

Communicating Third-Wave Feminism and New Social Movements: Challenges for the Next Century of Feminist Endeavor

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Abstract: *This article explores the various definitions of third-wave feminism emerging in the U.S. in an effort to facilitate feminist theoretical engagement with theories and strategies characteristic of this area of thought. The article distinguishes key differences among ideas labeled "third-wave" feminism, arguing that some are more useful for feminist theory building than others. The article also considers how third-wave feminist ideas may be understood as distinctive of new social movement organization. I argue that feminists must not be misled by simplistic popular media constructions of third-wave feminism, but should consider uses emerging in other national contexts for more productive theory building.*

"Feminism: It's All About Me! Want to know what today's chic young feminist thinkers care about? Their bodies! Themselves!" (Bellafante, 1998, p. 54)

Being completely invested in my work as a feminist media scholar means that reading the extended headline noted above, and the complete article published in *Time* in 1998 produced a palpable and visceral reaction. I found the article, complete with the now infamous "Who Stole Feminism—Ally McBeal?" cover page, while sitting in the waiting room at the dentist. As I read on, I could feel my blood pressure rising, and it was all I could do not to yell back at the columnist, or hurl the magazine across the room (both activities I'd have been comfortable with at home, but such an outburst was not likely to be understood by the other dental patients). At the time, I had been reading and writing about third-wave feminism and postfeminism for a few years, and the outspoken, yet under-informed Ms. Bellafante hadn't bothered tracking down any of the academics or the writings that composed the center of this emerging theoretical terrain. Physically spent from my waiting room fit and cavity filling, I emitted a resigned sigh on the drive home; what else could I expect from an article on feminism in a mainstream media outlet? What I have been far less prepared for is the frequency with which academic scholars have afforded third-wave/postfeminism a similarly limited interrogation, even reproducing Bellafante's assumptions as indicative of third-wave theory.

More than an average amount of confusion over terminology surrounds contemporary feminisms. Many modifiers now appear before feminism—anti-, post-, postmodern-, third-wave-, power—without more specific definition, and often in a manner indicating interchangeability. There is good cause for feminists to seriously and critically engage and deliberate emerging feminist theories, but such discussions are frequently short-circuited by the confused and contradictory

understandings of various versions of third-wave feminism. Additionally, one version of third-wave theory, classified as postfeminism, has oppositional meanings depending on the national context of the theorist, which brings me to the complicated nature of situating this article in a special issue on global feminisms. On one hand, the discussion of various definitions of third-wave feminism has important global dimensions. Indeed, theory building in this area is simultaneously emerging from various national contexts and situations. Ideas are being shared first locally and regionally, and gradually coming into conversation across national contexts. On the other hand, the space of a single article can only adequately encompass a single national context. The discussion here is admittedly U.S.-centric, and attempts to explain the negotiation of various third-wave perspectives within U.S. mass media and the American academic and activist communities.

This history and the struggle for understanding in this context are not useless for considering the emergence of third-wave thinking elsewhere; I believe valuable connections can be made, particularly in countries with similar social and media contexts such as Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. In fact, I argue that U.S. scholars would greatly benefit from incorporating the growing literature in this area emerging from the British, New Zealander and Australian contexts, as it is in many cases more theoretically complex and sophisticated than the experiential rhetoric dominating much U.S. writing. I also want to acknowledge the problematic nature of an article centered on the U.S. experience in a discussion of global feminisms, and assert that this contribution is not an attempt to impose U.S.-based theory building on other contexts, or suggest this history be accepted as a norm. Many aspects of third-wave feminism unquestionably result from the comparatively privileged status of many U.S. women (particularly those who are white and middle-class), and the problems this theory seeks to assuage may offer little for those who struggle for basic survival. However, as feminist theory-building and activism continue to address issues on a global rather than national level, increased attention must be paid to communicating theoretical and definitional intricacies that may grow from local experience but offer value in global discussions.

In an effort to facilitate discussion of recent feminist theories and perspectives, I begin by mapping my understanding of the diverse feminisms loosely grouped under the banner of third-wave feminism. Recognizing the role of mass media outlets such as *Time* is crucial to understanding contemporary confusion. As under-informed arbiters of knowledge, mass media sources have offered legitimacy to those whose ideas verge on

the anti-feminist while describing their positions as feminist, consequently delegitimizing the true theoretical innovation of third-wave thought. The contemporary terrain of defining third-wave feminism is highly contested; the explanation I provide results from examining the ideas of various groups rather than the prefix used before “-feminist” in their appellation. In this case, ideas reveal far more than names.

