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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Autumn 2008), pp. 175-196

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/588436>

Accessed: 13/08/2013 05:53

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### What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay

**M**any of my colleagues in women's studies tell me they do not know how to react when copies of *Bitch* or *BUST* show up in their faculty mailboxes. They know that the magazines are examples of something called third-wave feminism, but they are not exactly sure what that is or how it differs from second-wave feminism. Do young women have a genuinely different version of feminism? Do they have different issues, different solutions? Or are they just claiming they do as part of their rebellion against their "feminist mothers"? What exactly is third-wave feminism anyway?

This essay explores a wide array of popular and academic literature on third-wave feminism in an attempt to make sense of a movement that on its face may seem like a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims, in which the whole is less than the sum of its parts. While third-wave feminists do not have an entirely different set of issues or solutions to long-standing dilemmas, the movement does constitute, I would argue, more than simply a rebellion against second-wave mothers. What really differentiates the third wave from the second is the tactical approach it offers to some of the impasses that developed within feminist theory in the 1980s.

That is to say, third-wave feminism makes three important tactical moves that respond to a series of theoretical problems within the second wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of "women," the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism. Second, as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third-wavers embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification. Finally, in response to the divisiveness of the sex wars, third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the

I would like to thank Jill Locke and the anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments on this article, as well as Mary Hawkesworth, Karen Alexander, Miranda Outman-Kramer, and Julie Ann Salthouse for all their help and support.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2008, vol. 34, no. 1]  
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feminist political. In other words, third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition.

### **Moving beyond generational conflict**

The first step in understanding third-wave feminism involves an evaluation of the prima facie claims of its self-identified proponents. Seeking to provide a comprehensive overview of the movement, Leslie L. Heywood has put together a two-volume set, *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism* (2006a, 2006b). The first volume provides an encyclopedia of key terms and concepts from A–Z, while the second contains excerpts from primary documents. The second volume opens, appropriately, with the famous passage by Rebecca Walker, who reportedly kicked off the new movement in 1992 when she declared, “I am the Third Wave” (Walker 2006a, 5). Walker, like many early third-wave activists, situates herself in opposition to media-publicized postfeminists (some might say antifeminists) like Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, and Rene Denfeld, who gained prominence by creating caricatures of second-wave feminism and then lambasting them. In contrast to those voices, third-wavers do not completely reject the agenda of second-wave feminism (Heywood 2006a, 139); they simply seek to rid feminist practice of its perceived ideological rigidity. As Walker explains,

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad. This way of ordering the world is especially difficult for a generation that has grown up transgender, bisexual, interracial, and knowing and loving people who are racist, sexist, and otherwise afflicted. (Walker 2006b, 22)

While Walker may be accused of exaggeration, she nonetheless presents the critical perspective expressed in much of the self-identified third-wave literature.

In the decade or so following Walker's proclamation, a large number

of popular books declared the existence of a new wave in feminism. These texts include Rebecca Walker (ed.), *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995); Barbara Findlen (ed.), *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995); Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997); Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller (eds.), *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* (1999); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000); Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (eds.), *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (2002); Merri Lisa Johnson (ed.), *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002); Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (eds.), *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (2003); Michelle Tea (ed.), *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class* (2003); and Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin (eds.), *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (2004). Heywood helpfully includes excerpts from most of these books and others (excluding *The BUST Guide* and *The Fire This Time*) in her second volume.

Together these volumes present a vision of third-wave feminism that is hard to thematize for several reasons. First, the majority of these texts are loosely edited collections of first-person narratives that are anecdotal and autobiographical in nature. Second, many of the essays focus on media icons, images, and discourses rather than on feminist theory or politics per se, which makes a comparison to second-wave feminism difficult. Third, these volumes make clear that third-wavers embrace a multiplicity of identities, accept the messiness of lived contradiction, and eschew a unifying agenda; these hallmarks make third-wave feminism difficult to define. In fact, when asked to define the new movement, Baumgardner says, "This insistence on definitions is really frustrating because feminism gets backed into a corner. People keep insisting on defining and defining and defining and making a smaller and smaller definition—and it's just lazy thinking on their part. Feminism is something individual to each feminist" (Strauss 2000).

Overall, however, this popular literature contains four major claims about how third-wave feminism differs from second-wave feminism—claims that contain some truth yet overstate the distinctiveness of the new movement from its predecessor. First, third-wavers emphasize that because they are a new generation, they necessarily have to have their own distinctive version of feminism: "We are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives; it is natural that many of us are feminists. . . . This country hasn't heard enough from young

feminists. We're here, and we have a lot to say about our ideas and hopes and struggles and our place within feminism" (Findlen 2006, 6–7, 9). While many second-wavers bemoan the invisibility of feminism among young women, Baumgardner and Richards assert that "feminism is out there, tucked into our daily acts of righteousness and self-respect. . . . For our generation feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it's simply in the water" (2000, 17). Unlike their mothers' generation, who had to prove themselves, third-wavers consider themselves entitled to equality and self-fulfillment—"the legacy of feminism for me was a sense of entitlement" (Findlen 2006, 6)—even as they recognize continuing injustices.

