The Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's Third Wave

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This essay focuses on the repeated rhetorical moves through which the third wave autobiographical subject seeks to be real and to speak as part of a collective voice from the next feminist generation. Given that postmodernist, postructuralist, and multiculturalist critiques have shaped the form and the content of third wave expressions of the personal, the study is ultimately concerned with the possibilities and limitations of such theoretical analysis for a third wave of feminist praxis.

Wave (n) 2c. A forward movement of a large body of persons (chiefly invaders or immigrants overrunning a country, or soldiers advancing to an attack), who either recede and return after an interval, or are followed after a time by another body of persons repeating the same movement. (Oxford English Dictionary)

At a time when feminism has lost much of its political edge and is undergoing assaults from all sides, it is important that we learn to say "I" and "we" again, though "I" and "we" are not so simple... feminism has come to seem even more endangered, more cut off from a popular and a political base, more threatened by conservative tendencies from without and by divisions from within. "Better get it on record before it disappears," as Ann Jones quipped, ... a remark which has haunted me. (Gayle Greene, "Looking at History," 1993)

Hypatia vol. 12, no. 3 (Summer 1997) © by Deborah L. Siegel
Having arrived at this point, I should now adopt a more confident, visionary tone and scan the cultural firmament for signs of things to come: portents for feminism in the nineties. . . . I seem instead to be more at ease reviewing (even teaching) the history of a feminist past than imagining its future; waiting, as the decade unfolds, to see what the critical subjects we have created in our students will bring about. The nineties in this sense are theirs and lumber what they make out of it. (Nancy K. Miller, “Decades,” 1993)

Since the early 1980s, there has been much speculation in the United States about young women’s alleged reluctance to don the feminist mantle.1 The phenomenon has been explained variously by media pundits, by conservatives, and, most recently, by self-identified young feminist writers in books that ostensibly propose solutions to the question of feminism’s dubious future: Katie Roiphe’s Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism (1993); Naomi Wolf’s Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It (1993); and Rene Denfeld’s New Victorians: A Young Woman’s Challenge to the Old Feminist Order (1995).2 At the same time that Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld are traveling the country on publicity tours attempting to “reclaim” feminism for the “majority,” young feminist activists, newly radicalized by social injustices ranging from the passage of anti-abortion legislation to the Clarence Thomas hearings and the Rodney King beating, are coming of political age and are beginning to organize. The result is a remarkable resurgence of grassroots student activism, young feminist conferences, and a host of new or newly revitalized social action organizations and networks led largely by young women.3

Also during this period, a cohort of feminist scholars, mentored by the generation of women who founded the nation’s women’s studies programs, are coming of academic age. Positioning themselves as spokespersons for the next feminist generation, Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld adamantly insist that Theory, what they call the refined instrument of academic feminist fascism, exists independently of grassroots feminist movements and causes. In so doing, they echo charges leveled by celebrity feminists such as Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, and most recently (and less famously) Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, who have themselves perhaps cashed in on young women’s frustration with seemingly outdated feminist formulations in their divergent analyses of where and how academic feminism has gone wrong. While renegade conservatives such as Paglia and Sommers—they themselves members of the academy—caricature and critique academic feminism and its advocates from within, the anti-intellectualism of the younger critics is differently motivated yet equally reductive. Substituting a part of feminist theorizing for the whole, Wolf berates academic feminisms, which she lumps together under the monolithic term “club feminism,” and subsequently charges academic feminisms with
irrelevance. Denfeld similarly blames academic “New Victorians” for having “climbed out on a limb of academic theory that is all but inaccessible to the uninitiated” (Denfeld 1995, 5). Meanwhile, Roiphe parodically refers to her undergraduate feminist seminars as The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party. Not surprisingly, their new feminist order is a theory-free feminism returning us to a feminism similar to that which Sommers herself envisions, as common as Mom and apple pie (Sommers 1994, 275).4 Given such pronouncements, indications that the younger generation of feminist writers and activists is rejecting the academy as a viable site for feminist activity, there seems to be no place for theory production in feminism’s third wave.

The question of theory—how we do it and for whom—has been a focal point of debate among feminist academics from the beginning.5 Calling for a broader description of the activity that customarily qualifies as theoretical—that is, the highly inaccessible pontificating of European white men—Barbara Christian argues that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (Christian 1987, 52). What is more, she argues, “Our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (52). In further defense of the multiple sites, forms, and functions of theorizing, Katie King warns against a metonymic view of the production of theory in the academy. Speaking of how the academic machinery often privileges theory produced by certain individuals and leaves others uncredited or unacknowledged, King observes,

An error feminists make over and over is to mistake the part of a particular theoretical reading, especially a published reading, for the whole of the many forms theorizing takes: active thinking, speaking, conversation, action grounded in theory, action producing theory, action suggesting theory, drafts, letters, unpublished manuscripts, stories in writing and not, poem said and written, art events like shows, readings, enactments, zap actions such as ACT UP does: or for that matter, incomplete theorizing, sporadic suggestiveness, generalizations correct and incorrect, inadequate theory, images and actions inciting theoretical interventions and so on. It’s not that all human actions are equivalent to theorizing, but rather that a particular product of many forms of theorizing should not be mistaken for the processes of production itself. (King 1990, 89)

Both Christian and King, then, define theory and theorizing as an activity that extends well beyond the classroom, the seminar paper, the academic journal.

These “theory debates” provide a context for my own selection of texts (popular anthologies, newsletters, memos, List-Servs) and also highlight the
unfavorable view of many feminist critics, themselves representing a diverse range of theoretical identifications, toward the potential dissociation of feminist theory from feminist practice. Indeed, many of them build a regard for the relationship between theory and praxis directly into their criticism. Though Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld voice a genuine (and justified) concern that theory, as a democratic tool, should be widely accessible, by engaging in the ever-popular sport of theory bashing, these popular historians play into an anti-intellectualism that banishes theory as something “they” (and not “we”) do.

Dissenting young feminist voices such as Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld participate in a much-needed intra- and intergenerational conversation at the very moment when the status of feminism is being interrogated inside and outside the academy, from left and right. Yet their claims that the third wave is a theory-free moment—like the assumption that all theorizing takes place in the academy—are epistemologically naive, historically inaccurate, and ultimately misinformed. While young feminist writing is as diverse as the women and men who write it, much of it shares the assertion that regardless of whether or not one calls oneself a feminist, donning some aspect of a feminist consciousness is as natural as wearing cotton: “We are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives; it is natural that many of us are feminists” (Findlen 1995, xii). The rhetoric of naturalization might be a common trope informing some inflections of young feminist consciousness in particular, but an inquiry into the theoretical foundation of a third wave consciousness must nevertheless begin with an analysis of the historical and political contexts in which such utterances are shaped.

