Making Waves and Drawing Lines: The Politics of Defining the Vicissitudes of Feminism

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If there actually is a third wave of feminism, it is too close to the second wave for its definition to be clear and uncontroversial, a fact which emphasizes the political nature of declaring the existence of this third wave. Through an examination of some third wave literature, a case is made for emphasizing the continuity of the second and third waves without blurring the differences between older and younger feminists.

There is something lovely about a wave. Gently swelling, rising and then crashing, waves evoke images of both beauty and power. As feminists, we could do much worse than be associated with this phenomenon. The significance of speaking of feminism as coming in waves, however, is not entirely clear. This becomes especially apparent when we try to specify what is meant by a third wave of feminism in the United States. Given that the feminists of the second wave are neither dead nor silent, it is natural to wonder what “third wave” can mean. This paper discusses why it is problematic to speak of a third wave of feminism in ways that are not problematic when speaking of a first or second wave of feminism.¹ A lesson we might take from this, however, is one expressed eloquently by many younger feminists: to learn to live more comfortably with ambiguity and contradiction.

If a third wave of feminism in the United States has emerged, then understanding what this new wave is about demands that we explore two major feminist transitions: the shift from the first wave to the second and from the second to the third. By comparing the two, at least one conclusion emerges. The second wave is so named primarily as a means of emphasizing continuity with earlier feminist activities and ideas. By contrast, the third wave, at least the strands of it that this paper will consider, seems to identify itself as such largely as a means of distancing itself from earlier feminism, as a means of

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stressing what are perceived as discontinuities with earlier feminist thought and activity.

A meaningful discussion of the third wave depends, in part, on an understanding of what constitutes the second wave. Gaining a tolerably clear sense of the second wave requires some exploration of the boundaries of the first wave. When we speak of a wave, we typically mean "one among others." "Wave" just doesn't sound like the right word for the lone occurrence of something. Waves that arise in social and political milieus, like waves that arise in water, become defined only in context, relative to the waves that have come and gone before.

Furthermore, to call something a wave implies that it is one among others in some sort of succession, both similar to and different from the other occurrences. For waves in water, the similarities are temporal and proximal (relatively speaking), and the medium in which the waves are created is also the same. It is interesting, too, that the differences that distinguish waves in water are also temporal and proximal ones, variations in amplitude, duration, intensity, and volume. In an analogous way, one of the obvious differences between the first and second waves of feminism is time. The first wave in the United States is often seen as having begun with the Seneca Falls Conference of 1848 and ending with the passage of women's suffrage in 1920. Equally obvious, if there is a temporal difference between the second and the third wave, it is neither so great nor so visible as that which separates the first from the second. If there is a third wave, it overlaps considerably with the second. After all, as is suggested by many of the third wavers considered in this paper, the second wavers, if not their mothers, are the same age as the third wavers' mothers.

CONTINUITIES AND DISTINCTIONS

Another important feature of waves is that, unless they follow a significant period of calm water, what constitutes the beginning and end of one is something that can be determined only in retrospect, especially from the water. It is often impossible to be sure, simply from the feel of the water, if a new wave is beginning or an old wave is ending. Unless one has a broader perspective from which to determine frequency (perhaps from a helicopter flying above), it is hard to say if the water passing over is part of the old wave or part of a new one. Only after the wave has passed, that is, after it has crested and fallen, could a swimmer say with assurance that it was a new wave. Similarly, assigning to a particular social movement the name "wave" is something that, strictly speaking, can be done only in retrospect, because, like a swimmer in the water, we are in the social medium.

In Darwin's Dangerous Idea, Daniel Dennett argues that what constitutes a newly emergent species (rather than just an alternative variety of an existing
species), cannot be determined during the gradual and time-consuming process during which the organism evolves. That is, it cannot be known, as these gradual changes are occurring, whether the changes will be significant enough, relative to an environment that is also changing, to reach some point at which the organism can be said to count as a new species. As Dennett says, "Speciation can now be seen to be a phenomenon in nature that has a curious property: you can't tell it is occurring at the time it occurs!" (1995, 96). To point to some organism as the beginning of a new species can only make sense in retrospect, for it is only much later, when a group of such organisms exists, that any trait shows for which that early organism could have been the beginning.

