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Negotiating Spaces For/Through Third-Wave Feminism

AMBER E. KINSER

This essay examines the challenge confronting young feminists of finding their place and creating their space in the political landscape. It argues that the conceptual leverage of a “third wave” helps young women articulate a feminism that responds to the political, economic, technological, and cultural circumstances that are unique to the current era. Rather than take the position that the existence or authenticity of third-wave feminism ought be argued, the author asks the more important questions of what are the unique contributions that third-wave rhetoric can make? What is it about the political climate that has given rise to third wave that enables these feminists to make different contributions than second-wave feminists might make? Continuing to articulate feminism as a force to be reckoned with has become increasingly complex in our pluralistic world. It is further complicated by a now sophisticated and prolific postfeminist ideology that has co-opted and depoliticized the central tenets of feminism. The only thing postfeminism has to do with authentic feminism, however, is to contradict it at every turn while disguising this agenda, to perpetuate the falsehood that the need for feminist change is outdated. The author also discusses the rhetorical challenges facing third-wave feminists. She argues that their virtues of pluralism and contradiction could become their vices if they retreat from making arguments about what constitutes feminism, and that third-wave contributions can be made more profound if they refuse to see second wave monolithically. Finally, the author argues that third-wave feminists must meet these rhetorical challenges if they are to avoid the dangerous possibilities of false feminism: personal journey and resistance that are devoid of politics, and weak feminism: working for only as much social change as a patriarchal social order can outrun.

Keywords: First wave / second wave / third wave / feminism / feminist movement(s) / young feminists

I am the Mid Wave.¹ I grew up in a culture that had been transformed in part by the labor of “second-wave” feminists which, eventually, transformed my life as well. Most of what has informed how I view the world through feminist eyes, love in a feminist partnership, teach from a feminist agenda, and raise children as a feminist parent, I learned from the second wave. Most of that learning began in my young adulthood. I was 20- and 30-something in the third wave’s prominent decade of the ‘90s, which technically positions me as a feminist of the “third-wave” era, but I did not live the life many third wavers remember. There may have been

a second-wave revolution happening out there when I was growing up in the '60s and '70s, but there was little that was revolutionary happening at my house. Any feminism I learned was by working relentlessly to move away from my conservative upbringing and find some other mode of living. I sought a way of being in the world, of being female in the world, that offered more resonance and more liberation than I had so far been able to conceptualize. That way of being and being female I found through second-wave feminism, though I had never conceptualized my feminist ideas or ideals or praxis as "wave" affiliated. Now as I enter my 40-something years, I find myself looking for more: more sense, more liberation, more room to stretch what feminism means. I am able to find some of that "more" through third-wave feminist thinking and its emphasis on feminist evolution. So I work to negotiate some room of my own between second-wave and third-wave thought. In this essay I explore such negotiation of spaces between feminisms. First, I situate myself as a feminist between waves and explore how I live in that space. Then I situate the third wave within American feminist movement and explore how these feminists work to negotiate their space between more established feminism and its oppositions.

Situating the Writer

Both my parents hated Gloria Steinem. They rolled their eyes and shook their heads at her and the movement and women she represented. Sometime last year, I told my mother I had purchased a book about Wonder Woman comics, something she read eagerly as a girl while still managing to otherwise avert feminism. When I mentioned that the foreword was written by Steinem, she let out an audible gasp over the phone. I am still struck by how differently my mother and I view women's power. It is not that I failed to learn about being a strong woman. My mother was quite committed to teaching that lesson. The lesson emerged from her white working-class worldview, which seemed to be coupled with a general distaste for men, the latter all the more confusing since she channeled much energy into taking care of her husband and her father and taught me to do the same, though she surely never put it that way. Male privilege was one of many family lessons, including white privilege, that I did not learn very well, but not for any lack of trying on my family's part.

Still, there were lessons I did learn well, including how to live with great resolve and fortitude, and the necessity of a strong work ethic and a solid internal locus of control. These were not articulated in terms of being a woman, though, and certainly not in terms of feminism. My mother lived a complicated life and childhood and to a great extent took care of her sisters and her mother in partnership with her father, so she

learned how to be strong in body and spirit out of necessity. Part of that learning could be attributed to her father's teaching, whose perfectionism was not gender specific, so his lessons were not either. For all I know things may have been different if he and my grandmother had had a son, but all three of their children were daughters. Confidence, independence, and working outside the home were all modeled for me by my mother and were self-cultivated since she was a girl. These have been the lessons of many working-class homes long before waves of organized feminist movement proper started rolling in.

Even though many of the ideas that now inform my life I learned from the second wave, it failed to speak to my experience in some important ways. While there were multiple and varied feminisms in the second wave, as there have always been, the only ones that seeped into my life then were those made most highly public. Echoing the arguments of those working-class women and women of color who did not identify with the more publicized feminism of the '60s and '70s, I submit that suffering from the mind-numbing effects of domestic work at home was hardly the problem my mother was struggling with, and modeling for me, as a cocktail waitress, a cook, a medical secretary, and later a voc/tech school-trained office manager. I imagine that from my mother's point of view, Gloria represented a mockery of much that she held dear in order to make sense of her life as a perpetual caretaker of other people, a mockery of much that she had to protect in order for her life as a born-and-bred Baptist to make any sense.

Feminism may have presented itself as the resolute newcomer knocking on our door, but it sounded to my mother more like a dangerous stranger pounding away out there, and she was not about to let it into her sacred home. The truth of the matter is that feminism did in fact sneak in somehow. There had to be some reason she was unimpressed with her reading of Marabel Morgan's (1973) *The Total Woman* and that reason surely must have informed other lessons she taught me along the way, despite her efforts to avoid feminism's influence. She taught me to never expect that anyone should take care of me. She taught me how to cook for a family of six from a very young age, how to grow my own food, catch and gut my own fish, make my own clothes, make my own way in this world. She taught me to be bold about my body—to look at it, talk about it, ask questions about it. She taught me to be bold about my sexuality. She did not hide her sexual playfulness with my father; she was unconcerned about other people's responses to the mirrors on her bedroom ceiling. She wore a string bikini and made sure she and her three daughters had some combination of halter tops, mini skirts, hot pants, and go-go boots. Even now at 64, full-bodied and graying hair, she is always the sexiest woman in the room. She knows it, and everyone else can feel it.

Still, I had to come to feminism *as feminism* on my own and that did not happen until I was 20-something. In sum, my age, my expectation that feminism is evolutionary as well as revolutionary, and even my affinity for personal narrative all situate me as a likely third waver, but I did not live most of my life as a feminist or embodying feminist principles from my youth as did third-wave writers like Baumgardner and Richards (2000) and many contributors to third-wave anthologies edited by Rebecca Walker (1995b), Barbara Findlen (1995), and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997). My world was not already interwoven with second-wave feminist thought; I would have to discover it and weave it in myself. My working-class childhood, my current experience raising a pre-teen daughter, my experience raising a young son who fits just about every "masculine" stereotype no matter how many art sets and stuffed animals I give him, my experience being partnered with someone who is far from, to use his words, a "granny glasses, Birkenstock, sensitive guy," and my experience teaching in the Bible Belt where others can spot The Feminist from a mile away, all leave me searching for a broader feminism. So like other third wavers, I seek a way of being in the world, of being feminist in the world that allows more room for stretching and spreading my feminism. Like other third wavers, I seek to negotiate my own space in this modern, global, technology-driven, dauntingly pluralistic world. For me, that space is located somewhere between second- and third-wave feminism. For many of them, that space is located somewhere between the rock that has been second-wave feminism, and the hard place that feminism and its dissidents have led us to.

