

What's Political about the New Feminisms?

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The "new feminisms": postfeminism, power feminism, third-wave feminism, do-me feminism, libertarian feminism, babe feminism, I'm not a feminist, but . . . "feminism."

In this article, I examine these "new feminisms" to argue that they are not simply part of a backlash against feminism but are instead, in many cases, part of an ongoing contest over the meaning of feminism. Critical commentary on new feminisms has often accused this work of conflating consumerism with political action, personal change with political change, and cultural and cosmetic accommodations with economic and political restructuring.¹ While not entirely unfounded, these criticisms undervalue the real contributions some recent feminisms are making to social liberation movements, because these contributions do not easily fit into more familiar models of feminist politics. Rather than dismissing all the new feminisms as media hype or conservative backlash, I prefer to subject them to careful interrogation, not least because in addition to influencing some feminist work in the academy, they have had a far-ranging influence in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

Most of the new feminisms can be grouped under the rubrics of "post-feminism," "third-wave feminism," or both; these describe a loosely related set of beliefs about the contemporary scope and role of feminism as well as the sites and possibilities for the development and deployment of political agency. Because these terms—postfeminism and third-wave feminism—are often (usually erroneously) used interchangeably, I want to explicate the different meanings of the terms and show how they are related (a shared "girl power" ideal), as well as how they are not (in nearly all other ways). While both are responses to dissatisfactions with liberal, socialist, and radical forms of second-wave feminist theory, they express these dissatisfactions for somewhat different reasons and in different ways, as I will show in the next

section of this article. While postfeminism has exerted more political and cultural influence, I argue that third-wave feminism holds the most promise for building on and expanding outward from previous feminist theory and political practice.

Ultimately, my objective in this piece is to answer three questions:

what is *political* about this work;

what is *feminist* about this work; and

what is *new* about this work?

These questions are important yet fraught with definitional difficulties. Who is to say (definitively) what feminism is? Any definition I provide will both inevitably and rightly be contested by others within the loose amalgamation of people known as the “feminist movement.” Feminism has always been many movements working for multiple ends. I neither insist on nor defend a narrow definition of feminism here, but I do assume that “women” and “gender” are two of the central categories of feminist analyses; though “woman” cannot readily be disaggregated from other identity categories, gender as a political organizing principle is central to feminist inquiry and activism.² Second, what counts as political? Second-wave feminism criticized traditional definitions of politics for being too narrowly defined and for discounting much of the political work that women engage in. In different ways, postfeminism and third-wave feminism are taking up two of the earlier feminist ideas that follow from this critique: “personal is political” and cultural politics is *real* politics.

But, as I argue in the final section of this article, third-wave feminists have generally provided a weak argument for the political significance of their cultural interventions, and they have yet to articulate the relationship to feminism of such interventions. Still, a politics is being developed. As I understand it, what is political about some third-wave feminism is, first, the coalition-building that has become increasingly central and has changed some of the objects of feminist inquiry; and, second, a committed focus on intersectional identities and multilayered discrimination. While intersectionality is not itself a “politics,” it is an attempt to shift the epistemological standpoint of feminism, providing a new subject position from which feminist critique is articulated. The position from which knowledge is articulated can have dramatic implications for the kinds of politics that are then seen as viable and valuable. So as intersectionality shapes feminist activism, new possibilities for coalitions become visible, and the specific goals or political projects of feminism are fruitfully reconceived as well.

Unfortunately, in too many cases, third-wave new feminist work still labels all “left” political action as “feminist” (as well as whatever else it is) without explaining *why* it is feminist. Therefore, after explaining the rise and content of postfeminism and third-wave girl power in the next section and the content of other variants of third-wave feminism in the third section of the article, I conclude by arguing that this epistemological shift has enabled a focus on political coalitions that is exciting and necessary, but whose connection to feminism needs to be specified and defended. Similarly, the cultural artifacts that many new feminists produce and consume could serve a political movement (or set of related movements) well, but they must move beyond being merely the accoutrements of a slickly marketed girl-power identity.

GOOD-BYE TO ALL THAT: POSTFEMINISM³

The label “postfeminist” has been used to describe both young women and the cultural climate at least since 1982, although the term gained greater currency in the early 1990s.⁴ Originally, postfeminist “meant, according to pundits and pollsters, that young women enjoyed the fruits of the women’s movement—better access to employment, equal education, being taken more seriously—but believed the battle had already been won.”⁵ Thus, the postfeminist argument was that for women in the 1970s and 1980s, the women’s movement had once been necessary, but now it was a victim of its own success, having made itself irrelevant. Women who persisted in calling attention to sexism, postfeminists claimed, were needlessly fighting old battles.⁶ Conservative activists have used this rhetoric, but many people and organizations who are sympathetic to what feminism achieved offer similar, though more nuanced, arguments.⁷

Currently, the term postfeminism is used by different groups of people in at least three specific, different ways. First, its original meaning remains intact for those who argue that feminism’s time has come and gone; ergo, we are *postfeminism*, with an emphasis on “feminism” because what it represents as a social movement and the statement it implicitly makes about the nature and status of women are offensive and inappropriate in the current era.⁸ Then there are others who argue that the legacy of feminism exists in such an altered state that we can no longer call it simply “feminism.” This position draws on critiques generated by the second wave of feminist praxis, especially critiques of essentialism launched by lesbian and women-of-color feminists,⁹ and it often includes work that refers to itself as third-wave or “girl power feminism”¹⁰ while many theoreticians and cultural pundits label

it *postfeminism*.¹¹ Third and finally, for some, postfeminism indicates work inspired by poststructuralist, postmodern, or multicultural theory, specifically in relation to the critique of the stable, unitary political subject that was presumed to be the necessary locus for feminist agency and politics.¹² I discuss the first two understandings as postfeminism in this article, but I do not wish to confuse or conflate postmodernism or multiculturalism either with the idea that we are beyond feminism, or with “girl power.” Thus, while postfeminism has been used in all of these ways, one task of this section is to explain why it makes sense both conceptually and politically to limit “postfeminism” to the first usage outlined above. The second point of this section is to clarify the point that post- and third-wave feminism are sometimes conflated because specific aspects of postfeminism helped generate “girl power” (or “Girlie”) feminism, itself an aspect of third-wave feminism: speaking purely chronologically, postfeminism arose first and then became a point of departure for early girl-power third-wave feminism.

The Origins of Postfeminism: “Victim Feminism” and the Sex Wars

Postfeminists (in the limited sense explained above) include Camille Paglia, Rene Denfeld, Cathy Young, members of the Women’s Freedom Network, and “ifeminists,” a loosely aligned group of individualist or libertarian feminists. The basic political theme around which these diverse groups and individuals coalesce is the desire to remove the state as far from the “personal” sphere as possible, which can mean anything from legalizing prostitution to radically downscaling the state-level response to sexual harassment and domestic violence. On the cultural terrain, postfeminists attempt to do two things, in some cases simultaneously. First, postfeminists reclaim both traditional femininity and heterosexuality, the latter with its power struggles and normative gender differences more or less intact (and sometimes celebrated). Second, and directly related to their political arguments, they decry what Naomi Wolf calls “victim feminism.”¹³ Postfeminists use this label as shorthand for the claim that feminism has focused almost exclusively on—and overstated—the victimization that women face in their personal, professional, and political lives; rather than being victims, they claim, women as a group hold significant social power, in part *because of* the stereotypes of women as gentler, fairer, more believable, less violent, more victimized, etc., than men. Not only has “victim feminism” ignored this social power, but, postfeminists argue, women abuse the power that comes with these “sugar and spice and all that’s nice” assumptions to render men impotent in the courts of law and public opinion on issues such as sexual harassment, child

custody, and education, for example. On this account the idea of women as victims is both bad for women and empirically false.¹⁴

In differentiating themselves from the second wave by decrying “victim feminism” and reclaiming traditional femininity as positive and empowering, postfeminists in the 1990s were engaging some of the second wave’s arguments more directly than others. One obvious case is the “sex wars,” a schism within feminist movements over the questions of whether women can have an independent sexuality under conditions of discrimination or oppression. The sex wars have broken out periodically among U.S. feminists in and out of the academy since at least the 1970s, and the postfeminism of Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf, and others constitutes another intervention in the conflict. In the 1980s, the debate was primarily over the regulation of pornography and the question of whether legal interventions were more likely to ameliorate harms to women or aggravate them by stigmatizing sexual nonconformists and women’s own sexual explorations, making sweeping and harmful judgments about “good” and “bad” sex. Radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Susan Brownmiller argued in favor of legal regulation or elimination of pornography and prostitution because of the harms to women in these industries and the causal connections radical feminists drew between the depictions of women in pornography and the fact of rape. In contrast, “sex radical” or “sex-positive” feminists argued that the “market” should be kept as open as possible to allow multiple views of women and their sexuality to flourish, fighting images some women dislike with images and ideas that they want to encourage.¹⁵

In the 1990s, the sex wars flared again, with postfeminists opposed to most organized feminist work around rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the legal interventions that accompanied some of this activism, such as the Violence Against Women Act and class action lawsuits to fight sexual harassment in the workplace. In addition to arguments that there was too much policing of “good” versus “bad” sex and desire, postfeminists argued that these legal responses failed to acknowledge women’s own sexual agency, turning all women into victims in the eyes of the law and then, often, themselves.

