here? You weren’t supposed to come!” and I

said, “I was on the list.” Andrew came up and calmed him down and it was great and I’m getting our bags and I’m like “Let’s go.” Then when he got Harvey all calm, Andrew said “Now I want you to apologize to my colleague” and I was like [whispering] “What are you doing?” This made Harvey fly into another rage and this time he put Andrew into a headlock, he pushed him over the stairs, Andrew’s tape recorder hit a woman—she still has brain damage—he dragged him out to the sidewalk and started pounding his head. This was the night before the 2000 election and it became a big tabloid story. My editor told me and Andrew that night when we called to say what had happened “You must not give interviews, you’re a reporter on this guy, you can’t become the story.”

I’m a very good girl, so everybody called me and I said “I’m sorry I have no comment. Sorry no comment.” But Andrew, and my two male editors did not listen to this advice and they gave interviews to everybody in which they talked about how gallant Andrew had been, how this woman was being abused and he’d come to save me. The only spin Miramax could put on it was “this reporter had come to a party she wasn’t invited to and she shouldn’t have been there and Harvey was right.” That was the only spin they had. But none of these guys who were out there talking to the press, bothered to do the most basic thing. They were all talking about white knights and chivalry but what my editor didn’t say is “we told her to go to that party”—which is all they had to do is to professionally defend me, to say “She had every right to be there, she’s a reporter doing her job, she tried to contact this guy and this was a party to which the press was invited, and we her bosses told her to go there.” Nobody bothered to say that, and I kept my own mouth shut as instructed. All the press around it was these guys talking about how chivalrous they all had been and helped this poor damsel in distress. In retrospect, I was enormously pissed in a way I think I managed to articulate as a feminist fury and I actually went to talk to my two

male bosses a couple weeks after and said “wait a minute, I just want to talk about how this went down.” I told them, and tried to explain it to them, and they seemed to understand. I’d been told later that it made an impression on Peter who was the boss and he told other women “Rebecca really--. I’ve always thought about how badly we treated Rebecca Traister.” I don’t know if that’s true, he’s never said it to me. If I had a moment, that was certainly the moment where I felt myself thinking “uh oh, I have to say something about this.”

RS: Say something?

RT: Say something to somebody about the fact that there was this crazy treatment very tied up in the fact that I was a woman and these guys were men and I did what I was told and I got fucked somehow.

RS: Did that affect how you did your job later? Do you think you should not have obeyed those rules and kept your mouth shut?

RT: I don’t know what I think should have been done differently in retrospect. I think those guys should have talked to me. I think I should’ve been brought into a conversation about what they were going to say. I don’t much care whether or not I spoke, but I wish it hadn’t been framed as a story of me being saved. I wish there had been some conference with me, about like “Wait a minute, this what they’re saying is about you and your bad behavior and you going to this party. Let’s address that.” There was none of that. There was no treating me like a professional. There was treating me like a prop in their story of male gallantry.

RS: After that, how long did you stay at that job?

RT: Until the fall of 2003.

RS: So you were there when 9/11 happened. Can you talk about the impact on the impact of [9/11] on the way you thought about your job or the world?

RS: No. On the one hand, I didn't know anybody who died in 9/11 and I so I don't particularly like to talk about the way that it was traumatic for me because I don't think it was a particularly earned trauma. It was traumatic for me. It was, you know. I was twenty-six years old and I watched it from my bedroom window and was on a train above ground, the F train that comes to Park Slope, right at the place where you can see Manhattan. In terms of how I did my job, that morning I looked out my bedroom window and I saw a plane fly into the World Trade Center. Literally, I was in bed, late to work. I guess actually what happened is I woke up and the radio alarm woke me up and the first thing I heard was, "here's a piece of weird news, you should look out your window because a plane has flown into the World Trade Center" in a very cheerful way, whoever this radio person was, "it appears to be a small plane and no one is injured." That is what I heard on the radio. Now, I lived on this neighborhood on Seventh Street and my bedroom had a view of downtown Manhattan. I rolled over in bed and looked and sure enough there's smoke coming up from the World Trade Center.