Third-wavers want their own version of feminism that addresses their different societal contexts and the particular set of challenges they face. For example, young women today face a world colonized by the mass media and information technology, and they see themselves as more sophisticated and media savvy than feminists from their mothers' generation. A lot of third-wave literature emphasizes the importance of cultural production and critique, focusing particular attention on female pop icons, hip-hop music, and beauty culture, rather than on traditional politics per se. *Bitch*, for example, advocates "thinking critically about every message the mass media sends; it's about loudly articulating what's wrong and what's right with what we see" (Jervis 2006b, 263). In the newly published *bitchfest: Ten Years of Cultural Criticism from the Pages of "Bitch" Magazine*, the editors argue that "anyone who protests that a focus on pop culture distracts from 'real' feminist issues and lacks a commitment to social change needs to turn on the TV—it's a public gauge of attitudes about everything from abortion . . . to poverty . . . to political power. . . . The world of pop culture is . . . the marketplace of ideas" (Jervis and Zeisler 2006, xxi–xxii).

While every generation by definition confronts a new historical context, that alone does not seem sufficient to declare a new wave of feminism. Our media-saturated culture calls for increased attention to cultural critique, but second-wave feminism also attended to cultural traditions, protesting the Miss America pageant and creating women's music festivals, for example. In fact, second-wave feminism included an entire strand devoted to such issues: cultural feminism. Moreover, second-wave feminism still exists and, as a recent study shows, a woman's understanding of what feminism means has more to do with where and when she entered the discourse than it does with the year of her birth (Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce 2007). Consequently, it is more helpful to understand third-

wave feminism as a particular approach rather than using it to label women born within certain years or who occupy a certain age group.

Second, third-wavers claim to be less rigid and judgmental than their mothers' generation, which they often represent as antimale, antisex, anti-femininity, and antifun. For example, Naomi Wolf refers to second-wave feminism as "victim feminism" and portrays it as "sexually judgmental, even antisexual," "judgmental of other women's sexuality and appearance," and "self-righteous" (Wolf 2006, 14–15). She says second-wave feminism wants women "to give up 'heterosexual privilege' by not marrying, instead of extending civil rights; to give up beauty, instead of expanding the definition." It "believes sensuality cannot coincide with seriousness" and "fears that to have too much fun poses a threat to the revolution" (Wolf 2006, 15). While this picture clearly paints a popular caricature of second-wave feminism, it also provides a convenient foil against which third-wave feminism can define itself.

In contrast to their perception of their mothers' feminism, third-wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity. Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave. Its proponents argue that "our desires aren't simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn't shorthand for 'we've been duped.' Using makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues" (Baumgardner and Richards 2006, 302–3). The third-wave desire for girl power seems simultaneously authentic, playful, and part of the younger generation's project of reclamation, which also redeploys terms like "bitch," "cunt," and "slut."

In defining third-wave feminism as fun, feminine, and sex-positive, however, third-wavers unfortunately play right into the popular misconception that second-wave feminism was dour, frumpy, and frigid. While second-wave feminism did split during the 1980s over questions of pornography, prostitution, and lesbian sadomasochism—a topic discussed more fully below—it is important to note that the sex wars were a split within second-wave feminism. In other words, rather than breaking with its predecessor, third-wave feminism grows out of one important faction within the second wave. It is revisionist history to conflate second-wave feminism as a whole with the so-called antisex feminists and third-wavers with the prosex side. Such a depiction reinforces the commonly accepted

caricature of second-wave feminism as antisex—a view that is clearly overly generalized, inaccurate, and reductionist to anyone who has more than a superficial understanding of the movement (Kelly 2005).

Third, third-wavers depict their version of feminism as more inclusive and racially diverse than the second wave. In fact, Heywood defines third-wave feminism as “a form of inclusiveness” (2006a, xx). Third-wave feminism “respects not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion, and economic standing but also makes allowance for different identities within a single person” (xx). It also “allows for identities that previously may have been seen to clash with feminism” (xx); you can now be religiously devout or into sports or beauty culture, and still be a feminist, for example. Like a lot of third-wave edited collections, the Heywood volume of primary sources includes not only pieces by women on race (Morgan 2006; Wong 2006), class (Tea 2006), or both (Rehman and Hernández 2006) but also a significant number of texts that discuss the experience of living with multiple identities—biracial (Jones 2006; Tzintzún 2006; Walker 2006a), bisexual (Walker 2006c), transgendered (Wilchins 2006), or multicultural (Hurdis 2006; Weiner-Mahfuz 2006). Taking multiple identities into account complicates feminist analysis, but, these authors argue, that is what has to happen in order for feminism to speak to the experiences of young people today.