To defend and delineate the historically specific theoretical interventions of a third wave of feminist praxis, this essay juxtaposes discussion of some recent articulations of contemporary feminist theory, published in journals or disseminated by university presses, which target an academic audience, and the theorizing generated in two third wave anthologies of personal essays: Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation (1995), edited by Barbara Findlen; and To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995), edited by Rebecca Walker. As a literary critic who finds it possible, in certain instances, to theorize about practices by theorizing through texts, I understand these texts as participating in a larger movement culture that is only beginning to define itself. Historical struggles played out in the realm of young feminist organizing and recorded in the memos, meetings, and projects of such organizers are reflected in autobiographical writing by third wave authors, which, in turn echoes theoretical expressions of “academic” feminism. In performing an analysis that crosses the popular-academic divide, I am actively refusing the narrow parameters of the frequently invoked binarism in which academic work is condemned as an elitist expression of the ivory tower and set in opposition to the “real” political work going on in the “outside” world. Building on Susan Stanford Friedman’s affirmation, “in asserting the
political nature of the construction and dissemination of knowledge, I acknowledge that my academic work is an effect of, and affects, the political organization in society,” I would suggest that these popular third wave collections affect, and are also effects of, the production and dissemination of feminist theory (Friedman 1991, 471).

Because Listen Up and To Be Real are edited by women who identify themselves as “third wave” or “next generation” feminists; who, like many of their contributors, have some background in women’s studies; and who have explicit affinities with organized feminist activism in the 1990s, their texts seem an appropriate starting point for a discussion of third wave theorizing as an activity that encompasses different spheres, sites, and constituencies.6 Katie King warns, “feminists too easily believe ‘we’ already know the ‘history’ or even histories of feminism, even in the U.S. What is taken as history are some privileged and published histories of feminism, which have been all too quickly naturalized” (King 1990, 83). By rooting my analysis in a close reading of these texts, I necessarily limit my scope to the expressions of a select group of published writers. For in spite of claims to speak to concerns and issues of “the next feminist generation,” these voices cannot, of course, speak for an entire generation. Anthologies nevertheless represent a zone of possible convergence or clustering, where voices from different locations articulate their commonalities and differences. In centering my discussion around these two collections, I follow Jane Gallop’s example of reading an anthology as a whole as “a method for getting at ‘symptoms’ which occur across various authors” (Gallop 1992, 7).

The titles of Listen Up and To Be Real suggest the grassroots zeal of these anthologies; in the respective introductions, each editor adopts an informal, intimate tone, inviting readers to gather ‘round—listen up—to a diverse assortment of personal and political tales of “real” life about to unfold. Interestingly, both editors meticulously highlight the diversity of positions, attitudes, and locations through which their contributors identify themselves and from which they speak. Writes Walker, “the group you will read here is an eclectic gathering of folks: a fundraiser for women’s organizations, a lawyer, a videomaker, an actor, a cultural critic, a professor, a musician, a director of special projects for a film company, a student, a writer of children’s books, and yes, among others, two men and a ‘supermodel’ ” (Walker 1995, xxxvi). Echoing Walker, Findlen prefaces her text with the following:

Women in this book call themselves, among other things, articulate, white, middle-class college kid; wild and unruly; single mother; Asian bisexual; punk; politically astute, active woman; middle-class black woman; young mother; slacker; member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation; well-adjusted; student; teacher; writer; an individual; a young lady; a person with
a visible disability; androgynous; lapsed Jew; child of professional feminists; lesbian daughter; activist; zine writer; a Libra; and an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother. (Findlen 1995, xiv)

If the limitless multivocality implicit in such listings makes these anthologies good focal points for a discussion of cultural formations that bear the descriptive label “third wave,” it is perhaps also because that multivocality is an informing trope of the third wave narrative.

The reading that follows focuses on the repeated rhetorical moves through which the third wave autobiographical subject seeks “to be real,” to tell “the truth” about life in the third wave, and to speak as part of a collective voice “from the next feminist generation.” It begins by grounding third wave feminism as a historical phenomenon. Then, I address the various historiographical questions, problems, and ambiguities the concept of third wave feminism raises, even as I attempt to identify some of the components—common tropes, images, motifs, narrative patterns, general issues of concern—that justify discussion of a third wave of feminist praxis.

After building a theoretical argument around the commonalities in popular third wave narratives, the essay attempts to show how theory is being produced through the personal writings collected in Listen Up and To Be Real. Bearing in mind the assertion that the grassroots has always been a space for the production of theory, I provide a matrix for reading these recent grassroots expressions by considering the use of the personal narrative as a form of theorizing. The use of the personal in third wave expressions both resembles and differs from its use in second wave feminism. Even if the third wave constitutes a return to the personal, and that return seemingly enacts a return to consciousness raising, third wave personal expression nevertheless differs from the personalizing of the political effected through consciousness raising. Given that postmodernist, poststructuralist, and multiculturalist critiques have shaped the form and the content of third wave expressions of the personal, I am ultimately interested in the possibilities and limitations of such theoretical analysis for a third wave of feminist praxis.

EXCURSIONS IN FEMINIST OCEANOGRAPHY: CHARTING THE THIRD WAVE

Wave 2a. An undulatory movement, or one of an intermittent series of movements, of something passing over or on a surface or through the air.

Although popular and academic commentators alike have begun to invoke the term “third wave feminism” in reference to expressions and activities ranging from the rapid proliferation of girlzines and the rise of the riot grrrl underground to the establishment of “a movement culture that is disparate,
unlikely, multiple, polymorphous," thus far only cursory attempts have been made to document the historical conditions that constitute and justify the use of the term (Garrison 1996, 3).7 To chart the third wave is to explicate some of the definitional problematics informing the term's genesis.

In the oceanography of feminist movement, the "first wave" usually designates the surge of activism beginning in the 1830s and culminating around the campaign for women's suffrage that ended in 1920, while the "second wave" denotes the resurgence of women's organizing beginning in the late 1960s and ending—or at least suffering major setbacks—first with the defeat of the ERA and then with the advent of the Reagan-Bush era.8 Given this chronology, the "third wave," as I understand the term, is a response to what one might call the cultural dominance of "postfeminism," a word that itself has a different meaning depending on the site of its invocation.

When Rebecca Walker asserts in the pages of Ms. magazine, "I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the third wave," for example, the mobilization of the adjective "third" becomes an act of strategic defiance. Such an insistence on the continuation of feminist movement (I am the third wave) resists narrative scripts that imply that women's movements are no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant. The very invocation of "third wave feminism" signals a rejection of scripts that assume that the gains forged by the second wave have so completely invaded all tiers of social existence that feminists themselves have become obsolete. When used in this context, "third wave" becomes a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists, a sound bite to counter the now infamous refrain "I’m not a feminist, but. . . ." As Findlen makes clear in her introduction, a stance of postfeminist feminist defiance prompted the genesis of Listen Up.