Before focusing on third-wave feminism, however, it is necessary to better define second-wave feminism and the various feminist perspectives it commonly encompasses. Admittedly a precise definition of any of the feminist perspectives discussed here seems as elusive as other enigmatically invoked theories such as postmodernism, defined by various scholars in various ways and evolving over time. A single “feminist” perspective has not existed anytime in recent memory, if ever, despite the singular construction mass media assessments and literature criticizing feminism often advance. In many cases, only activists and scholars are aware of the multitude of feminisms and feminist perspectives circulating in a given society or even globally. Most people become aware of feminism when it is covered by, appears in, or is constructed by the mass media for some reason. These articulations of feminism tend to be very simplistic and often envision feminism as a monolithic entity.

In some ways, second-wave feminism is best understood with an emphasis on chronology, as an umbrella term encompassing the feminist perspectives arising in the post WWII era through the beginning of the 1980s (see Thornham, 2000; Bryson, 1992). The activism of this time period follows feminism’s first-wave, which focused on securing suffrage from the mid nineteenth century through 1920 (see Sanders, 2000). The wave metaphor is built on the trajectory of feminist development common to countries with similar histories of sex-based struggle, and varies significantly based on national context. During the second-wave era a number of feminist perspectives struggled for legitimacy in U.S. culture, and sought to achieve various ends (see Echols, 1989). Liberal feminists at this time generally focused on integrating women into the public sphere and actively sought legal equality with men. In the early years of second-wave U.S. feminism (1967-1973), radical feminists argued that women constituted a sex-class and believed relations between women and men, rather than class or ethnicity, provided the primary site of oppression in society.¹ By the mid 1970s radical feminism became less revolutionary and developed into cultural feminism, a perspective appealing to the essential sameness among women and seeking to establish all-female organizations and societies as the solution to gender oppression. Additionally, socialist or Marxist feminists attributed women’s oppression to capitalism, and consequently focused their efforts on altering class-based oppression (see Echols, 1989; Bryson, 1992). These categorizations, however, provide only general guidelines; significant

variance existed among various organizations identifying with each of these categories as well.

For reasons too expansive to address here, general assessments of U.S. feminism most often present second-wave liberal feminism. The depoliticization of radical feminism in the mid 1970s and socialist feminism’s primary focus on issues of class rather than gender were key in the ascendance of liberal feminism. Additionally, the establishment of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966 aided media outlets by creating a centralized organization with official spokeswomen offering at least an illusion of an “official” feminist position, although today NOW organizes itself based on issues rather than a particular feminist perspective (Cancian & Ross, 1981).

As in the range of second-wave feminisms, third-wave feminism can be broken into roughly three different camps, with a variety of continuities and disjunctures among them. In addition to the theoretical camps, an organization created as a response to the lack of a national organization specifically for young women calls itself the Third Wave Foundation (www.thirdwavefoundation.org). Rebecca Walker (daughter of second-wave activist Alice Walker) and Shannon Liss created the Third Wave Foundation in 1992. The organization lacks a specific theoretical mission statement, but review of their scholarship opportunities, educational outreach, and organizing and advocacy grants indicates an emphasis on “work that exists to challenge sexism, racism, homophobia, economic injustice, and other forms of oppression,” a breadth of focuses common among some third-wave feminisms that stress combating oppression on all axes of identity. Additionally, some scholars and activists have considered the transition from second to third-wave feminism as defined by a generational shift because many of the women writing as third-wave feminists are too young to have experienced second-wave feminist activism (Siegel, 1997; Findlen, 1995; Walker, 1995; Kamen, 1991). Heywood and Drake (1997) suggest the third-wave generation was born between 1963 and 1974; while others argue years of birth are less relevant than having the experience of coming-of-age during the conservative era of the 1980s. These perspectives add to the confusion about third-wave feminism and its parameters, but lack a significant theoretical foundation in comparison with those I discuss below.

