

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Women*

Article 17

3-21-2007

I am a Contradiction: Feminism and Feminist Identity in the Third Wave

Meredith A. Evans

University of Massachusetts Boston

Chris Bobel

University of Massachusetts Boston, chris.bobel@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evans, Meredith A. and Bobel, Chris (2007) "I am a Contradiction: Feminism and Feminist Identity in the Third Wave," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol22/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.

I am a Contradiction

Feminism and Feminist Identity in the Third Wave

Meredith A. Evans and Chris Bobel

How is Third Wave feminism defined? What are the implications for self-labeling as a feminist and the evolution of the “I’m not a feminist, but. . . .” group? While much controversy surrounds the etiology and even the very existence of a “Third Wave” of feminism, this nascent movement is a significant aspect of the current dialogue on contemporary feminism. Therefore, it is important to examine the history and the meaning of the identity of Third Wave. In an attempt to elucidate contemporary feminism, four key Third Wave collections of personal narratives were chosen and analyzed for current definitions of feminism. The anthologies used for this research contain the voices of numerous activists from 1995 to 2006 and represent a diverse range of individuals. A thematic analysis produced four themes: inclusion, multiplicity, contradiction, and everyday feminism. An analysis of the interconnections of these themes brought forth the question of whether a movement that is genuinely attuned to inclusion, multiplicity and contradiction can embrace the feminist label, or any label. Labels create boundaries and define the in-group, which is antithetical to these principles of Third Wave feminism. This might explain the current trend in research that finds many individuals supporting feminist ideology but resisting the feminist label. That is, the phrase “I’m not a feminist, but. . . .” may not simply be a reaction to a disparaged label but more precisely, an acknowledgement of the limits and liabilities of categorization.

Today, in college classrooms, in volunteer organizations, around kitchen tables and anywhere else that young progressives meet, it is not uncommon to hear those present distancing themselves from the label feminist while espousing the core beliefs at the heart of feminism. The phrase, “I am not a feminist, but. . . .” has emerged as a device for those who resist gendered crimes, wage discrimination, and exploitative representations of women but do not wish to be “one of *those* women.” Numerous

Meredith A. Evans is a clinical psychology doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Chris Bobel is an assistant professor of women’s studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

studies have demonstrated that there is a wide gap between those who identify with the aims of feminism and those who identify as feminist. In a study by Burn, Aboud, and Moyles, the majority of their respondents supported feminist ideology but only 12 percent self-labeled as feminists.¹ Liss, O'Connor, Morosky, and Crawford found that 81 percent of the women in their sample did not self-identify as feminists but agreed with all or some of the movements' objectives.² This discrepancy between ideology and self-label has been a consistent theme in recent feminist research yet there is no consensus regarding the roots of what's been dubbed resistance to the "f-word."³ This reality suggests that the answer is a complex blend of a term successfully disparaged, a movement tragically misunderstood, and the reality of diverse women's lives in context.

But perhaps there is another possibility. In order to grasp why the "f-word" is widely avoided by even those who attach to the notion of feminism, we find it instructive to begin with an in-depth exploration of what feminism means to those who at once embrace and critique it. Teasing apart feminism, the movement, from feminist, the identity, may produce some insights into resistance to the "f-word." Liss, Hoffner, and Crawford suggest that one possibility is that "individuals do not identify themselves as feminists because they do not understand what feminism is,"⁴ but our close reading of several key texts associated with contemporary feminism reveals that young women certainly *do* know what feminism means to them. The problem may be, then, that we are not listening closely enough. If we do tune in to what young women are telling us, we may tap into the reasons why the feminist identity has fallen out of favor. Accordingly, this essay seeks to answer two interrelated questions: How do young women define feminism and how does that definition inform their resistance to claiming a feminist identity? We believe that, in order to meet the needs of young women (and men), it is imperative that we listen to what they are telling us about feminism. That is, we believe that "meeting young women where they are" rests on grasping the changing definitions of a movement in flux and an identity in question.

The movement in flux is often referred to as the Third Wave of the U.S. women's movement, interchangeably called "Third Wave Feminism." There appears no consensus regarding the coining of the term "Third Wave." Some accounts, like Lorber,⁵ point to Rebecca Walker, daughter of legendary feminist writer and activist Alice Walker, who boldly asserted in a 1992 *Ms. Magazine*: "I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave." In this oft-cited piece, Walker crafts a feminist response to the infamous 1991 U.S. Supreme Court justice nomination hearings during which nominee Clarence Thomas was accused of the sexual harassment of former staff member Anita Hill. In this call to action, Walker encourages young femi-

nists to take up the mantle of feminist activism at a time of demonstrated need. Her impassioned plea stated:

Let Thomas's confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power.⁶

A few years later, Walker edited the first of several anthologies of Third Wave writing — collections of first-person narratives that lay the terrain of emerging feminist issues. In the introduction to the collection, provocatively titled: *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Walker refers to herself as “Third Wave.” Other accounts of the Third Wave's founding, including Garrison's⁷ trace the origins to Lynn Chancer's 1991 call for a Third Wave feminism that asked:

for a revitalized radical feminist offensive that does not wait for the leaders who reigned in the 1960s and 1970s to step forward, but for up-and-coming young feminists to confront antifeminist backlash, heralding a paradigm shift, rather than a simple cohort formation.⁸