While it is commendable that third-wave feminism makes diversity a central feature, it is a misconception to believe that second-wave feminism was composed of all white, middle-class women (Thompson 2002; Kelly 2005). Indeed, it may surprise many second-wave feminists to learn that third-wavers claim the writings of feminists of color from the early 1980s as the beginning of the third wave (Heywood and Drake 2006, 29), since those writers were central to second-wave feminism as it developed historically. While I am not denying the importance of books like *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; see also Hurdis 2006, 61; Rehman and Hernández 2006, 57) or *Sister Outsider* (Lorde 1984; see also Weiner-Mahfuz 2006, 203) to the personal development and political awakening of many third-wavers, claiming authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Audre Lorde as third-wave denies the important role they played in second-wave feminism; extracting them makes the second wave whiter than it was. As Astrid Henry points out, that move “enables younger feminists to present their new wave as more progressive and inclusive than that of their second-wave predecessors,” which allows them “to position themselves as superior to the feminists of the past in their seeming ability to make *their* feminism anti-racist from its inception” (Henry 2006, 126).

This is not to deny that second-wave feminism, like its first-wave predecessor, often had a white, middle-class bias, but so does third-wave feminism. For example, *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* posits the existence of “our own Girl Culture—that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas” (Karp and Stoller 1999, xv). Obviously, memories of playing with Barbie and reading *Vogue* probably resonate more with white girls than with others. And what about the class privilege of the third wave’s alleged founder—the Yale-educated daughter of Alice Walker and god-daughter of Gloria Steinem—who had the resources to create a major foundation during her early twenties (Heywood 2006a, xvii)? Indeed, the authors of *Manifesta*—both of whom served as editors at *Ms.*—base their analysis on conversations with their friends, all of whom “live in New York City and mostly work in the media” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 22). Thus, solipsism can affect even those with the best intentions.

Finally, third-wavers claim to have a broader vision of politics than second-wave feminism, to have no “party line,” and to focus on more than just women’s issues (Heywood 2006a, 366–67). Heywood argues that third-wave feminism “has never had a monolithically identifiable, single-issue agenda that distinguishes it from other movements for social justice. One of its main emphases, in fact, has been on feminism and gender activism as only one part of a much larger agenda for environmental, economic, and social justice, and one of its main arguments is that it is counterproductive to isolate gender as a single variable” (Heywood 2006a, xx). Third-wave feminism seems to include any approach, as long as it pays attention to gender issues and favors social justice.

Here again, third-wave writers overemphasize their distinctiveness. Second-wave feminism did not focus only on a narrow number of women’s issues. For example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many feminists saw gender equality as inextricably connected to the struggle for socialism. Alternatively, the Greenham Common women’s peace encampment made peace a feminist issue—a controversial claim that some see as essentializing. Indeed, the concept of the “personal is political” actually renders almost every issue political. Moreover, with (at least) four major schools of thought (liberal, socialist, radical, and cultural), second-wave feminism can hardly be seen as having one party line. Such an assertion can only come from a stunning ignorance of the historical development of feminist theory.

Because third-wavers frequently overstate their distinctiveness while showing little knowledge of their own history, the movement has been widely criticized by second-wavers. For example, in *Not My Mother’s Sister*

(2004), Henry makes a convincing case that third-wave feminism can be viewed as the rebellion of young women against their mothers and as their desire to have a feminism of their own, even though their political agenda—when they have one—remains quite similar to that of their mothers. As Steinem comments, “It will take a while before feminists succeed enough so that feminism is not perceived as a gigantic mother who is held responsible for almost everything, while the patriarchy receives terminal gratitude for the small favors it bestows. . . . I confess that there are moments in [the] pages [of Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real*] when I—and perhaps other readers over thirty-five—feel like a sitting dog being told to sit” (Steinem 1995, xix, xxii).

Indeed, third-wave feminists often argue against a straw woman—a frumpy, humorless, antisex caricature of second-wave feminists that papers over the differences and nuances that existed within that movement (Kelly 2005). At the same time, second-wave feminists can also be overly defensive or dismissive of the younger women’s perspectives (Evans 2003, 231).