The remainder of this essay explores the space between this rock and this hard place, and examines third wave's negotiation of that space. To begin, I situate the first, second, and third waves on the political landscape. In this section, my descriptions of historical periods in women's movement are truncated and quite simplified. Next, I examine the third wave's struggles to make its place in the current political climate. Finally, I explore the rhetorical significance of a "third wave" of feminism, with attentions to both its probable liberations and its possible limitations.

Situating the First and Second Waves

The ideas of feminism were alive and well long before the "first wave" but had not been organized into an identifiable movement until the mid-nineteenth century. The first full-scale women's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, is most often attributed as the beginning of American feminism arriving in waves. Such is the case even though it is highly unlikely that these women thought of their activities

as coming in feminist waves, and though African American women's movement within the abolitionist movements preceded the convention by about fifteen years, and though First Nation American women have embodied many of the principles of feminism long before even this time. The role of First Nation American women and African American women in paving the way for Seneca Falls and its outcomes points to a major problem with the wave metaphor in discussing women's movement; it highlights white women's movement and ignores that of women of color (Springer 2002; Guy-Sheftall 2002).

The ideas and practices of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women, as Wagner (2001) has argued, were valuable resources for ideas later attributed to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Coffin Mott. And Guy-Sheftall (1995) explains that "black women's self-help, abolitionist, and other reform activities . . . contributed to a climate of discontent which foreshadowed the historic women's rights gathering at Seneca Falls" (3). Though most had little opportunity to be part of organized woman suffrage efforts, "there were always African American women suffragists" (Terborg-Penn 1995, 137). In the mid-1800s, activists were publicly campaigning primarily for rights to property and wages, rights to guardianship of their children, rights to equal education, rights to political voice and, though hardly unanimously, the right to vote (Declaration of Sentiments 1848, Seneca Falls Resolutions 1848). In the later part of the nineteenth century, the numbers of African American women organizing on behalf of woman suffrage were increasing. This was happening in part, as Terborg-Penn (1993) notes, because of the "rising number of educated blacks who emerged during the first generation out of slavery" (143). "With this new freedom," she continues, "black women, like white women, actively developed the women's club movement as a vehicle for change" (143). Still, black women's contributions were restricted from public recognition and historic record both from within the movement and from the larger public arena, with the words of Sojourner Truth (1851, 1853) and Maria Stewart (1832) being two exceptions. After women won the right to vote in 1920, feminist movement and women's activism continued without stopping through today, though numerous struggles after 1920 did not receive the affections of the media or the mass American public for another 40 years.

In the mid-'50s, civil rights for African Americans began setting the media agenda; by 1960 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was organized and much public and media attention focused in on civil rights activism. As women activists looked at the structure of their work in this arena, they began to see similarities between how they were treated by male activists, and how their foresisters² were treated by the same during the early abolitionist movements leading to what we call the first wave. In each of these movements to recognize the equal humanity

of all persons, and particularly of black people relative to white people, the equal humanity of women was ignored. In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* spoke volumes about the lives that middle- and upper-middle-class women were leading. Her arguments affirmed their malaise and motivated them to cure it by moving out of private and into public space, where no such malaise plagued men. In the mid-'60s, the Vietnam war erupted, this time with different motivations for battle than the two previous major wars. Such motivations came under attack by large masses of the public resulting in full-scale marches and protests that included literally millions of people throughout the United States. Here again, women could see that even in social activist work, they were afforded only secondary status. This is the *esprit de corps* out of which arose second-wave feminism. Major paradigmatic shifts and social fabric rifts were shaking the foundation of American life. Regardless of whether one was trying to challenge the status quo or countermand by trying to maintain it, movements were and movement was afoot on a massive scale.

The "Second-Wave Feminism" title was coined by Marsha Lear when women of the 1960s sought to connect their ideas to those as reasonable, and by then noncontroversial, as the right to vote; "second wave" implied that the first wave of feminism ended in the 1920s (Lear 1968 as cited in Humm 1995, 251). The labels "first wave" and "second wave," then, were created at the same time as a way of negotiating feminist space. These terms gave activist women of the late '60s the double-rhetorical advantage of cultivating new ideas while simultaneously rooting them in older, more established ground. Identifying itself as the second wave revived the movement for the public after seeming to lie dormant for some time. Second wavers are often applauded for paying homage to and drawing from the work of "first-wave" women, as well they should be. But they did so for reasons far beyond a sense of patriotic duty to honor their foresters. The second-wave attention to *women's* rights, and more importantly, to *women's liberation*, emerged seemingly out of nowhere and needed to re-establish itself as neither particularly new nor fleeting. The labeling that linked the two periods of feminist movement was a rhetorical strategy that helped give clout to '60s women's activism and positioned it as a further evolution of earlier and larger movement.

In some ways, this era of feminist movement began to recede with the defeat of the ERA and continued to pull back during the Reagan-Bush era (Siegel 1997). But in other ways, feminists continued to move forward throughout the '80s. A fickle media had now redirected its sensationalizing efforts to other figures, like postfeminists,³ so feminist work seemed to many as if it had faded away. Yet the '80s is the only decade to date that can boast two World Conferences on Women. The voting patterns in the Reagan election indicated the first "gender gap" in voting since 1920, indicating that women of this time were voting "in support of issues that

concern them as women" (Bolden 2002, 159). The '80s also marked Bell Abzug's founding of the Women's Foreign Policy Council and Eleanor Smeal's founding of the Fund for the Feminist Majority (Rosen 2000, xxviii). Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981) publish *This Bridge Called My Back*, and Wilma Mankiller is "the first woman elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma" (Bolden 2002, 160). The American Association of University Women conduct their landmark research on "how schools shortchange girls" to be published in 1992 and feminist work succeeded in passing a congressional resolution declaring March "Women's History Month." By the mid- to late-'80s, feminist gains had been won on the home front and in the workplace and some of the basic ideas of gender equity were woven into the fabric of women's lives, though admittedly often at the level of a shared stock of knowledge rather than shared convictions and practices.