Young feminists are constantly told that we don’t exist. It’s a refrain heard from older feminists as well as in the popular media: “Young women don’t consider themselves feminists.” Actually, a lot of us do. . . . The country hasn’t heard enough from young feminists. We’re here, and we have a lot to say about our ideas and hopes and struggles and our place within feminism. (Findlen 1995, xiv, xvi)

Such a compelling affirmation of presence recalls the oppositional response of women of color to a dominant culture that would render their presence invisible, as exemplified in the title of Amy Ling’s 1987 essay, “I’m Here.” The third wave oppositional stance may be a welcome voice of contention for many second wave feminists, for whom the threat of “postfeminism” in the popular sense is particularly resonant. Many second wave feminists live with the horror of the first wave’s relative disappearance following the passage of the Nine-
teenth Amendment, a phenomenon that repeated itself after World War II, when advances for and by women were rescinded on the veterans' return.

If, when invoked by the popular press, “postfeminism” smugly refers to an era in which feminist movement is no longer necessary, in the context of academic feminist writing, the term “postfeminism” sometimes refers to a series of debates structured around the question of whether feminism, as a term with explanatory power, can survive the differently inflected deconstructive critiques mounted by poststructuralist, postmodernist, or multiculturalist theorists. While the nuances of the critique posited by these theorists fundamentally differ, and while each school in itself encompasses an infinite number of theoretical positions, together they constitute a powerful attack mounted against the representative subject of feminism. When, in the introduction to her collection of young feminist essays, Walker states, “we [third wave activists] find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving,” her assertion of a third wave consciousness is informed by premises that might be broadly understood as inflections of both postmodernist and multiculturalist theorizing about identity and subjectivity (Walker 1995, xxxiii). Such theoretical struggles and commitments simultaneously play out in the realms of textual practice and organizational structure. Interestingly, a number of young feminist organizations including the New York City Young Women’s Network have folded, unable to sustain an organizational identity that privileges the exploration over the definition, the search over the arrival.

One might go so far as to argue that third wave organizations and texts are somewhat shaped by a postmodernist feminist sensibility, for Listen Up and To Be Real are rightly understood as feminist anthologies without the fixity of one feminist agenda in view. In her discussion of feminist consciousness in the 1990s, Ednie Kaeh Garrison suggests that a historical moment called “postmod” contributes to the third wave’s distinction from the first and second waves in that “the simultaneous confidence and uncertainty about what constitutes feminism doesn’t have to be conceptualized as a ‘problem’ ” (Garrison 1996, 3). Instead, the condition of ambiguity is understood as a natural consequence of the proliferation of feminisms. Such a sensibility allows for an anthology like Listen Up to be published, an anthology “which contains a wide diversity of voices talking about differences through the object/subject feminism” (1996, 3).

Feminist theorists of the postmodern, such as Donna Haraway, similarly speak to the political possibilities the postmodern present makes available, suggesting that postmodern conditions require a politics that acknowledges the multiple and contradictory aspects of both individual and collective identities. Walker echoes Haraway when, in an interview entitled “Feminism Only Seems to Be Fading: It’s Changing,” Walker suggests, “the next phase in
feminism's evolution will entail a politics of ambiguity, not identity" (Tillotson 1995). This conceptualization of the third wave as a post-identity movement committed to political action is echoed in the title essay of To Be Real. Writes Danzy Senna,

My yearning to be real has led me in circles, to red herrings called identity, those visible signifiers of liberation that can be bought and sold as easily as any other object. Breaking free of identity politics has not resulted in political apathy, but rather it has given me an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited—and the very real power relations we must transform. (Walker 1995, 20)

Just as the yearning to be a feminist in an era (however prematurely) labeled postfeminist implies contradiction, so the simultaneous commitment to a “politics of ambiguity” and political action suggests that the third wave “real” is a moment full of contradiction and possibility. Both senses of the term “postfeminism,” popular and academic, inform the understanding of third wave feminism as a political stance and a critical practice formulated in response to the sociohistorical and material conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

If “third wave feminism” refers to a stance or a practice, however, a third wave feminist is not so easily defined. Activist and academic venues alike are currently taking up the question of constituency. Liz Jackson, a high school-age intern at National NOW who has been instrumental in developing a Young Feminism brochure, grapples with the qualification of age as the primary determinant in an April 1996 memo to members of the NOW Young Feminist Conference Implementation Committee:

What exactly defines a young feminist? Is it the age or the attitude? Is the distinction generational? Can we identify young feminists by the issues with which they are grappling? NOW’s position is that a young feminist is self-defined. But we may have to develop some of our own distinctions as we need to define a target audience. (Jackson 1996)10

Following a series of negotiations with committee members, a draft of the brochure reads as follows:

Young feminist issues are as diverse and varied as the women who confront them. While it is difficult to outline a universal list of what concerns young feminists, it is clear that there is an urgent need for young activism and awareness around the country. Young women are being refused access to abortion and birth control information, they are being raped and assaulted,
harassed for their sexuality, punished for their economic status, and denied an equal education. Young women must unite to fight for their reproductive freedom and against parental consent laws. They must demand nationwide to be given equal education opportunities and adequate birth control information. Young women must empower themselves to stop the violence against their bodies and their self-esteem. Young welfare recipients are at risk of losing all governmental support and [being] left to fend for themselves in a society that already discriminates against them. (Jackson 1996)

While the project of defining young feminist activism is both an exciting, historic challenge and a political necessity—a new frontier for feminist movement—the issues listed above are not limited to young women; nor, of course, can any such list be representative of the complexity of issues confronting any group called “women.” An additional complexity arises from the reality that young women grow up. Because “young women” is an always-shifting constituency, it becomes somewhat problematic to define the third wave by age.

At the same time that young feminist activists are struggling to define their constituency for practical purposes, participants of WMST-L, an interdisciplinary Internet bulletin board serving feminist scholars nationwide, are complicating the concept of an age-defined generational divide. List participants have recently coined the terms “thirty-somethin’ feminism” and “in-between feminists” to unsettle the binarism of young-old as it operates in the academy. Writes one list participant in response to a debate over the use of the category “new generation feminists,”

this is not necessarily a problem of biological age, as some women over 40 have also indicated a feeling of [being] caught in between the bifurcation of feminism into the “new” and “old” generations. Indeed, it seems that the “generation” of a feminist has far more to do with coming of age as a *feminist*, rather than coming of age as a woman (or man, as the case may be). (Kearney 1996)

Sociological studies augmenting Kearney’s observation suggest that age may be less important in shaping political outlook than the historical moment at which one enters a movement (Schnieder 1988). Certainly, age is less important in determining the critical apparatus to which a scholar is exposed than the historical moment at which one enters the academy. If a cohort is defined as a group “whose experiences are shaped through its members’ common exposure to a particular society in the context of a unique set of historical circumstances,” and if “postfeminism” in both its popular and academic con-
texts marks a unique set of historical circumstances, then the term “third wave feminist” applies to a political generation (or an academic cohort) defined not by a common set of beliefs but by common exposure to the pressure of some of the same (material, theoretical) problems (Schneider 1988, 7). Walker approaches such a formulation of the third wave when she suggests that the contributors to To Be Real “change the face of feminism as each new generation will, bringing a different set of experiences to draw from, an entirely different set of reference points, and a whole new set of questions” (Walker 1995, xxxiv). Substituting “cohort” or “political generation” for “new generation” here would allow for the various paths to becoming a third wave feminist.