### Framing the third wave

Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford’s *Third Wave Feminism* (2007) and Heywood’s two-volume *Encyclopedia* (2006a, 2006b) both try to make sense of third-wave feminism by providing an academic vision that frames the movement theoretically. Unfortunately, the format of these two books plays into the lack of clarity about the nature of the movement. *Third Wave Feminism* consists of a collection of loosely related essays, originally written for a conference on the topic in 2002. Heywood’s *Encyclopedia* provides an alphabetized list of key concepts related to the topic with little overarching analysis, which makes her own viewpoint hard to discern.

Unless completely familiar with the entire primary literature on third-wave feminism, it is hard for a reader to perceive the ways in which Heywood shapes her own vision of feminism through the choices she makes about what to include in the reader. For example, it seems strange at first that Heywood chose to exclude *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* from her volume of primary documents, especially since *BUST* is frequently cited as central to the movement, even in her own introduction (2006a, xix). Excluding it, however, means excluding some of the more purely sexual, consumerist, and frivolous pieces of the third-wave movement—pieces in which individuals detail the pleasures of “cock-sucking” (LaRue 1999, 100), discuss the “mysterious eroticism of mini-backpacks”

(Reling 1999, 64), glorify a history of shoplifting makeup and then throwing it away (Goldberg 1999, 200), or recount the experience of gazing at one's own cunt (Guzzo 1999, 16). Indeed, Stoller, one of the editors of *BUST*, reportedly declared at a conference that "painting one's toenails is a feminist act because it expands the notions of what a feminist is allowed to do or how she may look." She reportedly suggested, "'maybe we should be painting our nails in the boardroom' . . . in order to bring our Girliness into male-defined spaces" (quoted in Baumgardner and Richards 2006, 305).

Heywood's decision to exclude such material from her third-wave collection pushes the movement in a more serious direction—which I see as a positive move. Her volume, along with that of Gillis, Howie, and Munford, plays the role of nudging third-wave feminism in a more theoretically coherent and productive direction. Together the books suggest that third-wave feminism should be seen as a response to the series of watershed changes within feminist theory and politics mentioned above, even though the movement remains inchoate. The remainder of this essay builds on the efforts of these two works by teasing out more deliberately the distinctive contributions third-wave feminism makes to feminist struggle.

More specifically, it is my argument that while third-wave texts often exhibit certain limitations—a youthful myopia, an ignorance of history, and a sense of self-importance—overall third-wave feminism does make sense as a new yet still embryonic stage of feminist politics. Third-wave feminism presents a tactical response to three major theoretical challenges to second-wave feminism: the "category of women" debates (initiated by feminists of color) that shattered the idea of a shared women's experience or identity; the end of grand narratives through the decline of Marxism and the rise of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism within the academy; and the sex wars that fractured the unified political stand of feminism on many important feminist issues. In short, the third wave responds to the debates of the 1980s that hobbled feminist theory and practice.

### **Feminism without "women"**

Third-wave feminism responds to the "category of women" debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s that began with a critique of the second-wave contention that women share something in common as women: a common gender identity and set of experiences. The concepts of "woman" and "experiences" are closely connected within the second wave and, along with personal politics, form the three core concepts of that movement

(Grant 1993). In short, classic second-wave feminism argues that in patriarchal society women share common experiences, and through a sharing of their experiences with one another in consciousness-raising (CR) groups, they can generate knowledge about their own oppression. Once they realize that what they thought were personal problems (e.g., uneven division of household labor, male-centered sexual practices, domestic violence, etc.) are widely shared, they can see the ways in which the patriarchal structure of society produces such problems, and the personal becomes political.

Third-wave feminists rightly reject the universalist claim that all women share a set of common experiences, but they do not discard the concept of experience altogether. Women still look to personal experiences to provide knowledge about how the world operates and to trouble dominant narratives about how things should be. Indeed, the personal story constitutes one of the central hallmarks of third-wave feminism, and the movement has not moved beyond this genre over time—as illustrated by the recent publication of both *bitchfest* (Jervis and Zeisler 2006) and *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists* (Berger 2006).

The phrase “the personal is political” still forms the core of feminism, and sharing personal experiences functions as a form of CR within the third wave. Second-wave CR in its classic form occurred in face-to-face settings; however, plenty of proverbial lightbulbs went off outside of such gatherings as well (Evans 2003, 30–31). Many second-wavers wrote books—although they tended more toward ambitious theoretical analyses than personal storytelling—and, as Elizabeth Kelly remarks, texts like “‘The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm’ passed from hand to hand in tattered photocopies” (2005, 235). While the third wave lacks any formalized structure, similar to second-wave CR groups, the hope seems to be that through reading or hearing about the life experiences of a diversity of individuals, young women will gain insight into their own lives and the societal structures in which they live. Women’s and gender studies courses provide additional markets for third-wave literature.