Situating the Third Wave

"Third-wave" rhetoric first appeared in the mid-'80s and emerged from discussions and writings about the intersections of feminism and racism (Heywood and Drake 1997). These early moments of the third wave were articulated by feminist leaders, many of whom were grounded in the second wave, such as "Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other feminists of color who called for a 'new subjectivity'" in feminist voice (Orr 1997, 7). Paula Kamen's (1991) research on the "'twentysomething' generation" and its connections to women's movement, for example, is grounded in the works of these very women leaders of color. Kamen identifies them as "the authors with the most undeniable influence" on the late '80s/early '90s young feminists (17). The emphasis on race continued through feminist attention to the Thomas-Hill hearings but began to shift with Freedom Ride 1992, "a three-week bus tour to register voters in poor communities of color across the country" (Orr 1997, 1). At this point, third-wave rhetoric focused on rallying young feminists, and "this is the emphasis that stuck" (1).

To the discredit of feminism more generally and also a clear sign of the strength of white power beyond feminism, these minority leaders rarely receive the attribution they deserve for contributions that were so central to second-wave thought and to various evolutions into a third wave. Women of color still struggle to have race-related subjectivities occupy prominent feminist space, though they may have met with more success in the third-wave era than in previous ones. Even so, when an attractive, upper-class white woman argues that it is *feminism* that has made women into victims and men into villains and uses the "third-wave" label, she is

attributed as having facilitated this next evolutionary cycle of feminism, and Naomi Wolf (1993) becomes the name that is often connected with the third wave, even though much of her argument echoes postfeminist ones. A later, even more pronounced articulation of the phrase came through the voice of Rebecca Walker and other writers in Walker's anthology and her *Ms.* article, both in 1995. Walker's was a notable expansion of feminist space for women of color.

Whether one associates the swelling of a "third wave" with the call by Chela Sandoval for a new subjectivity that honors race, or the call by Naomi Wolf for a move from "victim feminism" to "power feminism," or the call by Rebecca Walker for a "facing and embracing [of the] contradictions and complexities" in our feminist lives 1995b, xxxv), it is clear that the label enables a particular rhetorical function which, once again, helps place the current strain within the larger context of feminism. The rhetorical shift from second to third wave, however, proves quite different than that from first to second wave. In the more recent transition, the social fabric was already interwoven with feminist ideals, though admittedly only superficially sometimes. Leaders of the previous wave and their causes had not been pushed out of public and mass-mediated space when the leaders of the next wave emerged. Revolutionary and massive social movement and change was not the spirit of the day. And perhaps the most critical point differentiating the political climate of early second wave from that of early third wave is that the latter emerged simultaneously with and in contention with a widespread and well-articulated postfeminist climate. The political savvy of a rhetoric of third wave provided the fourfold advantage of introducing ideas befitting the current political, economic, global, and technological climate; rooting these ideas in established, more solid ground; identifying current feminism as still a powerful force; and clarifying its unique contributions by differentiating it from that of the still-present, highly influential, and widely recognized second wave. Much of early third-wave rhetoric directs its efforts at accomplishing this latter goal. Second-wave and third-wave voices, however, are not the only voices vying for the affections and loyalties of today's young women.

Negotiating a Space for a Third Wave

Given where young feminists are situated in our larger political history, the rising of another wave is not at all surprising. It is yet more motion in a long history of feminist movement. Social change has always been an ongoing process, ebbing and flowing, slowing and quickening its pace in succession. Social critique and advocacy are hardly "movement-" or even "wave-"bound, but instead are a continuous cycle of living in the

world comprised of many and diverse and overlapping efforts. Though I use the wave metaphor in this essay, several writers have noted its inadequacies for talking about women's movement in the United States. (See, for example, Springer 2002; Guy-Sheftall 2002). As I mention earlier, the coining of the second-wave phrase in the 1960s to refer to women's activism of that time has some problematic implications that ought to be kept in mind. I use the phrase "second wave" here to suggest the *era of feminism rooted in and shaped by the 1960s–1980s political climate* and "third wave" to suggest the *era of feminism rooted in and shaped by the mid '80s–new millennium political climate*, thus allowing for the possibility that a feminist might affiliate with either or both and suggesting indirectly that different eras bring with them different constraints and possibilities for change. Further, I use these phrases with the understanding that the metaphor of waves is limited in what it can illuminate about feminism's evolutions.

We might replace "era of feminism" with the useful construct "political generation," as Nancy Whittier (1995) does. Her model works to explain continuity and change in social movements and accounts for the collective identities of movement cohorts given the particular internal conditions and external contexts of the movement. Still, Lisa Hogeland's (2001) caution "against generational thinking," and Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier's (2003) argument that the third wave "has less to do with a neat generational divide than with a cultural context" (14), and my argument here that third wave is less about differences in *politics* than it is about a differences in *climate* render the two words problematic in their own way. The writings in Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman's (2002) *Colonize This!* anthology, for example, is a continuation and further development, rather than an introduction, of women-of-color feminism and such development is enabled more through shifts in cultural context than through shifts in politics. The reader might mentally place quotation marks around each reference to second wave/wavers and third wave/wavers as she reads, allowing us to participate in the current larger dialogue about feminism while recognizing that the metaphor is imprecise. We might also, as Whittier (1995) suggests, work to conceptualize waves using a "cycle" approach, emphasizing "links between the organizations and activists that make up successive waves of protest," rather than using an approach that sees "each wave of protest as emerging anew" (193).

We have had some time to see how the work of second-wave feminism has influenced our lives and our thinking. It is still quite notably vibrant and active today, though it had its media heyday from the mid-'60s through the early '80s. Presently, what steals the affections of the media and consequently much public dialogue seems to be an emphasis on post-feminism, which claims that any needed gender equity has been attained and that further feminist activity is contraindicated. Postfeminism has

experienced a surge since the late-'80s, and it is in the midst of its bellowing voice that third-wave feminism begins to speak. While I have little in common with third wavers who grew up in decidedly feminist worlds, I share their struggle of living in a largely "postfeminist" one.

Third-wave feminists have defined themselves in a number of ways (see, for example, Walker 1995b; Heywood and Drake 1997; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Hernandez and Rehman 2002; Johnson 2002; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003). The precise politics that constitute third wave continue to be argued and counter-argued, particularly relative to second wave and is beyond the scope of this article. Various third wavers have defended their place in terms of how they differ from earlier feminisms (see, for example, Findlen 1995). But as I argue in what follows, what is most influential in defining a "third wave" is its position relative to, and therefore how it is poised to respond to, the current socio-cultural, technological, and political climate. I use "third wave" in the current essay to refer to a current era political body whose constituents practice a multiplicity of feminist ideologies and praxes while generally sharing the following characteristics: (1) They came to young adulthood as feminists; (2) They practice feminism in a schizophrenic cultural milieu which on one side grants that they have a right to improved opportunities, resources, and legislative support, and on the other side resists their politics which enable to them to lay claim to, embody, and hold onto same; (3) They embrace pluralistic thinking within feminism and work to undermine narrow visions of feminism and their consequent confinements, through in large part the significantly more prominent voice of women of color and global feminism; (4) They live feminism in constant tension with postfeminism, though such tension often goes unnoticed as such. Third-wave feminism is of course more complex than this list would suggest, but much of that complexity would serve to elaborate these four general points.