Although the second wave of feminism emphasizes its continuity with the first wave in identifying itself as it does, it also claims to be a distinctively new movement; a new "species" in Dennett's language. Dubbing Betty Friedan or anyone else as the founding member of this new "species" of feminism, however, is something that only makes sense (if it ever does) in retrospect. If, for example, Friedan's book had made only an instant but short-lived splash, she would not have been crowned, as some historians have done, the first "member" of the new species. In a similar but even more problematic way, some third wave feminists appear to announce themselves as the emergence of a new "species," but it may be too early to tell if there are non-arbitrary grounds for declaring that such a significant branching off from second wave feminism has actually occurred.

Given the uncertainty of drawing a terminal boundary around the second wave, the political motivations behind christening the beginning of a new wave stand out. In other words, the lack of any natural or obvious boundaries makes the motivations for asserting the beginning of a new wave more clearly political ones. This is not meant to serve as an indictment against those who identify themselves as third wave feminists, just to emphasize the clearly political nature of the break with the second wave, a break unlike that which occurred between the second and first waves.

It is evident from the work of many of those who point to the late 1960s or early 1970s as marking the beginning of their feminist consciousness that they found power in the term "second wave" largely because of the bridge it forged with politically active feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The significance of women like Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton could not be questioned, if for no other reason, than that they eventually led to the constitutional amendment that recognized women's right to vote. Many nascent pride-centered movements emphasize a search for historical roots; not only is one likely to be taken more seriously by others if one's work has strong historical precedents, but such ancestors can become resources on which one builds one's own identity.
In retrospect, from the perspective of the 1960s, the passage of suffrage must have seemed the crowning achievement, the crest of the wave toward which much previous feminist energy had been spent and after which, little else remained to be accomplished. While this assumes a misleadingly narrow view of the range of first wave feminist interests, there is some agreement that the victory of 1920 was a climactic moment. As Miriam Schneir puts it,

soon after 1920, the main women's organizations disintegrated, and feminism entered a long period of dormancy. . . . Feminist leaders vanished into virtual oblivion, their struggle nearly forgotten. (1994, xi)

Thus, while it is clearly an oversimplification to say that the first wave ended in 1920, it is not an arbitrary point at which to draw that line.

To say that the second wave regards itself as the descendent of the first in some ways is not to say that it is fully continuous with the first. Issues such as abortion, rape, and sexuality figure less prominently in the literature of the first wave, as does any deep and sustained concern for issues of race or class. But although the second wave did not merely extend or build on the work of the first wave, many second wavers clearly perceived something positive in claiming these earlier women as grandmothers or great-grandmothers. For example, in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Adrienne Rich cites Stanton with evident regard for the relevance of Stanton's words to the issue of maternal violence.

Stanton's was the first feminist voice to be heard on behalf of women who, battered by patriarchal laws and practices, had taken the most desperate and emphatic way they knew to make a clear statement. (Rich, 1976, 262-63)

Rich's appeal to Stanton is typical of many second wave references to first wave feminists in that it is not merely a passing allusion but a substantive reference. It implies that such feminist ancestors had concrete offerings for issues still relevant to women. It is not surprising, then, that a tremendous amount of second wave energy was devoted to uncovering and analyzing the work of "pioneer" feminists.

YOUNGER VOICES

The relationship between the sort of third wave feminism discussed here and second wave feminism is much different. Whereas second wavers may have seen themselves as carrying on many of the basic values and aims of the first wave, this brand of third wave feminism seems to define itself more negatively, primarily in terms of values it associates with the second wave and finds
disagreeable or irrelevant. Such a definition is implicit in two recent anthologies, issuing from editors who emphasize the “youth” of the women’s voices and the generational difference: Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation* and Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. These two books are good subjects for discussion both for what they have in common and for how they differ. Significantly, only *To Be Real* emphasizes the name “third wave.”

Rebecca Walker, cofounder and president of Third Wave, “an organization devoted to young feminist activism” (1996, 1), writes that for many young women, “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” (1995, xxxii-xxxiii). She also alludes to the second wave as having offered “identity politics” (1995, xxxiv), and suggests that second wavers have engaged in “policing morality” (1995, xxxv). She explains,

> As they [contributors to the anthology] struggle to formulate a feminism they can call their own, they debunk the stereotype that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities. (1995, xxxiv)

Here, it seems clear that Walker sees second wave feminism as somewhat monolithic, as embodying one more or less identifiable set of values, many of which she regards as negative values. It is interesting that she implies that the values she does regard positively—self-determination, self-possession, and other “non-dichotomous” values—are a relatively unique contribution of young feminists. Furthermore, she regards the work of such women as somewhat radical, praising them for “pushing at all our notions of what is good and bad, correct and incorrect behavior and ideology for a feminist” (1995, xxxv).