Reactionary Third-Wave Feminism

The first group includes those named in the popular press in the early-to-mid-1990s as third-wave feminists, the first popular surfacing of the term. During this time, women including Naomi Wolf (1993), Katie Roiphe (1993), Camille Paglia (1992; 1994), and Christina Hoff Sommers (1994) all published books criticizing second-wave feminism, although still identifying themselves as feminists.² Wolf (1993) originally uses the term third-

wave to differentiate her theories from second-wave feminism. Academic work on third-wave feminism often refers to this group of writers as “dissenters,” or “conservative postfeminists,” indicating that some feminists do not view criticism of second-wave feminism as a core component of third-wave feminism, but as a reactionary tactic used to draw media attention (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 1; Siegel, 1997).

This version of “third-wave” thinking, one I identify as *reactionary third-wave feminism*, bears little semblance to the other two perspectives of theoretical innovation commonly labeled third-wave feminism. In fact, on one level I would argue that most of these writers are better categorized as anti-feminist, and in no way belong among those producing third-wave theory.³ Sommers and Roiphe in particular, seek to discredit and criticize feminism as a goal in itself, not in a manner that suggests a constructive criticism that could lead to innovation and growth. This group did draw a significant amount of popular attention to feminism in the mid 1990s, and popular media assessments connected their anti-feminist diatribes to third-wave feminism, largely by virtue of their youthful ages. The fact that this reactionary “third-wave feminism” dominates news media understandings of contemporary feminism exacerbates much of the uncertainty about third-wave thought (see Bellafante, 1998). These writers do not present uniform ideas, nor do they advance a particular theoretical tradition. Rather, they each write polemics harshly indicting second-wave feminism on such grounds as constructing women as victims rather than empowering them, and overemphasizing the epidemic of acquaintance rape. The use of a very generalized understanding of second-wave feminism and representing second-wave feminists as being of one mind serves as a key tactic in composing their criticisms.

Women-of-Color Feminists / Third-Wave Feminists / Third-World Feminists

A more truly feminist branch of third-wave thinking focuses on including the intersection of various oppressions in feminist thought and activism. This group, alternatively identified as women-of-color feminists, third-wave feminists, and third-world feminists, has used the identifier third-wave longer than any of the other groups. Women-of-color adopted the term to define themselves and their activism against experiences of racial exclusion in second-wave feminist organizations (Short, 1994, p. 29). Short (1994) describes the position of these feminists⁴ as “wary of reproducing the same structures of invisibility enforced by a homogenization of ‘sisterhood’ within the women’s liberation movement that ignored ‘the divisions forged between women of color from varying backgrounds and heritages’” (p. 29; also see Mohanty, 1987; Sandoval, 1990).

As Short’s (1994) comments indicate, feminist theory written from the perspectives of women-of-color

existed prior to the idea of a third-wave gaining currency in more popular arenas. During the 1970s and 1980s, many women recognized that existing feminist theory was not sufficiently complex to understand or explain how oppression can be experienced differently within the broad category described as “women” (Combahee River Collective, 1986). These theorists advance understandings of feminism in relation to the multiple axes of domination under which many suffer. Theoretical perspectives including standpoint theories, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), outsider-within locations (Collins, 1990; 1998), and differential consciousness (Sandoval, 1991) all provide ways to understand and counter simultaneous oppressions based on varied aspects of one’s identity. Related, increased attention to transnational feminisms and seeking feminist understandings of the oppressions encountered by women in so-called “third world” countries through incorporating aspects of post-colonial theory also results in more complex considerations of feminism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). To distinguish these perspectives from other types of third-wave theory, I refer to this perspective as *women-of-color feminism* because of the centrality of race and ethnicity to this theoretical perspective and the use of this identifier in other scholarship.

Postfeminism

The third trajectory of third-wave feminist thinking is what I will refer to as *postfeminism*, a term already possessing a history of use (see Lotz, 2001). Although scholarship often endeavors to build on past knowledge or theory in a continued, cumulative advance toward understanding, work discussing postfeminism lacks a stable trajectory. Instead, scholars have repeatedly reinscribed the term, making it useless without citation of the intended definition (Modleski, 1991; Press, 1991; Dow, 1996; Probyn, 1997; Kim, 2001). The meaning of postfeminism common in the U.S. is much less sophisticated than the understanding connoted in many other national/theoretical contexts (Brooks, 1997; Phoca & Wright, 1999; Gamble, 2000). While initial confusion may exist, exploring the theoretical developments labeled as postfeminism enhances the depth of third-wave feminism by further grounding it with a distinctive theoretical base. Postfeminism provides a framework for emerging third-wave perspectives, which have wrongly been perceived as defined by generation or lifestyle attributes (see Shuggart, Waggoner, & O’Brien Hallstein, 2001), postfeminism addresses complicated theoretical developments such as poststructuralism, while also emphasizing the need to combat oppression caused by identity determinants that intersect with gender.