Another notable issue within second-wave feminism with which postfeminism opted to engage with was the dispute between sameness and difference feminisms.¹⁶ Liberal feminism has offered the “sameness” approach to understanding what women need from the remedial forces of the law. In this view, women are autonomous agents and, in all the ways that matter politically, just like men. Liberal feminists argue that women can make choices that are not self-defeating if they are given an equal shot at getting into the institu-

tions of power. Making opportunities equal is simply a matter of removing specific barriers that say “no women here.” In contrast, radical and cultural feminists offered the “difference” approach, arguing that gender-differentiated patterns of behavior are not the result of autonomous choices but rather are the result of structural inequalities, gendered socialization, innate difference, or a combination of these. The legal remedy is institutional recognition of this difference, which should then lead to institutional accommodation of women’s differences from men.

Since at least some postfeminism is not simply a backlash against feminism but includes writers and activists who are engaging with these important second-wave debates, we might expect postfeminists to articulate a new political path out of the sex wars or the sameness/difference arguments. But in actuality, postfeminists have ended up crafting a depoliticized “pro-sex liberal sameness *and* difference” position in which public and private are to be clearly demarcated. In private life, women and men should recognize and respect their basic differences. In public, women and men should be treated equally (that is, exactly the *same*) because the institutional barriers to access that need to be broken down already have been, and second-wave feminism has pushed institutions too far in the difference direction, “coddling” women instead of allowing them to flourish or flounder on their own merits. Thus, despite the clear intentions of most feminists to identify “victimization not so we can wallow in it, but so we can wallop it,”¹⁷ postfeminists claim that feminists have erased women’s agency and are seeking state protection of special interests rather than trying to grow up and take care of themselves.¹⁸

In the postfeminist view, feminists need to “loosen up.” Young women today, they claim, simply want equal access to employment without having to worry about how they’re dressing or having sex.¹⁹ Women today are confident in their bodies and with their sexuality and do not need a political movement to tell them what is demeaning and what is liberating. According to British new feminist Natasha Walter, if feminism wants to “build on all the new female confidence that exists,” it cannot be “a rigid ideology that alienates and divides women.”²⁰ Here, incidentally, is one important area where third-wave and postfeminism overlap: not only does second-wave feminism require one to forego humor and “make lifestyle and attitude adjustments according to the Commandments of Political Correctness . . . [by] developing a supersensitivity to anything that might be somewhat offensive,” according to third-wave feminist Kristina Sheryl Wong, but women must forego feminine trappings and regulate their sexual desire as well.²¹ Not so the third-wave feminist: “sexy is in,” as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards tell us re-

peatedly in *Manifesta*. Most sex is good, and more sex is better. Sexual regulation is as harmful and demeaning to women as pornography, or more so.

*Postfeminism and the Rise of Girl Power: The Connections
Between Postfeminist Women and Early Third-Wave "Girlies"*

Postfeminism seems to have incorporated and depoliticized many of the goals of second-wave equality feminists, focusing on personal choices rather than political action. These moves coincided with scholarly and media attention to perceived and real shifts in the lives of girls, shifts collected under the label "girl power": "Girls are doing better at school, girls are sassy, girls are not frightened, girls are confident, girls are even violent. Girls, now, are the beneficiaries of the battles that feminists once fought: they take for granted their equality with boys—even superiority over boys."²² As I will explain in this section, this idea of girl power, combined with the postfeminist ideal of "power feminism," set the stage for the rise of third-wave feminism. I examine "power feminism" and third-wave "Girlie"²³ or "girl power" together because there are important areas of overlap. In the next section of the article, I will explain how third-wave feminism has moved beyond its early intermingling with postfeminist ideals to become a more politically engaged movement.

As Natasha Walter, author of *The New Feminism*, writes, these new feminisms comprise "a celebratory and optimistic movement."²⁴ A woman can do or wear whatever she wants, so long as it's done with an appropriately fierce, optimistic attitude. Girlie feminism in particular is the "intersection of feminism with feminine culture."²⁵ This version of the new feminism then combines an optimistic sense of possibility with a "new" model of self-presentation (which looks very much like certain old models of self-presentation). In this celebratory movement, nearly all of women's choices are affirmed, making it positive and supporting for the individual woman, and nonthreatening to anything or anyone else.²⁶

Feminism as the power of positive thinking is perhaps nowhere more obvious or apt a description than when applied to the work of Naomi Wolf, who also happens to be the postfeminist most often claimed by third-wave feminists. In her 1993 book *Fire With Fire*, Wolf launched both the epithet "victim feminism" and the theory of "power feminism," two core concepts in the postfeminist/Girlie feminist nexus. Wolf presents what she admits is a "highly subjective comparison" of victim-feminist and power-feminist approaches to understanding women as political subjects. None of her characterizations of either type of feminism are identified with any particular person or group, though she does eventually offer a hint about who her specific

“victim feminist” foils are.²⁷ But claims like the following are, at best, caricatures of amalgams of various feminist positions:

victim feminism charges women to identify with powerlessness even at the expense of taking responsibility for the power they do possess; is sexually judgmental, even antisexual [*sic*] . . . puts community first and self later, hence tends toward groupthink, as well as toward hostility toward individual achievement; is judgmental of other women’s sexuality and appearance . . . is obsessed with purity and perfection, hence is self-righteous . . . has a psychological scarcity: there is only so much to go around, so one woman’s gain is another’s loss. . . .²⁸

Wolf seems to be taking issue with those who have pointed out that only *some* women have gained significant improvements in their standard of living since the legislative successes of the second wave and that, therefore, the battle to restructure the public sphere so that *all* women benefit is not over.

Third-wave authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards mischaracterize second-wave feminism in the much the same way when they reject the anticonsumerism of some feminism and write that “younger women, who have grown up with increased access to the ‘good’ parts of capitalism, have begun to ponder the fact that asking women to opt out is essentially asking them to choose to be marginalized.”²⁹ But many women, both younger and older, still do not enjoy this increased access to the “good parts of capitalism,” and until they do, it seems more accurate to say that feminists do not suffer from “psychological scarcity” but rather that, even in the United States, many women suffer from actual material scarcity created by a grossly unequal distribution of abundant resources. And pointing out, as many second- and third-wave feminists of color have, that some women are “making it” in part because they have been able to hire other women to do their home and service work does not equate to asking women to be marginalized or arguing that no woman should succeed because some women might lose, but to asking women with more power in some realms to use that power to help other women benefit from the power they have gained with the assistance of feminism.

In the place of “victim feminism,” Wolf offers “power feminism,” which has many attractive features and demonstrates why she is claimed by both third-wave and postfeminists. To my mind, what makes Wolf postfeminist are not her *goals*, as many of these are advocated by the very feminisms she criticizes. For example, Wolf claims that power feminism, in contradistinction to victim feminism, “knows that poverty is not glamorous [and] wants women to acquire money, both for their own dreams, independence, and security, and for social change,”³⁰ as if generations of feminists had not been

asserting this same point when arguing for equal pay for equal work, changes to the education system, or even pay for homemakers. What makes her a postfeminist, then, is her *method* for achieving these goals, which is based on the development of “a psychology of abundance [that] wants all women to ‘equalize upward.’”³¹ This power feminism “is unapologetically sexual [and] understands that good pleasures make good politics, . . . believes women deserve to feel that the qualities of starlets and queens, of sensuality and beauty, can be theirs . . . [and] knows that making social change does not contradict the principle that girls just want to have fun.”³² Power feminism’s motto: “If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.”³³ Her view is certainly optimistic, but perhaps also myopic.