They're saying "reports are there are no injuries." It was--. I was like, oh. I started taking pictures and it was like "that's something you don't see every day." As I was taking pictures, and the radio was saying again "a plane has flown into the World Trade Center," a plane flew into the World Trade Center. I have a photograph of it. I was taking pictures as it was happening. I remember each thought as I had them. That plane must have been coming—I was a twenty-six year old woman—that plane must have been coming to help people who were trapped on the roof. [Pause] And it must have accidentally crashed. How? The plane was going to help the people on the roof? That was genuinely the only thing I could think happened. Then, my next thought. Then I tried to call people and I realized there were no phones and I thought, "Oh shit. I bet this is going to be a big story today. I'm late for work. I have to get to work." So I got



dressed, I walked to the train station and the whole time everyone is standing on the street corners watching. It was visible entirely from this neighborhood. I got on the train, the train was there and I got on it with other people and we're going over the high part and everybody is staring at what's happening and then the buildings fall.

We didn't know--. I thought, and in some of the video you can still see it, I thought the top fell off one of them from where I was on the train. The train stopped. We watched the whole thing from the train windows, although we had no idea. No idea. All we could see was the cloud. I thought the top had fallen off one of the buildings. I did not know for a very, very long time. I don't know, what had really happened. I couldn't call anybody. I remember trying to call. They kept us on the train and then the cloud started to blow over directly to us and they let us off the train. I threw up because there was so much stuff coming. There were papers, clothes, everything, blown over here. I just walked home through it and then I went to a bodega and I stood in the bodega for an hour and a half trying to decide what I was going to eat for lunch. I got Kraft macaroni and cheese and I walked back to my apartment and I made Kraft macaroni and cheese and I ate entire four servings myself and finally calls began to come through and I began to understand what happened.

I don't remember where I was when I heard both buildings had fallen. I went out and I reported. I went to schools in this neighborhood, the middle school on Fifth Avenue and talked to the teachers because a lot of the kids in that school had parents who worked in the building and had watched. The whole back of the school faced it so a lot of the kids had seen it fall, from the windows of their classrooms, where their parents were working. It was horrible. Then it was just a scary and surreal time for a while. It was horrible. But it wasn't--. Again, I feel like to describe the trauma of it for me is borrowed because I didn't lose anybody and there are so many people

did. I don't know that it changed anything. I'm sure it changed me in a variety ways, but not in ways I recognized or do recognize now, I wouldn't trace that. It was just a terrible time to be in New York City. Then, I got my job at Salon in 2003. I have to eat a banana, is that okay?

RS: Oh yes.

RT: Because I can't eat any of these things because of the baby, I'm not eating enough during days and I find myself with terrible headaches all of a sudden.

RS: Do you have a headache now?

RT: Mhm.

RS: Would you like to stop and get some Tylenol?

RT: I would actually, it's probably better so it doesn't get too bad. [tape recorded paused]

RS: So you were going to tell me about starting to work at Salon.

RT: I'd been a junior person at The Observer for three and a half years and I wanted to move on. I had a friend from Talk days who was an editor at Salon and at that point—and I guess it was comparatively late to feel this way—but in 2002, I was really just learning what a blog was. I'd known about Salon for a long time because I had friends at Talk who worked there, but Salon and Slate were unusual in that they were just online. They didn't have print editions. My friend worked there. I'd also actually applied for a job at Slate around the same time. It seemed like those were places that had jobs. My friend was an editor at Salon and said "Come over, you can be the staff writer for life." The life section was essentially everything that wasn't politics: movies, books, sports, business, environment--it was the ladies' pages. Salon is a leftie magazine from San Francisco, it used be called "Mothers who Think" was the section, and then it just became "Life."

When I was hired, there was this interesting element of me trying to find work when I was at the Observer. The Observer is famously independently funded and famously paid almost nothing and I, as a young person, was really quite broke. Not poor, but broke and was in desperate need of freelance money and I wrote about the freelance business. I was completely celibate, I had a relationship that ended with that guy in my mid-twenties, but the only thing people wanted to hire me to do at that point was to write personal essays about my sex life in New York City. I was like, I don't have a sex life in New York City. That didn't matter, that was my market value. No matter that I'd never written first person before, in fact the only two first person pieces I wrote in the New York Observer, one was about my love of a baseball player, Darryl Strawberry, and one was about my loathing of makeup. I was the least sex in the city person in the world, but that was all people wanted to hire me to do, or to write reviews of sex toys, which I did once. My friend was getting married in France and I wanted to go. Allure Magazine asked me to write reviews of sex toys and they were going to pay me two thousand dollars and I did it. That was the market value for a young woman, a young woman who wrote about film, finance. It was no--. There was an element of that in the job I was supposed to do in Salon.

