As third wave feminist philosophers attending graduate schools in different parts of the country, we decided to use our e-mail discussion as the format for presenting our thinking on the subject of third wave feminism. Our dialogue takes us through the subjects of postmodernism, the relationship between theory and practice, the generation gap, and the power relations associated with feminist philosophy as an established part of the academy.

From: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
To: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
Subject: Catching the third wave

I am excited by our decision to write a dialogue through e-mail for the special issue of *Hypatia* on third wave feminism. I know that we did not decide whether we should eventually take it out of dialogue form and transform it into a collaborative essay, but I think we should keep its original form as an e-mail dialogue. I think that as third wavers, it is important for us to recognize and give value to forms of feminist philosophy that fall outside the boundaries of traditional academic philosophy. I also think that the very possibility of having a philosophical conversation through electronic mail—instant communication through computers and phone lines—will play a role in the development of feminist thinking in our generation. The Internet opens new lines of communication and provides a new kind of support for young academic feminists. Many graduate students cannot afford to go to feminist conferences and SWIP (Society for Women in Philosophy) meetings. Being able to communicate with feminist philosopher friends in different parts of the country helps alleviate potential feelings of isolation.

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From: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
To: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
Subject: Re: Catching the third wave

There are certain advantages to the new communication media, that is for sure. For example, I usually have a wide variety of conversations simultaneously over the Internet, which is difficult to manage in a physical setting like a classroom. In this way, I am exposed to many, and more diverse, points of view. I like to think that I bring some of these perspectives into the classroom with me, and that this alters the discussions in that physical space. E-mail has been not only personally but also professionally enriching. It has been instrumental to my gaining access to everything from information on graduate philosophy programs that are inclusive of feminist perspectives to feminist bibliographies, to conference announcements. The Internet can be a powerful tool for the dissemination of information because of its inexpensiveness and speed; and it is likely to play a central role in the organization and deployment of future feminist campaigns. There are also difficulties related to a virtual reality forum; sustaining a substantial discussion in a virtual space is a tricky business, I think because a lack of physical proximity and temporal linearity tends to fragment the continuity of a virtual conversation. By using the e-mail format for a philosophical dialogue, we are certainly pushing against the limits of the *whats* and the *hows* not only of philosophy, but also of the dialogue form.

From: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
To: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
Subject: What third wave?

Maybe we should begin our dialogue by situating ourselves as third wave feminists. I'm curious about what it means for you to be a third wave feminist because, to be honest, I have trouble understanding the construction of a third wave. First wave and second wave feminisms are marked by large, distinct activist movements. A great deal of first wave feminism was concerned with women's suffrage, and second wave feminism with the radical reconstruction or elimination of sex roles and the struggle for equal rights. No large, distinctive activist feminist movement seems to be occurring, out of which a third wave of feminism is rising. Third wave feminism seems to be more of an academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodernist critiques of second wave feminism. I cannot help feeling that one must be a postmodernist to be a third waver.

I came to feminism in the mid-1980s as a radical interested in activism. As someone who is critical of certain aspects of second wave feminism, but even
more critical of postmodernism, I feel as if I am standing on the beach with my surfboard, too late to catch the peak of the second wave and unwilling to conform to the rules of pack riding the third.

From: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
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Subject: Re: What third wave?

I certainly do not hold either that you have to be a postmodernist—whatever the meaning du jour for this term may be—in order to identify as a third wave feminist, or that not being hip to a postmodernist scene places you squarely outside the third wave camp. Consider the critiques of women of color, which do not fall neatly into the second or the third wave. Although they share feminist commitments to combat the oppression of women, they have taken issue with the construction of “woman” as white-centered. A better example may be found with the grassroots AIDS activist working under the rubric of “Queer Nation,” (Stein 1993). These are two examples of feminist positions that are not necessarily postmodernist nor second wave; notice also that the latter example is more clearly identifiable as a third wave position. This leads me to suspect that we are construing both waves of feminism too narrowly; but in any case, the two positions—postmodernism and third wave feminism—are not equatable.

I *do* think there are various posts from which to measure the distances between second and first wave feminisms. The most obvious post is a generational one, where the differences between these are, correspondingly, the differences between the baby boomer generation and the so-called generation X—which roughly works out to be those who were born after the 1960s and those who came of age during the Reagan administration (Coupland 1991; Howe and Strauss 1993). I strongly hold that the experiences that led me to identify as a feminist were significantly different from those that inspired the previous generation (Findlen 1995, xi).¹ I also wish to acknowledge, however, that there are women of my age group who identify with the struggles of the second wave of feminists in a straightforward manner, and there are women of the baby boomer generation who are acutely aware of the experiences and issues informing a third wave of feminism.