If age is not the primary determinant, then “third wave feminism” becomes more of a stance than a constituency, a practice rather than a policy. Regardless of how, when, and under what circumstances one becomes a part of the current wave of feminist activism and scholarship, what unites practitioners in a third wave of praxis is a pledge to expand on the groundwork laid during waves one and two; a commitment to continue the feminist legacy of assessing foundational concepts, particularly the category “women”; and the courage to embrace the challenge of moving feminism, as a political movement without the fixity of a single feminist agenda in view, into the next millennium.

Social movements change historically and culturally, as do forms of dominance. Walker and Findlen self-consciously position their texts as third wave formations by foregrounding the ways in which the historical conditions that shape the lives of their contributors are materially different. Findlen describes this difference in her introduction, identifying her thirtysomething self as a member of a “next generation” feminist “we.”

We have been shaped by the unique events and circumstances of our time: AIDS, the erosion of reproductive rights, the materialism and cynicism of the Reagan and Bush years, the backlash against women, the erosion of civil rights, the skyrocketing divorce rate, the movement toward multiculturalism and greater global awareness, the emergence of the lesbian and gay rights movement, a greater overall awareness of sexuality—and the feminist movement itself. (Findlen 1995, xiii)

Given that greater awareness of “the feminist movement itself” is a hallmark of the third wave, that awareness ultimately shapes the third wave personal narrative.
READING BETWEEN THE WAVES (PART 1):
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NEGOTIATIONS


If it is supposedly a contradiction to be a third wave feminist in 1997, then that contradiction will manifest itself in third wave self-expression. The contradictions inherent in speaking "as a" third wave feminist drive many of the narratives in Listen Up and To Be Real. To read these autobiographical essays as rhetorical projects embedded in concrete material situations is to explore how a third wave subject emerges out of a series of historically specific contradictions. Because these personal narratives are simultaneously the enunciations of individual autobiographical subjects and the inscriptions of members of a next generation feminist "we," they express a range of implications—practical, political, theoretical, and rhetorical—of a third wave "I" and "we."

The most explicit contradiction that drives many third wave narratives echoes a dilemma that characterizes contemporary feminist theorizing inside and outside the academy, a dilemma that is perhaps more theoretical than historiographic in nature. As Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller explain in their conclusion to Conflicts in Feminism,

feminists entering the 1990s require a new understanding of the meaning both of feminism and of feminist theory. Such an understanding needs to encompass the manifest contradictions between our recognition of "the disintegration of the representative subject of feminism," and the continuing need for a coherent voice with which to articulate political demands on behalf of the group called "women." (Hirsch and Keller 1990, 379)

Engagement with various challenges to the "representative subject of feminism" is indeed a foundational feature of the third wave narrative. Many third wave narratives are pulled between a desire to deconstruct an essentialized feminist "we" (often assumed to be a set whose members are white, heterosexual, and middle-class) and the political need to confirm common bonds. That the third wave draws heavily on the legacy of critique, which was made explicit through the feminism, or womanism, of women of color from the early 1970s on, is evident in statements such as the following:

These days, whenever someone says the word "women" to me, my mind goes blank. What "women?" What is this "women" thing you're talking about? Does that mean me? Does that
mean my mother, my roommates, the white woman next door, the checkout clerk at the supermarket, my aunts in Korea, half of the world’s population? I ask people to specify and specify, until I can figure out exactly what they’re talking about, and I try to remember to apply the same standards to myself, to deny myself the slightest possibility of romanticization. Sisterhood may be global, but who is in that sisterhood? None of us can afford to assume anything about anybody else. This thing called “feminism” takes a great deal of hard work, and I think this is one of the primary hallmarks of young feminists’ activism today: We realize that coming together and working together are by no means natural or easy. (Lee 1995, 211)

*Listen Up* contributor JeeYeun Lee’s recognition that collective action in the 1990s requires critical and practical “work” is echoed in the following articulation of third wave practice, published in the April 1996 issue of *See It? Tell It. Change It*, the official newsletter of the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation, by third wavers Julie Carlson, Kathryn Starace, and Alexandra Villano.

Third wave practice seeks to create what Angela Davis calls “unpredicted coalitions.” We should have several smaller organizations, each with its own agenda and approach, rather than replace each with bigger or better ones. We need to use each other as resources, pulling together our strengths and abilities in order to be effective and efficient in reaching our goals. Simultaneously, we need to strive to move beyond the boundaries that exist between us. We must challenge our own fears of difference, whatever the shape, size, color or name.

As this description shows, third wave practice is inextricably linked to theoretical activity. For in this formulation, third wave praxis fundamentally depends on the “work” of theory that strives to re-imagine “the boundaries that exist between us” as a vital space of feminist encounter (see Anzaldúa 1987). True to this call for a third wave organizational structure inspired by an embrace of the borderland, the voices in *Listen Up* and *To Be Real* coalesce in the space between differences. Each anthology functions as a somewhat “unpredicted coalition.” While efficiently and effectively united in the “goal” of postfeminist feminist defiance, the editors’ emphasis on limitless multivocality troubles the conventional understanding of an anthology as an “organized chorus” (Gallop 1992, 8).

As students of the 1990s, emerging feminists are well aware that attempts to assert the primacy of a feminist consciousness that can be codified and described is a necessarily exclusionary act. Yet while third wave narratives seek
to disturb the assumption of an all-inclusive feminist "we," many of them are compelled by nostalgia for an ideal of collectivity, the dream of a common language, which was foundational to certain strains of second wave feminist thought. Often, the feminist desire that courses through the narratives collected in *Listen Up* and *To Be Real* oscillates between a longing for a romanticized notion of inclusion and an acknowledgment of the limitations inherent in any act of representation. Such an oscillation is made explicit in the very title of *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*. The emphasis on the plurality of perspectives to which the reader is compelled to listen is held in tension with the promise that such voices will cohere in generational unity.

If the title appeals to a myth of generational unity, however, the editor immediately foils such expectations by insisting in the introduction that "there's no singular 'young feminist' take on the world" (Findlen 1995, xv). This disclaimer, in turn, is held in tension with successive invocations of the pronoun "we." Although she is highly conscious of the limitations inherent in the assumption of a "natural or easy" feminist collectivity, Findlen deploys a "next generation" feminist "we" in outer-directed proclamations of postfeminist feminist defiance, or in descriptions of the historical conditions that shape contributors' lives.

When invoked as a postfeminist feminist stance of defiance, the third wave "we" becomes a public performance, an outward show of solidarity. Instead of an affirmation of unity across difference, the third wave "we" is frequently mobilized as an expression of strategic essentialism. Just as often, however, this highly provisional, highly self-conscious third wave "we" is inflected with a longing for an uncomplicated notion of identification associated with a mythical feminist past.