How can a movement allow all women to dance (to their own beat)? First, on Wolf’s account, by foregoing collective action and collective political identities in favor of individualism—which might leave one wondering what makes postfeminism a “movement.” Even the more politically engaged new feminisms struggle with the tension between understanding the need to work in groups and coalitions and the strong appeal of individualism. As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake admit in their introduction to *Third Wave Agenda*, “Despite our knowing better, despite our knowing its emptiness, the ideology of individualism is still a major motivating force in many third-wave lives.”³⁴ According to many new feminists, one reason for this emphasis on individualism is that, while second-wave feminism was an outsider organization, today’s young feminists see feminism as very much on the inside; it is something they have grown up with “in the water, like fluoride.”³⁵ There is little need for collective action—and the sacrifice that comes with it—when all that is left to achieve is a proper psychological orientation toward one’s own political and economic opportunities.

Another reason for postfeminism’s focus on individualism stems from its problematic depiction of second-wave feminism, which rewrites the second wave as a movement controlled by an overly dogmatic, single-minded group of women and also misrepresents the slogan “the personal is political.” The slogan was meant to create an awareness of how seemingly private decisions and experiences are affected by political forces, but post- and third-wave feminisms assume it to be a prescription for how to live one’s life. Thus they misread the analytical point of the slogan and take it to mean that one group of women should dictate how “feminists” have sex and wear their hair, for example. This is the “straw person feminism” they erect in order to reject it. In addition, Girlie third-wavers, following Naomi Wolf, sometimes adopt an etiolated version of the slogan that says, in essence, “whatever I do personally is political because I am a feminist.”³⁶

The second way in which a movement can allow women to “dance” to their own beat is by offering one simple prescription: embrace power. Wolf writes that “women are suffering from much subordination for no more pressing reason than that we have stopped short of compelling it to end.”³⁷ It’s not necessarily that there isn’t still work to do, from Wolf’s perspective, but that women are not doing it correctly; they are not grabbing power now that it is available, and they are not having enough fun.³⁸ Women need “positive imagery” and “a widely understood, positive logo”³⁹—as opposed to affordable, quality health care, widespread reproductive freedom and education, or a living wage. (Or even a reassessment of what “embracing power” means. If this is simply an excuse for women to abuse and exploit others, then there is nothing feminist left in “power feminism.”)

Thus, in the logic of the postfeminist and the “Girlie,” the self is affirmed. In this account of the world, because feminist ideals are women’s birthright and they know it, the primary obstacle preventing women from fully taking control of their own lives is continued victimization rhetoric.⁴⁰ Instead, women should focus on their individual empowerment and choice: wear makeup or don’t; have whatever sex you want or none at all; be for or against legalized abortion.⁴¹ But this deceptive rhetoric of choice fails to consider constraints on different racial, sexual, or class positions. In an era when the United States is witnessing the dearth of both accurate sexual education in most public schools and women’s health clinics in most areas of the United States, for example, this Girlie ideal of a smorgasbord of equally viable sexual, career, and family options is inadequate to challenge the political realities of most women’s lives.

As we saw in the long quote from Wolf above, in addition to allegedly claiming universal and totalizing victimization and discouraging women from being assertive, second-wave feminists are, according to postfeminists, dowdy, anti-sexual prudes who fail to account for women’s need to feel desirable. Yet many among the earlier generations of feminists were far from “anti-sexual” as they proclaimed women’s right to own and embrace their sexuality on their own terms rather than (only) in prepackaged, pre-approved, and mass-marketed tropes of “sexiness” filtered quite heavily through the male gaze.⁴² But much of the “new” feminism wants to get back to traditional models of femininity and feminine adornment, shunting aside years’ worth of work demonstrating how the body serves as a locus of social control that cannot be displayed without engaging the social contexts in which women live and work.⁴³

In *Manifesta*, Baumgardner and Richards claim that “while it’s true that embracing the pink things of stereotypical girlhood isn’t a radical gesture

meant to overturn the way society is structured, it can be a confident gesture.⁴⁴ And this “gesture” of confidence is the focus of much of the politics that the third wave does offer, a point at which third-wave and postfeminism come uncomfortably close. Sounding very much like Naomi Wolf and Natasha Walter, Baumgardner and Richards write that

Girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual; against the necessity of brass-buttoned, red-suited seriousness to infiltrate a man's world; against the anachronistic belief that because women could be dehumanized by porn (and we include erotica in our definition), they must be; and the idea that girls and power don't mix.⁴⁵

As this quotation suggests, Girlie feminism is one of the clearest examples of the third wave's roots in the sex wars. To be Girlie is to reclaim traditional models of heterosexual power relations as pleasurable rather than demeaning and to embrace standard tropes of feminine sexuality; to revel in images and self-presentations of female sexiness that are often unreconstructed and uninterrogated. In the new sex wars, women as well as men participate in female objectification—making sex objects of other women and of themselves, “ironically” adopting the male gaze as their own. But the sexy dressing, the consumption of women's sexuality by women, or the attempts to be “in on the joke” rather than demonstrating a passé prudishness about sexual harassment, are rarely connected to any discussion about expanding models of sexual pleasure or increasing women's sexual liberation. Women's sexuality is still objectified, rather than being subject-centered; women are still supposed to project desirability in conformity with a commodified, Barbie Doll-like image of women and their sexual availability, for men's consumption. New models of sexual gratification or women's own sense of what is desirable to them, what turns them on (all projects of second-wave sex-positive feminists), are nowhere in evidence in the girl power or power feminist literature.⁴⁶

The continuum between postfeminist power feminism and third-wave “girl power” is made clear in the definition of “girlhood” provided by Baumgardner and Richards. Girlies are both “those preadolescents who are climbing trees and playing with Barbie” and “those grown women on *Sex in the City* who in their independence, their bonds with female friends, and their love of feminine fashion invoke a sense of eternal girlhood.”⁴⁷ But if girlhood “is more a state of being than an age,”⁴⁸ then one might stop to ask, why not “womanhood” instead? How empowering can “girl power” be if it has to be cut down to size; made juvenile; stripped of the connotation of emotional

maturity and adult personal and political responsibility that womanhood denotes but girlhood elides? While third-wave feminists say that they have more fun, what are the political and social costs of privileging fun over or instead of political and economic clout? How is Girlie, then, all that different from the infantilizing dismissal of women's complex adult subjectivity—prevalent in previous generations and still very much part of the culture today—that second-wave feminists were fighting against? How is the “Girlie” girl politically empowering in a way that womanhood is not, and why the assumption that *women* can't have fun, too? “Girlie” denotes an unthreatening, submissive, easy-to-control femaleness—as opposed to a fully formed adult subjectivity and political prowess—combined with an emphasis on “sexy dressing” and “ironic” participation in women's sexual objectification. This Girlie chauvinism narrows rather than expands models of women's adult subjectivity and sexuality. What remains is a hypersexualized collusion with the gender status quo.

Thus, a significant problem with the postfeminist girl power position is that it confuses a determined reclamation of femininity with a feminist statement on agency. While wearing lipstick and miniskirts might feel empowering and freely chosen, such freedom and empowerment are often—at least to some degree—illusory given the individual's inability to control the reading of her actions. The adorned body situated in fields of social inequality has a material significance. Only if one chooses to ignore the still-existing political inequalities of women (relative to men and to each other) can reappropriating “femininity” be as unproblematic as postfeminists, and many third-wave feminists, claim. Even the defiant occupation of a feminine space, as it were, cannot substitute for a broad program working for social equality, nor can it alone will into being a respect for feminine difference.⁴⁹

Evident as well in an individualistic, consumerist, power-feminist “fun” politics is a misappropriation of feminist work on resistance and playful difference.⁵⁰ The result is that for postfeminism the agency evidenced by resistance is firmly located in the atomistic individual who acts against the world, rather than the individual complexly situated in various institutional and discursive contexts. Drawing rather loosely on the “always already there” potential for resistance in particular situations, postfeminism fails to contextualize the possibility for resistance. Post- and third-wave feminists seem to believe that because certain actions are open to both liberating and discriminatory readings, the liberating meaning (because it is the one they prefer) is dominant, or at least sufficient, to counterbalance the negative weight of the images they project. These new feminisms thus disaggregate cultural representations of women's bodies and choices from the political messages they

have been tied to and the material effects that have resulted. This does not mean that one cannot engage in “sexy dressing” and be a feminist, but it does mean that a lack of attention to context and power is not the same as the resistant disruption of heteronormative feminine gender.