Recent theory developed by scholars outside of the United States contradicts a common negative use of postfeminism and redefines it as a critical interrogation of existing feminist theory seeking to refine rather than

discredit previous feminist work (Brooks, 1997; McRobbie, 1994).⁵ This varies from the use of postfeminism in popular media as anti-feminism or as a flippant assumption that feminism is no longer needed (Bellafante, 1998; Kim, 2001). This understanding also contradicts the more negative connotations advanced by scholars studying feminist discourse in media, such as Susan Faludi (1991), Andrea Press (1991), Tania Modleski (1991), and Bonnie Dow (1996).

Ann Brooks (1997) argues that postfeminism results from a breakdown in consensus during second-wave feminism in the areas of 1) the political effect of the critique by women-of-color, 2) the way first and second-wave feminism insufficiently contemplated the issue of sexual difference, and 3) the intersection of feminist thinking with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and post-colonialism (p. 8). Postfeminism is not at odds with third-wave feminism as theorized by women-of-color; rather it responds similarly with critiques of feminisms that have had racist and essentialist tendencies, as well as incorporates additional theoretical perspectives.⁶ Brooks (1997) writes:

Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticization of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms (p. 4).

The critical, academic use of postfeminism originates in the post-second-wave era with Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey's 1987 (1990) definition of postfeminism as demarcating "an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism" (p. 549; also Stacey, 1987).⁷ Notably, the theoretical definition Brooks (1997) advances rejects any indication that postfeminism involves a depoliticization of second-wave issues.

Each of these third-wave feminisms—reactionary, women-of-color, and postfeminism—responds to aspects of second-wave feminism. Reactionary third-wave feminists united in voice over what they argue is a tendency to construct women as victims in some second-wave ideology and strategy. Women-of-color feminists critique the race and ethnicity-based exclusion many experienced in second-wave organizing, as well as the inability of second-wave understandings of the category "women" to make adequate sense of the gross diversity among women. Postfeminists echo this focus on theorizing variant access to privilege among women, expanding the theoretical framework to include other factors defining identity, such as sexual orientation and class, as well as incorporating other theoretical and activist tools.

It is difficult to clearly differentiate women-of-color feminism and postfeminism. As Brooks' definition makes evident, the theories developed by women-of-color feminists largely have been subsumed within postfeminism, so that while a woman-of-color feminist may not agree with all of postfeminist thinking, postfeminists incorporate many of the perspectives and critiques offered by women-of-color feminists. Heywood and Drake (1997) identify the goal of postfeminism as "the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition politics based on these understandings—understandings that acknowledge the existence of oppression" (p. 3).⁷ Although postfeminists also incorporate postmodern and poststructuralist theory into their understanding of third-wave feminism, little difference appears between the postfeminist goal expressed by Heywood and Drake, and the goals of many women-of-color theorists.

Many of the thinkers who fall into the category I label as postfeminist identify themselves simply as third-wave feminists, and some define postfeminism differently from the definition I advance. In addition to the theoretical differences distinguishing third-wave feminism, a reconfiguration of activism and activist organization creates further separation between contemporary and previous understandings of feminism. Confusion about the discrepancies between the activism of the second-wave and those forms emerging in the third-wave provides another theoretical transition contributing to shifts in representations of feminist discourses.

Third-wave Activism and New Social Movements

Third-wave feminism departs from what was the core of second-wave liberal feminism on a key ideological issue. Where the second-wave liberal and cultural approaches sought to unify diverse women by appealing to a universal sisterhood, third-wave activists recognize the racist, heterosexist, classist and other

implications of the erasure of difference. Since third-wave thought largely results from the experiences of exclusion endured by women-of-color, much of the theoretical innovation it provides seeks strategies that reconceptualize activism as independent from the idea of a common womanhood.