If third wave narratives are set in motion by the contradictions that ensue from engagement with challenges to the monolithic subject of feminism, then challenges to the unified or coherent subject, the authoritative "I," surface in third wave personal narratives as well. In many instances, the autobiographical I's that comprise the third wave "we" are simultaneously coherent and unstable formations. In Walker's introduction in particular, the representative "I" is alternately the confident assertion of a coherent and knowing feminist self and the incoherent mark of a fragmented feminist subject always in process. Both editors begin their introductory essays with a personal anecdote in which they retrace the development of their feminist self through the memory of a childhood experience. Writes Walker, "My existence was an ongoing state of saying no to many elements of the universe, and picking and choosing to allow only what I thought should belong" (Walker 1995, xxx). In contrast to this past coherent, knowable self stands the ever-shifting "we" of the feminist present: "The ever-shifting but ever-present ideals of feminism can't help but
leave young women and men struggling with the reality of who we are” (1995, xxxi). If the third wave is marked by a politics of ambiguity, if third wave organizational structure is predicated on “unpredicted coalition,” so, too, the third wave subject is always in process: “seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving” (1995, xxxiii).

The foregoing discussion deliberately draws from two different taxonomies, for symbolic purposes grossly oversimplified as “multiculturalist” (to signify critiques of the representative subject on the grounds of material exclusions) and “postmodernist” (to signify the destabilization of a humanist conception of self). This is done to emphasize that third wave discourse is simultaneously inflected by two very different modes of deconstructive feminist theorizing. Carlson, Starace, and Villano maintain that “Third wave theory synthesizes new and old theories, while continuously creating maps of our own” (1996). Although the cultivation of theoretical hybridity may be symptomatic of third wave praxis, it would be historically inaccurate, of course, to suggest that such negotiations are characteristic of the third wave alone. Indeed, many of the negotiations, struggles, and driving contradictions described so far have been characteristic of feminist theorizing—and activism—from the start.

**READING BETWEEN THE WAVES (PART 2): HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DILEMMAS**

If waves travel in a circular pattern through space, the chronological wave-ing of feminist movement also implies a forward motion in time. Belief in a category called “third wave” depends, in part, on a temporal narrative of progress. Yet as soon as one sets out to identify some of the constituent components of “third wave feminism,” it becomes obvious that many third wave themes and issues are fundamentally enmeshed in praxis established by earlier waves. Attempting to identify, name, and perhaps nudge along a political stance or critical practice that bears the label “third wave feminism,” therefore, inevitably raises a number of historiographic dilemmas.

Jeannine DeLombard, a contributor to *To Be Real*, eloquently reminds us that waves by definition curve alternately in opposite directions. If we think of the third wave as curving alternately in the directions of the past and the future, if we think of the third wave as overlapping both temporally and spatially with the waves that preceded it, then it becomes clear that the difference of the “third wave” may have been present in some moments and some places during earlier periods as well. While any assertion of a “third” wave presumes an existence distinct from moments designated “first” and
"second," as periods in feminism, waves overlap. Just as the same water reforms itself into ever new waves, so the second wave circulates in the third, reproducing itself through a cyclical movement.

Indeed, inasmuch as conflicts surrounding the representative subject of feminism impel third wave narratives, the logic and language of second wave feminism shape the very vocabulary through which many third wave narrators describe a self and a life. For many third wavers who come to feminism through the academy, women's studies classrooms and textual encounters have replaced the consciousness-raising group of the late 1960s and early 1970s as the site of feminist awakenings. Considering that a good number of the epiphanies described in Listen Up occur in the context of the college classroom (which itself serves as tribute to the institutional success of the feminist movement), those epiphanies qualify as feminist encounters of a "third" kind. At the same time, their idealized and almost spiritual rhetoric of awakening and conversion recalls the spirited rhetoric of second wave narratives of coming to consciousness. Many autobiographical narratives from the 1970s invoke "the click" as trope for sudden feminist epiphany (O'Reilly 1972). The extent to which the rhetoric of third wave awakening echoes that of second wave epiphany is evident in the following excerpts from Listen Up.

When I read [Adrienne] Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality," a space opened up for me to speak as a lesbian/bisexual woman. Suddenly there were other lesbian/bisexual feminists around, women who welcomed me, supported me, maybe even loved me. (Gilbert 1995, 112)

My first women's studies class at Georgetown further kindled my identity as a feminist. . . . Margaret introduced me to the writings of feminists of color, such as Cheryl Clarke, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith. The thoughts and words of black lesbian feminists such as Lorde and the Smith sisters resonated deeply within me. (Bowleg 1995, 48)

[My women's studies class] raised my consciousness about issues of oppression, power and resistance in general. I learned a language with which I could start to explain my experiences and link them to larger societal structures of oppression and complicity. It also gave me ways that I could resist and actively fight back. (Lee 1995, 207)

Following the example of their second wave predecessors, third wave autobiographers liken the process of awakening to feminist theory to establishing "a space" of enlightening encounter, the acquisition of "a language" in which
to explain their daily experience. Yet unlike some of their second wave foremothers, for whom learning (inventing) the language was a revolutionary and often contested process, third wavers, like the children of immigrants, achieve fluency at an earlier age, under less strenuous circumstances, and with greater ease, as only members of the “next generation” can. These excerpts from Listen Up show how the rhetoric of women’s studies drives the discourse of third wave autobiography.

My friends advised me. “She’s objectifying herself. If she sets herself up as a sexualized Other, she will never centralize herself, she’ll never be truly Subject,” they said. “Tell her to throw away her tight jeans!” (Shah 1995, 115)

I succeeded with this reinterpreted analysis of go-go dancing for a while and placed my concerns about being eroticized on a back shelf. (Hakim-Dyce 1995, 233)

Our friendship jelled quickly. We were middle-class black women in an environment where there were few, and we shared a passion for music, books, and psychology. We soon assumed our position on the lesbian continuum. . . Life on the continuum was powerful, giddily overwhelming and liberating. (Bowell 1995, 47)

As an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother, I suffer from an acute case of multiplicity. (Curry-Johnson 1995, 222)

In passages such as these, second wave theory enables a third wave epistemology. The narrators fluently and casually draw on theoretical formulations to explain and make sense of their everyday existence.