FROM GIRLIE POSTFEMINISM TO THE NEW THIRD WAVE⁵¹

To those troubled by second-wave feminism’s alleged focus on women’s victimization, postfeminism offers one way of distinguishing oneself from that position. Third-wave feminism is another, newer response to second-wave feminism that is clearly informed by postfeminism, particularly in its “girlie” aesthetic and power feminism optimism. In the fifteen years since Rebecca Walker conferred the label on like-minded activists, however, third-wave feminism has increasingly distanced itself from some of postfeminism’s excesses and foibles. While there can be some true boundary crossers—Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe are either third-wave or postfeminist depending upon whom you ask and how broadly you stretch the definitions of each—what marks the third wave as distinct from postfeminism is a slowly growing, explicitly articulated sense of imbrication between older and newer self-identified feminisms, sometimes continuing to invoke gender as a meaningful category of political and social analysis. The degree of overlap with second-wave feminism that third-wavers recognize or desire varies, as does their critique of individualism. Third-wave feminism has been enacted, produced, and articulated in a variety of venues, but the core ideas of the third wave can be found in its central texts: two collections of personal stories about individual feminist moments or awakenings (Barbara Findlen’s edited volume *Listen Up* and Rebecca Walker’s collection *To Be Real*), two volumes of more traditionally academic articles (Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake’s *Third-Wave Agenda* and Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier’s *Catching a Wave*), a collection of essays by grassroots activists (Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin’s *The Fire This Time*) and one call-to-arms that tries to bridge the anecdotal and theoretical work (Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ *Manifesta*).

The “third wave” of feminism can be defined in terms of the theory it produces, the “Girlie” aesthetic it espouses, or the generation it is meant to mark. These are not completely discrete categories. Most self-defined third-wavers are of a particular age group, though not all feminists in that age range define themselves as third-wave. “Girlie” feminists constitute the largest and best-known group of third-wavers, and their ideas influence more theoretical pieces to varying degrees. The politically and theoretically richer elements of

the third wave are a smaller group, though becoming more prominent. In this section of the article, I trace the more recent development of the third wave to explain the politics that is emerging as this work evolves. From an essentially apolitical beginning described in the previous section, one can see the contours of a growing political group of “new feminisms” that draw upon the legacy of feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s while often trying to meld its cultural critiques and interventions with political action and engaging in coalition-building that rejuvenates the evolving, ongoing projects of the second wave rather than rejecting them.

Not “Just a Girl”: Feminism for Young Women

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards—perhaps the most widely cited third-wave feminists—claim that, as a *generational* phenomenon, third-wave feminism refers to

the core mass of the current women’s movement in their late teens through their thirties, roughly speaking—the ones who grew up with Judy Blume books, *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, and *Sesame Street*. Another way of looking at Third-Wave is as the ‘daughters,’ both real and metaphorical, of the Second Wave, the women who read *Ms. Magazine*, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and lobbied for *Roe v. Wade* and the ERA.⁵²

While this definition captures many who consider themselves part of a new era of feminist thinking in the United States, it is overly broad as well as both politically and psychologically problematic. First, many of the feminist theorists who fit the age and cultural reference profile that Baumgardner and Richards describe do not identify as third-wave feminists, nor is their work properly understood as part of this group. Second, thinking of third-wave (or even post-) feminism as a generational phenomenon and using the language that Baumgardner and Richards invoke presents at least two significant theoretical and political problems.

First, the “mother-daughter” language risks turning legitimate, substantive political and theoretical differences among groups of feminists into privatized, psychological dramas of mother-daughter family feuds. The many authors who have used the mother-daughter language to describe the relationship between the second and third waves embolden the depoliticization of feminism begun by postfeminism, and they aid the larger narrative, particularly in the popular press, of feminist “cat-fighting.”⁵³ While it is true that the phrase “third-wave feminism” was coined by Rebecca Walker, who was very publicly repudiating the politics of her prominent second-wave

feminist mother Alice Walker, this does not make the larger narrative of a daughters' rebellion politically viable or theoretically accurate.

Second, as Robyn Wiegman has persuasively argued, the idea of a generational transmission of feminism incorrectly assumes that feminism as a body of work is the same thing as the agents who produce it, and that women who come to feminist theory and practice at different times owe a filial loyalty to those who have come before them. Because feminism is not an entity or action that occurs in some linear fashion—because it is always polymorphous and changing—there is no coherent way “to be in time with feminism.” Hence, the idea of the generational transmission of feminism contains within it the problematic idea of paradigmatic uniformity and linear development that Wiegman, and I, would like us to move away from.⁵⁴ Even the language of the “waves” invokes the sense of feminism as a discrete product that gets singularly “updated” every generation or so. While the context of an era influences the type of analyses that are produced in critical inquiries, such inquiries are far too complex to be self-contained or relegated to the dustbin of history every twenty years or so.

But while younger feminists do not owe loyalty to earlier feminists in terms of reproducing their analytical paradigms, they do owe their interlocutors and their predecessors an intellectual honesty about just what second-wave feminism is and was. Many third-wave writers, like most postfeminists, mischaracterize the second wave by painting broad, undifferentiated caricatures of self-centered, white, liberal, homophobic women, failing to account for the movement's nuance and variation. This enables the myth of linear transmission but misses the dynamic nature of a movement. While socialist, radical, and women of color feminist critical praxis were all part of the “second wave,” those who adopt the label of the third wave either ignore this work or treat it as though it were somehow outside of the political practices of these times, as though second-wave feminism *was* white, liberal feminism, and all other feminist activity between the 1960s and the 1980s was a separate phenomenon. In their selective attention to earlier negotiations among second-wave positions, third-wave writers often suffer the same affliction that Deborah Siegel describes in regard to the characterization and analysis of “victim feminism” offered by Roiphe, Wolf, Denfeld, and Paglia: both groups “make feminist history the story of a product [‘victim feminism’] rather than that of a process. In the interest of affirming the difference of the third wave, many third-wave narratives assume a metonymic view of the second wave, in which a part of second wave activity is substituted for the whole.”⁵⁵ But third-wave feminism has developed its particular relationship to intersectionality and hybridity precisely because of the ongoing interplay between liberal and other feminisms of the second wave.

As a generational phenomenon, "Girlie" and young women's feminism *could* offer a systematic accounting of how material conditions have changed over the last fifteen years and currently operate inside the structures of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia to determine differentially the position of women in the U.S. and around the world. But Girlie feminism, with its deep alliances with the ideals of "power feminism" and its demands for sassiness, sexiness, and fun, does not provide this.⁵⁶ In fact, girlies tend to do more or less what they have accused second-wave liberal feminists of doing: taking their own concerns (sassy sexiness, self-esteem, fun) and identifying them with contemporary feminism as a whole. As Asian-American feminist Rebecca Hurdis writes, this leaves women of color feminism as "a separate issue, a different kind of feminism"⁵⁷ because there is no room for the issues of many poor women and women of color within the third-wave Girlie, power feminist paradigm. When some women of color and self-identified queer women who are engaged in various social struggles look at the self-proclaimed third-wave feminist literature, they end up either rejecting the feminist label or arguing for a different kind of "new feminism," one that they see as very much imbricated in ongoing debates arising out of the second wave about what is needed to achieve, and how best to argue for, human rights, an end to poverty, and better health care, for example.⁵⁸ So while a number of third-wavers have followed Rebecca Walker's lead and explicitly set the third wave against the supposedly too-ideologically-rigid second wave, a few seek to *embrace* "second wave critique as a central definitional thread while emphasizing ways that desires and pleasures subject to critique can be used to rethink and enliven activist work."⁵⁹ Drawing on the as-yet-unfinished legislative agenda of the second wave and seeing earlier work as broader than just its liberal incarnations, the newest and growing elements of third-wave feminisms are laying the groundwork for a revived feminism that, while still nascent, offers promising new political possibilities.