An example of the reconfiguration of activism is the strategy of differential consciousness developed by Chela Sandoval (1991). Sandoval first conceptualizes differential consciousness as an activist tactic that contrasts with the rigid classification of feminisms evident in the dominant, hegemonic, feminism of white women. She challenges feminists to break with the desire to conceptualize feminist activism from only liberal, radical, or Marxist/socialist foundations. Sandoval explains differential consciousness through analogy to a standard transmission that allows one to shift between gears depending on the needs of each situation. Differential consciousness conceives of feminism as a landscape of issues better faced from some positions than others. In Sandoval's (1991) words:

Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, and class justice, when their readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands (p. 15).

Differential consciousness, then, proposes that feminists constantly shift the construction of the social movement and tactics for activism according to the situation. Applied at the personal level, differential consciousness provides for the individual to be a self-determined site of feminism, variously positioning oneself on issues (for or against the criminalization of pornography), tactics (arguing women are the same as men or women are different from men), and identities (today I foreground my race, tomorrow I foreground my sexuality).

Theorists such as Maria Lugones, Patricia Hill Collins, and Iris Marion Young pose similar strategies. Lugones (1990) acknowledges the utility of what she terms "world-travelling" as a useful exercise for understanding how various identity components configure women differently. She challenges readers to consider how they are differently constructed in "worlds" of home, work, or other areas. By identifying the forces constructing each of us, we are better able to understand aspects of subjectivity that position others differently. Collins (1990) advocates taking advantage of "outsider-

within" situations. An outsider-within location "describes a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group" (1998, p. 6). Collins (1990) frequently occupies such a location as the only African American woman among white colleagues. These moments help her understand biases and differences in perspective resulting from various subjectivities. Finally, Young (1994) believes that viewing gender as what Sartre terms a "series" provides tools for comprehending both the similarities and differences among women. Conceiving of womanhood as a series supposes that women are a "social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of others" (Young, 1994, p. 722). This aids in theorizing how women can have similar actions and goals, yet different histories, experiences, or identities at various points in their lives.

Each of these strategies differs from previous forms of feminist activism and provides important tools for understanding the differences among women. Such perspectives recognize the complexity of injustice and the intersection of multiple injustices, and respond with similarly complex formations for activism. Unlike those second-wave feminist perspectives that sought to create unity by downplaying discrepant privileges among women such as whiteness and wealth, third-wave feminism seeks solidarity through mutable alliances by acknowledging the disparate positions of power women occupy. Third-wave theory not only attempts to create a dialogue about difference, but also to integrate notions of difference into the foundations of feminist theory and practice. This theoretical shift from the second-wave focus on a more singular voice to the third-wave's commitment to embrace multiple identities, tactics, and causes is analogous to the structural differences between traditional social movements and new social movements.

A key differentiation between some versions of second and third-wave feminism, then, is found in how activists theorize and practice their work. Third-wave feminism is best categorized as a new social movement, a distinction denoting a marked shift in the theory and practice of social movements in the late twentieth century, postindustrial society (Touraine, 1971). New social movements differ from traditional social movements in three ways. First, they de-emphasize class-based allegiances while emphasizing other sources of identity (Pichardo, 1997, p. 411). Collective alignment over issues of material deprivation based on identities other than class allows for revolution and social change outside of the working class (Pichardo, 1997, p. 412; Wilson, 1995, p. 1633).⁹ Second, new social movements are often loosely constructed and fragmented rather than centralized and bounded movements. Ruud Koopmans (1996) describes this organization as "a switch from clustered, unidimensional, but often highly involving

patterns of participation to 'post-modern,' more fragmented, multi-dimensional, but also less binding patterns of participation" (p. 28). Finally, new social movements emphasize cultural concerns such as the power of language and the media in the maintenance of systems of oppression, as consistent with perspectives advanced in poststructuralist theory (Melucci, 1994).¹⁰

As a result of conceiving of third-wave feminism as a new social movement, solidarity may be so lacking that feminists take oppositional stances on controversial issues, as is the case with pornography. Consequently, the challenge for third-wave feminists seeking broad-based community organization is in bringing together those who disagree on certain issues to solve social problems. Feminist media scholar Elizabeth van Zoonen (1992) argues that new social movements consist "of a complex interplay of differently organized groups, individuals, subcultures, etc., which do share a common recognition of a social problem ... but which can hardly be defined in terms of one goal, strategy or organizational form" (p. 455). Such a movement may not appear to function in the most efficient manner, but is certainly more inclusive of those persons and interests regularly marginalized by more singularly-focused social movements.