Modifying the perhaps simplistic account of a generation gap in feminism is the notion of a “political generation,” understood as “a group of people (not necessarily of the same age) that experiences shared formative social conditions at approximately the same point in their lives, and that holds a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances” (Whittier 1995, 180). I believe that this theory of “political generations” can account for subject positions across historical waves of feminism, as well as for the exis-
tence of two relatively distinct waves of feminism; for these reasons, it can help us measure the differences between a third and a second wave of feminism.

From: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
To: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
Subject: Can I surf without a surfboard?

This idea of a “political generation” is a useful alternative to simplistic accounts of a generation gap; but in using it, we should ask which groups of people are empowered to give voice to their concerns. I have to wonder what this emerging discourse about third wave feminism means for feminist philosophy. I am concerned that third wave feminism may be nothing more than academic discourse about discourse, instead of thinking that arises out of and is closely associated with the social and political problems ordinary women face. The reason I bring this up is that I fear that third wave feminism, because it is not arising from a mass-based social movement, may be even less class-conscious than much second wave feminism has been. More and more, the problems feminist thinkers take up are problems that arise out of academic discourses. They are not the socio-political problems ordinary women of different races, classes, sexualities, ethnicities face in their everyday lives. As I see it, feminist philosophy has to play its part in promoting feminist change, and this change cannot be limited to the world of academic philosophy. Feminist philosophers are responsible to all aspects of feminism. In selecting the kind of work they do, feminist philosophers should not ask, “What seems most interesting to me?” but instead, “What needs to be done?” U.S. feminists need theories about race, class, poverty, eating disorders, families, homophobia, work—theories they can “hold in their hands” and use and share easily. If I had to prescribe something for feminist philosophy, it would be pragmatism. I was very excited about the special issue of Hypatia devoted to feminism and pragmatism. That a number of feminist philosophers are interested in pragmatism gives me a sense of hope.

I also have serious concerns about the difficult, specialized, jargonistic language in which much recent feminist philosophy is being presented. These theories are accessible only to the most highly educated. I would like to think it ironic that theories about oppression are being presented in a manner that the majority of those who are oppressed cannot understand. But finding it ironic would not adequately convey the gravity of the problem this poses. This type of language perpetuates elitist power relations associated with who gets to speak about oppression. Every time I bring this up, people treat me as if I am so pedestrian that I cannot understand the significance of the insights of these theories, as if form and content were separable. I do not think feminist philosophers have seriously addressed the problem of power relations and of
who is empowered to speak, write, and publish about oppression in our country. I find it beyond ironic that this type of specialized theorizing about oppression is emerging at the very same time that the gap between the rich and the poor has widened in the United States, that higher education is seriously suffering financially, and that it has become significantly more difficult for people from low-income families to go to college. Feminist theory is becoming the product of the privileged few who hold academic positions, a product to which non-academics do not have access.

From: Rita Alfonso <dralfonso@cc.memphis.edu>
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Subject: Surfing the third wave

Since I came to identify as a feminist while in the academy, one of the experiences that has strongly marked my own feminism is that of formally being taught about feminism by second wave feminists in an academic environment. I belong to the first generation to have the good fortune to learn, in an academic setting, from the lived experiences of women, and to have female role models in nearly all the traditionally male-dominated fields; but because the medium shapes the message to some extent, I am convinced that acquiring a feminist consciousness has been different for those of us who encountered feminism in academia. The feminist theories and texts with which we are presented in the academy necessarily fall short of the experiences that originally animated them—the consciousness-raising experiences that led radical and liberal women of the late 1960s and early 1970s to identify as feminist, at a time when political activism provided the impetus and the focus for feminist theorizing. Although this has been my experience, and it is not an uncommon one, I recognize that it is not at all a universal one.

While it may seem that what characterizes my “political generation” is a general lack of cohesiveness or continuity, as well as a lack of political conviction in the face of a more politically conservative environment, we should remember that this is with respect to the liberalism of the 1960s. As a consequence of changed political conditions, the goals and strategies that some third wave feminists elect do not always coincide with the goals and strategies associated with the second wave of feminism; sometimes they even go against some perceived second wave feminist positions. Again, even if third wave feminists perform their feminism in ways that may, in many cases, be continuous with second wave feminism, these performances might not even *register* as feminist performances on a traditional, liberal feminist scale.
From: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
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Subject: Sexy sexuality

I went to a dyke punk show the other night. Tribe 8 was one of the bands. It made me seriously consider the differences between second and third wave feminists. Their antics most likely would have seemed offensive and male-identified to feminists twenty years ago. Two members of the band are hard core butches, one is a sexy femme complete with a low-cut shirt, and the lead singer performed bare-breasted and with a big black dildo hanging out of her pants zipper. She cut it off with a giant knife and flung it into the audience during the second to last song.