Many third-wave stories strive to demonstrate the gaps between dominant discourses and the reality of women’s lives. Some third-wavers, for example, use their own experiences growing up in interracial or multicultural families to illustrate how the politics of race, class, and gender play out in people’s lives (Weiner-Mahfuz 2006). For example, Cristina Tzintzún writes, “I worry about dating whites, especially white men. . . . I see what a white man did to my beautiful, brown, Mexican mother. He colonized her” (Tzintzún 2006, 195). Other essays show how their au-

thors don't properly fit into societal or feminist categories—how they are misunderstood, mistreated, hurt, or angered by dominant discourses—which exposes the human costs of hegemonic narratives and thus works to undermine their legitimacy (Hardy 2003; Tanenbaum 2006).

Unfortunately, however, the critical messages embedded within these personal stories often remain unspoken. For example, Tea published *Without a Net* so women could tell their stories of what it's "like to grow up receiving messages from the dominant culture that to be a female is to behave in a way that will get you eaten for lunch in your roughneck city" (2003, xii). Most of the stories in the volume movingly convey the difficulties of growing up poor, yet they remain personal stories, leaving readers to construct a critique of dominant ideologies. The same is the case with a good deal of the third-wave material.

When they do take a more analytical approach, third-wavers tend to focus a lot of attention on media images of women (Jervis and Zeisler 2006). Many complain that they do not see themselves represented in the mass media because they occupy minority subject positions, such as trans (Serano 2006, 81) or butch (Savoie 2006, 96), for example. *Bitch* editors Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler point out, however, that no one really sees herself reflected: "Most of us looking to celluloid for a reflection of ourselves will be sorely disappointed, no matter what our gender (even if we see ourselves as pretty standard males or females—Hollywood archetypes are limited about plenty more than the strict boy/girl thang [*sic*])" (2006, 51). Others find themselves identifying in an unusual way: "I'm not sure exactly when or how it happened, but at some point in my childhood I began to think I was a white guy trapped in the body of a black girl. And not just any white guy, either—a guitar player in a heavy metal band. . . . I'm a black female metalhead" (Chaney 2006, 26).

While such stories might be read as simply personal accounts of the struggles of growing up, this third-wave tactic implicitly reveals the fissures between conflicting narratives about gender. Building on Judith Butler's theoretical insights, Munford argues that third-wavers sometimes "deploy performative strategies that rely less on a dissonance between anatomical sex and gender identity (as in the instance of drag), than on a tension between opposing discourses of gender within female-embodied sexed identity—in particular the Madonna/whore and girl/woman binaries" (2007, 271)—think the Riot Grrrls, Courtney Love, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer. By occupying female subject positions in innovative or contradictory ways, third-wavers unsettle essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women and shape new identities within the interstices of competing narratives. There is no one way to be a woman.

The continued emphasis on personal experiences within the third wave illustrates the falsity of second-wave claims that women have a common identity based on shared experiences. While some feminist theorists have wondered how feminism can continue without the category women, the third wave approach seems to abandon the idea of creating a social movement as the goal of feminism, which alleviates the need for a shared identity upon which women can act together. This does not mean an abandonment of all politics, however. Third-wavers tend to take an anarchist approach to politics—calling for immediate direct action or understanding individual acts as political in and of themselves (Berger 2006). For example, one author writes, “In the year after 9/11, I decided my activism was the kind of activism women of color do on a daily basis. Everything I did to keep myself alive—from holding down my job to painting my toenails to building and using my altar to cooking up big pots of sweet potato curry with my best girlfriends before we watched *The Siege* (with irony)—I decided to count as feminism” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2006, 172). To the extent that collective action is needed, third-wave feminist politics should be understood as coalitional rather than unified (Stone 2007, 22).

#### **Feminism without foundations**

The collapse of the category of women within second-wave feminism corresponded to a larger trend in intellectual life away from the grand narratives of modernity and into the foundationless world of postmodernity. Gillis, Howie, and Munford portray third-wave feminism as a postmodern version of feminism. Their volume *Third Wave Feminism* (2007) includes many essays that frame third-wave feminism as antiessentialist (Heywood and Drake 2007; Stone 2007), postmodern (Heywood and Drake 2007; Howie and Tauchert 2007; Stryker 2007), poststructuralist in orientation (Pender 2007), constructed through “hybridity and contradiction” (Sanders 2007, 7), or a response to the “sense of fracture and fragmentation in the project of feminism,” illustrated by “the category of ‘woman’” debates (Moore 2007, 126). The volume’s postmodern framing, however, is more its authors’ vision of what third-wave feminism should or could be rather than a description of what it actually is in the popular literature at this point.