Around the same time, Chela Sandoval and Barbara Smith argued in an unpublished book that “Third Wave” was championed by women of color who exposed the Second Wave's lack of racial-ethnic diversity and intersectional analyses that see race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression.⁹ Sandoval and Smith called for a reinvigorated and authentically inclusive feminism. Later, in 2000, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards agreed, asserting that, “The Third Wave was born into the diversity realized by the latter part of the Second Wave.”¹⁰ Among others, Kimberly Spring and Catherine Orr published similar sentiments¹¹ as did Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake,¹² editors of the first collection on Third Wave (published in 1997). There they theorized the emerging Third Wave, focusing on the ways that contemporary feminism operated as a project in decolonization and one that “changed the Second Wave of the women's movement for good.”¹³

Astrid Henry locates another and still earlier origin, dating the beginning of the use of the term “Third Wave” to a 1987 essay written by Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey titled “Second Thoughts on the Third Wave.” The article, published in the journal *Feminist Studies*, traced the myriad changes in feminism throughout the late 1970s and 1980s and observed that “what some are calling a Third Wave of feminism [is] already taking shape.”¹⁴

The messiness of pinpointing an origin of Third Wave spills into the task of formulating a coherent definition of the newest expression of feminism. We agree with Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, editors of a 2003 collec-

tion of Third Wave writing titled *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, who “want to render problematic an easy understanding of what the Third Wave is.”¹⁵ At the same time, it is possible to trace the contours of Third Wave feminism as simultaneously a product and continuation of the Second Wave and a breakout movement that offers something fresh.

For Dicker and Piepmeier, “typically, the Third Wave is thought of as a younger generation’s feminism, one that rejects traditional — or stereotypical—understandings of feminism and as such is antithetical or oppositional to its supposed predecessor, the Second Wave.”¹⁶ Further, they characterize Third Wave “as a movement that contains elements of Second Wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures.”¹⁷ But they stop short of a tidy generational divide between the waves, arguing instead for the role of cultural context in sorting Second from Third Wave. For them,

the Third Wave consists of those of us who have developed our sense of identity in a world shaped by technology, global capitalism, multiple models of sexuality, changing national demographics, declining economic vitality.¹⁸

Some, like Baumgardner and Richards, define Third Wave chronologically and, thus, a movement populated by “women who were reared in the wake of the women’s liberation movement of the seventies.”¹⁹ For Heywood and Drake, an even more precise definition serves, capturing the “generation of feminists born between 1963 and 1974.”²⁰ Astrid Henry posits that the “Third Wave, has frequently been employed as a kind of shorthand for a generational difference among feminists, one based on chronological age” though she argues that the term more appropriately represents a “new” feminism that departs from the Second Wave, regardless of the age of the proponent.²¹

We approach this messy terrain searching for clarity. For the two of us, Meredith, a Clinical Psychology doctoral student working on her thesis on feminist identity and activism, and Chris, a Women’s Studies professor researching transformations and continuities in the contemporary American feminist movement, we are not strangers to the “I am not a feminist, but. . . .” conundrum and the struggle to capture and comprehend a Third Wave of feminism. But we realize that others, especially those who have limited contact with newer expressions of feminism, are hungry for an explanation. Indeed, many are searching for suitable explanations for why contemporary young women bristle when someone suggests they might be a feminist. Some, including Gina Bellafante, argued that young women found feminism, at best, obsolete or, at worst, irrelevant in her much-discussed feature story in *Time* magazine.²² The cover of the magazine provocatively asked “Is Feminism

Dead?” Others, such as Shawn Meghan Burn and Suzanne Pharr, reference the negative connotations associated with the identity of feminist.²³ A feminist, it goes, is man-hating, bitter, obnoxious, and dogmatic. Who wants to associate with something so unflattering, so inflexible, and/or so risky?

We are inspired by communication scholars, Fixmer and Wood, who looked to key Third Wave texts to define the Third Wave of feminism and more discretely, understand how this newest wave enacts the political.²⁴ Through an analysis of *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, *Listen Up: Voice from the Next Feminist Generation*, and *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* the authors identified three important themes of embodied politics that run throughout these writings: redefining identities; enacting personal, everyday resistance; and building coalitions. First, they describe “redefining identities” as rejecting discrete categories for cataloging women and a move toward embracing differences, multiplicities, and ambiguity. Second, “enacting personal, everyday resistance” focuses on the Third Wave’s use of the body as the primary site for resistance. And third, “building coalitions” emphasizes the movement’s commitment to bridging differences and working within an understanding of the intersections of oppression. They applaud the Third Wave for their emphasis on everyday resistance but focus more sharply on critiquing a movement that is “at best unwise and, at worst, dangerously naïve.”²⁵ They claim (and, we believe, overstate) that Third Wave feminists believe that “all structural sources of women’s oppression have been removed and cannot be reinstated.”²⁶ Furthermore, they take aim at what they see as Third Wave’s ignorance toward their feminist predecessors, specifically the radical branch of the Second Wave whose actions mirror much of the mission of the Third Wave. They conclude by suggesting that Third Wavers spend some time acquainting themselves with feminist history and appreciating the gains made by the Second Wave. They also suggest that Third Wavers seriously address what they see as a disconnect between their politics and a requisite engagement with juridical power.