Certainly, they wanted a young woman who could sometimes write about her own experiences. But they also wanted me to write about education, religion, parenting, fashion, whatever. I took the job because it seemed to offer bread. It was a higher salary and I wanted to work with my friend. Salon is an amazing place because when I got there its editor in chief was a man but the number two was a woman, the managing editor was a woman, there was a woman film critic, a woman book critic, a woman politics editor, it was actually the only place I've ever worked that wasn't specifically a women's magazine that was completely, effortlessly, justly

gendered. When I got there it was 2003 and my first piece was coming off of seeing so many movies because I was just coming off of being a film beat writer, and there were a whole bunch of movies at that time about men performing oral sex on women. There was just a bunch of independent movies in which cunnilingus in which featured and that was very usual and I wrote about that and about how this was some justice in the world or something. It got huge traffic. Obviously, it was about cunnilingus.

After that, my editor said there was this Erica John thing, the whatever anniversary of Fear Flying. It was so mean and ageist, what I wrote. It was called "The Feminine Antiques." [laughter]. I can't believe I wrote it. I wrote it. I still have the Observer voice in me for a long time, of sneering at everything. But it was also interesting, it was Erica John and Wendy Wasserstein and Sarah Jessica Parker talking about feminism. That did huge traffic. My editor, Lori, and the number two at Salon, Joan Walsh, everybody was a feminist. Everybody was a feminist. And then I wanted to do some other piece about feminism and they were like, "Okay, go for it."

At the time, the only person who was writing regularly about feminism in the media was Katha Pollitt. Ellen Goodman still had a syndicated column. No, actually, no. It was Katha Pollitt and Ellen Goodman mostly, who were in regular rotation about feminism. Susan Faludi wrote here and there, Anna Quindlin still wrote here and there but I don't think she was regular at the time. The field was wide open. Any story you wanted to write about feminism, no one else was writing about it. There was no competition. Around the time I started, a woman who is pretty much my age and who I knew professionally at New York Magazine also began to write pieces about feminism. That was Ariel Levy at New York Magazine, she's now at the New Yorker. In 2004 I came across a blog that was just starting, and that was Feministing and I met Jessica

Valenti. I think she started in 2004; it was all coterminous. Around that same time, I would later understand, though I wasn't in the net roots world, but around the 2004 election there was this community building around, especially Howard Dean and Democratic politics, and within that a splintering off of women in the political blogging scene. Ana Marie Cox, Amanda Marcotte, there were a bunch of fights about gender in the Democratic party activism that produced and helped to produce another tentacle of what would become the feminist blogosphere.

I should say, that I know a lot of people would hear me tell the version of the story and they would say "you are telling an incorrect story. We have been online since 1999. We've been online, we were doing feminism online since the mid-nineties," in chat rooms and things I didn't understand. They are probably right. This is my take on how this blossomed, both in my consciousness and in my profession.

RS: Back in 2008 you wrote a piece about the hoopla over the New York Times coverage of the BlogHer conference and the way women bloggers were treated.

RT: Yeah, I did but I can't remember what I wrote.

RS: Well. You start writing articles about feminism but then Salon launched Broad Sheet.

RT: That was my idea.

RS: It was your idea? Okay so tell me about that.

RT: I was just thinking about this the other day. It was my idea because there were so many stories and Broadsheet, gosh I don't remember what year we launched it. Probably 2005. I'd been at Salon for a while and I'd been writing about feminism but there were so many stories I couldn't write about. Everybody had been looking for blogs. I said to Lori that we should start a blog about feminism and I still know the stupid title I had for it. It was right around David Eggers, Salon was very tied up with Dave Eggers who was a San Francisco writer who had just