Another seemingly important distinction between second and third wave narratives of awakening is their method of language acquisition. Whereas most second wavers came to theory through grassroots activism, in many third wave narratives the introduction to this discourse, or the discovery of this space, occurs in an institutional space. Some may fear that “women’s studies”—that is, the institutionalization of feminism—limits the countercultural potential of feminism as a movement for social change and a radical philosophy. Annette Kolodny, for instance, speculates that in contrast to the generation of women who came to feminist literary criticism out of the 1960s New Left and the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s, “feminism [may become] merely another entree into sophisticated critical theoretical circles” for many graduate students of the 1980s and 1990s who have not been involved in social activism outside the academy (Kolodny 1988, 461). While in many instances, a student’s engage-
ment with feminism may indeed be limited to textual encounters and confined to institutional spaces, *Listen Up* and *To Be Real* suggest that this is not universally the case. Indeed, as is evident in the connections between theory and practice drawn by the contributors (many of whom are or were campus activists, involved in protests both inside and outside their colleges) the feminism of a new generation of activists is informed largely by the theory transmitted in women’s studies classrooms.¹⁶

Through direct references to their theoretically informed activism, these third wave writers emphasize that grassroots activism and women’s studies courses are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they often feed off each other, as students serve as volunteers in local feminist organizations. For third wavers who get their feminism in the classroom and on the street, from teachers, parents, siblings, and the media; for campus activists who organize in the wake of such national events as the Clarence Thomas hearings and the ensuing Year of the Woman; and for those who come to consciousness in a world that already holds many images of feminism, feminism has once again become as much a culture as a cause.

Second and third wave praxis clearly overlaps in significant and exciting ways. In the interest of affirming the difference of the third wave, however, the authors of third wave autobiography often assume a metonymic view of the second wave, in which a part of second wave activity is substituted for the whole. While the mobilization of a third wave of feminism is a political necessity, the rhetorical insistence on chronological categorization presumes that each wave is a monolithic formation, when this is emphatically not the case. Gloria Steinem, who is herself popularly identified as “the face” of second wave feminism, sounds a note of contention in the foreword to *To Be Real*. Responding to the charge raised by some of the contributors that “a depolarized, full-circle world view, one that sees and instead of either/or, linking where there has been ranking, has not always been a feminist specialty,” Steinem voices her concern that third wave daughters hold some serious misconceptions about the face that is to be, according to the title, changed (Steinem 1995, xxiii). “Imagine how frustrating it is to be held responsible for some of the very divisions you’ve been fighting against,” she implores, “and you’ll know how feminists of the 1980s and earlier may feel as they read some of these pages” (xxiii). When third wave writers construct the second wave as a straw (or bad) mother, in the interest of asserting their difference (or independence), second wave women are bound to experience the third wave’s irreverence as insult and to understand their challenge as wrongful condemnation. Positioning herself rhetorically as a movement mother, Steinem speaks to the experience of being on the (m)other side of the mother-daughter equation: “After all, it will take a while before feminists succeed enough so that feminism is not perceived as a gigantic mother who is held responsible for almost every-
thing, while the patriarchy receives terminal gratitude for the small favors it bestows” (xix).

If Steinem “speaks as” a movement mother, To Be Real is rhetorically a daughterly text. Bookended by historical perspectives—a foreword by Steinem and an afterword by Angela Davis, both of whom Rebecca Walker met as a child—To Be Real is truly the labor of a movement daughter. Whereas Steinem is literally godmother to Rebecca (daughter of Alice), the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship figuratively play out through many third wave narratives. Indeed, most of the writers in To Be Real speak as daughters, as do many in Listen Up, struggling to differentiate themselves from the feminism of their mothers and their mothers’ world. Walker constructs a psychoanalytic narrative to account for her dangerous attempt to break free of a powerful pre-Oedipal symbiosis.

Linked with my desire to be a good feminist was, of course, not just a desire to change my behavior to change the world, but a deep desire to be accepted, claimed, and loved by a feminist community that included my mother, godmother, aunts, and close friends. For all intents and purposes their beliefs were my own, and we mirrored each other in the most affirming of ways. As is common in familial relationships, I feared that our love was dependent upon that mirroring. Once I offered a face different from the one they expected, I thought the loyalty, the bond of our shared outlook and understanding would be damaged forever. (Walker 1995, xxx)

Here and throughout the introduction, Walker refers to the pain involved in allowing herself to create this anthology. Describing her book as her difficult progeny, she tells the reader, “What you have in your hands now is the book that I struggled for two years to even allow myself to bring into being” (1995, xl). While the struggle referred to is the creation of the book, the struggle functions as a figure for the difficult birth of Walker’s third wave self. The dynamic is particularly heightened in Walker’s text, yet ambivalence toward the issue of self-authorization is symptomatic of many third wave personal narratives.

Consequently, the third wave narrative is frequently tempered by the trope of obligatory gratitude, mixed with the assertion of the right to speak. Writes Lee in Listen Up, “Now mind you, I’m still grateful for this women’s studies class. . . . But . . . ” (207). Yet while movement daughters may be eager to express gratitude in order to avoid incurring the disaffection of the women who fought for the very notion of feminism and women’s studies, they are nonetheless quite determined to refashion feminism in their own image; for what else is the third wave about if not making waves? Writes Listen Up contributor Inga Muscio, “I sincerely thank the individuals who have fought so hard for
themselves and their daughters. I thank the people who bent over backwards so that I can have the luxury of experiencing the beliefs I now hold. Evolutionarily speaking, however, it is quite natural for this fight to progress into a new arena" (166). As Muscio suggests, third wave issues are both extensions of second wave issues and "new" issues in their own right. From the view of the ocean, waves are part of the same body of water. Yet from the view of the shore, each new wave makes an impression, forever changing the topography of the land.

Sociological research on generations has been based on a model of conflict, rivalry, and rejection. In an interview, Walker has responded to the charge that by insisting on calling herself a third wave activist, she is acting out against her mother, a central figure in second wave feminism.

It's so easy for people to want to make it sexy and juicy by turning it into this kind of Greek tragedy of daughter against mother and matricide and all that. And that's not really what it is at all. It's about trying to strengthen the relationships between mothers and daughters by allowing the difference and respecting the differences and really working through the difference. (quoted in Danquah 1995)

Findlen, too, downplays the mother-daughter dynamic in the introduction to Listen Up.

The spirited voices in this collection are not "daughters" rebelling against the old-style politics of their "mothers." In fact, many of the writers in this anthology cite the writings and actions of older feminists as an integral part of their own development and beliefs. It is clear that the kinds of experiences that lead young women to feminism are often similar to those that have always led women into feminism, even though the personal circumstances and social context may differ. (Findlen 1995, xv)

As Audre Lorde commented in 1984, the "generation gap" becomes yet another tool of repression; for if one generation views another generation as "contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community" (117). If intergenerational dialogue among feminists is to move forward, it must move beyond narrative scripts in which the second wave necessarily becomes the bad mother and the third wave the bad child. Such scripts ultimately result in paralysis: "I confess that there are moments in these pages," writes Steinem in the foreword to To Be Real, "when I—and perhaps other readers over thirty-five—feel like a sitting dog being told to sit" (Walker 1995, xxii).
Naming the “third” wave emphasizes the imperative for the second wave to pass the torch and let the “next” generation carry it wherever historical conditions may lead. The metaphor most commonly employed to describe intergenerational relations among feminists, that of familial generations, is so fraught with intense emotion that perhaps we need a new way to conceive the difference between cohorts of feminists. Writes Christina Crosby, “The question remains of how to deal with difference and how to work for difference—how to think difference as a problem for theory and not a solution” (1993, 139). Following Crosby’s invocation of theory and solution, perhaps we might better understand the (r)evolution that is feminism through the analogy of science. Instead of seeing the work of the pioneering investigators as a failed experiment, however, the third wave needs to experience itself as fundamentally part of the same project. The third wave is a continuation of the experiment; it builds on foundations of the past even as it races toward the future. Heinz Kohut, a founder of the self-psychology movement in the United States (a relatively “young” movement that challenges some of the foundational premises of classical psychoanalysis) likens the psychoanalytic theoretician-practitioner to a playful scientist.

