

## **Young women in the contemporary Australian women's movement: collective identity, discursive politics and "postsocialist" dilemmas**

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In the mid to late 1990s the Australian women's movement was consumed by suggestions of inter-generational warfare that distracted movement actors from some important tasks. Questions were raised about the presence and visibility of young women in the movement. Assertions that some forms of feminist praxis were 'good', and some were not, undervalued the value of the important work being done in this 'between the waves' moment. In this paper I contend that young women are playing a key role in maintaining the political space available for Australian feminist activism in a "postsocialist"<sup>1</sup> context. I argue against the generational paradigm as a model for understanding changes that occur within social movements over time. Further I argue that, despite both media rhetoric and the claims of some young feminists, there is little to suggest that the activism of contemporary young feminists constitutes a 'third wave' of the women's movement. I offer an understanding of this "cross-generational moment" (Zita 1997:1) that draws a more productive and inclusive picture of the role of young women in the contemporary Australian women's movement.

An exploration of contemporary young feminists' processes of collective identity provides a useful and timely alternative to the intrinsic limitations of feminist generationalism. Alberto Melucci's (1985, 1989, 1995, 1996) conception of collective identity as a process directs us towards an examination of young feminists' shared cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and field of action; their networks of active relationships; and their emotional investment in their activism (1995:44-5). This constructivist approach avoids the reductive noose of generationalism by understanding that the apparent unity of collective action is in fact discursively constructed through movement participants'

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser (1997) defines "postsocialism" as the absence of a credible, progressive alternative to the current order, marked by a false antithesis between claims for recognition and the need for redistribution. Fraser always places the term "postsocialist" in quotation marks 'to signal the effort to maintain a critical posture' in relation to the "general horizon within which political thought necessarily moves today" (1997:1). I concur with this critical stance and therefore continue Fraser's use of punctuation.

continuous processes of reflexive discussion and contestation over key concepts. For young Australian feminists two of these key concepts have been their role in the broader women's movement and their relationship to older feminists. It is these issues that this paper explores.

With the notable exception of scholars such as Chilla Bulbeck (1997, 1999, 2000, 2001) and Anita Harris (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2001), the issue of generationalism in the Australian women's movement has been largely abandoned as an area of scholarship and media interest. Certainly in Australia there has been little questioning of the appropriateness of the generational metaphor or the alleged age-based split in the women's movement. In the United States scholars have suggested that age is not particularly relevant in considering changes that have occurred in the women's movement over time. For example, Nancy Whittier (1995) argues that age is less important than the point in time at which movement participants are politicised in determining what constitutes a "political generation". While this is undoubtedly true it does not follow that age is not a useful and important avenue of enquiry in developing new understandings of the contemporary women's movement. The very fact that the debates that occurred within the media, and within the women's movement, in Australia in the 1990s were based on questions of generational cohort make it essential to explore age as an axis of difference with the movement. Further, I would argue that while the concept of generationalism does not hold much explanatory power in itself, there *are* important differences in the ways the young women are performing feminist praxis, and these differences need to be understood, and hopefully embraced, by the wider movement.

It has been suggested by several scholars that the women who became a part of the women's movement in the early 1970s were largely ignorant of women's history in this country (Lake 1999, Sawer and Simms 1993, Curthoys 1992). To some extent this allowed second wave feminists to break with tradition and engage in processes of collective identity that were fresh and innovative. For contemporary young Australian feminists, however, almost the reverse is the case. Contemporary feminists are all too

aware of the history of second wave activism in this country and, in order to assert the unique qualities of their own feminism(s), are forced to define themselves against the previous 'wave' or 'generation'. This has resulted in an apparent rejection of much of the second wave that has taken place in a very public manner, with certain key texts attaining a high degree of popularity and media coverage<sup>2</sup>.

### **Changing contexts**

Following the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975, the conservative government of Malcolm Fraser attempted to wind back the feminist machinery of government that had been established in the early 1970s (Dowse 1982) and to "cut funding and limit federal responsibilities for women's issues wherever possible" (Kaplan 1996:37). At the same time, the movement itself was becoming more diffuse, in part due to a recognition of the impossibility of sisterhood, but also due to the development of expertise on particular issues by different groups within the movement. Reade (1994) argues that "the movement splintered into a collection of specific interest groups which began to speak for and act upon issues reflecting their particular experiences" (1994:212). The idea of "splintering", however, fails to capture the strength of the submerged networks that continued to operate within and between groups. Certainly to the public eye, and even to some women in the movement, there appeared to be a lack of impetus or momentum. I would argue, however, that these structural and organisational changes merely reflected the movement's necessary transformation to accommodate a different political opportunity structure.