written a book called *You Shall Know Your Velocity*. I wanted to call Broadsheet “You Shall Know Your Misogyny,” which I thought was very funny at the time but everyone was like no, that’s terrible. I just thought of it as a place...As soon as people starting writing about feminism, all the women who were working in journalism were “Uh huh!” There was a real hunger, a tremendous hunger to start talking about this stuff again. It had been deadened for so long. There were a ton of people at Salon, a ton of women at Salon who wanted to write about this stuff, and we thought this would be a great blog and we launched it. It was my idea in conjunction with Lori Leibovich and Katherine Mieskowski and Lynn Harris who used to write for Salon. There were a lot of women who were working on this together and it was extremely successful and there was a big debate that is a valid one, is were we ghettoizing these things or were we making more space for them? I think both things were true simultaneously. I don’t think there’s one right answer. For me, the reason I was pro-Broadsheet and in general am pro-women’s media, even it’s own space, is that I am on the side, mostly, of getting more space, more people, more stories out there. I also think it’s absolutely true that it ghettoizes a lot of these stories as being the territory of women and keeps them out of the “regular” i.e. the male section of the news. It’s true. It’s very valid. I don’t think there’s a good answer for it.

RS: So that’s 2005, that’s ten years ago. What do you think--. Feministing had just started, the feminist blogosphere explodes. Other than the fact that there is just a lot more of it than there was back then, how would you describe the shifts or changes you’ve seen in terms of that.

RT: Well there being a lot more of it means a number of things. One, it becomes something that people aspire to do. If you had asked me as a twenty-five year old would you like to be a feminist journalist, I would have said that thing does not exist. I couldn’t have aspired to be it. That thing might have existed in the 1970s. It might’ve. I understand that Gloria Steinem was a

feminist journalist. Nora Ephron was a feminist journalist. It didn't exist. Now it exists and it's something that people want. When I was at Salon and when young people would start to come to me and say "I want to be a feminist journalist" and I'd be like "What are you talking about?" I still couldn't conceive of it as a thing you could be. A couple things happened, good and bad. The conversation gets expanded, more people enter it and that's a terrifically democratizing thing about the web. You don't have to have the job at The New York Observer, you don't have to have a job at The New Yorker, the Salon, you can have a blog that you run out of your basement in Waukegan. It brings lots of people into the conversation.

Happily, the conversation gets more diverse. When you're talking about journalism, you're talking about a massively white educated—at Salon there were no people of color. Farhad Manjoo who now writes for the New York Times was the one person color at Salon when I worked there and Salon was the leftiest, most diverse place I worked. There was not a person of color at the New York Observer. Not at all. There really, until recently, weren't people of color at The New Republic. Journalism is oppressively white. It's now become slightly more diverse, I'd like to think in part because of some of the pressures that have been applied to it from a feminist media. Those are really good things. The whiteness, the elitism, the coastalism, the New York isn't all that about feminism gets interrogated when you expand and democratize and it's also a great thing; it needs to be interrogated and it needs to be critiqued and needs to be taken apart.

Some bad things, or complicated things. With this expansion, when you lose the gatekeepers—which is a great thing, because the gatekeepers keep out everybody except the most privileged, the most white and the most everything—you also get a dilute profession. This is happened not just in feminism, but in journalism. You no longer have the people who were

subjected to the kind of “learn how to be a reporter” that I was subjected to at the New York Observer. You get lots of people who don’t report. This is journalism, and blogging means the rise of a lot of people who have terrific writing voices, or at least arresting writing voices, but don’t actually know about the ethics, the rules, or how to be a reporter. I’m not saying that’s a bad thing; again, it democratizes the profession and allows a lot more people in. But it is true that it has also caused problems within journalism. It also makes things complicated in feminism in part because a lot of the people who want in to a feminist media, and who should come into a feminist media, are activists not journalists, and academics. You get a whole bunch. You just don’t get journalists.