Critics of new social movements and developments in third-wave feminist activism also argue that de-emphasizing a centralized collectivity with a singular agenda is not innovation but retreat. Despite this perception, collective action remains essential to third-wave feminist activism; however, an expectation that participants agree on all issues is not part of this construction of collectivity, which is instead based on acknowledging the various positions of power various people occupy. Contrary to proclamations regarding the death of feminism, this construction allows feminism to be more inclusive and enables it to remain viable in new social contexts. When women say, "I'm not a feminist, but ... I believe in the right to choice/I need better access to childcare/It makes me angry that my wage is lower than a white man's/I'm tired of being afraid," they express their alienation not from feminism, but from a perception that feminism provides a singular agenda from which one cannot vary.

Conclusion

The reason for this painstaking review of various iterations of third-wave feminism and its development as a new social movement is to acknowledge the complexity of the present terrain of feminist thinking. The complicated organization of new social movements and the confusion about third-wave feminism caused by inaccurate media portrayal make a shared understanding of this theoretical innovation difficult to communicate. In recent years, discussions of feminist theoretical endeavors and developments have been stymied by the lack of shared vocabulary, preventing conversations

because of the various assumptions held of third-wave feminism. For the past five to ten years, discussions of an emergent third-wave and theory-building identified as postfeminist have bubbled up organically in disparate national contexts. These ideas have much to offer on a global scale, but the idiosyncrasies of various perspectives must be reconciled so that conversations may be shared more broadly. Many have been too quick to dismiss the potential of third-wave thinking, while others have been too quick to accept new theories as tools to discredit second-wave ideas. Theorists such as Sandoval provide ideas of tremendous depth, and offer the potential to revolutionize both feminist thinking and practice.

More specifically, I have been frustrated by academic adoption of the most simplistic, reactionary iteration of third-wave feminism, of postfeminism as anti-feminism. I have seen many conference presentations and read multiple journal submissions applying the watered-down feminist theory created in marketing departments and used in popular journalism that then find third-wave theory reactionary and limiting. As you seek, so you find. In the past, feminist scholarship criticized mainstream media outlets for their misrepresentation of feminism and its goals (Faludi, 1991). Recently, some "feminist" criticism has taken the "theory" and definitions of third-wave feminism provided by outlets like *Time* as legitimate, and used it to critique third-wave/postfeminist thinking.

I am not suggesting that third-wave feminist theories provide a theoretical nirvana, but the ideas of the truly theoretical third-wave groups (women-of-color and postfeminists) offer noteworthy contributions. A fundamental problem in communicating third-wave theory in the U.S. has been the articulation of third-wave perspectives in works of a primarily experiential format (Findlen, 1995; Walker, 1995; Heywood & Drake, 1997). Even those works grounded in a more activist and theoretical base, such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards' (2000) *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, lack the organization and the language that feminist scholars have used to secure acceptance within the academy. There is certainly great value in feminist writing that is accessible to a general audience, however, the lack of an established place for third-wave ideas pre-dating these works has complicated academic deliberation of these ideas.

Feminist innovation requires shared conversations and theory building. To start with, many disciplines would benefit from a serious interrogation of existing third-wave theory and attempts to expand its range rather than invalidate or discredit it. Some articles in a special issue of *Hypatia* in the summer of 1997 attempted this endeavor, but follow-up work has been lacking (Zita, 1997). Academic feminists must move beyond using articulations of third-wave feminism found in mass media outlets, and instead aid their students in deconstructing these stories as part of the history of the

simplification and containment of feminism in the popular sphere. Assessments of reactionary third-wave feminists should also remain at the margins of our work, and we should be vigilant in preventing anti-feminist voices from hijacking popular discourse on feminisms in contemporary societies and the necessary endeavors of feminist activism. Far too much effort has been expended assessing the significance of a “new wave” of feminism and the related generational strife the metaphor of “waves” suggests.¹ Third-wave feminism provides valuable theoretical tools that allow for multiple and varied feminist positions and activism in the same moment, so that the development of its ideas should not be viewed as a backlash against or erasure of various second-wave feminisms.