In her study of the contemporary radical women's movement in the United States, Nancy Whittier (1995) argues that longtime feminists found it difficult to remain politically active during the 1980s due to the destabilisation of the women's movement that resulted from "the constriction of both political opportunities and economic resources" (1995:14). Longtime feminist activists also found some of the changes in the movement itself to be at odds with their original aims and ideologies. While these "veterans" have remained

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<sup>2</sup> Both Trioli's (1996) *Generation f* and Bail's (1996) *DIY feminism* were ranked in the top ten bestsellers in October 1996 (Bulbeck 1997:3).

consistent in their politics and their focus “the women’s movement as a whole has changed sharply around them” (1995:19). This has also been the case in Australia where the focus for many feminists became the necessary fight to preserve (and extend) the funding for a wide range of services that the movement had secured during the 1970s. However this focus on state funding led to the further institutionalisation of feminism at the expense of the movement’s more radical goals. For some this has meant a new form of coalition politics such as Whittier found in the United States, where “other movements absorbed feminist activists and helped to preserve and disseminate feminist ideology, culture and innovations in strategy, tactic and organisational structure”(1995:189). While these new coalitions have been important for contemporary young feminists, for longtime feminists these changes were disturbing and contributed to the view that the movement was failing to thrive. In terms of instrumental policy goals, the level of continued pressure from the women’s movement that was necessary to maintain the pace of institutional change was lacking (Lake 1999:260), however the need for the movement to evolve and take other forms during this period was unavoidable.

Transformations in organisational form and the antifeminist agenda of the Fraser government were by no means the only political changes that the Australian women’s movement had to contend with in this period. The introduction of economic rationalism (and its attendant neo liberalism) under the Hawke and Keating governments “hurled Australian society into a headlong clash between the necessity to compete internationally for export markets and an ever-eroding social justice agenda” (Kaplan 1996:155). While the rhetoric of the Hawke and Keating governments was more favourable to the women’s movement than the Fraser government had been, the reality of global economics and the rise of the New Right meant that the social, cultural and institutional spaces available for social movements was rapidly decreasing. Traditional forms of movement activism in this climate became untenable, as Mark Davis (1997) argues:

Geopolitical balances have...shifted with the end of the cold war; the global political is operating in new ways, and the sorts of struggles that take place within it have changed. The idea of public culture has dwindled, with public institutions being privatised or corporatised and media ownership being concentrated in fewer

and fewer hands. Economies have become globalised, markets rationalised and corporations downsized, making this a different world from that of even twenty years ago (1997:17).

For young women growing up in this “postsocialist” era the possibilities of politics and activism appeared markedly different from the possibilities that feminists in the 1970s encountered.

The other notable occurrence of the 1980s and 1990s to have a profound impact on the young women growing up in this period was the political and social backlash against feminism and the women’s movement. The backlash included conservative attacks on feminism and the women’s movement for their alleged destruction of the family and the damage that they had done to men’s lives (Faludi 1991). The extensive media coverage that this publication garnered resulted in the term “backlash” entering popular discourse and becoming a part of the feminist idiom in ways that could not “fail to have an effect on most young feminists” (Bailey 1997:24). In fact for most young women growing up and coming to feminism (or not) during the 1990s, who had missed out on the euphoria of 1970s feminism, the discourse of backlash was far more prominent in discussions of feminism than other perhaps more celebratory tales of feminist history. In Australia this anxiety about feminism came to a head with the generational debates of the mid 1990s, which in turn overlapped with another “very significant shift to neoconservatism and the New Right that coincided with the end of thirteen years of Labor government and the election of the Liberal-national Party coalition” (Mead 1997:9) under Prime Minister John Howard.

The strength of the conservative backlash against feminism during the 1980s and 1990s added further pressure to what were increasing internal divisions within the women’s movement (Sommerville 2001). These divisions came about as many feminists attempted to correct some of the perceived ‘errors’ of the 1970s to do with exclusion and racism. Others, however, blamed the postmodern turn in feminist theory for the destruction of the political category “women” and expressed their fears that this attention to diversity and difference would leave the women’s movement unable to successfully articulate political

demands (see for example Kaplan 1996, MacDonald 1996). These social, cultural, political, economic and even theoretical trends combined during the early 1990s to create the myth of “postfeminism”. Deborah Siegel (1997a) argues that the popular media uses this term to describe

...a moment when women’s movements are, for whatever reasons, no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant; the term suggests that the gains forged by previous generations of women have so completely pervaded all tiers of our social existence that those still “harping” about women’s victim status are embarrassingly out of touch (1997a:75).

While this postfeminist condition has never in fact existed, the continuing, neoliberal, assertions that it was a reality significantly undermined the women’s movement’s standing as a creditable political player. So, under attack from the New Right, in a changing political and economic climate and paying necessary attention to their own processes of collective identity, feminists and the women’s movement seemed, at least to those not a part of it, to all but disappear from public consciousness. It was in this confused climate that the ‘generation wars’ exploded in the Australian media.

### **Is this the Third Wave?**

As in the United States and Britain, Australian feminists engaged in a high-profile ‘generational debate’, which as Jane Long (2001) recalls was “hard to avoid” during the 1990s due to the “steady stream of writing which debated the extent to which feminism was allegedly unravelling along the seams of youth and age” (2001:8). The debates that occurred during the 1990s have been highly influential, particularly in manipulating public perceptions regarding the ‘health’ or otherwise of the Australian women’s movement. Anxiety from older feminists (Summers 2002 [1993], Greer 1999, Kaplan 1996) about the whereabouts and style of younger feminists framed a set of “competing discourses about young feminists” (Harris 2001:1) that have continued to influence contemporary young Australian feminists’ processes of collective identity.