*Making Connections: Second- and Third-Wave Continuities
and Multi-Issue Activism*

Viewed from a theoretical, rather than a generational, perspective, the third wave is marked by the self-conscious adoption and adaptation of third world feminism's language and politics of hybridity, "postmodern and poststructuralist theories of identity, emphasizing paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and messiness," and the critiques of essentialism and exclusion within second-wave debates, especially as developed by women of color and lesbian feminists (including contemporary queer theory).⁶⁰ As it is evolving, this body

of work continues to engage with notions of pleasure, desire, Girliness, and popular culture as a site of political resistance, but additionally embraces what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls “intersectionality”—seeing how race, sex, gender, and class *intersect* (rather than work additively and as discrete categories) to produce both identities and political needs.⁶¹ This reliance on intersectionality sometimes gets articulated as a new standpoint from which to launch political interventions; at other times it remains at the level of cultural playfulness with identity categories. This playfulness can take the form of “gender maneuvering,” where there is a deliberate attempt to disrupt the way in which gender is supposed to organize the activities of people in a particular social setting;⁶² less usefully, it can simply excuse an incoherent or nonexistent political analysis, so that “playfulness” means “whatever I feel like doing today,” much like Wolf’s definition of feminism.

Whereas the identity category “woman” was central to most second-wave feminist work, third-wave feminism rejects the idea of a stable or essential “woman” category as the ground of feminist politics or cultural action. Heywood and Drake, and Dicker and Piepmeier, argue that third-wave feminists are not drawn together by the identity “woman,” nor do they define feminism as “simply about women’s issues.” Rather, third-wave feminism “is a broad-based political movement that seeks freedom for all those who are oppressed” and whose activists are united only by a commonality of feeling of the need for justice in the world.⁶³ When the desire and ability to speak from or to multiple perspectives promotes coalition building and a political agenda based on what activists *want* rather than who they *are*, then this can be a potentially profitable step for feminism. But when the playfulness is a rejection or elision of the material weight of gender, or when the rejection of identity devolves into endless essays on individual experience, where the cataloging of experiences is the end in itself, then the new third-wave continues to exhibit the same problems that plagued Girlie feminism and fails to take up the potential for change set forth in earlier critical feminist engagements.⁶⁴

As Heywood and Drake define them, the primary goals of third-wave feminism are “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.”⁶⁵ Thus, the critique of essentialism can enable two third-wave feminist moves. First, it can enable a politics based on issues rather than on identity. While we will see in a moment that this is part of the third wave’s self-proclaimed difference from the second wave, issue-based politics is not the only distinction. The second move that the critique

of essentialism can enable is a *different kind* of identity-based politics, that is, a movement that takes intersectionality as its epistemological grounding, using intersectional identities as the subject positions for a feminist politics. Rather than eschewing identity, identity categories on this account could be rearticulated, complicated, and used critically. Third-wave feminists themselves seem to conflate the new objects of activist concern with their identities. But one promising aspect of the move to intersectionality is that when the identities in which one grounds political claims are shifted in this way, new possibilities for activist coalitions become more obvious and useful. The coalition politics based on intersectional identities that third-wave writers and activists have been working toward is focused on cultural production and sexual politics as the “key sites of struggle seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice.”⁶⁶ Cultural politics seems to be the underspecified *how* of doing third-wave feminism; cultural representation and sex seem to be the *subjects* of most third-wave inquiry and activism.

For example, Heywood and Drake argue that Courtney Love is the third wave’s Gloria Steinem, and that music is the most productive site of activism and coalition building for third-wavers.⁶⁷ More recently, Mimi Schippers and Holly Bass have melded the identity-challenging and coalition-building aspects of the third wave in their discussion of music and theater as sites of feminist activism, seemingly agreeing with Heywood and Drake’s argument that “critical engagement with popular culture as a key to political struggle” is central to the third wave’s protest against a second-wave “politics of purity that would separate political activism from cultural production.”⁶⁸ Certainly some discussion of the interpenetrating effects of culture and politics is preferable to the postfeminist position that the cultural is irrelevant to the political and, therefore, that anything in the cultural realm is irrelevant to feminism. But most third-wave work thus far has merely substituted cultural critique and consumption for political action rather than theorizing a more sophisticated relationship between the two or offering an agenda that truly combines culture with politics.

This may be in part because while third-wavers have added their own set of cultural concerns to a feminist agenda, they haven’t yet articulated how they see or want these additional concerns to be linked to the incompletely realized and incompletely drafted legislative agenda of the second wave. Nor have they specified how the cultural critique and sites of cultural production they have created and the cultural artifacts they have produced can lead to new political solutions to the unresolved political problems that the second wave articulated, or new political problems that they have identified. The

problem is not that the “critique, reworking, and producing [of] pop- and subcultural images and narratives”⁶⁹ is not important or cannot be combined with a legislative agenda; rather, it is that third-wave feminists have not articulated how they see the two as related, though clearly they do. Baumgardner and Richards argue that third-wave feminists are, in fact, using many of the tools of second-wave feminism but applying them to “new” categories and substantive areas of study; they argue that the goals of the third wave include first- and second-wave core beliefs in legal, political, and social equality, but also include new struggles like equal access to the internet and technology, HIV/AIDS awareness, child sexual abuse, self-mutilation, globalization, eating disorders, and sexual health.⁷⁰

In other venues, Amy Richards has argued “that the legislative agenda of the third wave would be most accurately called ‘Second Wave, Part Two’” with only “young feminist *culture* as truly third-wave.”⁷¹ Dicker and Piepmeier offer one potentially compelling reason for this cultural split: the cultural *context* in which third-wave feminists have come to political consciousness is the world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, environmental degradation, multiple models of sexuality, and changing national demographics.⁷² This cultural context can account for the changing issues that feminism must face, but if third-wave feminism cannot articulate a gendered analysis of these cultural shifts and their responses to them, then one might ask in what sense it is still feminism. Further, without some clarification of how the hybrid engagement of political activism and cultural production works, the focus on individualism and culture looks more like an abdication of politics than a new way of doing politics, of pursuing the “Second Wave, Part Two” legislative agenda.

The essential problem with third-wave cultural politics is not that political activism and cultural production can or should be clearly demarcated activities. It is that the cultural reworking and critiquing that even the best of the third wave provides suggests no clear way to determine where to launch political interventions, the bases on which they are to be launched, or the resignifications that are to be offered.⁷³ At most, there seems to be a vague hope that cultural acceptance of difference will simply somehow lead to better political outcomes. In the words of Debbie Stoller, editor-in-chief of the third-wave feminist magazine *Bust*, “Changing the pop culture and critiquing the pop culture is a perfectly valid way to effect change in people’s ideas and values, and these changes trickle down to the government.”⁷⁴ She gives the example of popular television shows about or starring gay people such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Queer as Folk*, which, she claims, promote a greater social acceptance of homosexuals.

This seems to be true to some degree—and changing cultural narratives and increasing social acceptance are vitally important in making the day-to-day lives of marginalized people more bearable—but it has not stopped the passage of “Defense of Marriage Acts,” numerous popular votes for constitutional amendments banning gay marriage, or judicial rulings forbidding gay people to adopt in some states. Popular culture change does not seem to be “trickling down to the government.” Third-wave feminism needs to articulate a stronger connection between cultural critique and political action, offering up some way of making political judgments that not only engage with staid old political and economic institutions, but also give clear justifications for why some forms of cultural work are more “resistant” and rewarding than others. If the theory of political change on offer is one of pure cultural determinism, which suggests that cultural values are directly transmitted to political actors who introduce and pass laws reflecting new cultural interventions, then third-wave feminism needs to explain how to make this happen more effectively. But if third-wave feminists want to make a different argument, that the relationship between cultural intervention (e.g., *Queer as Folk*) and political change isn’t linear cause and effect, then they need to specify what the nature of that relationship is. Can it be measured and studied, or must it simply be assumed? Are there specific practices that interrupt or assist the transmission of counter-hegemonic cultural values to political activities? Once third-wave feminists get more explicit about where, when, and how certain cultural activities and interventions are useful for political ends, then they can link their cultural activities to their political agenda (broadly conceived) more specifically and convincingly.