The emergence of third-wave theory in its various theoretical iterations indicates the continued dynamism of feminist theory, and the articles throughout this issue illustrate the complex and varied issues to which feminist theories respond. As I noted in the introduction, this article focuses on a particular national perspective, but the questions about theory building and dissemination that emerge here provide a case framework for exploring similar questions in relation to other feminisms in other contexts. Within the U.S., third-wave theory developed in response to the limitations of essentialist understandings of women that narrowed the relevance of some features of second-wave activism, and its attention to the diverse experiences of women aids in understanding not only the U.S. context, but the varied realities for women around the globe.

Many Western countries, and particularly the U.S., have experienced extraordinary changes since the advent of second-wave activism, but there is much more to do both in these comparatively privileged contexts and in those that have not changed as swiftly. The discontent with the status quo voiced in many third-wave criticisms is not a critique of second-wave feminism, so much as a critique of societies that still need much feminist intervention. The great disparity in problems women face in varying national contexts requires sophisticated theory. The exchange of goods and services in the transnational sphere that characterizes globalization also requires increased exchange of ideas among feminists to make better sense of shared problems. Women-of-color-feminists and postfeminists have contributed new ideas to feminist thinking. Considering their ideas does not require a disavowal of those ideas that have come before, but a renewed emphasis on theoretical innovation, particularly in ways that can be translated into activist praxis.

Notes

- 1 As Echols notes, even the category of radical feminism is composed of many sub-categories of different groups of radical feminists with divergent beliefs among them. Also see Daly, 1979; and Firestone, 1970.
- 2 For more description of each see Craig, 2002.

- 3 Categorizing the work of Naomi Wolf is complicated. Her first book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1991) had a clear feminist foundation, but subsequent books *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it Will Change the 21st Century* (1993) and *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle from Womanhood* (1998) deviated from this original trajectory. Personally, I have more difficulty classifying her work as anti-feminist than the contemporaries with which she is often compared, but her work also lacks the theoretical emphases common among the other groups of third-wave feminists.
- 4 Many of these women choose not to identify as feminists because of the term's connection to the hegemonic and racist practices of mainstream feminism, despite holding beliefs concurring with general feminist ideologies. Alice Walker proposes the term womanist as an alternative to feminist as a way to indicate an understanding of feminism that seeks to end all forms of oppression. See Walker, 1983.
- 5 Other relevant examinations have come to my attention since the final drafting of this article. See also Hollows, 2000; Mosley & Read, 2002; Read, 2000; Brunsdon, 1997.
- 6 Postmodern and poststructuralist theories are not completely lacking in the work of women-of-color. Some of the more recent works have begun integrating these perspectives. Overall, women-of-color theorists have been more suspicious of the relativistic excesses of some versions of postmodern theory, and therefore less likely to give these ideas a central position in theoretical constructions. See Collins, 1998, pp. 124-154.
- 7 Postfeminism, however, was not a new term. Faludi (1991) notes the term first appears in the 1920s press, commenting on the need for feminism following the victory of suffrage (p. 50).
- 8 Although these authors use the designation third-wave feminism rather than postfeminism, their theoretical base is consistent with what is termed postfeminism in this article.
- 9 This is sometimes described as identity politics, a notion that should not be understood to indicate that individuals have essential personal understandings of issues based on a particular categorization of who they are, but as the recognition that they find themselves defined by a package of different identities affecting distributions of power and how they understand those distributions of power. In other words, concern with material aspects exists in new social movements as well as in traditional social movements, despite the fact that “identity politics” has wrongly come to mean a complete absence of material concern to many. Perspectives offered by a range of feminists-of-color aids in rehabilitating the term as denigrated mainly by white feminists. See Collins, 1998; and Mohanty, 1991.
- 10 Poststructuralist theorists who argue that relations of power exist everywhere in society and that power is even transmitted in forms appearing innocuous like the structures of words and language influenced Melucci, who emphasizes the power in language and applies it to social movement theory.
- 11 Garrison's (2000) replacement of the oceanic wave metaphor with radio waves provides a valuable exception, as does Siegel's (1997) assessment of waves. Much of Garrison's dissertation complements the perspective I advance, and provides much greater depth.

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