Since the mid-1990s younger and older feminists, both in Australia and elsewhere, have been seeking to name and describe the changes that they see in the women's movement. One of the most common descriptors has been the idea that contemporary young feminists have formed the 'third wave' of the movement in the tradition of the two previous, high profile waves. Many young feminists in the United States identify themselves as belonging to the 'Third Wave'. Some, such as Amy Richards, (co-author with Jennifer Baumgardner (2000) of *ManifestA: young women, feminism and the future*) have been involved in organising specifically third wave activism. Richards co-founded the Third Wave Foundation, a national organisation of young feminists in the United States that claims 5,000 members and manages to raise US\$300,000 in funds each year. In Australia, however, there is nothing on such a large scale as the Third Wave Foundation, and the groups of young feminists that exist here more closely resemble submerged networks than high profile organisations. Therefore the question must be asked: Is this the third wave? At the present time there is little evidence to suggest that we are in another wave of feminist activism that in any way resembles the previous two waves. We cannot simply import a term that may (or may not) accurately describe the situation in the United States. Further, to discuss the work of contemporary young Australian feminists as if it were already a wave is to miss the significance of what they are actually doing. Between the waves feminism has historically been ignored or forgotten, and mislabelling contemporary feminist activism 'the third wave' merely repeats this error.

This rejection of the term 'third wave' as a descriptor for contemporary young feminist activism is not to suggest that the concept of waves of activism is not a useful one. Waves are a powerful metaphor, calling up images of "beauty and power" (Bailey 1997:17) and suggesting a ferocious energy, surging forward in a motion that cannot be stopped. Jacquelyn Zita (1997) suggests that the idea of a wave "allows us to shape a space that has both continuity and discontinuity with the past" (1997:6). This idea allows for the possibility of understanding both the high profile peaks of activism and the times of abeyance such as we are in at the present. Cathryn Bailey (1997), however, cautions that, given the impossibility of drawing any clear line between the end of one wave and the

beginning of another the “political motivations” for claiming one group of feminists is chronologically or sequentially different from another must be questioned. Bailey argues that waves can only be properly defined in their historical context where differences between them can be clearly understood. Anita Harris (2001) suggests a similar degree of caution in not allowing the term ‘third wave’ to “homogenise young feminism” (2001:1) and thus obscure the cultural context in which this feminism is arising.

One reason that some young feminists have claimed the title ‘third wave’ is to highlight what they see as the important differences between their lives and activism and the lives and activism of feminists in the second wave. Asserting these differences through ongoing processes of collective identity is an important task as it allows the women’s movement to renew and remake itself rather than stagnating and becoming outdated. Chilla Bulbeck (1999) suggests that for contemporary young women the insights of 1970s feminists are no longer new and that, “early feminists must sometimes seem to be fumbling idiots” (1999:15). Kathy Bail (1996) argues that young women’s rejection of a feminist identity indicates that “many of them have already trashed this loaded term, or, at the very least, they want to bend it and make it their own” (1996:5). Bail goes on to suggest that what she calls “a reaction against constricting dogma” is in fact a “means of keeping feminism active and alive” (1996:5). While I would suggest that an understanding of feminism as “a constricting dogma” is primarily due to backlash media coverage rather than reality, the argument that ‘between the waves’ conflict is important for the movement as a whole is an important one. The risk in this approach, however, is that by making the “reinvention process” fundamental to young feminist praxis, “new and improved” becomes more attractive and even more valid than “historically informed” (Orr 1997:32-3).

The realisation of this risk has led Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997) to argue that a rejection of everything that the second wave has done, merely to make young feminists seem “fully differentiated” (1997:53), is unconsidered and unnecessary. They claim that the struggles of second wave feminists “are still our struggles, if in different forms” (1997:54). Heywood and Drake see that the second and third waves of the



women's movement are neither "incompatible nor opposed" (1997:3) even though they may be different in their goals, strategies and orientations. As Catherine Orr (1997) argues:

...third wavers are not the first to struggle with the complexities and contradictions of applying feminist principles to their everyday lives. Acknowledging this might lead to some well-worn second wave paths that prove invaluable. The wheel does not have to be reinvented (1997:32).

I would argue that an important part of young feminists' processes of collective identity is to determine their similarities and their differences to second wave feminists, while seeing neither group as homogenous. In this way they may be able to see themselves as part of a 'between the waves' moment that is doing important work in furthering feminist understanding and negotiating ongoing conflicts.

Writing of Australian feminists in the between the waves period of 1919 to 1969 Zora Simic argues that

...activists in this period established the space, framework, networks, tools and discourses for campaigns such as equal pay that came to fruition in the women's liberation period (1999:2).

Simic goes on to argue that what separated activists between the waves and in the second wave were "definitions and meanings for feminism and feminist activity and the cultural, social and political space available for such feminist activity" (1999:2). Given the undervalued nature of between the waves activism, however, it is understandable that contemporary young feminists should seek to create for themselves an identifiable "we" that as Deborah Siegel (1997b) suggests becomes "a public performance, an outward show of solidarity" (1997b:59) in which young feminists take a "stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists" (1997b:52).