Heywood agrees with Gillis, Howie, and Munford that third-wave feminism is postmodern in orientation: “In its emphasis on destabilizing fixed definitions of gender and rejection of unitary notions of ‘woman’ and ‘feminism,’ third-wave feminism is clearly informed and shaped by postmodern theory, as well as other anti-foundationalist discourse such as

*postcolonialism* and poststructuralism. . . . Third-wave feminist ideas about *identity* embrace notions of contradiction, multiplicity, and ambiguity, building on postmodern theory's critique of ideas about the unified self and engaging with the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity" (2006a, 257–58). Not assuming a unified category of women, most third-wavers take an antiessentialist stance (2006a, 144), rejecting "the assumption that all members of a particular race, class, gender, or sexual orientation share common characteristics" (2006a, 122). While Heywood alludes to the conundrum that feminists need to make claims on behalf of women even as they reject a unified category of women—when she mentions in passing that "many feminists are willing to take the intellectual risk of essentialism to critique social and economic inequities that cut along gender lines" (2006a, 123)—she does not actually address this problem theoretically, and few primary or secondary sources even mention it.

Third-wave feminism clearly responds to the conditions of postmodernity, yet it would be too strong to characterize the movement as postmodern. That is, while Gillis, Howie, and Munford's volume depicts third-wave feminism as a set of responses to a theoretical world described as postmodern, a lot of the primary sources maintain an uncritical view of experience, rely heavily on identity politics, and seem to articulate a basically modern liberal position that is individualistic, subject volitional, and expressive. It would thus be more accurate to describe third-wave feminism as a tactical response to the conditions of postmodernity rather than to portray it as a new postmodernist stage of feminist theory. Put differently, third-wave feminism is not unequivocally postmodern in its theoretical approach, but it responds to a postmodern, post-Marxist world in which all foundations and grand narratives have been called into question.

In its response to postmodernity, third-wave feminism strives to accommodate a wider array of identity positions than did the second wave—at least theoretically. For example, Heywood argues, "Because third-wave feminist thinking explicitly questions the gender binary male/female and generally has a non-essentialist approach to thinking about gender, transgender fits much more fully into third-wave understandings of gender and sexuality than did second-wave thinking" (2006a, 326; see also Stryker 2007, 64). Moreover, "many third-wavers connect butch lesbian expression with transgender identities and affirm that variation in gender is sometimes tied to sexuality but that gender and sexuality do not depend on each other" (Heywood 2006a, 48). This argument makes sense, and it allows Heywood to write transgender and butch folks into her vision of third-wave feminism, but it is not completely there, even in her own

work. Heywood includes only two pieces written from a transgender perspective in her collection of sixty-five primary sources (Ruttenberg 2006; Wilchins 2006), and nothing from a butch or femme perspective. In general, very few essays in the self-identified third-wave literature come from butch, femme, or trans perspectives either.

Nevertheless, when framed as a response to postmodernism, the third wave does provide a more inclusive and accommodating version of feminism with an alternative, critical way of seeing the world. Noëlle McAfee and I have called feminist theory “a kind of ‘hermeneutic of suspicion,’ [that] largely operates as a critique of existing theories and practices” (McAfee and Snyder 2007, vii). While a third-wave approach to feminism may not be able to generate a unified vision or inspire a mass movement, it does continue the tradition of feminism as critique, as a critical lens that should be turned on all existing discourses, institutions, and cultural practices.

Because it responds to a fragmented postmodern world that has moved beyond grand narratives like Marxism and radical feminism, third-wave feminism does not attempt to present a unified vision with which every woman can agree. Consequently, third-wavers do not feel the need to spend a lot of time constructing ambitious theoretical analyses or justifying on what grounds they are acting; they just do it. Others can either join them or do their own thing.

### **Feminism without exclusion**

By rejecting a unified category of women and embracing the anarchic imperative of direct action, third-wave feminism necessarily embraces a philosophy of nonjudgment. From this position, the third wave directly responds to the infamous sex wars, the devastating split that pitted feminists against each other; with all its emphasis on claiming sexuality, third-wave feminism clearly identifies with the prosex side of that split. As Heywood explains, “pro-sex feminism usually refers to a segment of the women’s movement that defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist dismissals” (2006a, 260). According to Heywood, “feminist pornography for [the third-wave] generation is heavily influenced by marginalized or nonnormative sexualities—including gay and lesbian, transgender, butch, and sex worker activists—and is devoted to reducing the stigma surrounding sexual pleasure in feminism and U.S. culture. As sex educator and feminist pornographer Carol Queen asserts, ‘Unless we honor the full spectrum of con-

sensual erotic desire, none of us will be truly free to pursue our own.’ In this sense, the emerging third-wave position on feminist pornography builds on the sex-positive feminism of the 1980s” (2006a, 248). Third-wave literature includes many stories that praise sex work, advocate sexual assertiveness, and revel in the use of vulgar sexual language. By including a diversity of views on sexuality and not judging any of them, third-wave feminists hope to avoid contentious splits.