Some of the goals of third-wave feminism have been to look back at the most recent movement because it is still influencing our lives and distinguish its triumphs from its challenges, identify where that wave might have done something different to bring about other consequences, and consider how the choices that were made influence our lives phenomenologically. The next goal then is to let those findings inform the feminism the third wave is now cultivating. While some second wavers may feel put out of the race by this taking of the torch, such is hardly the intent of most of these feminists. For example, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) and Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) make very clear their understanding and appreciation of the second-wave women whose work allowed their own as well as their conceptualizing of the two waves as co-existent. Nevertheless, it is important that we realize, as Orr contends, "that the inevitable reworking of the successes and failures of second-wave feminism is underway" (1997, 12).

An important part of the discovery about where the second wave has brought us is to see that in the last two decades feminisms, or perhaps more important, its discourses, have become, as Joannie Schrof (1993) suggests, a culture as well as a cause. Many women now arrive in their 20s and 30s having always taken as a given their equal rights. Many of them have grown up with a vocabulary for talking about sexism, reproductive rights, sexual autonomy, fair treatment, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender issues, workplace equity, global awareness and intersections of race, class, and gender. This vocabulary is infused with what Findlen (1995) identifies as a "sense of entitlement" to the rights they imply. "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" (xii). The number of women who can make such claims is, of course, increasing; my daughter is 12 and certainly lives this life. Crafting her own feminist identity is as important to her as crafting her own intellectual, athletic, or relationship identities. Feminist discourse, whether authentic or that co-opted and made synthetic by postfeminism, has become for young women "as powerful and pervasive as pop music or romance novels" (Orr 1997, 11).

Feminist identity for today's young women must be understood not only as a third-wave phenomenon and a second-wave consequence, but also as part of a postfeminism outcome (Cullen 2001). That is, young women and girls are attempting to paint a place for themselves in the feminist landscape even as that landscape is colored and textured by a postfeminist ideology, which asserts that there is no longer any need to "be a feminist," and which outlines derisive monolithic images of feminism as proof that it is undesirable and outmoded (Beck 1998). Further, postfeminism is comprised of "backlash" arguments asserting, among other falsehoods, that any further feminist activity will in fact move us backward (Faludi 1991). Third-wave rhetoric is in part, and I maintain, in large part, a result of women's attempts to manage the competitive tension between these claims to and about gender equity.

According to assertions of postfeminist ideology, gender equity claims its own space in the public arena as part of a natural cultural evolution and is not the result of particularly feminist efforts (Faludi 1991; Pozner 2003). Given the proliferation of these claims, it is easy for young women to conclude that gender equality is the norm, and that, therefore, feminists who argue for it are simply unnecessary. Postfeminism very well may be a voice that is currently rising above the din for many young women. It is seductive. It co-opts the motivating discourse of feminism but accepts a *sense* of empowerment as a substitute for the work toward and evidence of *authentic* empowerment. It gives a head nod to feminist principles, but wipes the brow of the mass public and breathes a sigh of relief as if to say, "Yes, gender equity is very important. That's why we should all

be so thankful that we have finally achieved it. I don't know what those other women are still upset about, but I'm sure glad things are fixed now." Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) admit that "backlash rhetoric and our own complacency have inured us to inequalities that persist around us" (13). Jennifer Pozner (2003) centers this postfeminist-constructed "condition" in the media, labeling it "False Feminist Death Syndrome," the symptoms of which include the "Premature Obituary" and the "Passing Fad Fantasy." Postfeminism outlines images not only of how outmoded feminist struggles are, but also of how undesirable feminists themselves and claiming a feminist identity are. In a piece posted online at The 3rd WWWave, Kim Allen (2000) explains the over-simplified and pejorative representations of feminism with which young women of the third-wave era grow up: "We have been raised on media images of feminism, which are of two types: images of feminists as man-bashing bra-burners, created by the sexist forces in the media, and images of feminists as stereotypical second wavers who haven't changed in thirty years" (para. 3).

Third-wave voices are clearly a response to the strength of postfeminism and its effective depoliticizing of feminist discourse, and therefore by definition are going to have a different articulation of what it means to be feminist and a different narrative of feminist living than second wavers. Third wavers came of age in a world where feminist *language* is part of the public dialogue, but authentic feminist *struggles* are not accounted for in that dialogue except in terms articulated by the mainstream, which still perpetuates a conservative and sexist status quo. Young women have to have a feminism that can counter the dangerously sophisticated pronouncements of the failure and inadequacies of feminism coming out of postfeminism. Perhaps what is most significant about a third wave is that it represents a complex effort to negotiate a space between second-wave and postfeminist thought.

Feminist identity for today's young women is further shaped by the second wave's response to the third wave. Much has been made of third wavers trying to nudge or even elbow their way into the feminist gathering, and of second wavers struggling with these entrances into feminist space. Significant among second-wave accomplishments is that they have been a strong enough force to have both young women crafting their identities from that clay and postfeminism trying to remold it altogether. Significant among third-wave accomplishments is that second wavers are responding to their efforts, sometimes applauding, sometimes questioning, but in any case seeing third wave as a force to be reckoned with. The "other" feminism to which each wave seems to be justifying itself and before which each seems to make its case often seems to be, however, more a mythical representation of that other than anything else. My own experience suggests and my reading of literature from both waves

underscores that few second wavers actually oppose or are threatened by the work of young feminists, and few third wavers actually ignore the accomplishments of or seek to replace their foresisters.

As a group, feminists may be spending more time than is still necessary arguing whether or not such a thing as a third wave exists or has a right to, or carefully outlining the differences between waves. We have posited these questions, made some important claims about difference and sameness between them, and extolled the virtues and identified the vices of each. Over the last decade or more this has been an important dialogue that has helped us define and build strategies for our larger goals of weakening the patriarchy and liberating women. This dialogue has been necessary and has served some important functions for guiding our feminist projects. It is time now that we direct more of our attentions to those projects, with each of us claiming membership in whatever wave, or space between, that allows us to answer the questions we need to ask and to do the work we need to do. In this spirit, I turn now to an examination of the work that a "third wave" enables, followed by a discussion of the rhetorical challenges and dangerous possibilities it faces.

Rhetorical Significance of a "Third Wave"

For those who identify with the third wave, the pressing issue is, as Emi Koyama (2001) points out, "not about what third-wave feminism is, but about how calling ourselves 'third wave' enables us to do that we cannot do otherwise. The question we ought be asking is *what is the rhetorical significance of a 'third wave'?*" (para. 4) The answer lies in how modern feminists are situated in the current political climate, how they are positioned relative to technology use and cultural reproduction, and how second-wave work has rooted feminism such that plurality and contradiction are not destabilizing.