### **From sisters to mothers and daughters**

In Australia the debates between younger and older feminists have primarily been framed within a paradigm of 'generations' rather than metaphorical waves. This rhetorical move suggests that the women's movement has progressed from the now disparaged notion of sisterhood to another feminine "familial metaphor" (D'Arcens 1998:105); that of mothers and daughters. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s these conflicts were primarily over the grounds of 'race', class and sexuality, in recent years these conflicts have shifted to incorporate the terrain of age. This shift has involved what Virginia Trioli (1996) describes as a "significant and painful realigning of the feminist debate as it moved from one generation to another" (Trioli 1996:8). The concept of generation itself is limited, tending towards the creation of caricatures and stereotypes of groups of feminists. However, as Devoney Looser (1997) argues "Not to examine 'feminist generation' out of a concern for its theoretical instability and violence as a category does little to address the effects of the category" (1997:33).

Trioli (1996) argues that invoking the concept of a generational divide, with all its "rhetorical riches," is "the easy way out" of the struggle to understand differences between feminists in the 1970s and 1990s. The image of the "knowing, mature, libertarian feminists on one side; [and] the cringing, punishing young things on the other" (1996:9) does little to advance our understanding of either the complexity and diversity of young feminists' activism or the important place that these young women should hold in the contemporary women's movement. Associated with this problem is an embedded attachment to a "discourse of linear progress" that suggests a "too-stable feminism" in the past, against which contemporary feminism is measured and usually found wanting (Long 2001:5-7). Both Jane Long (2001) and Louise D'Arcens (1998) argue that "herding older and younger women into opposing camps" (D'Arcens 1998:111) works only to "severely obscure the diversity of feminisms and their historical fluidity" (Long 2001:3). While this supposedly "blanket generational experience" (Long 2001:3) allows young women to claim a specificity and unity that 'belongs' to their generation, the privileging of age over other aspects of identity is at odds with the diversity that is

apparent among young feminists. According to Bulbeck (1999), young feminists are “torn between a desire to deconstruct an essentialist feminist ‘we’, and the political need to confirm common bonds” (1999:14). In other words, the generational paradigm does little more than complicate existing feminist dilemmas about difference and strategic universalism.

Differential relations of power and authority are also constitutive components of the generational paradigm. As Louise D’Arcens (1998) argues:

Because this model is based on an unequal, hierarchical relationship between successful middle-ages mothers and less established feminists daughters ...This raises the question of whether, within this model, it is possible for young feminists to respond to their elders without in some way reinforcing the predetermined image of insolent daughters (1998:109-10).

According to Mark Davis (1997), this model of what he calls the “new generationalism” amounts to little more than a form of “cultural gatekeeping” which is used to “single out social groups, apportioning tastes and ideologies according to age, to set up young people, even demonise them, as ‘outsiders’” (1997:16). While the concept of generation may indeed function as a “regulatory category” as Davis suggests (1997:15), his argument that the “taunt of generationalism...usually comes from above,” (1997:15) denies the agency of young people, and in this case young feminists, in apportioning the category to themselves. Contemporary young feminists have been just as active as older feminists in constructing debates within feminism along the axis of age. While acknowledging the power relations that age often creates, which in many cases may account for the anger, hurt and hostility that characterised the Australian feminist generation debates, it is unhelpful to lay the blame for the creation of the category at the feet of one or other group.

These intrinsic difficulties in the concept of feminist generationalism again highlight the reasons that an understanding of contemporary young feminists’ processes of collective identity is important at this point in time. An examination of young feminists’ cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and field of action; the networks of active

relationships among young feminists; and their emotional investment in their activism (Melucci 1995: 44-45) makes it possible to trace specific trajectories and capture the diversity of activism being practiced by contemporary young feminists without resorting to generalisations based on monolithic, universalised generations. This approach also allows for an exploration of Australian debates between different groups of feminists that does not get “beached on the need to find fault” (Trioli 1996:51) as the debates in the 1990s did. The concept of generations may still be usefully deployed, however, in developing a model of what D’Arcens calls “intergenerational reciprocity” (1998:113) to replace the concept of conflict between generations. While the differences between (and among) contemporary generations of Australian feminists may be significant, understanding the processes of collective identity for both diverse groups may allow for a model of “conflictual sisterhood” that D’Arcens (1998:114-5) proposes as a replacement for the generational model. This suggestion recognises the necessity for conflict to occur between feminists in the women’s movement as a part of their ongoing processes of collective identity, by acknowledging that “conflict is as much a part of sisterhood as harmony or shared interests” (1998:114).

### **The Australian generation debates**

The generational debates within the Australian women’s movement were sparked by published criticism of young women by two well-known second wave feminists; namely Anne Summers and Helen Garner. These publications provoked outrage from young women who responded in the media and in publications of their own. This rapidly developing body of literature was quickly labelled ‘the generation debate’, in which, as in the United States, two homogenous, anonymous and universalised masses of women were divided into camps determined primarily by age, thus erasing other differences between women based on location, class or ethnicity. In the media beat-up that accompanied these publications the essayists’ work was reduced to “trashing, countertrashing and metatrashing” (Bulbeck 2000:7) and the real significance of inter-generational feminist discourse was lost. Also lost was the actual work that young women are doing in maintaining the Australian women’s movement and creating its future.