Despite often being narrowly focused on culture and sexuality with little direct political engagement, there is a promising increase in the degree to which the most recent incarnations of the third wave, in Labaton and Martin’s *The Fire This Time* for example, attempt to incorporate the second-wave critique of essentialism and embrace intersectionality as feminist subjectivity. “We see a new movement evolving from one in which there is a dialogue about feminism and race to a feminist movement whose conversation is race, gender, and globalization.”⁷⁵ Many of the contributors to *The Fire This Time*, members of the activist collective known as the Third-Wave Foundation, and groups like the Audre Lorde Project, Young Women United in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network are still concerned with cultural representations and sexuality, but are also engaged in building young activists’ leadership skills, grassroots connections, and political education. The groups mentioned here, and others described in Labaton and Martin’s text, are either multiracial and multi-issue groups or single-

issue groups that combine forces with other organizations and end up being multi-issue through coalition. Many of the new social justice groups are identity-based, but the identities motivating their politics are explicitly intersectional, with groups specifically designed to express the needs of, for example, working-class, Hispanic lesbians, articulating this identity as a political space with unique concerns rather than as a repository of a universalized group of "women's concerns" plus universal "Hispanic concerns," etc. The potential for the generalizability of results and analyses comes through work on specific issues with multiple groups. These groups, then, are building an alternative to the "old boys network," developing skills for articulating political needs that grow out of these intersectional identities and working in coalition to achieve them. How does this work?

Dicker and Piepmeier argue that because we live in a world without a monolithic definition of "woman," feminists are unable to speak with confidence of "women's issues."⁷⁶ What remains, then, are arguments like Michelle Sidler's, asserting that under- and unemployment, not patriarchy, are the most pressing problems for feminism today.⁷⁷ This kind of agenda item is certainly more obviously political than the right to wear high-heels without apologies, and it is also quite a move from second-wave arguments, which tended to focus on patriarchy as the problem feminism needed to address. But if gender and patriarchy are not the animating concerns for the third wave, and if one can no longer speak of "women's issues," then one must conclude either that postfeminists are correct and we in the West have moved beyond feminism, or that gender and patriarchy are only central concerns when the topic is sexuality or gender stereotypes, and that these issues are less significant than employment policy. If the latter is the preferred conclusion, then third-wave feminism ends up as incoherent as postfeminism, claiming simultaneously that gender is and is not important.

Another sign that the ground is shifting under feminism can be seen when Labaton and Martin write that the "core issues" of feminism like reproductive rights and domestic violence are still important, but worry that if feminists become too "distracted" by these issues, they will forget to work on other social justice concerns.⁷⁸ If reproductive rights and violence against women are a "distraction" from (more?) important feminist issues, then third-wave activists need to supply some justificatory measure for deciding what makes an issue feminist, and why. Still, many of the activists in the Third-Wave Foundation and elsewhere are undeniably hard at work in grassroots organizations throughout the United States and the world. This work is different from second-wave feminism in part because of its concerted efforts to "do" feminism through other modes and sites of activism. Economic

globalization and “underregulated free trade” are the new “prime catalyst[s] for social change activists, young feminists among them.”⁷⁹ If economic globalization and free trade are the prime catalysts for new feminist activists, then does this mean that the ground of feminism—the activity and organizing principles that make activism feminist rather than something else—has changed? If it has not changed—if gender is still what makes these issues feminist—then some discussion of how gender works here is necessary. One could argue—though third-wavers themselves have not—that they are practicing a form of “gender mainstreaming,” borrowing a term from the United Nations that describes its shift in aid project funding and development. With “gender mainstreaming,” women’s experiences, knowledge, and interests are included in planning all aid projects, not just those historically deemed “women’s issues” and directed by a special “women’s office.” If some form of gender mainstreaming is the guiding third-wave practice, then it is still necessary to make gendered concerns explicit rather than implied if third-wave analyses are to be explicitly feminist.

One example of a multi-issue, cross-generational, gender mainstreaming project was the April 25, 2004 March for Women’s Lives in Washington, D.C. In reframing the issue motivating the demonstration from one specifically about abortion rights to a larger problem of government intrusion into private medical and sexual decisions, the original organizers of the March were able to meet the continuing critiques feminists had been making for decades about class and race bias in political agendas, as well as to broaden the coalition to include other stigmatized or discriminated-against groups through an articulation of shared values. So gay men and lesbians were marching for reproductive freedom in part because of the underlying values of privacy and anti-sexism that unite these groups. Additionally, the coalition of organizing groups modeled intersectional politics to some degree when “reproductive rights” was explicitly defined more broadly than just access to abortion, including also quite prominently access to contraception (emergency or otherwise), prenatal health care, nonracist medical care, and informed consent for sterilization and other procedures. Here continuities with, and not just the rejection of, the second wave were evident. Efforts to combine feminism with other analytical lenses can make the gender analysis harder to discern in some cases, but the impulse to develop coalitions with other groups, coming out of a deep understanding of and appreciation for both identities and politics as intersectional, is exciting.

Perhaps because of its attention to activism rather than organizing principles, third-wave feminism is harder to define than second-wave feminism. Julie Shah, co-director of the Third-Wave Foundation, says that “the third

wave is self-defining for each individual. It's a group of women and men who are concerned about social justice for women, and social justice in general. Third-wave feminists tend to not want to separate out from other social struggles."⁸⁰ According to Lisa Jervis, co-founding editor of the third-wave feminist magazine *Bitch*, in this new feminist perspective, "gender isn't always the primary mode of analysis. . . . Anti-poverty work, international human-rights work, and labor are all issues that are feminist issues, but they aren't all about women."⁸¹ I would argue that all of these issues *are* about women (as well as men and children), but they need to be approached from multiple angles and with multi-pronged solutions. Because third-wave feminists often do not see or specify what is at stake for women in these issues, it can be difficult to find the feminism in third-wave activism. Turning this concern for social justice into a new feminist social movement will require, I think, making more explicit how and why these issues are understood as feminist, in addition to whatever else they might be, and connecting the social and cultural activism to an explicit political agenda. Finally, while the attention to multiplicity is the great strength of the emerging political third wave, it can also lead to divisiveness and factionalism.⁸² The result is that while the newest crop of third-wave activists have demonstrated an impressive openness to issues, identities, and organizational structures, infrastructure and coherent strategy have been sacrificed in the process.

Refreshingly, after the raucous reign of postfeminism and Girlie feminism through most of the 1990s and early 2000s, it appears that there are strong political impulses in some of the representatives of the third wave who are doing the hard work of supporting a diversity of women and working with other social and political justice groups in a variety of campaigns. While Girlies and postfeminists are still very much on the scene, they have been joined more visibly by contemporaries willing and able to begin to take on specifically political activism in addition to and as part of their cultural interventions.

CONCLUSION

The term "postfeminism" still has enormous cultural resonance, judging from the frequency with which it is used in contemporary media and academic work in girls' studies and feminist theory. But it would be more accurate to say that we are in the process of creating, in Michelle Fine's words, "a new gender regime" rather than living in an era *beyond* feminism.⁸³ While many of the familiar concerns are still alive—pay equity, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, and reproductive rights—the third wave is also hav-

ing a different conversation about gender and sexuality, marked by the unwillingness of many to label their sexuality, and attempts to embrace objectification with irony rather than reject it with critique.

I set out at the beginning of this essay to answer three questions about the “new feminisms”: What makes them *new*, *feminist*, and *political*? While the new feminisms are diverse, these questions about them can be answered fairly succinctly at this point. In terms of newness, recent third-wave feminisms exhibit a stronger, more successful commitment to coalition building among a diverse group of people than second-wave feminisms were able to muster. They have prioritized and greatly expanded identity category play, which may help efface the influence of gender as an organizing principle for distributing political and social power. The way in which many of them engage identity includes both a more complex understanding of the intersection of race, class, and sexuality in constructing political identities and possibilities, and a frequent rejection of labels, which includes an increasing wariness about the label “feminist.” Part of the newness, then, is a different feminist standpoint generating feminist knowledge and action. While this approach to feminist politics signifies the potential of the third wave to be usefully innovative, it can complicate the relationship to feminism when third-wave activists reject the older feminist principle of sex, gender, and patriarchy as central categories of social and political analyses. It is not clear why, if gender drops out, this new movement should be called the third wave of feminism or new feminism rather than simply “social justice activism.”