While third-wavers claim the mantle of being prosex, however, the central issue at the heart of the sex wars—how to create gender equality when women enjoy female objectification (pornography), claim the right to make money servicing male sexual needs (prostitution), and eroticize relationships of inequality (somasochism)—has never been resolved; it seems to have simply dropped from sight. Oftentimes, third-wave feminism seems to have morphed into being all about choice with little examination of how chosen desires are constructed or recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large (Wood 2006). For example, *BUST* editors Karp and Stoller praise feminist scholar Jan Breslauer for proclaiming in *Playboy*, “This boob job is empowering. . . . I know the party line on breast augmentation that women who have surgery are the oppressed victims of a patriarchal culture . . . [However,] feminism is about having control over life and one’s body” (quoted in Karp and Stoller 1999, 3). Karp and Stoller themselves explain, “If bigger boobs are what she wants, it’s her right to choose both as a feminist and as an individual,” period (1999, 3)—a position that legitimizes potentially everything a woman chooses to do as feminist.

Not all third-wave feminism takes the *BUST* approach, however. Indeed, discussions of how the beauty industry negatively affects the self-image of women have been central to the third wave (Heywood 2006a, 44), yet in the end, the principle of choice, which is not a postmodern concept, usually trumps all. Zeisler, who specifically criticizes the body-shaping industry, emphasizes the importance of context in evaluating an individual woman’s choices; she insists that breast implants can be feminist under the right circumstances: “It’s hard to condemn someone whose insecurity about having small breasts poisons the rest of her life; for her, that amounts to a feminist issue” (2006, 260) because, apparently, any choice that fulfills a woman’s need or desire is feminist. Even if you have a feminist analysis of the beauty ideal, she argues, “it isn’t going to help someone whose day-to-day life has already been damaged by this code and just wants to get implants and get on with living” (260).

Third-wave feminists, however, while less judgmental than some of their

predecessors, seem no better equipped to answer the core questions about pleasure and danger raised during the sex wars than were second-wavers. Sexism may in fact be sexy to many, but what does that mean for the feminist dream of gender equality? For example, Joan Morgan confesses her attraction to the trappings of patriarchy, the rituals of chivalry, the thrill of objectification, and the sexiness of male dominance: “Truth be told, men with too many ‘feminist’ sensibilities have never made my panties wet. . . . And how come no one ever admits that part of the reason women love hip-hop—as sexist as it is—is ‘cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard?” (Morgan 2006, 11). If sexuality is socially constructed, it only makes sense that women desire male dominance, but where does that leave feminism? Sure, women can advocate legal equality and still desire inequality in their intimate relationships, but is it possible that inequality at home might undermine equality in the public sphere? Is the personal still political? Morgan has no answers about how to balance pleasure and danger—but, in her defense, neither does anyone else.

In one of the few articles in *Third Wave Feminism* addressing such thorny issues, Melanie Waters examines “the third wave’s unquestioned pro-porn stance and its proven endorsement of sexual confessionalism” (2007, 251). She criticizes Baumgardner and Richards’s contention that *BUST* magazine’s use of soft porn imagery is unproblematic for feminism because it presents porn as “demystified, claimed for women, debated” (quoted in Waters 2007, 258). As Waters points out, there is in fact no discussion of the negative effects of porn within *BUST*’s pages; it is not being debated. Consequently, “the magazine’s use of soft-core, ‘cutesy’ imagery suggests precisely the opposite; . . . that a pro-porn, pro-sex stance has been adopted as third wave feminism’s default position” (Waters 2007, 258). While this approach renders third-wave feminism more popular with the young—“who have been fed the myth that feminists are . . . fat, man-hating, no-fun lesbians” (258)—it is not conducive to critical thinking: “Inclusive and nonjudgmental though this feminism is, it nonetheless promotes an ethic of acceptance that is hostile to the flourishing of politicized feminist debate” (259). Because politicized debate about sexuality once shattered the feminist movement, third-wave feminism completely embraces nonjudgmentalism and choice, sometimes to the point of blunting its critical edge (259).

Waters’s solution to the pleasure/danger dilemma draws on the work of Butler and others who see the “expansion of the pornographic imaginary” (Waters 2007, 256) as a solution to the key problem: that pornography constructs a rigid and hierarchal vision of male dominance and gratification as well as female submission and objectification that degrades

and disadvantages women and undergirds patriarchal relations throughout society. Once this traditional vision of gender relations becomes decentered through the proliferation of alternative pornographic subjectivities, it will no longer be hegemonic; it will be reduced to just one type of relationship among many. Third-wave feminist approaches that draw on postmodern understandings of discourse allow for this new solution, but unfortunately, Waters argues, a lot of third-wavers fail to articulate this strategy because they seek to avoid academic jargon and refuse to speak for more than just themselves. Consequently, the bigger picture gets lost among the multiplicity of personal narratives (257).