Great, except then there are these big fights about what the job is, what the priorities are, what the responsibilities are, what the morals are, what the ethics are. This has created a lot of unfortunate tension and anger in what is broadly referred to as online feminism. Because you have a group of people who are activists and they have a very different set of goals than journalists even though they might ideologically agree and be in the crowd for the same reason. Journalists have a different set of responsibilities. They feel different ways about language. I’ve seen this a few years ago there were fights about “cisgender” and language around transgender rights and there were activists saying “You have to use these words, if you don’t use these words you are betraying feminism and trans rights” and journalists saying “For my job, the use of these words is not useful right now. It’s the activists’ job to get the words into the culture and then I can use them. I can explain what they mean but to simply throw them in stories alienates readers rather than brings them in if I want to write about trans rights.” The activists are saying, “That’s crazy, you’re silencing me because you’re not using the words that I choose” and the journalists were saying “We can’t do our jobs if there’s an insistence that we use activist language. Our job



is not to use activist language.” That’s an instance I can think of. Now, low and behold, several years later, I think the activists have done exactly what activists do which is work the words in language. I would now not blink using the word cisgender in a piece, I don’t think. There was a time not that long ago when I wouldn’t have used—well, this really wasn’t a fight I had, but I would’ve been on the side of the journalists. It would not have been useful if I were writing in the Times magazine, which is where I think I had the column, for me to just use cisgender in a paragraph without explaining it, which is what the activist wanted, because my readers would not have understood what I was talking about. It would not have served the purpose of, especially if I was writing about trans rights and cisgenderism. No, it wouldn’t have worked. That’s not what my job was as a communicator and as a writer.

There are conflicts like that that have erupted. The other thing you have when something becomes popular is, well first of all, you get varying quality, right? You also wind up repeating a lot of feminist history and the history of social movements where people turn on each other, there’s a lot of jockeying about power and control. When something is not popular, nobody cares about who has the most power or the biggest reputation or makes more money. There is an enormous amount of anxiety, that is very legitimately tied up to things like privilege, race, class, access, whose voices are amplified and whose voices aren’t, but it makes a very difficult, cacophonous atmosphere. Twitter has also changed a lot because tempers are so high on Twitter.

RS: Why is that, do you think?

RT: I think a lot of people are angry for a lot of reasons, very legitimate reasons. I think anger is something a lot of people, and perhaps especially a lot of women, feel. There aren’t always a lot of great outlets to express anger, but Twitter is the perfect outlet for a lot of people to express anger. It’s both direct and anonymous-ish and you have a different avatar out there in

the public sphere. You can get attention from the public world without actually having you yourself be out there. All this stuff people talk about, the culture of silencing, the meanness, the fury that erupts on Twitter, all of stuff happened in the second wave. It happened in the early part of the twentieth century, it happened around pacifist movements, splits about suffrage. It happened in the end of the nineteenth century, certainly around the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. It's just now has different embodiments.

I remember there was a moment a couple years ago when there was a massive fight happening. It was the worst part, for me, the part where I was like "this is terrible to watch." I'm not hurt by it; I think it's an interesting part of history. It's terrible to see people go at each other who fundamentally share the same values and same beliefs, even if you understand why it's happening, instead of the people who they actually agree are wielding an unjust amount of power. I was watching one of these battles unfold on Twitter. I think it involved Mikki Kendall, I can't remember, but it was the same week that the The New Yorker published Susan Faludi's piece about Shulamith Firestone and the way she was drummed out of feminism; it was just repeated history. It just happens and it happens in a lot of social movements and not just feminism. I think feminism is perhaps more susceptible to it because it's such a massive part of the population and almost everybody in that population has different other allegiances; it's because of the intersectionality of feminism, which is something we need to emphasize but also one of the things that makes it fragile as a cohesive movement. Because you have half of a population and in that half you have so many people who have other battles that are just as crucial to them as the one that is in some way tied to their gender. There's a series of competing interests, and they're legitimately competing. They're often legitimately entwined but in ways that are harder to see than the moments in which they compete. It's always what's made

feminism fragile, it's this kind of fighting because it's both so easy to put your gender second to the other stuff that calls you, and it's also so easy to get mad at the fact that for so long we've been talking about women that you can feel as though women have always been put first, or white women have always been put first. All those things are possible and legitimate, to say I'm sick of putting gender first, or wait a minute we never put gender first. Both those things can be true at the same time.

RS: There's also something about the expectation of sisterhood.

RT: Right, right. Which I think makes people more angry. The failures of comprehension or seeing other people or affinity there are gaps that when those gaps become apparent it makes you crazy because wait aren't we supposed to be able to see and respect each other.

RS: I want to follow up with that a little bit. I know you're very tied in to the online feminist--.

RT: I don't feel very tied in to that.

RS: But you participate.

