Charting the Currents of the Third Wave

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The term "third wave" within contemporary feminism presents some initial difficulties in scholarly investigation. Located in popular-press anthologies, zines, punk music, and cyberspace, many third wave discourses constitute themselves as a break with both second wave and academic feminisms; a break problematic for both generations of feminists. The emergence of third wave feminism offers academic feminists an opportunity to rethink the context of knowledge production and the mediums through which we disseminate our work.

It was inevitable. A new generation of feminists is reworking what it variously perceives to be the successes and failures of the women's movement of the late sixties and seventies. In the past two or three years, the term "third wave" has been bandied about in popular culture as a descriptor of a type of feminism, or perhaps, more specifically, of feminists of a younger generation. However, the meaning of the term is hard to pin down. Although effectively commanding the attention of the media, self-proclaimed third wave feminists present difficulties for scholarly investigation: Is the third wave a movement? If so, who is in or identifies with the movement? Is there an age limit? Is that all there is? What are the fundamentals of the politics espoused by its devotees? How do those politics compare with those of the second wave? These questions serve as my point of departure. The purpose of this essay is to map a territory that is still forming. In doing so, I discuss where third wave discourses are located and what their arrival on the historical scene might mean for second wavers or academic feminists.
LOOKING FOR THE THIRD WAVE

The earliest mention of the term "third wave" took place in the mid-eighties when a diverse group of feminist activists and academics pooled their intellectual resources into an anthology they titled The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism. The emphasis was to be on multiracial alliances among women that grew out of the political and theoretical discussions of the early eighties on race and sexuality. Age did not seem to be the issue. Because of difficulties with the publisher, the anthology has yet to materialize in book form (Albrecht 1997). Yet the term circulated among some feminists and popped up again in 1992 in the wake of the Thomas-Hill hearings and the William Kennedy Smith trial. One hundred young feminists gathered in New York City and organized themselves into an activist network they called "The Third Wave." The vision was "to become a national network for young feminists; to politicize and organize young women from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds; to strengthen the relationships between young women and older feminists; and to consolidate a strong base of membership able to mobilize for specific issues, political candidates, and events" (Dulin 1993, 33). The first project was Freedom Ride 1992, a three-week bus tour to register voters in poor communities of color across the country. In this incarnation, the third wave emphasis was on organizing young feminists, and this is the emphasis that stuck.

There are several key texts that have attempted to document this generational emphasis on the third wave. Among the first and most cited are those published by popular presses: Rebecca Walker's To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995) and Barbara Findlen's Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation (1995). Both anthologies proudly place themselves in "the next generation" of feminism. Both are filled with autobiographical accounts of young feminists attempting to fit the legacies of and lessons from the women's movement of the 1970s into their own lived experiences. Most important for feminist scholars, however, both offer insights into how feminist discourses are interpreted and shaped by a generation that has always regarded the women's movement as a piece of history.

Like many who position themselves within the third wave, I am not old enough to remember the women's movement of the seventies in any detail. Theoretically, this makes me the target audience for these books. I must admit, however, that I did not rush out to buy To Be Real when it first hit the shelves. Although I knew Walker to be an informed and outspoken young feminist activist (a cofounder of The Third Wave, in fact), the title turned me off: "What are we? Impostors? Has the previous generation of feminists been lying? Has its battle-weary face aged to the point that it is now unattractive to the MTV generation?" All I could see was another best-seller decrying the historical obsolescence of feminism. Granted, I was more than a little defensive. The treatises on feminism (especially academic feminism) from mainstream pub-
lishers of late have ranged from misinformed to downright cruel, and I was in no mood to endure the mental exertion of separating the heartfelt critique from the hype. But finally I picked up a copy. Warmed by Walker’s own concerns about the title and about the bashing that feminism has undergone recently, I let my defenses down long enough to begin exploring third wave feminism with some rigor.