All of this led me to think about feminist theorizing about sexuality. Second wave feminism has been marked by strands that appear prudish. For example, some early radical feminist groups such as the Feminists and Cell 16, believed that all sexual relations were oppressive (Echols 1989, 173-74). By the 1980s, huge debates about pornography, butch-femme and s/m had arisen (Vance 1989). These tensions persist to this day. Tribe 8 served to remind me that many younger lesbians who are feminists are faced with the task of reconciling feminism with sexuality centered around neo-butch-femme or s/m (Nestle 1992; Morgan 1993). Second wave feminism seems to say no to these forms of sexuality. It seems that second wave feminism has put up more restrictions than green lights when it comes to sexuality. This is not to say that it has not seriously challenged the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and sex defined as male-centered intercourse. These challenges have been liberatory, but more needs to be done. Second wave feminism has not been successful at producing new, interesting forms of sexuality. It has, in part, relied on popular essentialist notions of sexuality as an empowering force within, as per Helene Cixous and Audre Lorde.

On the other hand, postmodernism seems to say yes indiscriminately to all forms of “disruptive” sexuality. By doing so, it sanctions the production of new sexualities without providing coherent political strategies through which to evaluate them. Madonna is a good example of this. She is constantly changing identities, resisting definition, transgressing boundaries; but it is not clear that her disruptions constitute positive feminist change. My point is that I do not think that second wave feminism has done a very good job of offering viable redefinitions of sexuality. This leaves young feminists either alienated, confused, or in the sex shop, spending lots of money on overpriced sex toys.
The antics of Tribe 8 remind me of the riot grrrl movement, which has intrigued me since the early 1990s. From what I have gathered, riot grrrls was originally the name of an all-girl punk rock band based in Olympia, Washington. They quickly disbanded, but they lent their name to a surge, around 1991, of all-girl bands in Olympia and Seattle. What was special about the riot grrrls was their antics and strategies, which reminded me of those I have read were used by the early radical feminists, the Redstockings (Redstockings 1975). For example, riot grrrls started up what they called "rags," which were magazines written and published on personal computers, and distributed both electronically and through a more conventional grassroots operation. These "rags" were devoted to the expression (from poems and short stories, to letters and sketches) of dissatisfaction with the status quo, heterosexual arrangement between the sexes. The riot grrrls conducted their own versions of consciousness-raising sessions, according to Amy Raphael, who has researched and formally written about them (Raphael 1994, xxvii). Similarly, Kathie Sarachild writes that the first thing which the Redstockings did as a group was to put out a journal devoted to their common experiences as women (Sarachild 1975, 147).

Among the riot grrrls antics was dressing up in baby doll dresses, usually worn with combat boots, colorful but torn stockings, and any number of tiny plastic hair barrettes, but writing "slut" on their bodies to preempt society's judgment of them. I interpret these antics as an intentional "putting on" of the *girlishness* and innocence preserved with the societal ideal of femininity, (remembering that these were post-pubescent women) while simultaneously writing over and naming the performance of femininity as such, revealing femininity to be exactly its opposite—*sluttishness*. What this performance speaks to is the essential sameness of these two opposite poles of femininity; and it is a play on the ancient virgin/whore dichotomy. Unlike the Redstockings, who protested by throwing items used in the oppression of women into the "freedom trashcan" at the 1968 Miss America Beauty Pageant, the riot grrrls donned and reclaimed, in a perverse manner, the accoutrements of femininity. They made a display of the power that these accoutrements brought to them, and simultaneously mocked this power through parody. More than about performing music, the riot grrrls were about performing their gender.

What is unfortunate about the riot grrrls, though is that they never really managed to gain momentum because they were quickly co-opted and merchandised. The surge of all-girl bands—including Bikini Kill, 7 Year Bitch, and best known of all, Hole—had been incorporated into the Seattle grunge scene.
by 1993. But I think that their example still speaks to the great difficulties of sustaining a feminist movement today. "All" the Redstockings did to catch the attention of the national *and* international media, according to Sarachild herself, was to throw some items representing "femininity" into a trashcan, while this same act today, I should think might only serve as a ten-second sound bite (Sarachild 1975, 147). The example of the riot grrrls also invokes a way of performing feminism that pushes against the conceptual boundaries of the Anglo-American, liberal feminist tradition. This issue of femininity provides one of the notable differences between second and third wave feminists. Whether it makes sense or not, young women today seem to be experiencing femininity and reacting to its exhortations in another way—they seem to be reclaiming it, taking it on—in contrast with the predominant androgyny of the earlier wave. Beyond the rise of political conservatism, this might be a plausible explanation for the increasing popularity not only of the work of the feminist Carol Gilligan and her care-based ethics, but also of the theorists of sexual difference—Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva—in the United States.

