


2010

## Book Review: Girldrive: Criss-Crossing America, Redefining Feminism

Melanie Springer Mock

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac)

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

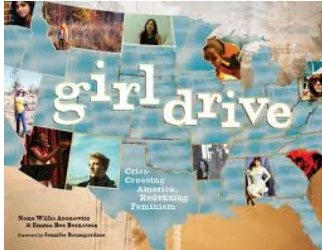
---

# Girldrive: Criss-Crossing America, Redefining Feminism

by Nona Willis

Aronowitz and Emma Bee Bernstein. New York: Seal Press, 2009

**Reviewed by Melanie Springer Mock**



I must admit to a certain sentimentality when it comes to road trips. The idea of traveling across the United States by car is so appealing somehow: traversing the open road, just me and the family; cutting through a brown swath of western States, and green midwestern corn fields, and the undulating hills of Ohio and Pennsylvania; wondering about the stories of people living in the towns and cities.

In this romantic haze, I tend to forget how long and tedious the open road can sometimes be, the hours and hours of scrubby hills, of corn fields, of nothing much. I forget about the kids whining in the backseat, and my own longing for the comfort of home. I forget about the undercurrent of sadness I sometimes feel, driving through a depressed small town or a crowded city and thinking about the unhappiness written on people's faces, and about their grief-filled narratives.

This tension—between the romantic ideal of the road trip and its inability to meet high expectations—is clearly evident in *Girldrive: Criss-Crossing America, Redefining Feminism*, by Nona Willis Aronowitz and Emma Bee Bernstein. While the book's concept is appealing, its content challenging and insightful, I felt an air of sadness throughout *Girldrive*; and this road trip to "redefine feminism" was, at its heart, disappointing.

Aronowitz and Bernstein began their journey across America in 2007, following a brainstorm hatched over eggs and Bloody Marys: they wanted to discover what other women thought about feminism, and believed a road trip might be the best vehicle for such discovery. As longtime friends from the Upper East Side and the daughters of prominent second-wave feminists, Aronowitz and Bernstein hoped to get outside of their own cultural contexts to find out about the experiences of women whose race, class, and geographic location might also inform the ways they understood—and lived—feminism.

After generating a list of over 200 women with help from email blasts, a blog, and word of mouth, the authors began their journey, setting off from Chicago to the west coast, then returning along the southern states, before ending in New York City. Their book is part travelogue, part biographical reporting, part reflection on the ways feminism has changed, and been changed by, the places they visit. *Girldrive* includes stunning photography of the women interviewed for the book—and, fundamentally, the photos themselves celebrate the beauty, diversity, and power of women living in the United States.

More than that, though, *Girldrive* commemorates the various understandings women hold about feminism, as well as the ways women use that understanding to inform their everyday lives.

Each section of *Girldrive* features short biographies and pictures of the women Aronowitz and Bernstein interviewed, organized by geographical location. The authors include a broad cross section of women, from older, well established feminists like Erica Jong and Anne Waldman; to prominent voices in third-wave feminism, such as *Bitch Magazine* editor Andi Zeisler, and Carla DeSantis,

founder of *RockGrl Magazine*; to a number of emerging voices, including women who are active in their communities but don't necessarily see themselves as feminist activists.

Those who provide *Girldrive* with the most compelling—and challenging—critiques about contemporary feminism tend to be active in their communities, but don't identify as "feminist activists." In South Dakota, for example, Aronowitz and Bernstein meet Charon Asestoyer, described by the authors as "probably the most visible advocate for Native American women in the country" (p.29). Yet Charon suggests women's issues are not the most significant barrier to success for native women. She says, "The biggest challenge is racism, which is probably a much bigger set of issues than the feminist issues. Most of the oppression felt by the native culture is land-based. The colonization has gotten a little more civilized, but it has never stopped" (p.29).

A number of other minorities interviewed for *Girldrive* echo Charon, arguing as well that other issues, like race and class, have been too long ignored by the mostly white, mostly upper- and middle-class women who have defined the feminist movement. Siman, a Somalia-born Muslim living in Phoenix, says "the world is most divided along class and race lines. The battles most important to me are globalization and capitalism" (p. 81). Likewise, Mayaba and Mandisa, both young grassroots activists in post-Katrina New Orleans, reject what they see as white mainstream feminism. According to Mandisa, "Feminism should not be devoid of race or ethnicity. Until we see that white supremacy and capitalism and patriarchy are all intertwined, then I question your gender politics" (p.177). More important than identifying as feminists, Mayaba and Mandisa argue, people should just be "doing the work" of justice.

These New Orleans women voice one of *Girldrive's* significant tensions: that is, the conflict between theoretical feminism and action, between academia and activism. Aronowitz notes this difference in one of the many short essays scattered through the text. Too often, Aronowitz writes, "academia sequesters feminism into a humorless, dry corner of the ivory tower," making inaccessible the very language and ideas that might transform young women, empowering them to live differently; and, without an understanding of the concepts that inform feminism, some women cannot connect their everyday experiences with feminism itself.