To Be Real is tightly focused in its attempts to assess feminism’s applicability to young women in the 1990s. In the introduction, Walker explains what she looked for in the essays to be included in the volume: “I wanted to explore the ways that choices or actions seemingly at odds with mainstream ideas of feminism push us to new definitions and understandings of female empowerment and social change” (xxxvi). Thus, each essay is an enticing variation on the same theme: working through contradictions. Walker prodded authors to “be personal, honest, and record a transformative journey,” usually from anger with, guilt from, or resentment toward an image of the “ideal feminist” they wanted to be but of which they were nevertheless somewhat skeptical. More than just an editorial choice on Walker’s part, navigating feminism’s contradictions—historical, cultural, psychological—is a primary theme of third wave feminism.

In “Close, But No Banana,” for example, Anna Bondoc likens her struggles as a feminist activist to her experiences of confession in the Catholic church. “Certain progressive people whom I’ve both met and, at times, emulated, focus so sharply on shaping themselves into perfect beings: color-blind, well-read, articulate people who can organize rallies, volunteer in soup kitchens, raise thousands of dollars for the good fight, and leap tall buildings in a single bound” (1995, 170). Falling short of this ideal means, for Bondoc, that one has “sinned” against the cause. In this and other essays in the volume, I found myself identifying with the author’s dilemma, interrogating my own brand of feminist idealism, and questioning the litmus tests I otherwise would not admit to having.

At its best, To Be Real deals with the messy contradictions one encounters when attempting to apply feminist theory to everyday life. These stories are refreshing for those of us who are sometimes beleaguered by questions of how much difference our theoretical debates make in the lives of women outside the academy. At the same time, Bondoc’s use of a religious analogy to position feminist and other progressive political practices gives me pause. This construction of feminism as cultish flattens what I (or anyone else who has studied feminist histories) know to be a very complex and contradictory social movement into a few shorthand caricatures. Although Bondoc eventually sides with feminism as a necessary political analysis, this kind of historical reduction fits too well within conservatives’ attempts to expose what they consider to be feminism’s overbearing excesses. Unfortunately, third wave texts are replete with this kind of characterization of the second wave. Essay after essay adds
another chapter to, in a variation on Milan Kundera's words, a history of forgetting. The image of the monolithic, ideal, "mainstream" feminism against which these young women battle is rarely examined as a representation; rather, it almost always is accepted as "real." As a result, the contradictions that are navigated never seem to have historical precedents.

For example, in "Kicking Ass," author Veena Cabreros-Sud disregards a significant second wave legacy of confronting violence against women. Instead, she swallows whole an archetypal feminist who is a white, middle-class, "lustless, cookie-baking, June Cleaver in drag. A combo Stepford Wife/Virgin Mary. The polite, 'good' woman who goes eek at the mousies" (44). As I read statements like these, I am puzzled and even angered by this new style of rebellion based on a misremembered, or at least extremely narrow, version of the history. My mind registers example after example of feminist theories, practices, and direct actions that utterly contradict such cavalier assertions. "What about Roxanne Dunbar," I write in the margins, "the karate-chopping radical of Boston's Cell 16 who toured the country in the 1970s? Or what about sex-radical feminists of the 1980s? Or, how about Lesbian Avengers? Are these women Stepford Wives? Hardly!" Too often, in their quests to "be real," many of the contributors end up fighting ghosts that could be exorcised easily (or at least rendered more complex) by consulting historical accounts of the women's movement.

Thankfully, these very issues are taken up in the foreword and afterword of the book by two second wave veterans. Gloria Steinem begins the anthology with a great deal of excitement but also a few misgivings about the images foisted on those who lived through the women's movement of the 1970s: "I confess that there are moments in these pages when I—and perhaps other readers over thirty-five—feel like a sitting dog being told to sit" (xxii). Likewise, Angela Y. Davis concludes the volume by remarking that she feels "obliged to try to understand these writers’ positions, while simultaneously arguing for the same kind of nuanced vision of historical feminism that the anthology wants to apply to third wave feminism" (282). In other words, third wavers are not the first to struggle with the complexities and contradictions of applying feminist principles to their everyday lives. Acknowledging this might lead to some well-worn second wave paths that prove invaluable. The wheel does not have to be reinvented.