The true scientist—the playful scientist as I put it before—is able to tolerate the shortcomings of his [sic] achievements—the tentativeness of his formulations, the incompleteness of his concepts. Indeed, he treasures them as the spur for further joyful exertions. I believe that the deepest meaning of science is revealed when it is seen as an aspect of transient yet continuing life. The sense of continuity despite change—even despite deeply significant change—supports the scientist in his ever-repeated return from theory to observation. (Kohut 1977, 312)

We would do well to apply this spirit of true inquiry to our investigation of the feminist present; for just as the third wave cannot afford to deny its past if it is to lead us all into the future, so the second must come to see the efforts of the third—however incomplete—as the joyful exertion born of its labors.
THE LEGACY OF THE PERSONAL: THEORIZING (IN) THE THIRD WAVE

To Be Real, then, is not a book of feminist theory. It is not a dry, academic tome, or a political manifesto. It is a very personal book filled with anecdotes about individuals’ own struggles with the contradictions and complexities of their own beliefs, their perceptions of feminist dogma and their daily encounters with a society that more easily categorizes people than it treats them as individuals. (Phil Haslanger, review of To Be Real, 1996)

The inchoate belief that feeling bad is the equivalent of being oppressed may be especially appealing to the young, whose solipsism can be excused as developmental. But social and political commentary requires detachment from the self as well as engagement in its dramas. . . . Almost all the young contributors to Listen Up focus on themselves with the unchecked passion of amateur memoirists who believe that their lives are intrinsically interesting to strangers. . . . They write about feminism by writing about growing up. (Wendy Kaminer, “Feminism’s Third Wave,” 1995)

Contrary to these popular conceptions, I would argue that Listen Up and To Be Real, while intensely personal books, are by no means “merely personal.” Following Kathleen Hanna (lead singer of the riot grrrl band Bikini Kill) in a promotional blurb on the book’s back cover, I would have to agree that Listen Up is “A valuable resource for anyone who knows that feminism is more than just a ‘subject’ or a ‘line of study.’ The writers have managed to document how different feminist ideas and practices actually function in their lives.” The charge that To Be Real, according to Haslanger, is not “feminist theory” on the grounds that it is a “very personal book filled with anecdotes” is somewhat of a contradiction in terms, as well as historically misinformed. As Hanna’s commendation suggests, there is a sense in which the personal has always been the material of feminist theory.

Writes Nancy K. Miller, “If one of the original premises of seventies feminism (emerging out of sixties slogans) was that ‘the personal is political,’ eighties feminism has made it possible to see that the personal is also the theoretical: the personal is part of theory’s material” (1991, 21). As the autobiographical mode in theory has become increasingly prominent, the question of whether theory can be personalized and the personal adequately theorized has become, of course, a source of much debate in academic feminist circles. Whereas Kaminer dismisses the “stories” told in Listen Up as the solipsistic rantings of the developmentally immature, other critics warn that the excessive personalizing of feminist discourse can potentially obscure
instead of unveil systemic problems and power structures. Some argue that the proliferation of the personal narrative in feminist theory displaces women with a few writerly I’s.¹⁹ In the autobiographical narratives in Listen Up and To Be Real, the personal is not inherently theoretical, nor does it claim to be. Nevertheless, most of the writers ground their essays in the premise that the personal, as Miller insists, is part of theory’s material. Writes Walker,

I prefer personal testimonies. . . . I believe that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory, and that by using the contradictions in our lives as what Zen practitioners have called the “razor’s edge,” we lay the groundwork for feminist theory that neither vilifies or deifies, but that accepts and respects difference. (1995, xxxvii)

If the personal is not inherently theoretical, however, neither are the stories mere tales of growing up, as Kaminer suggests. Kaminer’s assumption that “political commentary requires detachment from the self as well as engagement in its dramas” signals, in effect, a return to the binary opposition of the personal and the political, an opposition that the second wave emphatically opposed. In defense of the multiple forms of theorizing, Gayle Greene argues that “personal criticism, rather than a practice pitted against theory and reinforcing the usual binarisms (personal against public, female against male, concrete against abstract), may be imbricated in theory in a way which broadens the notion of theory; and that, far from turning in on itself in a response which is trivial, self-indulgent, ‘merely personal,’ such writing is ‘engaged’ ” (1993, 20). Instead of the trivial musings of “amateur memoirists,” as Kaminer snidely suggests, the personal criticism practiced in Listen Up and To Be Real is more often the engaged and engaging expression of the third wave as it confronts the personal, political, and theoretical predicament of being a feminist in the 1990s.

Gloria Steinem likens Listen Up to “a consciousness-raising group between covers.” As Steinem suggests retrospectively in her own recent work, the primary function of the CR group was to provide a space in which the isolated “I” could, by means of identification, collapse into a collective, rescuing “we.”

These [early] radical feminist groups assumed that women’s experience should be the root of theory. Whether at speak-outs or consciousness-raising groups, “talking circles” or public hearings, the essential idea was: Tell your personal truth, listen to other women’s stories, see what themes are shared, and discover that the personal is political—you are not alone. (1994, 270)

If the third wave constitutes a return to the personal and the return to the personal enacts a return to CR, the result is CR with a difference. It is true that these third wave anthologies forge a temporary and contingent textual com-
munity, for the individual stories converge in a moment of unpredicted textual coalition. Yet third wave personal expression differs from the personalizing of the political effected through CR because third wave texts are not necessarily intended to be that shared space designed to facilitate an unqualified identification between the reading and writing subject. Because the third wave is about how to practice feminism differently, to broaden and deepen the analysis of gender in relation to a multiplicity of issues that affect women's lives, third wave theory places differences among women at the center of the project. While such a focus bears the risk of obscuring commonalities, solidarity inheres in the reality of commitment to being the third wave.

CONCLUSION

Wave. 4c. A seismic disturbance of a portion of the crust or surface of the earth, traveling continuously for a certain distance.