If nothing else, this critique of a purely theoretical feminism, and the unwillingness of some women to do the practical work of feminism, makes this book worth reading. The women's stories in *Girldrive* remind me—an academic prone to make feminism more intellectual endeavor than lived experience—that theories alone will not create gender equity; instead, we need activists, politicians, artists, teachers, mothers, even (the authors would argue) plus-size burlesque dancers carrying the message of feminism to younger generations. *Girldrive* suggests that, without women willing to model feminism through their lives and livelihoods, the significance of feminism will be lost: and more and more women will continue to reject a feminist identity, if not the label of feminism itself.

Aronowitz and Bernstein encounter a number of young women who have already denied a feminist identity, either because the word seems connotatively loaded, or because they find the word too exclusive—a term unable to fully capture the complexity of human nature. Some women claim "humanism" a more appropriate identity marker, but Aronowitz rants against those who prefer this to feminism, writing "Of course everything is connected and one major problem like sexism can't be overcome without taking on racism, classism, and every other -ism. But come on. To dodge the word 'feminism' and say you're a humanist seems like a cop-out" (p. 41).

At the evangelical college where I teach, I encounter strong young women and men who—like those the *Girldrive* authors interview—reject a feminist identity, for a number of reasons. Aronowitz and Bernstein's frustration on this account is shared. How do we help empower others to understand feminism, accept feminist identities, live in such a way that we make gender equity and justice really matter?

Creating conversations around the topic of feminism—the seeming intentions of the *Girldrive* project—might be one answer. Yet as I read *Girldrive*, I couldn't help but note that some women were excluded from the conversation, either because of geography, because of the authors' limited resources, or because of the authors' own perspective as East Coast city dwellers. For in their drive across the country, Aronowitz and Bernstein miss entire swaths of the Midwest; they also focus mostly on city-dwellers in their survey of women, giving little voice to those whose female identity is being formed in small towns and on farms. I imagine a feminist on a Kansas dairy farm might speak to experiences of oppression and inequity in ways far different than that of a magazine editor or artist in Seattle, yet the urban voices drown out those of rural Americans in *Girldrive*.

The experiences of thoughtful Christian feminists—or feminists from other faith traditions—also remain muted in the text. Certainly Aronowitz and Bernstein interview people of faith, including an evangelical from South Dakota, whose take on feminism (and her outright rejection of a feminist identity) seems far removed from what I know of Christian feminists; a fundamentalist Muslim who understands the conflicts between her faith and feminism; and a woman in Tulsa who has rejected her parents' uber-evangelicalism to claim a feminist self. Perhaps the most interesting person of faith featured in *Girldrive* is Katharine, a twenty-something Chicago activist who is thinking about becoming a nun. Katharine believes a nun is "the ultimate feminist.... She has given up her entire life, her clothes, her cool shoes, just so that she can help people who don't have help. That's really empowering" (p. 174).

Still, it seems the book's predominating ethos is that faith and feminism hold only tenuous ties. Judging from Aronowitz and Bernstein's interviews, the defining ideologies of Christianity deal not with redemption, salvation, or even the trinity, but with sexual abstinence and choice. Rather than plumbing the ways Christian feminists understand God, the Bible, their own faith, *Girldrive's* authors focus their interviews with women of faith on sex-before-marriage questions and on whether Christians can ever be anything more than ardently pro-life. Because I believe my faith is so much more than a pro-life-or-choice platform, that it informs the way I understand feminism (and feminism, the way I understand faith), I found this reductive approach to Christian feminists both all too familiar and deeply problematic.

While this mischaracterization of Christian feminists is troubling to me, I am even more bothered by the authors' consistent turn toward chemical substances as a means of enlightenment or release. In *Girldrive*, the authors' interviews with women regularly occur in the haze of pot smoke, or over generous pours of alcohol. Though not a teetotaler, I found these allusions to alcohol and drugs depressing and alienating: it's difficult to feel kinship with women who need alternative substances to find kinship with themselves. At one point, Aronowitz and Bernstein drop acid, and Aronowitz proclaims after tripping for an hour, "We are the most joyful and solid we've felt in weeks . . . we are finally us" (p. 88). The irony—that someone would need acid to feel completely herself—seems lost on the author.

And, ultimately, the authors both seem lost. Not in the religious sense of needing salvation, but in the sense of needing to find their truest selves. In *Girldrive's* introduction, we discover that one of the authors, Aronowitz, is dealing with the recent death of her mother; and the other, Bernstein, with a debilitating depression that compels her to take her life shortly after the *Girldrive* trip's conclusion. Knowing this about the authors provides a compelling perspective to the text, but also lends the entire book a consistent thrum of sadness. We can see the biographies of strong women; and the essays about feminism activism; and the photographs celebrating female diversity through a different lens entirely: one colored by the authors' own ardent desire to discover who they are as feminists, and who they should become.

That, at least, seems a desire we all share.

### Melanie Springer Mock

<http://ifeveonlyknew.com>

Melanie Springer Mock is Professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg. She is the author or co-author of five books, including most recently *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else* (Herald Press, April 2018). She is member of [INK: A Creative Collective](#). Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Christianity Today*, and *Mennonite World Review*, among other places. She lives in Dundee, Ore., with her husband and two sons.