Anne Summers' *Letter to the next generation*<sup>3</sup> (2002 [1993]) was addressed "especially to women who were born after 1968," who, in an early indication of the burst of generational rhetoric to come, she named the "daughters of the feminist revolution" (2002:521). In the *Letter* Summers wondered what young women think and feel about feminists from the 1970s. She could not:

...imagine any young woman who wanted to do something with her life not being able to make the connection between the great array of choices now available to her and the battles we had fought. Wouldn't she acknowledge this? Wouldn't she feel something – gratitude? a debt? a responsibility to keep widening those choices for herself and her generation? To me, it seemed inconceivable that young women in their early twenties would not feel as drawn to the movement to increase women's opportunities as I had been when I was their age (2002:519).

Summers expressed her concern about the possibility of a "generation gap" emerging in the feminist agenda, as second wave feminists began to focus on issues more relevant to older women, and urged young women to "remain vigilant" (2002:537). While the critical tone of the letter provoked outrage from many young feminists who felt that their activism was being ignored<sup>4</sup> Summers also clearly expressed her belief that young feminists are active in ways that she did not understand. These young women, she suggested "will do it in your own time and in your own way" (2002:523). The *Letter* had its desired, provocative effect as young women rushed to respond to what they saw as a challenge from Summers, even as they criticised her for being a "gatekeeper of public debate" (Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998:xi). However, the *Letter* also planted one of the most obvious 'red herrings' that was to emerge in the debates of the 1990s. In drawing attention to the "I'm not a feminist, but..." phenomenon, and questioning the visibility of

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<sup>3</sup> This text first appeared in *Refracting Voices: feminist perspectives from Refractory Girl* (1993), and was subsequently reprinted in the second and third editions of Anne Summers (1994, 2002 [1974]) *Damned whores and god's police*. Its widespread notoriety, however, results from its inclusion in the (then) annual women's issue (to coincide with International Women's Day) of the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend Magazine* in March 1995, at which time Summers was editor of this publication.

<sup>4</sup> In May 1995 *The Sydney Morning Herald's Good Weekend Magazine* carried a five-page spread in which young women challenged Anne Summers' article. The magazine reported that "articles on sexual harassment and feminism's generation gap in our recent issues generated the greatest volume of mail in the magazine's 10-year history" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* cited in Mead 1997:23).

the 'next generation' of feminists, Summers created the myth that there were no young feminists at all. This resulted in feminism and the women's movement having to "defend its relevance by a random census of the number of people prepared to wear its tag" (Trioli 1996:52). This diverted attention from the more interesting, and important, questions of how feminism and feminist activism is different for young women.

In contrast to the critical but hopeful tone of Summers' *Letter*, Garner's *The first stone* (1995) functioned "to exhale a very large and very disappointed generational sigh about the ways in which the promise of liberation in the 1970s had paled into priggishness" (Long 2001:2). Garner brought the notions of 'victim feminism' that were a part of the generational concerns in the United States into play in the Australian context, without, as Jenna Mead<sup>5</sup> (1997) points out, "much thought for the differences between Australia and the US" (1997:9). Garner also made interpersonal relationships the focus of her analysis and criticisms of contemporary feminism, rather than examining questions of institutional power and structural disadvantage that young women continue to experience. Mark Davis (1997), one of Garner's most rigorous critics outside the women's movement, summarised Garner's assessment of Australian feminism in *The first stone* as containing a "common refrain":

...there's a new type of feminism abroad – a negative, doctrinaire, punitive feminism that can focus on only one thing at the expense of all else: the idea that women are victims...this is a feminism that allows no possibility for fun, sex or female power, and it has reached plague proportions among young women (1997:76).

These allegations of "contemporary feminism's supposed corruption and decline" (1997:82) acted to widen the generational divide in Australian feminism by allowing some, high profile older feminists to "dichotomise between their feminisms and what follows by casting themselves as the movement's mothers" (1997:83).

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Jenna Mead emerged as a key figure in what became known as the 'Ormond affair'. At the time of the incidents of alleged sexual harassment Mead was the equal opportunity officer at Ormond College and counselled the women complainants throughout the case. In *The First Stone*, Mead was split into six or seven different characters, allowing Garner to imply that a feminist conspiracy obstructed her research for the book.

From 1995 to 1999 the Australian print media maintained a sporadic focus on the feminist 'generation wars', however very few of the column inches devoted to this topic did much to further anyone's understanding of the changes that were occurring within the women's movement. Criticisms continued to flow from older feminists such as WEL founder Beatrice Faust (1997) who argued that "Older feminists cannot hold the line without support from the under-30s – yet many young women are so naïve that if you spit in their face they'll say it's raining"(1997:23). These were met with responses from young women such as Kathy Bail who suggested that "rather than try to connect with the activities of younger women, many feminists are quick to dismiss them" (1997:46). Other younger feminists attempted to present their own ideas of what the debates were about. For example Fiona Stewart (1999) argued that:

Contrary to popular belief and some media, the feminist movement is not about to self-destruct...So, the debate we're having is not really about feminism. It's not even about whether it has succeeded or not or to what degree. It is more about a society that has failed to live up to women's raised expectations of life in general. (Stewart 1999:15).