I have my suspicions, however, as to whether the addition of historical nuance to this generation's perspective is the minor adjustment that Steinem and Davis imply. Perhaps the reinvention process is central to these third wave feminists. In other words, as I read these essays, I do not get the feeling that the writers are, as a group, interested in looking for historical precedents within the second wave, or would be impressed on finding them. Traditional approaches to history, after all, have been in the business of documenting continuities, producing narratives that link the past to the present, and
constructing larger contexts into which events are cast. This is not the direction in which the third wave seems to be heading. On the contrary, a break with the past is a major and consistent theme in *To Be Real* and other sources of third wave discourse. It may be that consumer culture has rendered “new and improved” much more enticing than “historically informed.” So, as scholars steeped in the debates of postmodernism, perhaps we should not be surprised that even feminist history is heaped onto the reviled pile dubbed “master narratives.”

*Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* is another rich source of third wave sentiments, formatted in much the same way as *To Be Real*. In the introduction, editor Barbara Findlen, who is also the executive editor of *Ms.*, highlights how growing up after “the problem that has no name,” the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the point at which the women’s movement was “news” offers today’s young women the most important of feminist legacies: a sense of entitlement. Topics range from incest to abortion to racism in women’s studies to mother-daughter bonding, all framed by these young women’s personal experiences and feminist orientations.

One of my many favorites is “Imagine My Surprise,” by Ellen Neuborne. The author discovers that in spite of her feminist parents’ overt efforts to encourage her assertiveness and her employer’s lip service to gender equity, she is struck dumb when it comes to the blatant sexism she experiences on the job. Horrified by her own passivity, she reproves herself, “I’m a daughter of the movement. How did I fall for this?” Then, turning her interrogation outward, she demands: “Do you think you would do better? Do you think you would recognize sexism at work immediately? Are you sure? Programming is a powerful thing” (30-31). It is this kind of feistiness and this invitation to participate in the pains and joys of these women’s lives that kept me eagerly turning pages. Yet this same feistiness also kept me asking questions, specifically about the limits of third wave feminism’s emphasis on individual empowerment: how powerful is a sense of entitlement in a work (or any other) culture that has yet to recognize it? Is a sense of entitlement enough? Certainly the answer must be no. Yet at the risk of dismissing Neuborne’s essay (which, as I said, I enjoyed immensely) as a naive encounter with the agency-structure dilemma, I simply call attention to what seems to be a lack of theoretical, historical, or organizational resources under which third wave feminists seem to be laboring.

In spite of many strong analytical essays that, like those in *To Be Real*, wrestle with the various contradictions of putting feminist theory into practice, *Listen Up* is less focused on a particular question or theme and more uneven in the depth and quality of the writing. A few of the essays come off as personal manifestos—raw, engaged, unapologetic, deliberately outrageous—and do not seem to offer the reader any kind of clear analytical path to follow. For example, Nomy Lamm’s “It’s a Big Fat Revolution” begins:
If there's one thing that feminism has taught me, it's that the revolution is gonna be on my terms. The revolution will be incited through my voice, my words, not the words of the universe of male intellect that already exists. And I know that a hell of a lot of what I say is totally contradictory. My contradictions can coexist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I'm not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear, analytical pattern that I know they're supposed to. . . . The fact that I write like this cuz its the way I want to write makes this world just that much safer for me. (85)

The academic or second wave feminist encountering such declarations might feel eclipsed as an audience member, given this self-centered and even haughty tone, not to mention the author's degradation of anything that resembles intellectual labor. But instead of completely dismissing this kind of bravado as self-absorbed, I think it is also important to read these texts as attempting both to acknowledge and to critique a kind of "postfeminist" turn in popular culture.

Back in 1987, Judith Stacey warned us of the coming postfeminism, which she defined as "the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism" (1990, 339). Postfeminism assumes that the women's movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental societal changes. Put this way, "feminist" practices become matters of personal style or individual choice and any emphasis on organized intervention is regarded as naive and even oppressive to women. Lamm, although certainly arguing that personal choice and individual style constitute the bulk of her political tools, does not accept the idea that feminism eradicated institutional sexism or that lines between privilege and exploitation based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, physical ability, and body shape have disappeared. Nor does she disregard the need for organized feminist responses to oppressive institutions. This seems to me a crucial difference between the third wave feminists in these two anthologies and the claims coming from those I call "feminist dissenters."