Clearly, many of these young writers convey the sense that the feminism of their mothers’ generation is naive, obsolete, or otherwise somehow lacking in relevance to their lives. It is interesting to note that each of these women seems to feel that she has a sense of what defines previous feminism; that is, she has in her mind some picture of feminism which she is operating. Given the less-than-positive light in which earlier feminism is portrayed, that picture might seem to come straight from a backlash press. Walker anticipates this assumption.

> It has become clear to me that young women are struggling with the feminist label not only, as some prominent Second Wavers have asserted, because we lack a knowledge of women’s history
and have been alienated by the media’s generally horrific characterization of feminists. . . . (1995, xxxii-iii)

Despite Walker’s disclaimer, the picture of second wave feminism she paints, if not derived from the media’s “horrific characterization,” is remarkably consistent with it. Feminists have frequently been stereotyped, for example, both by reactionary media of the 1960s and 1970s, and by more recent backlash media, as humorless, too angry, unconcerned about their appearance, and fanatically invested in “political correctness.” Each of these negative characteristics is associated with second wave feminists in To Be Real. For example, contributor Jennifer Allyn implies that heaviness and seriousness defined the aesthetic sense of previous feminists. She defined herself in contrast.

I felt part of a new generation of feminists. We wanted to make room for play in our lives—dyeing our hair, shaving our legs, dressing in ways that made us happy—without sacrificing a commitment to political activism. (Allyn and Allyn 1995, 144)

Another contributor, Allison Abner, explains that when she received a copy of Rich’s Of Woman Born while pregnant, she hid it in a drawer.

I fear that Rich’s strong resentment of her children and husband will rise up and haunt me, like a Kewpie doll. At the same time, I feel as alienated from her and angry as when I attempt to read books by many white male writers. (Abner 1995, 190)

Abner seems to read Rich’s first chapters as being excessively angry, whereas this reader and many others, find much of their value in their expression of the honest ambivalence associated with the demands and rewards of mothering.

The stereotypes of the feminist as fanatical or overly invested in political correctness are expressed in essays such as Gina Dent’s, which aims at “taking the religion out of feminism” (74) and Jeannine DeLombard’s, which emphasizes that her brand of feminism, “where the third wave of Western feminism and the third wave of American lesbianism intersect” (21) is “political but not correct” (22). In Walker’s interview with fashion model Veronica Webb, Webb traces the “guilt” she feels about her career to “what people from Naomi Wolf to Gloria Steinem have said about models presenting negative images to young girls” (214). It seems understood in the context of the interview that “guilt” would be the natural result of having digested the feminism of Wolf and Steinem.

Other contributors seem to think they are bucking some sort of second wave party line through their revelations: “Is it horrible to say that reading about real-world rape and torture sometimes turns me on?” (79). Indeed, the attempt to fulfill the promise of the second half of the title of To Be Real: Telling the
Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism largely involves perpetuating the idea that older feminists have distorted the truth about difficult issues, either through ignorance or narrowness produced by a thoughtless adherence to political correctness.

Setting aside the negative picture that is drawn of second wave feminism, something that occurs mainly in To Be Real, it should be emphasized again that second wave feminism is regarded as a definable phenomenon, as embodying a more or less coherent set of values and ideas which can be recognized and then transcended. Yet even a cursory look at the literature of the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s undermines this assumption. Introductory feminist texts, for example, have long struggled to gather coherently the myriad theoretical perspectives from which feminists have approached problems. Such perspectives have been described, for instance, as Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Womanism, Lesbian Feminism, and so on. The fact that there is no one feminism has been apparent for some time. It is exactly this sort of variety that has led editors and writers to speak of “feminisms” rather than just feminism (see, e.g., Jaggar 1988; Tong 1989).