Journalist Virginia Trioli (1999), attempted to put the debates into some sort of perspective:

Much is made of arguments between feminists, with a rancour attributed to the disputes that is never applied to, say, arguments between economists, military strategists or quantum physicists. The rancour is, in reality, rarely there: but what often attends differences of feminist opinion is a thin-skinned defensiveness that is not only disappointing but self-defeating (Trioli 1999:45).

The end result was, as Jane Long (2001) proposes, a "confusing and, indeed, contradictory series of claims about feminism and its directions" (2001:2) that have inevitably had an impact on the young women who were reaching maturity in the mid-1990s.

Some young women took the opportunity to use their publishing connections to make a more extensive response to the criticisms from Summers and Garner. Journalists Virginia Trioli and Kathy Bail both produced texts during 1996 in order to put forward their view

of the ways in which young women were engaging with feminism and the women's movement. In a direct response to some of the criticisms raised in *The first stone* Trioli describes the "highly practical breed of feminism that is the practice of many young women's lives"(1996:11) in the areas of the workplace, the media and laws surrounding questions of sexual harassment. While initially critical of the generational paradigm (1996:9) Trioli ultimately finds it hard to avoid because, as Louise D'Arcens (1998) observes, there is a central conflict in the *Generation f* project that "results from [Trioli's] desire to defend her generation while at the same time casting doubt upon the very concept of feminist generations" (1998:110). Nevertheless Trioli's contribution to new discussions of the role of young women in the Australian women's movement was strategic and effective as it delivered a fairly straightforward presentation of the work that young feminists were doing. Her analysis covered areas that were generally understood to be feminist terrain and she placed the need for more traditional collective action at the centre of her assessment of the instrumental, political goals that young women were pursuing.

A far more controversial response to criticisms levelled at younger women from older feminists came from Kathy Bail and her edited collection *DIY feminism*. The concept of DIY or do-it-yourself feminism is intended to describe young women's rejection of what Bail saw as "institutionalised" feminism that "suggests a rigidity of style and behaviour and is still generally associated with a culture of complaint" (1996:5). Dismissing organised feminism as "old-fashioned", Bail exalts a feminism that is "largely about individual practice and taking on personal challenges rather than group identification" (1996:16). While this perspective has some degree of resonance with the types of cultural practices and discursive politics that are a feature of contemporary young feminist activism, Bail's approach almost entirely de-politicises the actions of the young women who contributed to her book. In reducing young feminists to a desire to be "identified through their interests and passions – such as music, publications or business- before their gender" (1996:4) Bail ignores the deep significance that these sites of cultural production – as acts of resistance – have for many young feminists. Central to Bail's perspective is the idea that feminism as a social movement is no longer appropriate or relevant to



contemporary young feminists. This rejection of the need for collective action is seen by Anita Harris (1999) as evidence that Bail's representation of DIY is:

...fundamentally consistent with liberal individualism [where] freedom to do as one pleases, resistance to categories, and personal achievements (preferably accomplished through sassy behaviour) are held up as evidence of social change (1999:283).

In other words, Bail avoids any analysis of structural disadvantages that affect young women's lives in different ways, depending on the opportunities available to them by virtue of their 'race' or class. As some other young feminists ask "What if we can't do-it-ourselves?" (Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998:xvi).

Some young Australian feminists criticised Bail for the ways in which she caricatured and stereotyped young feminist activists. For example, Foong Ling Kong (1997) suggests that *DIY feminism* provides a list of "do's and don'ts" for young women who want to be identified as belonging to the "marketable category" of "The Young Feminist" (1997:69). Rosamund Else-Mitchell and Naomi Flutter (1998) echo this criticism in their introduction to the collection *Talking Up* when they argue that *DIY*:

...sounds very edgy. Let's face it, marketing feminism with groovy fonts, a funky layout and some pictures makes it palatable and digestible to a populist post-modern world. But it doesn't necessarily equate with social transformation and it isn't a call to action (1998:xv).

One contributor to *Talking Up*, Krysti Guest (1998), also expresses her frustration with Bail for representing young feminists as "only worded up on groove culture, cyberpunk and lipstick" when she sees the real work of feminism as dealing with things that can be "pretty damn joyless...complex to understand and which oppress women" (1998:160-1).

These criticisms suggest that Bail has not accurately captured the work that many young feminists are doing. Anita Harris (1999) argues that the cultural products being generated by young feminists with an authentic, *punk* DIY ethic, such as the production of zines<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup> The word 'zines' is short for fanzines, which Anita Harris (1999) describes as "independently produced informal newsletters...[which] are produced on little or no budget, provide social commentary of a critical

goes far beyond Bail's neo-liberal individualism. Harris sees clear links between the politics of grrrl<sup>7</sup> power and grrrl culture and the continuing collective politics of the women's movement. She points out that:

Producers of grrrl zines see themselves actively shaping and building feminist politics, and bringing feminism to a wider and younger audience. Their ways of doing feminism are not presented as being at odds with older or more mainstream ways, but work together with these to build a strong movement of a diversity of women (1999:286).