Convinced that feminism has become the cause of, rather than the solution to, women's problems, feminist dissenters are entangled in representations of third wave discourse. They frequently are touted and even supported by conservative constituencies and constructed as youthful rebels against "establishment feminism" in the popular media. For example, Katie Roiphe's book The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism denounced the anti-date rape movement on college campuses as all but baseless. Rather than helping students confront issues of sexuality in an affirming way, Roiphe complains that actions like "Take Back the Night" marches create a repressive "culture
of caution" that stifles the very sexual freedoms that the women's movement sought to establish. Yet Roiphe's reliance on her own perceptions without regard to her particular class and race privileges, her heterosexist presumptions, and her complete disregard of feminist debates around sexuality make this account of sex in the 1990s ring hollow. Claims such as "if 25 percent of my female friends were really being raped, wouldn't I know it?" (1994, 52) reduce well-documented trends of violence against women to solipsistic dismissals. *The Morning After* is plagued with questionable statistics and shoddy analysis. Yet Roiphe, who was still in graduate school at Princeton when the book was published, took to the talk show circuit and received high praise from the likes of George Will and the *National Review* for writing a "bombshell of a book" and bringing "some needed honesty to the discussion."7

Another feminist dissenter who quickly became mainstream journalism's first choice for young feminist opinion is Naomi Wolf. Although very much aligned with the idea that corporate America works to provoke women's anxieties and keep them in line in her first book, *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf takes a 180-degree turn in her latest effort, *Fire with Fire*. She wants to reconstruct feminism as a "civil rights movement" for women. Women's real problem, argues Wolf, is that we have been socialized by a feminism that sees power as "male" and thus "innately harmful." The solution is to seize power—economic, political, sexual power—and throw off the yoke of victimization. Pitting Audre Lorde's often-quoted warning that the "Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house" against Wolf's own faith in women's ability to work the free market in their favor, the book reads like a thinly veiled encomium of possessive individualism. Political issues like reproductive rights are too divisive. It's time for women on the left to get together with women on the right and stake our claim on the nation's resources as *women*. *Fire with Fire* was taken to task by a number of feminists, but Wolf's supermodel looks and market-friendly philosophies continue to make her good copy the in mainstream media.8

The problem with categorizing Roiphe and Wolf as examples of third wave feminism is their position regarding what I argued earlier is a fundamental tenet of the third wave: navigating feminism's contradictions. Instead of navigating contradictions, these authors deny that feminism necessarily and inevitably holds contradictions. They imagine there is some pure outside where women can stand free of both gendered oppression and other forms of exploitation. Roiphe, for example, argues that she wrote her book "out of the deep belief that some feminism is better than others" (1994, 7). In her world, the feminism she encounters on her campus exists only to perpetuate its own existence by convincing women that they are victims of male violence. She nonetheless refuses to acknowledge any kind of complexity in living out her preferred feminism if she or anyone else were to become, say, a victim of "real" rape. Anyone paying the least bit of attention to the anti-porn/pro-sex wars of
the 1980s knows that the very problems she raises have been passionately debated for years among feminists. Likewise, Wolf's feminism is about getting more for women—more money, more power, more pleasure. In outlining her project, she demonstrates a blatant disregard for the position of U.S. women (whom she assumes to be a rather unproblematic class regardless of economic, race, and political differences) within late capitalism, let alone the position of women in developing nations in relation to first world economies. Roiphe and Wolf can to argue for their visions of feminism insofar as they deny differences among women. This lesson has been hard won by too many of us who continue our struggle to learn how to build coalitions across differences. The third wave does not need this kind of regressive stance.