Additionally, some older versions of feminism worked to redefine gender roles, and others argued for the abolition of the ideological structure of gender. But Girlie third wave rejects both of these feminist projects. This is also new, but not obviously feminist, unless self-objectification can be defended on grounds more convincing than “because I feel like doing it.” The second-wave idea that the “personal is political” was meant to engage, rather than retreat from, politics, and Girlies have not engaged. That is, they do not show *how* the personal lives of women are shaped by political structures, nor do they explain how self-objectification will alter those structures. Other third-wave forms of gender “play” can be more usefully and compellingly disruptive to patriarchal gender norms, but the work to show how this can be done has only started. This new feminism approaches activism from the postmodern feminist insight that subjects are determined in or through practices, but practices have not been clearly linked to political structures.⁸⁴ If a subject determined in practice is the new model of identity politics, then third-wave feminists should embrace and articulate more clearly the contours of this updated identity politics. If identity politics is no longer epis-

temologically valid in their view, or if the politics of feminism for the third wave is now driven by objects (policies or crises) rather than standpoints, then this new ground of feminism should be linked to the political institutions that are most centrally implicated in creating and exploiting these policies.

What's *feminist* about the new feminisms? The problem with calling this work third-wave *feminism* is not that it isn't necessarily feminist; the problem is that *how* the work is feminist is not articulated in most cases. If the new feminism means that gender is not always the central category of analysis, then more work needs to be done to specify *when* and *why* it should or should not be. While the issues they support and discuss might well be of great concern to many feminists, the links to feminism should still be clarified so that those in the prison reform movement (for example) can see how and why they should support abortion rights, or what the gendered concerns are in the prison reform movement. Since third-wave activists argue that we can no longer talk about "women's issues," presumably they want to shift the subject of feminism to *feminist* issues. If "women" is not what makes these issues feminist, then third-wavers need to supply some definition of what does make issues feminist.

Finally, what's political about the new feminisms? Quite frankly, little as yet, at least under the auspices of legislative or electoral politics. But while postfeminism and Girlie feminism have foresworn most political projects for their different reasons, other instantiations of new feminisms are engaged in local grassroots activism. Some of this grassroots work may yet link third-wave cultural interventions to engagements with institutions of formal political power. Presumably, the paths for such links are already blazed. If specific issues are what separate the third wave from the second, then to the degree that the second wave was successful in getting women access to grassroots and institutional political power, the project of the third wave might be to use that access to seek an end to gender oppression. If using the access to existing institutions of power for ending gender oppression or changing the very nature of those institutions is, ultimately, the goal of the third wave, then it will be borne out as both feminist and political. If this access is used for other types of projects, then we can say that the third wave is political and could be feminist if more attention is given to rearticulating and defending the new ground of feminism. Ultimately, I think there is political promise in the fifteen-year-old movement known as third-wave feminism, but it will take more than empowering cultural messages to realize this potential.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, Rayna Rapp, "Is the Legacy of Second Wave Feminism Postfeminism?" *Socialist Review* 1 (1988): 31–37; Elspeth Probyn, "Choosing Choice: Images of Sexuality and 'Choiceoisie' in Popular Culture," in *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance*, ed. Sue Fisher and Kathy Davis (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 278–294; Michelle Jensen, "Riding the Third Wave," *The Nation* (December 11, 2000), <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20001211/Jensen>.

2. Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993) makes a compelling argument that woman, experience, and personal politics were the core concepts of second-wave feminism. While Grant rejects woman and experience as still useful but thinks personal politics should be retained, postfeminism and third-wave feminism, I argue here, have rejected woman but retained experience and an anemic version of personal politics.

3. My description of postfeminism is drawn from many sources in addition to my own reading of postfeminist texts. The most influential secondary sources for my understanding of what postfeminism is and how the term is used in various ways are Michèle Barrett, "Post-feminism," in *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*, ed. Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli, and Frank Webster (London: Sage, 2000); Susan Faludi, "I'm Not a Feminist But I Play One on TV," *Ms.* 5 no. 5 (March/April 1995): 31–39; Linda J. Lacey, "Book Review: We Have Nothing to Fear But Gender Stereotypes: Of Katie and Amy and 'Babe Feminism'," *Cornell Law Review* 80 (March 1995): 612–645; Patricia S. Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States," *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring 1988): 3–22; Georgina Murray, "Agonize, Don't Organize: A Critique of Postfeminism," *Current Sociology* 45, no. 2 (April 1997): 37–47; Camille Nurka, "Postfeminist Autopsies," *Australian Feminist Studies* 17, no. 38 (2002): 177–189; Rayna Rapp, "Is the Legacy of Second Wave Feminism Postfeminism?" *Socialist Review* 1 (1988): 31–37; and Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey, "Second Thoughts on the Second Wave," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 341–361. I should note that I am supplying here an analytical framework for an amorphous group of writers and activists, but my description is not one provided by postfeminists themselves. Additionally, most of the postfeminist and "girl power" authors discussed in this section are white. I focus on them in these sections not because I wish to exclude

writing by women of color, but because most postfeminists and Girlies are white, and this fact is significant to my critique of both. These phenomena come out of a position of racial privilege that is problematic from the perspective of a political, liberatory feminism.

4. The term "postfeminism" seems to have been coined in October 1982 in Susan Bolotin's *New York Times Magazine* article "Voices From the Post-Feminist Generation."

5. Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 227.

6. Whittier, *Feminist Generations*, 2-3; Deborah Siegel, "Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a 'Post-feminist' Moment," in *Third-Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, ed. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 75. Whittier argues that the idea of a postfeminist era is a "myth." While I agree that the "postfeminist era" is a myth, given the real, current, gendered inequalities in the West (and postfeminism is primarily an idea found in Western, Anglo nations), the "postfeminism phenomenon" is quite real, given that many people, including the women Bolotin interviewed, espoused precisely the beliefs Whittier describes. (See Bolotin, note 4 above.)

7. Hence the use of the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." label examined by Susan Faludi in her 1995 *Ms.* article, cited in note 3 above. Examples include Naomi Wolf and contributors to the feminist websites <http://www.ifeminists.net/index.php> and www.feministing.org.

8. See, for example, Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1995); Rene Denfeld, *Kill The Body, The Head Will Fall: A Closer Look at Women, Violence, and Aggression* (New York: Warner Books, 1997); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life: How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch With the Real Concerns of Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence From Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), although she says she "is the third wave of feminism"; and Cathy Young, "Feminists Play the Victim Game," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1999, <http://www.vix.com/memag/batnytop.htm>; Cathy Young, "Lady Boss Busted: Is the 'Glass Ceiling' a Matter of Choice?" *Boston Globe*, November 3, 2003, <http://www.reason.com/cy/cy110403.shtml>. See also the literature of the Independent Women's Forum (<http://www.iwf.org>) and the Women's Freedom Network (<http://www.womensfreedom.org>). Katie Roiphe [*The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1993)] is often included in this category, although some prefer to include her as part of third-wave feminism (see, for example, Jennifer Baumgardner and

Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Approaching these questions from a different direction altogether, Patricia Mann (*Micro-Politics: "The Postfeminist Frontier"*) says we are in a postfeminist era because feminist issues are now mainstream concerns, not because they are outmoded ones.

9. From early in the second wave, feminists struggled over whose experiences, needs, and goals should take precedence in writings and other political activities. Women of color and lesbians often accused leaders of feminist political and social groups of focusing on white and heterosexual women's experiences and political demands at the expense of those of other women. The "essentialism critique" was an argument that white and heterosexual women assumed that there is an essential womanness that all women share; that this essential womanness was somehow distinct from the sexual or racial part of one's identity or lived experience; and that this woman part should be the unifying force of feminism. Current work on intersectionality springs from this essentialism critique, arguing that various identity elements are interdependent and codeterminative rather than additive and discrete. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–1299; Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771–1800; and Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1988).

10. See for example Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*; Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004); Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, ed., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Rebecca Walker, ed., *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995). Naomi Wolf is generally included in this category.

11. Barrett, "Post-feminism"; Murray, "Agonize"; Andrea Press and Terry Strathman, "Work, Family, and Social Class in Television Images of Women: Prime-Time Television and the Construction of Postfeminism," *Women and Language* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 7–15; Rapp, "Is the Legacy"; Rosenfelt and Stacey, "Second Thoughts."

12. Barrett, "Post-feminism," 46; Murray, "Agonize," 37. As I discuss in the final section of this article, third-wave feminists who actively reject the postfeminist label draw from this work, but postfeminists themselves do not.

13. Wolf labels radical feminism "victim feminism." The phrase has become ubiquitous among postfeminists. See Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993), 135–232.