This analysis suggests that the 'generational wars' in the Australian women's movement have been decidedly miscast. Young women may indeed be involved in new processes of collective identity and new forms of activism that may be hard for older women to recognise. But setting up one group as radically and dichotomously opposed to the other does little more than generate a load of media rhetoric. The fact that younger and older women are engaged in a wide variety of activism is sign of the women's movement's health. Understanding their processes of collective identity as providing space in which to discuss these differences does not mean that the movement is on the verge of self-destruction. Looking for these differences, and embracing them when we find them, will ensure that young women's engagement with the broader women's movements is valued rather than overlooked.

### **Contemporary diversity**

In all the texts written by young women about their relationship to feminism, both in Australia and in the United States, one clear message comes through; young feminists want their diversity acknowledged as a positive contribution to the contemporary

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nature, and usually include reviews, information sharing, editorials and creative writing around issues relevant to young people" (1999:284). I would suggest that they are another interesting echo of the discursive strategies of 1970s feminism which relied on the distribution of hand typed and roneoed newsletters and information sheets such as Anne Koedt's (1969) *The myth of the vaginal orgasm* which was widely distributed on university campuses and Women's Liberation meetings.

<sup>7</sup> Anita Harris (1999) argues that the "re-writing of the word 'girl' into 'grrrl' was intended to communicate anger (the 'grrr' stood for growling) and rejection of patronising attitudes towards young women" (1999:284-5). It is primarily associated with groups such as Riot Grrrl and producers of zines such as Grot Grrrl, who "used music and writing to develop a political platform for younger women" (1999:285).

women's movement. They reject the somewhat absurd stereotype that Louise D'Arcens (1998) draws from some of the discourse of the Australian generational debate; the image of "the generic young feminist...a curious hybrid figure who sits provocatively-dressed at her computer emailing her solicitor" (1998:111). As Virginia Trioli argues:

There is no young feminist anymore ... There are young women in Australia who call themselves feminists but who have almost nothing in common – politically, ideologically – with each other ... feminism now incorporates so wide a spectrum of thinking and action that some older feminists clearly cannot get a grip on it (1996:9).

Blaming older feminists for 'not getting it', however, merely obscures one source of the problem, that is, the packaging of 'young feminism' in the media and by publishing houses. On the covers of 'new feminist' books both in Australia and the United States, parts of women's bodies, particularly crotches and mouths, were used to signify that 'young feminist' voices were speaking (Bulbeck 2000). As Anita Harris (2001) suggests, the so-called 'generation debate' itself can, at least in part, be seen as resulting from a combination of "well-intentioned young women themselves, good marketing by publishing companies, and international corporations piggy-backing on new images of girlhood to gain access to potential consumers" (2001:2).

The feminism that is practiced by young women in the contemporary women's movement is nothing if not diverse. Yet in the "race to colonise" and name what young feminism is and means, the diversity of young women's activism is in danger of being lost (Harris 2001:8). Anita Harris (2001) suggests that there are three distinctive features of "new feminist praxis", namely its diversity; its ability to use contemporary resources such as technology and popular culture; and its dispersed, often leaderless structures (2001:5) However even naming these characteristics runs the risk of inadvertently stereotyping young women's activism. After all, not all young feminists have access to, or are interested in, new technologies, and some young women prefer to be involved in traditional, hierarchical organizations with clear leaders. Similarly, some of these traits can also be said to have applied to feminists in the 1970s, as exemplified in the Women's Liberation groups' determination to have leaderless collectives. Nevertheless the point

that young feminists want to make is quite clear. They see that they have created their “own tactics, style and generational imprint” that benefit the women’s movement as a whole (Baumgardner and Richards 2000:289).

One way in which young feminists see themselves as different from their predecessors is on their emphasis on ‘lived feminism’ or feminism that is practiced in their daily lives. In reality, however, this notion, and the suggestion that feminism begins in women’s personal lives (Else-Mitchell and Flutter 1998) is a clear but unacknowledged echo of the second wave concept of the personal as political. What is different is the context in which young feminists’ daily lives are lived. As Anita Harris (2001) points out “the feminism lived by many young women is constituted in diverse, networked, global, and interconnected praxis” (2001:1). In other ways, too, there is more to connect younger and older feminists than a superficial analysis might reveal. The unresolved dilemmas about difference in feminism that have gone on since the 1970s, for example, have had a lasting effect on the young women who have grown up within these debates. As Heywood and Drake (1997) suggest, young feminists are “products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism”(1997:3).