**Bad Girls/Good Girls: Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties**, edited by Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry is not exclusively a third wave anthology, but it does provide this generation with a much-needed response to the high-profile feminist dissenters like Roiphe and Wolf, as well as their elders, Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Sommers. Taking direct aim at the victim-power feminism dichotomy perpetuated by the media hype around these dissenters, this volume seeks to "return us to a complex, multivoiced, activist narrative of feminism" (1996, xxiii). Many of the authors call attention to the volumes of feminist scholarship, activism, and cultural work from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that undercut the image of feminism as prudish, asexual, and man-hating. Drawing from many previously published essays by feminist public intellectuals such as bell hooks, Katha Pollitt, and Anna Quindlen, as well as feminist academics and activists (some of whom had never before been published), Maglin and Perry explicitly situate their work in the genre of ground-breaking texts on female sexuality, such as Ann Snitow et al.'s *Powers of Desire* (1983) and Carole S. Vance's *Pleasure and Danger* (1992 [1984]).

Although *Bad Girls/Good Girls* does not rank with these ground-breaking volumes in terms of originality (in many cases, it covers the same "pro-sex" territory mapped out in the early 1980s), it functions in two important ways as an anthology on female sexuality for the 1990s. First, it "updates" the theoretical complexities of negotiating female sexuality by investigating issues such as women and AIDS, the popularity of therapeutic discourse in feminism, the social construction of sexual harassment, first world consumption of third world sex tourism, and the relationship between discourses on rape and alien abduction. Second, and perhaps more important, *Bad Girls/Good Girls* includes several essays that carefully and persuasively document that even in the age of "power feminism," women are still the primary victims of acquaintance rape, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment. This point is a critical one. The attention focused on Paglia, Roiphe, and Wolf, along with the Religious Right's relentless "family values" campaign throughout the early 1990s, have combined to give new life to the pernicious narrative that says that women who claim sexual agency must necessarily accept their existence outside of
societal approval and legal protection; that desire amounts, in essence, to blaming the victims of male sexual aggression. This anthology successfully tempers the force of that narrative.

Finally, Third Wave Agenda: Doing Feminism, Being Feminist edited by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake is the first book-length academic analysis of third wave feminism that takes its subject to be a unique and demarcated movement on the part of young women. All its contributors, including the editors, are self-proclaimed third wave feminists. Many of the essays read like the personal narratives in To Be Real and Listen Up, yet this volume has a larger underlying theoretical project. The editors acknowledge the important contributions of Walker's and Findlen's anthologies in giving readers insight into the experiences of the next generation of feminists, yet claim that each fails to “provide consistent analysis of the larger culture that has helped shape and produce those experiences” (10). Therefore, Heywood and Drake, both young faculty in research institutions, attempt to provide the much-needed historical grounding for third wave feminism in their introductory essay. They argue that the third wave is “a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while also acknowledging and making use of the pleasure, danger and defining power of those structures” (11). Although this is not a position from which to define a clear political agenda, the contributors follow the editors' lead and consistently attempt to bridge their analytical strategies with their participation in consumer culture.

Most intriguing is the section of the introduction headed “From the Third World to the Third Wave: Our Debts.” Here, Heywood and Drake argue that the “definitional moment” of third wave feminism took place on the terrain of race in the early 1980s rather than age in the mid-1990s. In other words, the contradictory character of the third wave emerged not from the generational divides between second wavers and their daughters, but from critiques by Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzulduá, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston and many other feminists of color who called for a “new subjectivity” in what was, up to that point, white, middle-class, first world feminism. These are the discourses that shaped, and must continue to shape, third wave agendas in the years to come. In short, Heywood and Drake's introduction provides the most satisfying account of the emergence of the third wave in the larger social, economic, and historical contexts of fin-de-siècle North America.

MORE THIRD WAVE SIGHTINGS

Certainly, secondary sources are not the only means of gaining insight into third wave issues. Primary sources, including “zines” and cyberspace, are fairly easy to access as well. As the 1990s complement to all those uncopyrighted,
mimeographed articles that made their way across the country during the second wave, zines are pages of handwritten or typed material that are photocopied and distributed through loose, informal networks by girls and young women. These young authors tend to self-identify with Riot Grrrl, a movement of sorts that emerged in the early 1990s from the punk music scene when the testosterone level reached unbearable highs for some young female devotees. (The spelling of Grrrl is meant to subvert the image of girlhood innocence and evoke an angry grrrrrowl.) Riot Grrrrls consistently claim that there is no formal organization, nor are there leaders, per se. However, Kathleen Hannah, lead singer of the punk band Bikini Kill, often receives credit for coining the term “Riot Grrrl” and helping promote this particular form of young feminist rage by cofounding Riot Grrrl Press, a nonprofit distribution and printing service for underground female writers (Lee 1995, 16; VanEvery 1995).