RT: Here and there but not really, not with the stuff that's the most active right now.

RS: Okay.

RT: I very rarely get into--. I don't know how I managed to get out of the Twitter fray. I think it's probably a sign of my obsolescence. They very rarely get very mad at me, everybody on Twitter. What do I mean by they. I tend to not get into it on Twitter. For me, I think I've compartmentalized a bit and focused on my professional commitment over my ideological commitment to feminism as a more media or activist whole.

RS: I guess I was thinking more of the women in media listserv conversations.

RT: Yeah, I do but I rarely go in on that because it's a shit show in there.

RS: Do you find, do you have a “in the flesh” feminist, a sense of being part of a community?

RT: Very much so.

RS: What does that look like?

RT: It’s with a group of other journalists, Anna Holmes, Irin Carmon, Michelle Goldberg, Katha Pollitt, a woman named Aminatou Sow who’s also on the WAM list but she’s not a journalist, she works at Hulu. A couple of men I would count in that: Adam Serwer, who’s a journalist, Jamelle Bouie sometimes, sometimes. They are the people that I speak to most regularly about this stuff and with whom I have active conversations. The broader community, funnily enough, I don’t [pause, whisper, phone buzzes]. Irin and Anna are texting me right now about something happening on Twitter.

RS: Oh, okay.

RT: That’s an example, that’s the daily engagement. We watch, mostly from a distance.

RS: And then have a conversation?

RT: Mhm.

RS: So I think we talked about this once a while ago, but you came of age around the time that people looking back, or even at the time, were identifying as the Third Wave. Do you name yourself as part of that?

RT: No. I think that the wave version of feminism is relatively useless. The people who actually coined the term “third wave” are older than me by probably ten years. Jennifer Baumgartner, Rebecca Walker, Amy Richards. I am old for young feminism right now. I am forty. I think they must be forty-five to fifty. That third wave, I don’t mean to discredit them, Jennifer now runs Feminist Press and I have a great relationship with her, I think she’s terrific.

Rebecca Walker has gone in a different direction, I think she has disavowed some of that stuff. Without discrediting them, because I think what they did, especially in the atmosphere that they did it in, was terrific and helpful; for me they existed but I didn't--. They didn't have anything to do with my becoming a feminist or what I perceived was the awakening of feminists who were younger than me. I was already on the old side of it in my late twenties. Valenti was in her early twenties, and I remember Nona Willis Aronowitz, do you know Nona? She's Ellen Willis's daughter and she is a journalist and a feminist and she wrote about young feminism and I remember her talking to me when I was twenty-eight and saying "I really want to talk to young feminists, do you know about any young feminists who are writing in the media?" At some point I said, "well, there's me," and she said "no but I mean young feminists." She was eighteen at the time and she's now thirty I'm happy to report. They called themselves third wave, I don't think it meant anything. I think people who want to make it mean something talk about slutwalks being third wave and third wave being--. And then there's young Shelby Knox, who also isn't so young anymore, who always wanted to call it fourth wave. There's these differentiations. Sometimes I feel more tuned to Katha, who's not second wave either, she's younger than that. It's just crazy, everybody is from different perspectives. It's a media way of making categorical distinctions that are fundamentally meaningless.

RS: It connects to this idea of your position in the media and in the movement as you age, I'm interested in that.

RT: I think that's part of it. I think the fact that I'm older now makes me obsolete. I don't mean that in a self-pitying way, I'm very lucky career wise. I have a good job.

RS: What do you mean by obsolete?

RT: Within these conversations, they don't really care what I'm saying. I'm not a young feminist. I'm not an avatar of anything for the young people who are the most active on Twitter. I write. In part, it's because I have a platform that's probably considered elite—that is elite. I'm kind of an old lady. It's okay, I'm happy to be an old lady. I have a lot of advantages; coming from this other generation it's very hard. I could never have built a career in journalism at this point, I couldn't have afforded to. As far as journalism goes, I was on the last chopper before the wave of underpaid blogging began to wipe out, within journalism, most opportunity for young people. I don't think that the real young feminists, the ones in their twenties now, particularly care what I have to say. They don't see me as connected to them in any way, any more than I saw myself connected to Ellen Goodman, which I didn't. Or for a while, Katha Pollitt, who is now a very dear friend, but when I was a young person it's not like Katha Pollitt was speaking to or for me.