Without the theoretical edifice for context, however, third-wave feminist confessionals often read as simply apolitical manifestations of the expressive individualism that characterizes our predominantly liberal culture. The theoretical tools of academic feminism allow third-wave scholars to push popular articulations of women's experiences in a postmodern, critical direction, rendering them more radical and theoretically sophisticated. Indeed, Waters's critique of the celebratory and dismissive tenor of much third-wave writing on pornography suggests that many popular third-wave texts do not have a compelling theoretical analysis or alternative solution to many of the difficult dilemmas that hobbled the second wave.

Ironically, many third-wavers criticize academic feminism for losing its critical edge: "The Third Wave is, in the main, rather self-consciously poised against the academy, even though almost all of the [third-wave] authors have been, or look forward to being, college-educated, and many tell of taking courses in women's or gender studies" (Kelly 2005, 239). Third-wavers challenge academic theorists "to write comprehensible theory (intellectual philosophies and ideas articulated in a way that students, and perhaps the general public, can understand), making it more useful and meaningful to women outside of academia" (Heywood 2006a, 10). Heywood herself calls academic feminists out for their hypocrisy, stating: "Some academic and second-wave feminists argue that these [third-wave personal] narratives are not 'academic' or 'theoretical' enough or are solely grounded in the personal. . . . [They] do not view the personal as academic enough, despite the feminist mantra, 'the personal is political'" (2006a, 9). Third-wave collections, she insists, frame "the personal in political contexts" (9).

Heywood's call for clear, accessible writing is a worthy goal, as long as it doesn't result in the glossing over of important nuances. The problem, however, is that when articulated in everyday language, minus the theoretical apparatus, personal accounts are often read as merely idiosyncratic personal stories or confessions rather than as examples of postmodern

subjectivity that intend to destabilize dominant discourses. Often we need analyses such as Munford's (2007) to tease out the political implications. Feminist theory does need to speak to women's experiences, and third-wave voices challenge academic articulations that miss the mark. At the same time, feminist theorists need to play the role of organic intellectuals, pushing third-wave feminism to achieve its potential—which is essentially what *The Women's Movement Today* and *Third Wave Feminism* are trying to do.

### **A new wave?**

Third-wave feminism continues the efforts of second-wave feminism to create conditions of freedom, equality, justice, and self-actualization for all people by focusing on gender-related issues in particular, even as it offers a different set of tactics for achieving those goals. Since as many similarities exist as do differences, why continue to use wave terminology (Jervis 2006a)? The wave metaphor certainly has some limitations. First, the metaphor implies that the two waves of feminism are tied to particular demographic generations, which is counterfactual and unhelpful (Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce 2007). Second, it fuels the vision of generational rebellion, which is “divisive and oppositional” and obscures more than it reveals (Jervis 2006a, 134–35). Third, as Kimberly Springer argues, the entire wave metaphor is organized around the activities of white women, overlooking the activist work of black women that preceded and followed the so-called waves (Springer 2006, 33–34). Finally, third-wave feminism focuses almost exclusively on American feminism, often prioritizing issues that at best do not resonate internationally and at worst undermine the possibility of transnational coalitions.

Yet while there are good reasons to reject the wave metaphor, this terminology developed at a particular moment in time and continues to be used; consequently, it requires theoretical commentary. As I hope I have demonstrated, “third-wave feminism” does contain the seeds of a new approach within feminist theory and politics that I believe has great potential. As Ednie Kaeh Garrison puts it, “Although it is by no means guaranteed, I do still want to believe the name-object ‘third wave feminism’ has transformational potential. However, this potential can be realised only when feminists and their allies take the lead in defining and demarcating its content, not in flippant, irreverent, sound-bite versions of intellectual wish-wash palatable to the media and the public, but with careful attention to the messiness, the contradictions, the ambiguities, and the complexities such an endeavour inevitably entails” (2007, 195). While

distinctively American, third-wave feminism potentially offers a diverse, antifoundationalist, multiperspectival, sex-radical version of feminism that could move American feminism beyond the impasses of the 1980s and 1990s.

Third-wave feminism is not yet a social movement—and it may never be. Because it strives to be inclusive of all, collective action constitutes one of its biggest challenges, and one that it shares with other antifoundationalist discourses, such as radical democracy. In fact, third-wave feminism is not unlike radical democracy. Both require the constant engagement of participants in the struggle for a better world. There are no predetermined answers and no guarantees of success, just the inspiration for critical engagement with the lived messiness of contemporary life.

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