The literature of the 1970s and 1980s, moreover, covers an impressive breadth of issues. Violence against women, advocacy for the ERA, and an emphasis on abortion rights figure prominently, but so do issues surrounding racism, lesbianism, and even such bugaboos as sadomasochism among women and feminists’ defending pornography (see, e.g., Kahn 1995). This is not to suggest that all has been said on these matters; just to note that it is misleading to write as if earlier feminists did not engage them. Most of the issues addressed in To Be Real, for example—men in feminism, violence and feminism, a woman’s dilemma about her name and marriage, ambivalence about motherhood, the relationship of feminism to sadomasochism—are not new; nor are essentially new solutions offered.

In her forward to To Be Real, Gloria Steinem makes the following critical point:

Some tactical and theoretical wheels don’t have to be reinvented. You may want to make them a different size or color, put them on a different wagon, use them to travel in a different direction, or otherwise make them your own—but many already exist. (Steinem, 1995, xix)

These women’s (and men’s) voices are valuable and welcome; however, it may be incorrect and inefficient to believe or to foster the perception that the journey being embarked on is an essentially new one. Valuable resources may be lost by assuming that current problems and concerns have no historical precedents.

Although such third wave feminists seem to think that a reasonably clear border defines second wave feminism, it is not clear what they think deter-
mines this border. The allusions to the significance of being young women suggest that age is an important factor, but that suggestion is problematic in more or less obvious ways. For a young woman steeped in the so-called ideology of the second wave and enthusiastic about it, for example, why is it relevant that she is twenty-four rather than, say, thirty-four? Women have few experiences that are inherently associated with age; the beginning and ending of menstruation may be the closest possible example. The best that can be said may simply be that women of certain ages tend to have certain experiences and outlooks, with an acknowledgement that there will be vast numbers of exceptions.

A less problematic possibility might be that third wavers draw the boundary, as has often been done with first wave feminism, in terms of the decades during which the most significant public activity and political events occurred, the time when the most important second wave aims were achieved. As already argued, however, the convention of choosing such dates only gains a nonarbitrary rationale in retrospect. Seneca Falls would not have been the beginning of anything had interest in the issues raised there died out shortly afterward. Similarly, the constitutional amendment might reasonably be seen as an end to the first wave not only because it achieved a major feminist goal but because, for many years following, there seemed to be no visible activity of a scope similar to what had occurred prior to its passage. Again, the determination of the end of a wave, even for merely analytical purposes, from our current vantage point, seems downright impossible in the case of the second wave. This consideration should lead to the question of why it is so important for some young women to claim the beginning of a new wave.

For one thing, it is hard to imagine how the negative stereotypes issuing from backlash media could fail to have an effect on most young feminists. Instead of denying that influence, younger feminists might seek to understand it better, to accept it as part of what makes us, for better or worse, who we are. To deny, for example, that I have been influenced by the conservative heyday that has marked about half of my life (I am 31 years old) would be both implausible and unhelpful. As has been amply pointed out, sexist stereotypes influence not only how men see things but also how women do. Similarly, antifeminist stereotypes not only influence those hostile to feminism but may also work insidiously on feminists, especially developing feminists. Acknowledging that such stereotypes and other backlash phenomena have shaped a person's view of feminism does not mean that they are all that have shaped that view.

Findlen, editor of the *Listen Up* anthology, gets it right on this score when she acknowledges, both in her own essay and through her choice of contributions, not only the influence of the backlash against women but other factors that make young women's experiences unique. For example, the effects of negative stereotypes are recognized.
As is made clear by several of the writers in this book, some young women do fear the feminist label, largely because of the stereotypes and distortions that still abound. If something or someone is appealing, fun or popular, it or she can’t be feminist. Feminists are still often assumed to be strident, man-hating, unattractive—and lesbian. (Findlen, xiv-xv)


Some of the women also describe the experience of growing up with the burden of the illusory expectation that there were no limits to what women could do. For young women who had feminist mothers, the messages they received at home and from society could produce uncomfortable and even tragic contradictions. “Maybe your mother gave you Our Bodies, Ourselves and taught you to love your body, but that didn’t stop you from being raped” (Findlen 1995, xvi).

Ellen Neuborne’s point is instructive:

I thought the battle had been won. I thought that sexism was a remote experience, like the Depression. Gloria had taken care of all that in the seventies. Imagine my surprise. (1995, 30-31)

One of the influences that only young women have experienced as they were maturing is the idea that a “postfeminist” era had been reached. It may be that one of the important contributions young feminists have to offer is an understanding of what it means to be a feminist in a society in which many vocal and influential people have said that feminism was no longer necessary.