One of third wave's most critical features is that it speaks to a "media-savvy, culture-driven" generation of young women (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 77), and this will have consequences for important dialogue with both internal (regardless of wave affiliation) and external constituencies. One of the advantages of being positioned alongside the second wave rather than immersed in it is that feminists may be better able to reflect and write about what it means to have learned from and benefited from second-wave efforts. In that dialogue, women can also determine what it means to be positioned simultaneously alongside post-feminism, and how to negotiate the particular space between these two. Such maneuvering of space is a prominent part of third-wave writings and of narrative writings in particular. Examinations of four major anthologies of third-wave texts (Walker 1995b; Findlen 1995; Heywood and Drake

1997; Johnson 2002) as well as Baumgardner and Richards' (2000) treatise, Pozner's (2003) media critique, and Kamen's (1991) interview research, and further including online resources such as those of The 3rd WWave and Third Wave Foundation, reveal that this negotiation is a common and definitional struggle.

In 1972, Jane O'Reilly articulated the concept of "the click," that point of sudden clarity when a woman saw for the first time the ways in which her own life exemplified the gender inequity and oppression that she heard feminists talking about but never before identified with because she could not see it evidenced in her life. As second-wave feminism grew in strength and voices, more and more women experienced the click with less and less effort. But as the media pulled their attentions away from second-wave and toward postfeminist claims, fewer women were likely to experience it. "The click is more complicated for us," third-waver Kim Allen explains (2000, para. 3). Negotiating the space between second wave and postfeminism means *working much harder to feel the click*.

The second wave refined the tools available to third wavers for "dismantling the master's house," to extend Audre Lorde's (1984) metaphor. But the house keeps getting rebuilt, walls shored up, and foundations poured again. Window dressings are redesigned and outer appearances are landscaped over to give it more surface appeal. Dismantling the master's house has become an increasingly complex enterprise. Further, to identify accurately and confidently one's successful efforts in the midst of all this renovation is exceedingly difficult. It is a necessary part of third-wave feminist movement for women to talk with each other about the phenomenology of feminist living in this context, and personal narrative is often the device of choice for such talk, as exemplified in the opening pages of this essay. Narratives help women address how it is that one negotiates one's space, about how one "does feminism" while positioned between a discourse that emerged in the wake of great national unrest and protest and "clicks" happening in numerous and concrete moments, and a discourse claiming that the time for all that protesting and clicking is past because everything is better now and can, moreover, articulate evidence to support that claim. One of the important contributions of third-wave feminism is its emphasis on narrative for exploring how it feels to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates one's sense of identity, and how one stabilizes that identity while being knocked about by postfeminist and backlash forces.

"Third wave" offers rhetorical advantages that extend beyond dialogue with internal feminist constituencies. As a consequence of being "media-savvy" and "culture driven," third wavers are able to infiltrate and command public domain spaces heretofore unavailable on a large scale to the breadth of feminist activity. Various cybercommunities, for example, attest to "the tenacity of young feminists in claiming the right to exist

in what had been a rather masculine space" (Orr 1997, 10). Second-wave successes have placed third wavers in more positions of more power in what Irene Karras (2002) calls "cultural reproduction." She asserts that a major difference between the two waves "may lie in the fact that third-wave feminists are now more directly influential in cultural reproduction as writers, producers, and directors than second-wave feminists were during their youth" (4). So feminists not only can talk with each other about resisting postfeminism, but also can actually resist it using these cultural forms. Feminism can invade more postfeminist strongholds in media, politics, and organizational domains so that the authority of postfeminism continues to be questioned and undermined. Pop culture, for example, has been claimed by third wavers as "both their terrain and weapon of choice," who believe that "by participating to a greater degree in creating and supporting positive images for themselves, they will finally infiltrate the last vestiges of patriarchy" (Karras 2002, 10).

Third wave encourages more pointed efforts to explore a greater depth and breadth of feminist living. Yet it should be noted that every era of women's movement has been made of multiple feminisms. Consider, for example, NOW's mainstream position on women's rights to the draft and military service on the basis of gender equity, which co-existed with the contrasting position held by Women Strike for Peace, who made appeals to exempt women from the draft and war on the basis of gender difference in terms of their maternalism and vulnerability (Swerdlow 1992; Tobias 1997). Another second-wave example of feminist multiplicity is grounded in the subject of biological motherhood as the source of women's oppression. Anne Oakley (1974) argued that women would be liberated only outside its constraints. Adrienne Rich (1976), in contrast, argued that if biological motherhood were reconstructed and reclaimed, women could be liberated within and perhaps through it. From the first wave, note the divisiveness at Seneca Falls over the right to vote resolution. Note also the differences between Frances Willard (1883) and the Women's Christian Temperance Union's emphasis on salvaging the family as the driving focus for feminism, and Emma Goldman's (1910a, 1910b) emphasis on being released from family bonds altogether. Although there have always been differences and variety within feminist thought, it has been at times less committed to and at times politically restricted from amplifying its polyphonic (Bakhtin 1929) or multi-voiced intonations. Another aspect of the rhetorical significance of a "third wave" of feminism is that it helps us to generate feminisms that speak to the increasingly pluralistic world of which we are a part. As Krista Jacob proclaims in the first volume of the online journal *Sexing the Political*, third-wave feminists are "celebrating their pluralities" (2001, 1). Given the global economy in which these women were raised and the shrinking distance between them and the rest

of the world because of information technology and their mastery of it, and given the social reform brought about by activists continuing to work on issues of race, age, ability, and sexuality in addition to gender, third wavers may be better at pluralism than their second-wave forebears were. More accurately, they may be better positioned in the current political climate given the fruits of second-wave labor, to openly advocate and affirm pluralism. They also typically began celebrating diversity at young ages and consequently seem to be better at working through some of their own resistances to difference. They surely have something to teach others who grew up surrounded by and engaged in less polyphonic conversations.

The third wave's keener ability to dialogue with internal and external constituencies offers lessons for feminism and the larger culture that extend even further than celebrating pluralities. A recurrent and resounding theme in third-wave literature is the welcoming of contradiction. In addition to being apparently better positioned relative to pluralism, third wavers may be better positioned to boldly articulate, as a way of making sense of, contradictions in feminist living. Because of the tenuous and even ambivalent space they must negotiate between second wave and postfeminism, blurred boundaries, uncertainty, and flux are inherent in their feminist lives. Part of the rhetorical significance of the third wave is that it can help us learn, as Cathryn Bailey (1997) suggests, "to live more comfortably with ambiguity and contradiction," and learn that "complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole" (1, 8).

Third-wave feminism is not, however, a flawless mode of living and, like any public discourse purporting to speak for masses of people, including second-wave feminism, it ought to be questioned and examined closely. A "third wave" seems to enable projects that the second wave does not. Such projects include a more pronounced struggle to help women feel the click in the current era, canonical use of narrative devices, more activity in cultural reproduction, and a notable investment in casting a wider feminist net that is even more welcoming of difference and contradictions. Yet a third wave presents feminist movement with pointed challenges as well. Some of these challenges are explored in the following section.