The tone of most Riot Grrrl rhetoric is angry, the content is highly personal, and the emphasis is on creating safe and supportive spaces for grrrrls to express themselves. Feminism is a primary theme for these writers. Hannah frames her own account:

To me, a big part of feminism (or whatever you wanna call the rejection of the equation, girl=dumb) is the simple assertion that us girls are important. Our bodiesheartsminds are important enough that we will defend them, protect them, ourselves. We don't have to live lives that are filled up with events that are really just sentimentalized versions of abuse. We don't wanna live that way and we don't have to. (Hannah 1996)

The importance and intrigue of these publications are found in their overtly declared dissatisfaction with mainstream representations of girls and women. Advertising, television, and women's fashion magazines are frequent targets of derision. “Tara,” co-editor of the zine Cupsize, argues for the importance of zine producers making these kinds of critiques of consumer culture in the 1990s: “Because we grew up with the privileges of the '70s feminist movement, we're trying to figure out where to go from here” (in Mifflin 1995, 6E).

It is difficult to point to a representative zine given that they are highly individualized and sporadically published and distributed. In one I recently picked up, along with strident manifestos, the editor drew from many other zines to include art, poetry, fiction, comics, and interviews with punk bands, as well as informative articles on the joys of lesbian sex, breast cancer, coming out to parents, roommates, and current events. Also, now that the mainstream media have taken notice of the zine network, it has expanded beyond Riot Grrrl circles, which tend to be white and middle-class, to become more of a medium for all kinds of people with “alternative” agendas. Gay, lesbian, bi, and queer-oriented zines seem to be proliferating, and to a lesser extent, I have noticed more contributions by women of color.
Interesting hybrid publications also have emerged from the space between established feminist journals or magazines and the more informal zine network. The production values are higher than mimeographed zines' and the quality of writing more consistent. One example is Bust, started about three years ago when editors Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller “noticed there was a gap between cool women’s magazines and everything else. There was Sassy, which was cool, and Ms., which was cool if you’re older, and all the fluffernutter in the middle—Cosmo, Mademoiselle and Glamour. We just wanted to say, look, here’s a place where you can read about girls like you” (in Mifflin 1995, 6E).

The target audience of Bust appears to be older than that of most zines, but essays still promote that “youngish” sense of outrage through a highly vigorous style of writing. A recent issue, on motherhood, features various points of view on the topic. “Motherhood Lite” by “Magdalen” chimes in with “though I reserve the right to change my mind and squirt out brats later on, should the much-hyped biological clock suddenly take hold of my usually-sensible uterus, for now I’m into letting other folks have the morning sickness, wild hormonal swings, stretch marks, and college-savings funds. After all, why be a mom when you can be an aunt?” (1996, 76). Whereas “Mumu Mama” offers another account, by “former hipster” Jennifer Solow: “I’m 32 and I’m pregnant and I asked for it. I’m tired, hormonal, and zitty and I haven’t gone to Jo-Jo’s step-class in 8 weeks. . . . I’m wearing Tevas to the farmers’ market and napping in the afternoon. I’m horrifically uncool and it couldn’t be better” (1996, 41).

Many of these hybrid zines have corresponding web pages designed to advertise the publication, solicit material for upcoming issues, provide space for readers to interact with editors and other readers, and link the reader to related feminist and/or female-oriented web pages. Grrowl! is both a hardcopy zine and a highly stylized online zine, or “e-zine,” that corresponds to the web site Nrrdgrrl. Bitch, which characterizes itself as a “rag” with plenty of attitude, also comes out in hard copy and online. Of course, not all web pages correspond to zines, which leads to another important venue for third wave expression: cyberspace.