While it has become customary for popular feminist writers to condemn the work of academic feminists and, likewise, for academic feminists to refuse to take seriously the work of popular feminist writers, those of us currently writing and coming of age as feminists inside and outside the academy can no longer afford to remain on different sides of the fence. As Linda Kauffman reminds us, “Theory should, after all, lead to reconceptualizations of power that go beyond traditional definitions of politics. This is one of the many areas in which feminism's contributions have been vital. It exposes the falsity of the dichotomy between theory and practice by consistently reminding us that the point of theorizing is to transform human behavior” (1989, 3). Indeed, one of the most vital legacies feminism has to offer is its insistence on joining theoretical analysis with political practice. In Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics, Michael Berubé challenges scholars on the academic left to write publicly accessible theory. As the “political correctness” debates have made clear, when academics do not popularize academic work, others are more than willing to popularize it for us. “That kind of popularization takes place on terms we can neither influence nor anticipate,” warns Berubé, “and now that we know just how bad criticism's 'popularization' might look in hands not our own, we have all the more reason to get busy” (1994, 163).

Third wave feminists are getting busy. Excerpted in widely circulating magazines, including Ms., Cosmopolitan, Mademoiselle, and Girlfriends, the essays in Listen Up and To Be Real have become grassroots venues in which theory is being generated and disseminated. As I hope to have demonstrated, the personal narratives collected in these anthologies exist in a state of dialogue with contemporary academic feminist work. Contrary to the variously inflected caricatures of academic feminism posited by Roiphe, Wolf, Denfeld, Paglia, Sommers, and Patai and Koertge, academic feminism and grassroots expression are once again informing each other in ways that are
exciting, energetic, and vital. Unlike the women showcased in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life* (1994) (another popular attack on feminism, using the personal as the place to do it), the contributors to Walker’s and Findlen’s anthologies insist that feminism and its theories remain but one of the many narratives informing their lives and their activism.

Given such points of explicit overlap, I envision the third wave as a moment that asks us as scholars to re-imagine the disparate spaces constructed as “inside” and “outside” the academy instead as mutually informing and intersecting spheres of theory and practice. Understanding the activities going on in these different arenas of theory production as inextricably linked might encourage emerging academic feminists to rethink the relationship between the feminist scholar and the public, and young or emerging feminists operating outside the academy to rethink the relationship between activism and academic theory. For the activity of the third wave, I maintain, is quite possibly beginning to resemble that of an earlier period, in which links between feminism, the academy, and grassroots activism were visible and viable. If a wave is defined as a large body of persons—chiefly invaders or immigrants overrunning a country, or soldiers advancing to an attack—who recede and return after an interval, and if the 1980s marked the recession, perhaps the 1990s mark the return.

NOTES


2. While multiple and varied rationales remain for rejecting the “f-word,” the arguments put forth by Roiphe, Wolf, and Denfeld—that the primary reason young women flee from the term today is because “we feminists” has come to mean “we victims”—have been hailed in the mainstream U.S. press as the sentiments of an entire generation. For a more detailed analysis of the popular reception of these works, see Siegel, forthcoming.

3. Among these networks are African American Women in Defense of Ourselves; Bay Area Teenage Feminist Coalition; Campus Organizing Project; Feminists United to Represent Youth (FURY); Grrrl Club; National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL); Students Organizing Students; Third Wave Direct Action Corporation; Women’s Action Coalition (WAC); Women’s Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM); Women’s Information Network (WIN); Women Express, Inc.; Youth Education Life Line (YELL); Young Women’s Action Network; Young Women’s Project; and Young Women’s Voices. Newly published magazines and journals by and about young women and their activism include *Hear Us Sisters Emerging* (HUES) and GAYA: *A Journal By and About Young Women*. NOW held its first national Young Feminist Conference in February 1991. Other recent young feminist conferences have included

4. My thanks to Dale Bauer for making this connection.

5. Early feminist journals and magazines in the 1970s were constantly debating the relationship between theory and practice. The debate about the uses of theory therefore well precedes Barbara Christian's more recent intervention, "The Race for Theory" (1987), which is specifically directed at advocates of poststructuralist theory. See also Homans 1994, Davies 1994, hooks 1994.

6. Findlen is currently the executive editor of Ms. magazine; Walker, a founder of the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation and a contributing editor at Ms., was recently named by Time magazine as one of the nation's top fifty leaders.

7. For discussion, see Walker 1992; Kaminer 1995; Heywood and Drake, forthcoming; Albrecht et al., forthcoming; Garrison 1996; Sandoval 1991.

8. For historically grounded analyses of feminist generations, see Cott 1987; Whittier 1995.

9. For a more detailed discussion of the term as it circulates in academic feminist writing, see Modleski 1991; Mann 1994.

10. The NOW Young Feminist Conference Implementation Committee (CIC) is made up of twelve young women from different NOW regions who collectively offer input on NOW conferences, rallies, and projects. In 1993, the NOW membership passed a resolution "to create and distribute brochures on young feminist issues and organizing, [and] create a Young Feminists Resource Kit, which would include information on convening both chapters and action teams/task forces." The Young Feminist CIC became active following the Young Feminists Summit, a NOW-sponsored conference in April 1994 held in Washington, D.C. The CIC is beginning to define projects of its own, beginning with the development of this brochure.

11. For an earlier articulation of young feminist issues, see Nadia Moritz, The Young Woman's Handbook, published under the auspices of the Institute for Women's Policy Research in 1991. While some young women are struggling to name issues as age-specific, others draw on class and health issues as the primary markers. Writes a contributor to the Summer 1994 issue of GAYA: A Journal By and About Young Women, "The daily feminist agenda for young women often differs from that of older, more settled women. At 26 I am more concerned with AIDS than breast cancer, or whether I'll ever be able to afford healthcare. Right now I am more concerned about finding a job that pays above minimum wage, than equal pay for middle management. This is not to say that I am not concerned about breast cancer or economic equity, but these are not the top priorities for me or for a vast majority of the women I have talked to in recent months" (3).

12. Perhaps it is this confusion that commentators in the mainstream press respond to when they characterize third wave feminism as unorganized and unfocused. Writes Joannie Schrof in an article published in U.S. News & World Report, "The third-wave agenda is ambitious—and unfocused, according to some critics. . . . The young generation's indignant mindset translates into an aggressive, colorful style of activism—a style some find invigorating, others juvenile" (1993, 69).

13. The following discussion draws on Virginia Woolf's invocation of waves as trope for the simultaneously linear and circular aspects of time. See, e.g., The Waves.
14. For a discussion of feminist activity between the first and second waves, see Meyerowitz 1993.

15. As important as it is to the survival of feminism, women's studies is not the sole crucible for the next wave. As Barbara Ehrenreich aptly notes, women's studies is "limited to the 52 percent of young women who go to college at all (and, of course, to the far smaller percentage who are willing or able to take courses with no clear vocational goal)" (Ehrenreich 1988: 33).


17. For discussions of how the psychosocial dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship shape intergenerational tensions among women in the academy, see Keller and Moglen 1987; Michie 1986; Miner and Longino 1987; Sprengnether 1993; Westphal 1994.

18. When a friend of mine, a founder of a young feminist network in Washington, D.C., asked a panel of older feminists what words of advice they had for the next generation, one of the panelists responded with "Say thank you."

19. For critiques of the movement toward personal criticism, see Scott 1993; Bernstein 1992; Kauffman 1993.

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