From: Jo Trigilio <trigilio@oregon.uoregon.edu>
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Subject: Surfing freestyle

How to understand and situate femininity has been a subject that has haunted second wave feminism. Second wave feminists faced the difficult task of saying that women are not naturally feminine but socialized to be feminine, while at the same time trying to give value to feminine traits. They have broken ground for third wave feminists to redefine femininity, to perform it differently. But this will be no easy task for third wave feminists, because we have to contend with new forms of oppressive and objectifying femininity. The normalization of cosmetic surgery—of breast implants, facial reconstruction, and liposuction in particular—is creating new racist, classist, thin-centered, sexually objectifying forms of femininity. Femininity is no longer just about make-up and high heels. It is now being constructed surgically. Perhaps the normalization of cosmetic surgery should be taken as an indication that second wave feminism has in some way failed to provide viable practices and redefinitions of appearance. Second wave feminism has been astoundingly successful in changing socio-political structures and attitudes associated with sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Public consciousness has been transformed with regard to these issues. This is not the case with appearance.

As I see it, feminist philosophy has only begun its work. Being an academic feminist philosopher comes with a price. Surviving in academic philosophy involves proving to the boys that you can "do" philosophy. As a result, I fear
that different kinds of philosophizing are not being facilitated. Academic philosophy in general suffers from having replaced the love of wisdom with the love of linearity and the love of citing other academic philosophers. Feminist philosophy has not done enough to challenge the dominant form of philosophy as linear and rationalistic. While feminist philosophy, in just a short time, has been amazingly successful at challenging the content of Western philosophy, it has not done much by way of challenging its form. Nonlinear writing, imbued with passion and emotion, has not found its way into the mainstream of feminist philosophy. When power relations have changed to the extent that feminists no longer have to prove they can “do” philosophy in the dominant, traditional form, radical fundamental change can take place. As it is, established feminist philosophers are still training feminist students to prove that they can “do” philosophy the traditional academic way. There are other ways of “doing” philosophy: storytelling, narratives, dialogues, aphorisms, to name a few. These forms of philosophizing are better suited for conveying emotion, passion, and wonder. They also make philosophy potentially more accessible to non-philosophers and non-academics.

I think feminist philosophers have not yet learned the art of freestyle thinking. I want to tell a story to illustrate this point. I studied calligraphy intensively for months with a very good but very strict teacher. I spent hours on hours drawing carefully measured guidelines for the letters and then making perfectly uniform, beautiful letters. The calligraphy society was impressed by my work, and accepted it into a show. To my surprise, my calligraphy teacher told me after the show that I was too constrained, that I needed to be freer, to let go. This made me feel both anxious and confused. It made me feel anxious because the thought of drawing outside the lines was scary. Staying within the lines was safe—not necessarily easy, but familiar. It confused me because the very teacher who seemed to have demanded that I stay within the lines, was telling me something “else.” To draw outside the lines? To not have lines? To use different kinds of guidelines? I have come to realize that what she was saying was that the real art lies not in mastering how to make beautiful letters within the lines but in using what you learn from drawing within the lines to do something “else.”

This is the lesson feminist philosophers have not yet learned. We are all very busy drawing within the lines of different traditions and schools of thought. The “liberties” we take are within the realm of safety, like taking the serifs of a different character set and putting them on the character set with which we are familiar.
NOTES

1. Barbara Findlen supports this view when she notes the significance of her historical location to her identity as a third wave feminist: "My feminism wasn't shaped by the antiwar movement or civil rights activism; I was not a victim of the problem that had no name. Indeed, by the time I was discovering feminism, naming had become a principal occupation of feminists. Everywhere you looked, feminists were naming things—things like sexual harassment, date rape, displaced homemakers and domestic violence—that used to be called, as Gloria Steinem pointed out, just life" (1995, xi).

2. The fashion world picked up the grrrl attitude in 1991 through Sassy magazine, which flourished with these images until 1994, when its editorial board and its image were revamped.

REFERENCES