The spate of publishing in the 1990s that attempted to articulate and define what feminism means to contemporary young women can be seen as an example of what Stacey Young (1997) calls the “feminist strategy of discursive struggle.” These authors “[p]ublish their work in an effort to bring their insights to bear on other women’s lives, and on the women’s movement’s analyses and agendas” (1997:13). Discursive struggle is as important to feminist activism as policy oriented or electoral politics in the struggle to transform power relations and social structures. As Young argues:

...discursive production is central to women’s movement activity; furthermore it is an especially important site in struggles to expand our understanding of differences among women, their relationship to the construction of women’s subjectivity and identity, and their relationship to feminist resistance (1997:23).

The texts of the feminist ‘generation wars’ deal explicitly with issues of differences between women, both in terms of ‘generational’ or age related differences, and other

differences based on location, class or ethnicity. This emphasis on “how to practice feminism differently” means that the work of contemporary young feminists “places differences among women at the centre of the project” (Siegel 1997b:69) and can thus be seen to stand in contrast to second wave emphasis on unity and sisterhood. Cathryn Bailey (1997) argues that this attention to difference may be the most important contribution that younger feminists make to the women’s movement, as “despite the efforts of older feminists, racism within feminism is alive and well” (1997:26). However, for Krysti Guest (1998), this suggests the need for more contemporary feminist *theory* from young women as she fears that the emphasis on individual approaches that has characterised young feminist discourse to date will end up “smothering...systemic questions of difference...allowing some pretty nasty systems of oppression to remain invisible” (1998:165).

This dilemma clearly articulates the “postsocialist” context in which contemporary young feminists are working. In their desire to express their individualism, their difference from previous forms of feminist activism and their attention to difference and multiplicity, young feminists risk obscuring their fundamental commitment to achieving social, cultural and political change. They are grappling with the “postsocialist” struggle to avoid an either/or choice between a social politics of class or equality and a cultural politics of identity or difference and are working to understand how culture and economy work together to produce injustices (Fraser 1997). Therefore any analysis of contemporary young feminist activism must not focus on discursive struggles and articulations of difference alone, but must also acknowledge that contemporary feminism has orientations that are materialist (Walter 1999) and strategic (Schubert 1998).

One reason these orientations are so often overlooked is due to many young feminists’ engagement with popular culture as a site of resistance. However, young feminists defend these strategies, while acknowledging that, as Heywood and Drake (1997) argue:

Our hybrid engagement with culture and/as politics sometimes looks problematic to second wave activists, who might accuse us of exchanging engagement with institutional and economic inequities for a self-referential politics that

overestimates the power of critiquing, re-working, and producing pop- and subcultural images and narratives. But as third wave activists, we contest a politics of purity that would separate political activism from cultural production (1997:51).

Nancy Whittier (1995) also rejects the downplaying of cultural critique as a feminist strategy and points out that “cultural hegemony triumphs by making nondominant points of view invisible or unthinkable” (1995:53). Young women know and understand this, and, in the absence of a more favourable political opportunity structure, engage with popular culture as a site of genuine and necessary resistance. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000) argue, this is a significant difference between contemporary young feminists and feminists of the 1970s:

For the generation that reared the Third Wave, not only was feminism apparent in the politics of the time but politics was truly the culture of the time...For the Third Wave, politics was superseded by culture – punk rock, hip-hop, zines, products, consumerism and the Internet (2000:130).

It may, indeed, be difficult for older feminists to understand contemporary forms of feminist activism as Chilla Bulbeck (2000) suggests, due to their “fear [of] the loss of politics, as we have come to know it” (2000:19). However, giving contemporary young feminists a measure of respect and credit for devising and engaging in strategies and tactics that are appropriate and necessary to their time is somewhat overdue. This ability to adapt should also be seen as a sign of the flexibility and strength that allows the women’s movement to survive the constant changes that are occurring both in the social and political context in which it operates and within the movement itself.

Rejecting the generational script with its attendant, emotionally laden discourse of mother-daughter relationships (Siegel 1997a) is another essential task if the movement is to survive as a mainstream political player. There is more important work to be done in understanding this “cross-generational moment” (Zita 1997:1) and documenting the sites and forms of contemporary feminist activism that young women are engaged in. This type of documentation should aim to provide a more productive and inclusive view of the role of young women in the contemporary Australian women’s movement. This work

belongs in this between the waves, “exploratory period” that, as Zora Simic (1999) points out, is essential “in order for major cultural changes to occur” (1999:6) in the future.

Young women in the Australian women’s movement are involved in coalition work with other social movement actors that again points to their engagement with issues of differences between women. Anita Harris (2001) argues that this reflects previous examples of between the waves feminism:

In Australia at least, we are perhaps seeing some kind of hearkening back to the forgotten feminism between the wars that was heavily concentrated on Aboriginal rights, ideas of nation, citizenship and equality, union issues and migrant labour debates...it is possible to document a kind of resurgence of these sorts of concerns today (2001:8).

Add to this list the young women who are working in coalition with the anti-capital movement and the refugee movement in Australia and it becomes clear that the “identification of a single, young Australian feminist voice is impossible” (Mitchell 1998:185-6). Nor is such identification desirable. The model of conflictual and multivocal sisterhood that is indicated in the processes of collective identity of contemporary young Australian feminists is a clear sign of the women’s movement’s continued relevance and vitality.

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