This is not to imply that this is the only unique contribution that young feminists can offer. Other crucial concerns are raised in each anthology. For example, the influence of AIDS is described, and a connection between feminism and the struggle with anorexia. As contributor Abra Fortune Chernik writes in Listen Up,

I began reading feminist literature to further understand the disempowerment of women in our culture. I digested the connection between a nation of starving, self-obsessed women and the continued success of the patriarchy. (1995, 80)

What may also be valuable is the expression of a new aesthetic, one that incorporates old and new. In Listen Up, Laurel Gilbert describes herself as a student and teacher who bakes. “I read Ms. and listen to Nine Inch Nails and the Violent Femmes. . . . I’m a young mother with alternative body piercings that attract questions in the mall” (1995, 102).
The most important contribution of younger feminists, however, may be in providing new demands and suggestions about the very issues that have consumed many older feminists. If there is one message that screams from the pages of both books, it is that despite the efforts of older feminists, racism within feminism is alive and well. Indeed, many of the contributors suggest that it is not their age that makes them feel excluded from feminism but their race. To Be Real is exceptionally valuable on this score because of the very timely insights that sometimes emerge from its pages. For example, Eisa Davis suggests that racism may be involved in singling out the misogyny of hip-hop, a genre of music she experiences as central to her identity ("I belong to the church of hip hop" [1995, 127]). She implies that a more complex analysis of this music would appreciate its transgressive potential. In Listen Up, JeeYeun Lee describes her experience of being made to feel invisible as an Asian American by a feminism for whom “woman of color” means either Black or Chicana: “My emerging identification as a woman of color was displaced through the writings of Black and Chicana women, and I had to read myself, create my politics, through theirs” (1995, 207).

HEALTHY COMPLEXITY

The diversity of voices that arise from younger feminists, whether they call themselves members of the third wave or not, can be expected to complicate and enrich feminism. Another important lesson to be learned may be just this; that complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole. To Be Real is explicitly organized around the theme of contradiction and multiplicity. Walker explains, for example, that she was “looking for essays that explored contradiction and ambiguity” (1995, xxxvi). The postmodernist lesson, that the demand for logical consistency should be treated as a psychological obsession to which the modern era has been especially susceptible, has been absorbed in many of these pages. Many of the younger feminists really do seem less concerned about forging a monolithic identity and more interested in “weaving an identity tapestry,” as Sonja D. Curry-Johnson describes it.

What we call ourselves, a “new generation” versus a “third wave,” should not be taken as a merely semantic issue, however. It is interesting that Listen Up, the anthology that does not emphasize the expression “third wave,” contains the most explicit acknowledgments of debt to earlier feminists. Aisha Hakim-Dyce writes of having “devoured the work of bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Gloria Anzaldúa” (1995, 231) and Alisa L. Valdes alludes to “my hero Robin Morgan” (18). In the same anthology, Laurel Gilbert explains that “when I read Rich’s ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality,’ a space opened up for me to speak as a lesbian/bisexual woman” (112).
If it is important for some feminists to hold on to the name “third wave,” it might be most productive to do so in a context that acknowledges and utilizes the conceptual tools of older feminists, a context that explicitly recognizes the continuities as well as the discontinuities with earlier feminisms. In an interesting way, the wave metaphor captures the notion of continuity as well as discontinuity; waves are different from one another but are similar, too. By identifying themselves as the third wave, younger feminists can also be read as aligning themselves with feminism broadly construed, placing themselves in the grander context of the women’s movement, a movement not only of their mothers but also of their great-grandmothers.

Perhaps it is the presence of dialogue among the various generations, whether they are conceived as “waves” or not, that is most crucial to the future of feminism. For younger feminists to ignore the work of earlier feminists is not only to fail to wrap their hands around valuable tools, it is to join their shovels to the backlash forces that would bury the history and significance of feminism. Older feminists should not merely be heard as nostalgic nags when they remind younger women of work that has already been done. Younger women, however, should not be dismissed out of hand by older feminists as ungrateful, ignorant brats when they read their mothers’ feminisms with critical eyes. Such a dismissal is just another way of telling younger women that their voices do not matter, a message they receive far too often from society at large; a society that, by the way, is likely to see a feminist as a strident, humorless, man-hating fanatic whether she is old or young, whether she defines herself in terms of the second wave or the third.

NOTE

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