This is not everyone’s idea of a feminist community, but to some young women, cyberspace is the venue of choice. Just as baby boomers were the first generation to grow up with television as a primary influence, Generation X (a term often used to describe the current population of twentysomethings) will undoubtedly feel the effects of the Internet for a long time to come. Much has been written already about the uniqueness of the “space” that only can be accessed online. It is interesting, however, to consider exactly what this new expanse—neither real nor tangible—means for specific groups: women, men of color, lower-class people, rural people, the elderly, artists, writers, and so forth. Men, it has been estimated, account for 77 percent of the Internet’s total
usage (Gilbert and Kile 1996, 1). This means that at any given moment, three men are online for every woman. At the same time, cyberspace is a forum that has, theoretically, more than enough room for everyone. The playing field between producer and consumer is significantly more level than, say, in television, film, or even popular music. In Surfer Grrrls: Look, Ethel! An Internet Guide for Us! authors Laurel Gilbert and Crystal Kile wax ecstatic on the potential of cyberspace for furthering feminist goals: “Call us utopian, but the more the Net swells with the sound of many different voices, the more we’ll all enjoy it and learn from it, and the more representative it will be” (1996, 5).

An example of this potential is “Cybergrrl,” a worldwide web site created by Aliza Sherman. Cybergrrl touts itself as “the Premiere Place for Girls and Women Online.” Relatively mainstream in its orientation (sponsors and clients include Lifetime Television, the Avon Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign, and Chase Online), Sherman’s cyberspace support system nevertheless offers girls and women a turf on which they can communicate with others about issues such as reproductive rights, women’s health, and tips for women in business. Specifically for girls are features such as fighting depression, dealing with embarrassing situations, and sibling rivalry. The recent expansion of feminist-centered cybercommunities attests to the tenacity of young feminists in claiming the right to exist in what had been a rather masculine space. The utopian claims, however, might be a bit premature. Although the World Wide Web offers completely new dimensions to the old-fashioned vanity press (in other words, anyone can get “published”), the assertion that the Internet is democracy incarnate is far-fetched. After all, it still requires access to computers, software, and a specific set of language skills, along with the inclination and leisure to sit in front of a monitor for hours at a time.

Daria Ilunga from “Plugged In,” a community access and training center for low income children and adults in Palo Alto, California, has mixed feelings about the Internet as a community-building space for marginalized people. In a recent interview, she said that “one of the things that was interesting to me when I began using e-mail and stuff back in college was that I could engage in dialogues with people that would not happen if you met face-to-face. It freed me to say things that I, as a woman and as a person of color, often didn’t feel comfortable to say.” At the same time, Ilunga warns against likening equity in the virtual world with equity in the material world. “It’s not as easy as just giving men of color, women, and the ‘underclasses’ access to new technologies. Computers are NOT going to solve all of our problems” (1996).

WHERE CAN THIRD WAVE CURRENTS TAKE US?

If nothing else, delving into third wave discourses allowed me to break out of my academic orientation and gave me the sense that feminism is thriving
someplace other than in scholarly journals and classrooms. This comes as welcome news in the wake of the ominous pronouncements in the next generation’s denial of anything that hints of feminism: “I’m not a feminist, but . . . .” Based on the theory that one measure of the strength of a movement is the zeal with which it is attacked, it even could be argued that all the negative attention feminist dissenters have been creating attests to the strength of the feminist presence in the 1990s.

On the one hand, the fact that third wave feminism is taking place outside more traditional feminist institutions is cause for optimism. Besides allowing for alternative venues and forms of institution building, this newest wave is returning to popular culture, the medium through which feminism captured the popular imagination—and thus political clout—in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the other hand, this trend also might be somewhat foreboding for those of us in the academy. Accessibility seems to be the watchword for the third wave. And when issues of accessibility to feminism are foregrounded, chances are that academic feminism’s exclusivity and excesses lurk in the background. Many of these young women may devote themselves to feminism, but only insofar as they are able to “relate” to it on their own terms. For a significant number of them, those terms include eschewing anything that alludes to academic feminism.