RS: How do you think about power and the media and your role?

RT: From what angle?

RS: What I'm thinking about, is you feel like to the young people you don't matter.

RT: Well, to young people in specific areas. When I write about Hillary Clinton, young people who cared about Hillary or who worked on her campaign, young people who read my book, love it. They feel very excited about it. If it's about a specific topic, I do think young people respond to what I write. I hope that young people will respond to the book I'm writing about single women; I think they might. It's not that they don't care, it's just that me as a figure is fundamentally uninteresting to them. I'm not a character in the feminism play.

RS: So you have now a professional life that's encompassing writing these books and you have a new journalism job. Why? Why do you write the books, and what do you see as the point?

RT: I have to see what happens with this book to really answer why I write the books. I've been thinking about it and I watch other friends sail their books and then increasingly, as books do, watch them sink or drift. I've been thinking about this book I'm writing on unmarried women which is five years in the making. On the one hand, I feel excited about it. On the other, I feel like it will drift just away and it will be this five year endeavor and it won't make much of an impact because very few books really make an impact at this point.

RS: What kind of impact, when you started it, did you hope for?

RT: When I started in a journalism, the idea of a book-- Take feminism out of it for a minute. When I was a young journalist and learning about the profession, a book was a capstone. Somebody wanted you to write a book, that was a sign that you had really arrived. It wasn't necessarily that the book was going to do really well, but the book was an affirmation that you were a serious journalist and it was going to ground you. Many men, Ken Auletta would say to me "You'll look at your book on the bookshelf and you'll know you're immortal." I never felt anything remotely like that when I wrote my first book. When an agent would approach you about something, you'd arrive journalistically. This was what you were working toward, somebody wanted you to write a book. I think probably I feel this way now not because that's changed exactly, but that having now written books, I know it's not quite all it's cracked up to be.

The reasons I write the books are to be able to work for myself on something that I really care about and that I have an unlimited amount of time—which is also a horrible experience--

that I have an unlimited amount of time to devote myself to and really tackle a project in depth without the limits of having to do it in one thousand words or five thousand words, and that I own, that I'm not doing for someone else. Those things have been very gratifying, but it's also the finances of books are terrible and I've gotten really good advances and it's still terrible. The reality that you're going to spend, in this last case, five years, on something that probably a few thousand people will buy and God knows how many of them will read it. It's not an inspiring model. I'm very glad I wrote this book about single women, it's something I very much cared about.

When you say what did I hope for, when I got the idea that I wanted to write about this I was shocked that no one had written about it. There was a book called Bachelor Girl by Betsy Israel but there's not a lot of non-academic, and I discovered later the scholarship on it, but there's not a lot of non-academic, popular press books about unmarried women. When I thought of it and sold it, it's not even that I had a rational hope that it would become a best seller, it was "I think this could be important because I don't think people have really explored this." That's a little different. My book took five years, and during that time Kate Bullock wrote a piece for the cover of the Atlantic Magazine called "All The Single Ladies" which is also the title of my book, which it is now going back to the title again. She wrote it not long after I signed my book deal. She then published a book called Spinster which is very different from my book and a memoir of her single life. There's a lot more acknowledgement and media about contemporary single women.

So I hope that my book is good and smart and it tries to tackle the history of single women and make an argument about why it's important that there's a huge generation of women who are unattached to matrimony. Why it's important nationally and how it shapes the country.



I think the book is good and it says very different things that people haven't said yet, but it's not the same feeling that I've discovered something that no one else has noticed yet.

RS: Do you think of your writing and your journalism as part of movement building or activism?

RT: No. Not at all. I guess I'm pleased enough if a piece that I write becomes useful to people in the movement, but it would be the opposite of my job, it would be a violation of my responsibility as a journalist, which I do take seriously, and I do believe you can be a journalist and have your own set of priorities that are not about activism and still be a real feminist who believes all this stuff. I would be doing my job badly if I were writing for the purpose of being a part of movement building or activism, which is not to say that sometimes I'm not an activist journalist, but it's in my own—it's my own accounting, not the accounting of a group that I'm trying to support in a mission.

RS: Can you give me an example of that?