Rhetorical Challenges of Third-Wave Feminism

The enterprise of negotiating a space from which to speak and in which to live has included reacting to perceptions of more established feminisms. Unfortunately, some third wavers have repeated the postfeminist error of viewing the second wave monolithically and oppositionally (see The 3rd WWave Web site and writings in Walker 1995b for examples). This error

has resulted not only in inaccurate critiques of second wave but also, and perhaps more important, an even more tenuously negotiated third-wave space because it is juxtaposed with the monolith. Allen (2000) and Pozner (2003) provide two of the few third-wave accounts that examine these images of second wave as *representations* rather than as facticities. The discrepancies between authentic second-wave feminism and synthetic popular representations of the same are contradictions with which third wavers need to be less comfortable living. Second-wave feminism is often viewed as a “definable phenomenon, as embodying a more or less coherent set of values and ideas which can be recognized and then transcended” (Bailey 1997, 5). It is important for third wavers to see their efforts as part of a larger feminist project of which all feminists are a part, rather than adopt a postfeminist stance of opposition to the second wave. It is admittedly difficult to negotiate third-wave space, but feminists must be careful not to let the lie of postfeminism seep into our collective consciousness. Seeing the second wave as some kind of failed experiment (Siegel 1997) is another form of the postfeminist lie.

Second wave has always been comprised of ambiguities and contradictions, just as any human social group or movement has. Note the example of Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Gayle Rubin (1975) who, as Linda Nicholson (1997) highlights, sought to articulate a relationship between Marxism and their feminism, while others, like Alison Jaggar (1983) and Nicholson (1985) herself, argued that a Marxist framework is not particularly useful for explaining women’s oppression. The weakness in second-wave feminism is not that it did not struggle with contradiction, but that it did not or could not amplify discussions about those struggles in its public or mass mediated dialogue. In contrast to much third-wave experience, feminist thought for second wavers, and for first wavers for that matter, was not an established component of social life, so earlier waves were reluctant to outline their ambiguities and contradictions as fully. They did not have the firm foundation of a recent era of powerful and highly public mass feminist movement on which to stand. There was more at stake in admitting that they did not always measure up to their own ideals. Third wave must extend its strengths in pluralism to how it conceptualizes the second wave and refuse to accept a falsified account of its work and its goals. Perhaps the most prominent form of the lie is that second-wave feminism is actually just so much lifestyle dogma, and indeed many young women seem to reduce the second wave to just that (see, for example, Kamen 1991). Consequently, they reduce their arguments about feminist living to a reaction against that perceived dogma (Springer 2002, 4). But second wave is of course not this trite, and third wave is of course not this simple or reductionist. Therefore, the concerns of second wave must be understood more deeply so that third-wave responses to it can be made more profound.

Part of the third wave's task to understand the depth of the second wave calls for the former to truly understand the ways in which it is historically grounded in the latter. It is not enough that third wave acknowledge this grounding; it needs to *understand* and *use* it. Through their articulations of difference from second wave, third wavers may come to feel as though everything they confront as feminists is new and notably different from what second wavers confronted. But *everything* they are facing is not new, and it is important for third wave to distinguish what is from what is not. We cannot move from any one place if we do not understand how and why we came to it. The point is not that third wave ought forever demonstrate gratitude to second wave; the repercussion of not understanding the work of the women who went before is much more profound than mere ingratitude. Bailey (1997) seems to have said it best in what could be viewed as a further extension of Audre Lorde's metaphor: "For younger feminists to ignore the work of earlier feminists is not only to fail to wrap their hands around valuable tools, it is to join their shovels to the backlash forces that would bury the history and significance of feminism" (9).

For example, attention to the intersections between race and feminism is not an exclusively third-wave phenomenon, though women of color certainly have a more audible voice in constructing feminism in the third wave. This intersection has been a recurrent theme in feminist movement, before and throughout both first and second waves. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) in the second wave, as one example, and the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the first wave as another, illustrate the roots of race and the contributions of women of color to feminist thought and living. Neither is pointed attention to sexuality issues a third-wave phenomenon, as evidenced by Monique Wittig (1981) and Radicalesbians (1973), and again by the work of Combahee River Collective (1977). These works are illustrative of how third-wave issues are historically grounded in earlier feminisms. Feminists have to be able to distinguish what has been done, from what seems to have been undone, from what is yet to be done.

Further, while third wave as a group may be stronger at pluralistic thinking in some ways than second wave as a group, in other ways third wave is weaker. For example, significant contributors to second-wave thought include socialist feminists like Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Marxist feminists like Margaret Bentson (1969), but third wave has yet to address issues of class or the relationship between class and the embodiment of choice effectively, although some writers, such as Michelle Sidler (1997) have made some contributions in this area. So there are lessons that could be learned from second-wave work that will be useful to third-wave thinkers. As Bailey (1997) has said, "This is not to suggest that all has been said on these matters; just to note that it is misleading to write as if earlier feminists did not engage them" (6) and, I would add, detrimental to

third-wave work. Hogeland (2001) attests that neither are all third-wave *tactics* unique, pointing out the similarities between “the in-your-face activist style of Riot Grrrls” and some early second-wave activist strategies (8). Caring about the third wave in ways that enable it to position itself with commitment and integrity alongside the second wave is a formidable rhetorical challenge. But even before we have cleared this hurdle, more dangerous possibilities will lie ahead.

Dangerous Possibilities for the Third Wave

One of the most crucial projects for third-wave feminism is that of articulating a resounding voice that distinguishes itself from postfeminism. Again, rather than continue to pour energy into clarifying the differences between them, second- and third-wave feminists might best channel their energies together into distinguishing themselves from postfeminism. This is a notably more complicated distinction for third wavers to make, given their characteristic celebration of pluralities and efforts to explore polyphonic feminism. Third-wave feminist rhetoric invites, in the name of inclusiveness, practically any claims to feminist membership hence discouraging what Bailey (1997) calls “defining the vicissitudes of feminism.” It would be easy for external constituents to co-opt third-wave vocabulary as part of its effort to depoliticize feminist gains, making their arguments sound like those of third wave though cleverly enough not suspiciously so. Indeed, this is precisely what is happening. Consequently, those new to feminism or heretofore not affiliating with feminism begin to see it as not really all that different from what everyone is already doing anyway, which of course is the genius of postfeminism, resulting in acceptance of the status quo and a failure to see the need for any change.

Similarly, if the voice of the third wave is not made to be notably different from postfeminism, it would be easy for internal constituents to co-opt the synthetic vocabulary of postfeminism and simply call it feminism. What is seductive about this co-optation is that one gets to feel like a revolutionary agent of change without having to take any of the revolutionary risks, which of course results in nothing that remotely resembles change and certainly not revolution. Such “commodification of feminist thinking,” to use hooks’ (1994) terms, creates a comfortable sense that “one can partake of the ‘good’ these movements produce without any commitment to transformative politics and practice” (71). As a result, feminist movement becomes impossible. In what follows, I examine two dangerous consequences for failing to articulate a voice that is readily distinguishable from postfeminism, comprised of a markedly different vocabulary and unique inflections and intonations of that vocabulary. I identify these consequences as “false feminism” and “weak feminism.”