The perception among many of these young women is that the academy is entrenched in intellectual elitism, racism, classism, radicalism or even conservatism. This perception is not exactly baseless, considering the enthusiasm and subsequent success with which many feminists in the academy pursued careers throughout the late 1970s and 1980s at the same time that women’s movement activism was waning. In the case of the third wave, the embrace of popular culture is tantamount to a kind of populism. Unfortunately, academic feminists may find themselves positioned uncomfortably against this populist movement. In large part, this perception of feminism in the academy no doubt is beholden to the media attention rightly or wrongly garnered by the feminist dissenters discussed earlier. However, to the extent that our professionalism might preclude our active pursuit of potential constituencies outside the academy, I believe we should take the next generation’s criticism seriously.

The question is, of course, how we situate what we see as feminism when media representations (rarely credited for giving feminism a fair shake) provide so many of the images against which these young feminists define themselves. In reading through the anthologies, zines, and web pages, I was struck again and again by the way representations of feminism formed the primary battleground for these young women. For example, Gloria Steinem, a figure who was popularized by the mass media but is hardly typical of second wave feminists, frequently functions as the “great mother,” in whose apron strings the third wavers find themselves entangled. As mentioned before, some historical back-
ground on the women's movement might lessen the strife considerably. However, the issue of representation also attests to the limits of our professional success in the academy. Our sphere of influence tends to be our classrooms. But this does little good to those who never enroll. What feminism in the academy comes to mean in the larger society, then, is determined by those who can speak in the language talk show audiences can understand and Cosmo readers can appreciate. Second wave "moms" can and should be represented as something more than just oppressive to their third wave "daughters."

Once again, however, I think this symbolic mother-daughter battle has another side, which offers a more complex understanding of third wave perspectives. This familial framing on the part of third wave feminists constructs feminism as a coming-of-age issue. In other words, figuring out her own feminism may become more and more a girl's right of passage. Perhaps identity (as opposed to, say, the spectacle of mass activism conjured by the histories of the second wave) is such a central focus of the third wave because feminism has become, to many girls, a discourse as powerful and pervasive as pop music or romance novels. Thus, feminist sensibilities, culminating in a sense of entitlement on the part of many women in this next generation, are present even as these women do battle with their feminist foremothers.

If nothing else, the rhetoric of the third wave demonstrates that it is an exciting time to be a young feminist. But what about the not-so-young feminists, especially the ones in the academy? I believe that the mother-daughter metaphor has just as many implications for the mother's politics as for the daughter's. In other words, it provokes second wavers to ask, What does the emergence of third wave feminism mean for us? How is the second wave being historicized? How is that history being circulated (or perhaps not circulated)? What are the functions to which this history is being put? If the third wave marks a different stage in the contemporary movement, then perhaps it is time for the second wave to identify exactly what its historical legacy is or should be. This means not only writing the histories but disseminating them through media that tend to be more popular with, and accessible to, third wave feminists: women's studies zines, for example, or links to a women's history home page.

At the risk of sounding like a cliché, we might say that the emergence of a popular movement among young women outside the academy is an opportunity for us on the inside. They could use our input as well as our involvement. That involvement might take the form of what may seem at first, uncomfortable cultural exchanges across generational lines as well as professional boundaries. What we must realize is that the inevitable reworking of the successes and failures of second wave feminism is underway, and the best place for second wave academics to be is where the action is. After all, if the second wave is history, then perhaps we should get to work on demonstrating to the next generation that it is a usable past.
NOTES

1. “Wave” is a term coined during the 1970s to emphasize the contemporary movement’s (second wave) connection and indebtedness to the Woman’s Rights movement of the nineteenth century (first wave).


3. These discussions were instigated by and took place within texts such as Moraga and Anzuldua (1981), Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982), Smith (1983), and hooks (1981).


5. For all the hoopla generated on behalf of these authors, it is important to note that these women might be the Generation X version of a larger publishing trend that has its older adherents as well: Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, and, most recently, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.

6. See Pollitt (1995) for an analysis of Roiphe’s methodological shortcomings. Also, Maglin and Perry (1996), reviewed later in this essay, contains several essays that respond to Roiphe’s specific claims and general assumptions.

7. These quotes were two of the fifteen review quotations printed on the front, back, and inside covers of the paperback edition.


9. See Kamen (1991) for an extensive treatment of this trend.

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