RT: Yeah, I could write and I did write and published this winter a piece about paid leave and it was first person piece about my own experience and it was about--. There was no apology about it, it was a call to get paid family leave. It was by many measures a piece of activist journalism, but for me there are very sharp lines. I wrote that piece because I wanted to write that piece. It's something that I personally, Rebecca Traister, who is now an opinion writer, felt was my opinion. But I would not have written that piece, not even at the official behest but at the unofficial behest of an organization that's pushing for paid leave. Or because a bunch of my activist feminist friends are gunning for paid leave; there's a very sharp division in my head.

RS: But an opinion writer, there is more room for you to give voice--.

RT: Yeah and I do, but it's very much governed by my opinions. It's me, it's what I'm thinking about, it's not what I gather the group around me is thinking about.

RS: Well, I guess the last thing I want to ask you about is, to some degree you touched on it—the recession and the crash is tied up with, although as I understand it is not necessarily cause and effect with the crumbling of traditional journalism.

RT: It's not cause and effect. Journalism was already crumbling even before recession.

RS: How have you seen the recession and the crash—maybe it's too hard.

RT: No, there's a math of economic impact. Journalism is crumbling. It's crumbling because of the recession and the crash and it's also crumbling because of the rise of technology that makes journalistic writing, in its many forms, whether it's opinion writing or reported stuff about your local community and the fire department, available online for free. You have no economic model that supports a paid force of journalists.

The pressure on that is amplified by the bottom falling out of the economy so that even the people who are funding it-- So journalism is in a free fall. Even over the course of the twentieth century, you have journalism had also become this weirdly self-interested profession in which journalism became a cool career that people wanted to get into. You have a flood of people coming into a profession that has no economic model, which results in a lot of people working for free or for no money. When you are working for no money and you need to support yourself, and this is extra true of exactly the people who you want in there diversifying it, the ones who don't come from trust funds, the ones who are coming from diverse economic places, it forces a decreases in the quality of the work. Either you're doing twenty bucks a post, you hope, and you're doing as many as you can because that's your money and so you're writing ten posts a day, how great are those posts going to be? They're not going to be that great. Or you're

writing for free or for twenty bucks per post in addition to a having full time job that you use to pay your rent. How great is the work you're doing in the margins of your professional life, compared to a model where you are paid something? Journalists were never—there were some brief moments where they were amply remunerated—if it's not a profession that pays any more, then the quality of the work is inevitably going to suffer.

This is sort of my own quirky argument, but you also have a generation of young people who, and it's no fault of theirs any more than it's mine for not knowing what was happening in 1994 with the Gingrich revolution--they don't know--and this is something I talk about with my peers who are forty year old, people who came of age in the deep backlash—young people don't have any idea that that existed. A bad economy doesn't give them time to read. Let me tell you, I don't have time. I am a well remunerated professional journalist who is forty years old. I'm about to be writing a piece about Andrea Dworkin and I haven't had time to go back and read the Andrea Dworkin I need to read.

Young people, they come and they're pushing for feminism to become purer than ever before, they don't have any context for what it was like just fifteen or twenty years ago. They don't know how there was no feminism. They think of the world as a place that has always had a feminist blogosphere, that has always had a feminist media. Fine, that's great, good, that's the way it should be. It's how it should be that people don't know what coat hangers are anymore. That's the idea. Except it creates little bit of a lack of perspective, a little bit of a lack of context, a little bit of lack of depth in a lot of the work. A crumbling media and no economic structures to support this kind of feminism does not help because it does not encourage anybody to gain that depth. Does that make sense?

RS: Mhm. I just had some young feminists on campus write to me and say “hey, we’re having a conference, a one day conference called ‘Feminism Here and Now: Starting the Conversation.’” [chuckles]

RT: This is--. These young people, and again I’m like John McCain—get off my lawn! The young people, they don’t know this has all happened before. They don’t know it happened five years ago, they don’t know it happened forty years ago, they don’t know it happened one hundred and forty years ago. They just don’t know. That’s fine. It’s not their job to know, but in an ideal universe it would be their job to learn. It’s just not. It can’t be.

RS: And they would have the time.

RT: The time.

RS: Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn’t?

RT: No.

RS: Well thank you very much.

RT: Thank you, I hope it was helpful.

END OF INTERVIEW.