One of the ways that false feminism finds form is through the failure to address adequately the complex relationship between patriarchy and social structure. When Naomi Wolf (1993) suggests in her later work, for example, that feminism can either talk about power or it can talk about victimhood but not both at the same time, she incorrectly identifies feminism as all about inner struggle. Wolf's dichotomy obfuscates the connection between victimhood and power, thus disabling women from recognizing when they in fact have been victimized so that they can then stop self-blaming and begin the personal *and political* work that can help them reclaim their power. Wolf reduces feminism to personal transformation, to use Hogeland's (2001) terms, suggesting that true feminism is about the power one feels inside and is unrelated to the difficult work of dismantling the power of patriarchal systems. When Janis Cortese (1998) of *The 3rd WWave* suggests that the second wave realize "that they were successful enough that they (and we!) are no longer on the margins," she incorrectly identifies movement within or even minimally beyond the margins as evidence of no longer being marginalized (para. 2). She incorrectly identifies *necessary* gain as *sufficient* gain and encourages us to move beyond this battle prematurely, based on the faulty assumption that it already has been won. While other arguments made by Cortese are less problematic, this one feels too close to those made by postfeminists like Wolf and similar writers like Paglia (1991), Roiphe (1993), Sommers (1994), and Denfeld (1995) for comfort. When third-wave narratives begin and end with the story and without offering, as Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) note, "a sustained analysis of how these personal stories fit into a larger political picture," they miss the second-wave point that the personal is in fact political (12).

It is certainly an important advance to come to the social and political arena with a sense that one is entitled to be there. My 12-year-old daughter feels this in ways I most assuredly did not at her age. But a *sense* of entitlement and having the *rights* thereto are not the same power. That sense will get woman nowhere if the patriarchal social structure does not afford her the rights of that entitlement, and so far it has not done so except after unrelenting feminist insistence. Catherine Orr (1997) cautions us against emphases on individual empowerment at the expense of other structural emphases when she asks, "How powerful is a sense of entitlement in a work (or any other) culture that has yet to recognize it? Is a sense of entitlement enough? Certainly the answer must be no" (4). It is very likely that false feminism will eventually lead women to be dumbfounded, hence incapacitating feminist movement, when they see how much work is left undone and who has retained power all along, as Ellen Neuborne (1995) does in Findlen's third-wave anthology: "I thought the battle had been won. I thought that sexism was a remote experience, like the Depression. Gloria had taken care of all that in the seventies.

Imagine my surprise. And while I was blissfully unaware, the perpetrators were getting smarter" (30–1).

Another way that false feminism finds form is through any kind of resistance *qua* resistance. Feminism is false when it is confused with resistance *per se*. In this form, anything that looks like one is casting off any cultural restriction whatsoever, and in particular if the one doing so is female, counts as feminism. Part of the genius of postfeminism is to co-opt the language of feminism and then attach it to some kind of consumer behavior that feeds young people's hunger for uniqueness, even if the uniqueness being sold looks just like everyone else's. This "free-market individualism" (Orr 1997) or "consumer feminism" (Hogeland 2001) makes no feminist movement, yet allows women to feel like it does and like they are helping it do so. Ariana Ghasedi and Andy Cornell (2001) criticize Baumgardner and Richards's *Manifesta* for perpetuating this very *feminism = resistance + consumption* equation: "While [Baumgardner and Richards] criticize the Spice Girls for being light on feminism, they lack a deeper analysis of them as an integral part of the co-optation of Riot Grrl's radicalism—the process of changing Girl Power into girls' spending power" (para. 7). If she buys the teabags made just for women, or decides she will not do office hours because she deserves a massage after all, or decides not to have her pap smear, or buys the black instead of the pink nail polish, or buys the pink just to say she is not afraid of femininity, or buys the L'Oreal because she is worth it, or pays extra for clothes at the alternative store because it allows her to be herself and annoy her co-workers at the same time, these are all styles of resistance to something or another, each of which makes sense and/or a statement in a given context. My point is neither to critique the usefulness of these choices nor to minimize their impact on personal transformation. My point is to clarify that these acts do not *equal* feminism, yet often enough function as substitutes for feminist movement. They represent the cultural phenomenon of "empowerment through style," which Kimberley Roberts (2002) calls the "happy bedfellow of postfeminism" (para. 2). This resistance is gutsy, feminism is gutsy; this resistance must be feminism. Because women want so much for the work to be over and because the patriarchy has so much invested in perpetuating the belief that it is, it is easy for strong young women to confuse the two, mistaking anything that feels like resistance for third-wave feminism. Reluctance of third wave thought to assert any kind of boundaries for feminism further encourages this mistake.

A second consequence of third-wave feminism failing to articulate a voice distinct from postfeminism is the proliferation of weak feminism. Unlike false feminism, which results in no feminist movement, weak feminism results in minimal feminist movement, the kind that the patriarchy can still get a handle on, the kind that, from the standpoint of patriarchy, probably is acceptable anyway since it placates feminists and is

so negligible as to be wholly unthreatening to the status quo. Weak feminism is seductive because it is easy for the feminist, and in true feminine form, "nice" to everyone else.

Third-wave feminism's openness to multiplicity is potentially one of its greatest strengths. But multiplicity in the company of postfeminism puts the third wave at risk of being expected to welcome, and itself wondering why it should not welcome, all voices no matter what utterances they are making, resulting in what Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) call a "feminist free-for-all" (17). *Everything* cannot be feminism. My point is not one about silencing others, but one about negotiating space in ways that help clarify which utterances belong fighting other battles outside of, perhaps alongside, feminism. Once again, resistance per se does not equal feminism; consumerism for women does not equal feminism. Some choices *are* more compromising to women's lives than others, and third-wave feminists have no business shutting down the discussion about which choices accomplish what all in the name of pluralistic thinking. Pluralism, multiplicity, polyphony, all of these suggest a willingness to hear; they do not imply *ipso facto* acceptance of what is heard. Second-wave feminism may have been better at making decisions about what was in the purview of feminism, but it may have silenced voices that should have been part of the feminist dialogue. Even so, it is not in the best interest of feminism for the third wave to respond to that dialogue by encouraging the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction. If we invite every cause and point of view under the purview of feminism, then it is spread so thin that it dis-integrates altogether, coming to mean nothing at all, since it cannot possibly mean everything, and weak feminism will prevail.

Postfeminist rhetoric indicates either that feminism is unnecessary, undesirable, unavoidably constricting and dogmatic, or the same as the everyday choices women are already making. Such arguments pose a "false dilemma" for young women who are tempted to respond by choosing synthetic postfeminist vocabulary in order to avoid what they perceive to be the stigma of choosing authentic feminist vocabulary. Third wavers can easily feel trapped into having to choose from within the false dilemma, unless they have developed the skills to reject it altogether. Once one feels so trapped, the obvious choice for many women is to articulate a feminism that does not conflict with anything at all. But a feminism that conflicts with nothing is, of course, not feminism. In one of the few echoes of these sentiments that I came across in the third-wave literature, Cortese (2001) asserts that "feminism undoes its own advances [through]: attempts to broaden itself out to the point of evaporation, and attempts to define itself as 'not really that scary,' and hence embrace the same old crap that came before, but label it feminism" (para. 33). More third wavers must join this conversation, if feminism is to remain vibrantly multi-voiced (Kinser 2003).