14. For examples of these arguments, see note 9, above. For a more extended criti-

cal discussion of the labeling of radical feminism “victim feminism” and the debates about sexual violence that have arisen, see Chris Atmore, “Victims, Backlash, and Radical Feminist Theory (or, The Morning after They Stole Feminism’s Fire),” in *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept*, ed. Sharon Lamb (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

15. Carol Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul Books, 1984) was a response to the 1982 Barnard Conference that is said to have fully ignited the sex wars of the 1980s. On the sex radical position, see also Ellen Willis, “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography,” in *Debating Sexual Correctness: Pornography, Sexual Harassment, Date Rape and the Politics of Sexual Equality*, ed. Adele Stan (New York: Delta, 1995); and Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995). On the pro-regulation side, see Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

16. On the liberal/sameness position and Katie Roiphe’s work in particular, see Lacey, “Book Review.” For an extended discussion of both the recurrence of the sex wars among feminists and the relationship between new feminisms and the liberal/radical, sameness/difference debates, see Kathryn Abrams, “Sex Wars Redux: Agency and Coercion in Feminist Legal Theory,” *Columbia Law Review* 95 (March 1995): 304–376; Kathryn Abrams, *Changing the Subject: Agency and Law in Feminist Legal Theory* (forthcoming).

17. Faludi, “I’m Not a Feminist,” 36.

18. Postfeminists don’t argue that rape and domestic violence never happen, but they do argue that rape is not nearly so widespread as second-wave feminists would have us believe, and domestic violence is a problem of “mutual violence” rather than primarily men’s violence against women.

19. Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

21. Kristina Sheryl Wong, “Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 295.

22. Barrett, “Post-feminism,” 46–47.

23. “Girlie,” with the capital “G,” is Jennifer Baumgardner’s and Amy Richards’ term, defined and used in their Third-wave *Manifesta*.

24. Walter, *The New Feminism*, 7.

25. Baumgardner and Richards, “Feminism and Femininity,” 60.

26. See Faludi, "I'm Not a Feminist," 32–33.

27. Victim feminism isn't directly attributable to any one theorist because it is "a composite. It evolved out of the aversion to power of the radical left, the identification of women and nature popularized with the 'cultural feminism' that came of age in the 1970s, old habits of ladylike behavior that were cloaked in the guise of radicalism, and dollops of the work of such writers as Adrienne Rich, with her belief that language is male; Carol Gilligan, with her view of women's different moral reasoning; and Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon . . . with their vision of overweening male oppression and female lack of choice. All of these writers, profound theorists themselves, had their work intermingled by some feminist subcultures with all these currents to create a murky brew: This became the belief system of today's victim feminism" (Wolf, *Fire*, 143).

28. *Ibid.*, 136–137.

29. Baumgardner and Richards, "Feminism and Femininity," 62. Similarly, Natasha Walter takes pains to separate feminism from socialism (*The New Feminism*, 39), ultimately arguing that the best route to women's emancipation is through capitalism.

30. Wolf, *Fire*, 137–138.

31. *Ibid.*, 138.

32. *Ibid.*, 137–138.

33. *Ibid.*, 138. Here Wolf has co-opted and depoliticized yet another radical ideal from Emma Goldman (see note 43 below).

34. Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 11.

35. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 17; Walter, *The New Feminism*, 33–34.

36. Wolf, *Fire*, 139.

37. Wolf, *Fire*, 50–51. Similarly, Baumgardner and Richards contend that "injurious niceness, which is a socialized disease, often explains why women tend not to demand equality" (*Manifesta*, 65).

38. Wolf, *Fire*, 51.

39. *Ibid.*, 36.

40. See Siegel, "Reading Between the Waves, 75–76.

41. Amy Richards explained that third-wave feminism welcomes both pro- and anti-abortion rights political agendas when she appeared on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* (April 22, 2004).

42. For example, think of Emma Goldman and Marie Stopes and the early free love/sexual infidels philosophy and practice as well as birth control activism in the late-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, or the work of Kate Millet and Ellen Willis in the second wave. One pertinent correction to both the postfeminist and third-wave response to the sexual politics of the second wave is that the idea of guilt-free sex—or abstinence—is far from new. For second-wave feminist women who

came of age pre-AIDS, many had the sex they wanted (or didn't have the sex they didn't want) precisely because feminism gave them a sense of entitlement to sex on their terms. It wasn't feminism that made sex scary for many young women so much as it was AIDS in the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s when sex could—and did—kill.

43. See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 165; Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 63–82.

44. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 136.

45. *Ibid.*, 137–138.

46. For a detailed discussions of the new feminism as “the old objectification,” see Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: The Free Press, 2005), 74–82; and Angela McRobbie, “Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3–14.

47. Baumgardner and Richards, “Feminism and Femininity,” 60.

48. *Ibid.*, 61.

49. See Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8; Moi, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style,” 12.

50. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) are the seminal texts on this subject.

51. The label “third-wave feminism” was coined by Rebecca Walker with her 1992 essay in *Ms. Magazine* entitled “Becoming the Third Wave.”

52. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 401.

53. On mother-daughter tension between the second and third waves, see, for example, Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 137; Jensen, “Riding the Third Wave”; Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy: Women, Politics, and the Future* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004), 95; Astrid Henry, “Feminism's Family Problem: Feminist Generations and the Mother-Daughter Trope,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 209–231.

54. Wiegman's comments were delivered at her lecture “On Being In Time With Feminism” at Duke University, May 2, 2003.

55. Siegel, “Reading Between the Waves,” 59.

56. It is important to note that while many in the third wave adopt a power feminist position, Heywood and Drake (*Third-Wave Agenda*, 49–50) specifically reject Wolf's power feminism.

57. Rebecca Hurdis, "Heartbroken: Women of Color Feminism and the Third-wave," in *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, ed. Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002), 286–287.

58. Contributors to *Colonize This!* and *Catching a Wave* in particular deal with this continued sense of exclusion. See, for example, Taigi Smith, "What Happens When your Hood is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?," in Hernández and Rehman, *Colonize This!*, 62; Hurdis, "Heartbroken," 287–288; Susan Muaddi Darraj, "Third World, Third Wave Feminism(s): The Evolution of Arab American Feminism," in Dicker and Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave*, 199–203; Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in Dicker and Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave*, *passim*.

59. Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 7. See also Mimi Schippers, "Rocking the Gender Order," in Dicker and Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave*.

60. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, "Introduction," in *Catching a Wave*, 16; Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 13.

61. On intersectionality and the third wave, see Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin, ed., *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xxvi–xxix and 284. On the different methodological approaches to studying and organizing complex identities and social relations, see McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality."

62. Schippers, "Rocking the Gender Order," 281.

63. Dicker and Piepmeier, "Introduction," 8; Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 50–51.

64. While "experience" has been one of the core concepts of feminism since the development of the second wave, the reliance on and sharing of experience was a launching point for consciousness-raising, which was to enable a political analysis of why women shared so many similar experiences. Third-wave experiential essays are stuck at the sharing phase.

65. Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 3.

66. *Ibid.*, 4.

67. *Ibid.*, 4–6, 16–17.

68. *Ibid.*, 51–52; Schippers, "Rocking the Gender Order"; Holly Bass, "Can You Rock It Like This? Theater for a New Century," in Labaton and Lundy, *The Fire This Time*.

69. Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 52.

70. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 21.

71. Quoted in Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F-Word*, 95.

72. Dicker and Piepmeier, "Introduction," 10, 14.

73. Schippers, "Rocking the Gender Order," comes closest to articulating where these interventions work and how they can be useful. Tellingly, she ends her piece by saying that the cultural productions she argues for are separate from (the still-necessary) collective political action.

74. Quoted in Rowe Finkbeiner, *The I-Word*, 94.
75. Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin, "Introduction," in *The Fire This Time*, xxix.
76. Dicker and Piepmeyer, "Introduction," 10.
77. Michelle Sidler, "Living in Melobdom: Third Wave Feminism and Class Inequity," in Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*, 25-39.
78. Labaton and Martin, "Introduction," xxvii.
79. Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin, "Afterword: Looking Ahead: Building a Feminist Future," in *The Fire This Time*, 280.
80. Quoted in Rowe Finkbeiner, *The I-Word*, 93.
81. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 103.
82. *Ibid.*, 31-32; Labaton and Martin, "Afterword," 283-284.
83. Michelle Fine, "Foreword," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), xiv.
84. One exception is Carol Guess, "Deconstructing Me: Being (Out) in the Academy," in Heywood and Drake, *Third-Wave Agenda*.

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