The third wave must work to keep feminism from evaporating by being courageous enough to say *I will not let feminism mean nothing. Having it mean everything will lead to it meaning nothing. Here are my arguments for what I believe it should mean.* . . . Part of that conversation will require distinguishing between feminism and feminist acts. Even anti-feminists can engage in feminist acts, so the simple presence of the latter is insufficient to constitute feminism. Conversely, that a feminist engages in some act is insufficient grounds for identifying the act as feminist. Being a feminist is not the same as, to use Deborah Siegel's (1997) terms, "donning some aspect of feminist consciousness" (3) and third-wave, second-wave, and mid-wave feminists need to be able to negotiate the difference. My point is not that feminists should spend a great deal of time arguing over who and what are more and less feminist, though I do strongly believe that such dialogue is important and ought be given voice. My point is that we should find ways to talk about it somehow, and that we are fooling ourselves if we think we can make feminism be all things to all people. We cannot; and weak feminism proliferates when we pretend that we can. It is true, as I have argued elsewhere, that "feminists judging other feminists is messy and political" (Kinser 2003, 114). But it is also true that "order often enough is born in chaos, and feminism is by definition political" (114).

In summary, given the precarious space they occupy between second wave and postfeminism, third-wave feminists are particularly at risk for adopting problematic approaches to feminist living. To avoid false feminism, third-wave feminists must articulate sharper distinctions between feminism and postfeminism. We must distinguish between necessary gain and sufficient gain in gender equity; it must distinguish between a sense of entitlement and the rights of entitlement. It must distinguish between resistance for its own sake and feminist resistance, between consumerism and feminist living. To avoid weak feminism, third wavers must come to see dialogue about clarifying the vicissitudes and authenticity of feminism as inviting rather than threatening. We must learn to reject the false dilemma that our only choices are between feminist stigma and postfeminist comfort. Third wavers must understand that we cannot have authentic feminism without feminist action and that isolated feminist acts alone do not constitute feminism. Feminist living is a complicated thing.

Summary

Clearly, "third wave" feminism can position feminists in rhetorically and politically advantageous space. From its vantage point, we can get a critical view of feminist movement that we might not otherwise have

had. It changes the voice of feminism—sometimes amplifying, sometimes altering, sometimes both—in ways that infiltrate the domain of pop culture and openly confront a multiplicity of contradictions and oppositions in modern feminist life. But it must proceed with caution. If third-wave feminism is to know how to personally and politically position itself, it must have clear vision of second-wave feminism and such will not come from a monolithic view of it. It must have clear vision of postfeminism and such will not come from refusing to see its threat or the commodifying and co-opting mechanisms through which it functions. Third-wave feminism must be able to confront the relationship between feminism, *struggle*, and social change, and it must confront what it means to live in the margins.

Part of my negotiating a space between the second and third waves, and part of the third wave negotiating a space between second wave and postfeminism will be figuring out how our own voices fit into the current dialogue, as well as what new conversations we can start and who will make the most useful contributions to those conversations. Our job as second-, mid-, and third-wave feminists will be to construct feminist identity in a culture where postfeminist voices are amplified so that we can spot their lies, avoid their errors, and reject their false dilemmas. Only through this work will we be able to explore the depths of the third wave.

Third waver Cortese (2001) asserts pointedly that feminism “shouldn’t be the same-old-same-old. Feminism is revolutionary. And feminism is scary,” she insists. “Real change is always scary. And that’s the way it should be” (para. 37). This argument has real resonance for me; it reminds me of my mother’s “what’s fear got to do with anything?” approach to persistence. And yet I cannot say that living in the margins has ever scared me. It has exhausted me, chilled me, alienated, angered, and unnerved me, even as it has invigorated me, protected me, transformed, strengthened, and sculpted me. What does scare me is minimal change. What scares me is the status quo remaining just that, and the possibility that feminists and other activists will allow their enthusiasm to be dulled by their successes. What scares me is modern feminists failing to take full advantage of their new millennium positioning and so failing to infiltrate and transform the traditionally masculine strongholds. But change through feminism never scared me personally, and I think that has much to do with my being situated between second and third waves. It is my one foot in the second wave that has grounded me in authentic feminism, before postfeminism became such a force to be reckoned with, that prepared me to see through the seductions of postfeminism. It is my other foot in the third wave that keeps me grounded by hope even in the face of what could be, and might yet be, a crushing backlash. It is the mid-wave space I occupy that helps me see more clearly the complexities of a pluralistic world and that despite the foundational work of the second wave, “doing

feminism" has become *more* complicated, not less so. Feminists are positioned now in ways that allow us to dialogue about what it *means* to live a feminist life and about *how* we can live one when global pluralism can feel daunting. One of the significant contributions of third-wave rhetoric is that it has helped us to get comfortable with this: Feminist living lacks precision. This is at once its greatest strength and greatest challenge.

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Notes

1. "I am the Mid Wave" is a play on Rebecca Walker's (1995a) landmark *Ms.* article in which she asserts, "I'm the Third Wave." The phrase has reverberated throughout discussions of third-wave feminism.
2. I follow Mary Daly's lead in using this term rather than foremothers. Mary Daly is cited in Thaney's (2000) news article reporting on the sixth annual "Re-Imagining Community" conference in Minneapolis. Daly is quoted as saying "I disagree with the term 'third-wave' feminism because it seems to cut off the third wave from the second. . . . Communication with our foresisters is necessary" (para. 8). Though Daly is opposed to the term "third wave" in ways I am not, I found her use of the term "foresisters" to be a helpful way to heed Hogeland's (2001) warnings against generational thinking in our discussions of second- and third-wave feminisms.
3. Postfeminism is a cultural ideology that has been defined in a variety of ways and is a hotly contested construct. For purposes of this article, I adopt Gamble's (2000) emphasis on postfeminism as centering around "issues of

victimization, autonomy, and responsibility." I use the term postfeminism to refer to general and abstract arguments advanced through mediated and public discourse rather than through individual self-proclaimed "postfeminists." The arguments assert that our current era is one that no longer requires feminism because the struggle for equity, particularly with regard to gender, has been won and is now over; one need only be autonomous and responsible to stave off victimization and oppression. This argument claims that feminist struggle has outlived its utility and now appears to be channeled into misguided and troublesome directions, which are problematically constricting and ideological; that feminism makes "a big deal out of nothing." What makes the "postfeminism" pill easy to swallow is that it has been coated by a pernicious public dialogue that has incorporated, revised, and depoliticized some of this discourse and the central tenets of feminism (Orr 1997, 5; See also Faludi 1991; Gamble 2000; Humm 1995; Whittier 1995).

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