We endeavor to build on Fixmer and Wood’s work by conducting our own thematic analysis of a slightly larger and updated body of Third Wave feminist writing and by adding a discussion of how these themes interrelate and contribute to the resistance to the label of feminist. Our analysis draws on two of the texts used by Fixmer and Wood (*To Be Real* and *Colonize This!*) and adds the updated edition of *Listen Up!* plus a newer edited collection titled *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*. Departing from Fixmer and Wood, our intention is not to critique the Third Wave’s strengths and weaknesses — after all, it is still a movement very much in its infancy — but to produce a more complex and nuanced understanding of what Third Wavers are saying through the pages of key Third

Wave texts. Unpacking the resistance to the label of feminist must not categorically instill panic and despair, rather, it can signal a deeper need to understand more fully what contemporary feminism means today. It is our hope that the present analysis will contribute to a more productive dialogue across and within the waves, one that carries the potential to transform defensiveness into openness and tension into dialogue.

We chose the following books not only because they represent prominent contributions to the Third Wave literature but also because they allowed us to sample the voices of a large and diverse number of authors. Each book, a collection of personal narratives, variously explores the myriad ways in which feminism is defined and realized, calling particular attention to the singular features of the Third Wave as departure from and improvement upon Second Wave ideology and practice.

In *To Be Real*, editor Rebecca Walker collected essays on “feminism and female empowerment in the nineties.”²⁷ More specifically, she asked the contributors to write essays “that explored female empowerment from the perspective of what in your life has been empowering for you.”²⁸ The result was a unique and complex mix of intense personal narratives on everything from public eroticism as activism to identity politics, to recognizing and appreciating beauty as an act of resistance.

In *Colonize This*, Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman sought to bring together the voices of young women of color to “deepen the conversations” in communities of color and “introduce some of the ideas of woman of color feminism to women who have thought that feminism is just a philosophy about white men and women and has nothing to do with our communities.”²⁹ This compelling collection of narratives focuses on four themes: family and community, mothers, cultural customs, and talking back.

Barbara Findlen originally published *Listen Up* in 1995 to “create a visible, public forum for our experiences as young feminists, and to affirm our presence.”³⁰ The pages of this new edition are filled with the original pieces, several of which focus on the intersections of the authors’ feminist identity with ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, class, and other personal identities. New essays, added in 2001, were included in this updated version in order to “showcase fresh voices on new subject matter” such as consumerism and the impact of welfare reform.³¹

In our final book, *The Fire This Time*, editors Vivian Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin define feminism as a framework for looking at tendencies toward domination and connecting the content of their authors’ contributions through an analysis of how power imbalances have affected lived realities. These essays focus on activism and cultural critiques embedded in grassroots actions ranging from fighting the prison industrial complex to

critiquing the male-dominated new art form of hip-hop theater. The editors tie these seemingly disparate voices together through an overarching frame of “doing social justice work while using a gender lens.”³²

In search of how the writers defined feminism for themselves, we analyzed the selected texts thematically by using a particular method called “axial coding.”³³ Simply put, this method involves coding passages from the texts that either directly or indirectly defined feminism and then categorizing this material into subgroups. Once complete, a conceptual framework of four interrelated themes emerged. It should be noted that any exploration of these texts and subsequent interpretations is filtered through the framework that both authors bring to the table. We are two educated, middle-class, white women — one in her early thirties, the other in her early forties. While we attempted to study the data systematically to allow for the themes to emerge naturally, we are aware that our experiences, biases, privileges, and many other individual factors necessarily shape our interpretations and conclusions.

As the following analysis will demonstrate, according to the authors of these anthologies, contemporary feminism is based on inclusion and it examines the intersections of all oppressions while simultaneously honoring multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction. The focus is on redefining, or even eliminating, labels so that identity becomes a source of power, not a limiting frame. Feminism is envisioned as liberating and pluralistic, rather than restrictive; monolithic and homogeneous; and enacted in the everyday. Movement participants idealistically seek to “create a movement that speaks to and represents the experience of all women.”³⁴

If this new brand of feminism is (or, perhaps, aspires to be) as inclusive and flexible as these writers suggest, why are so few individuals claiming the feminist label? Why has the phrase, “I’m not a feminist, but. . .” gained such popularity? In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, we delved deeply into the popular writing which best represents Third Wave. Simply put, we found that for many, there is a fundamental difference between *doing feminism* and *being a feminist*. For example, in her foreword to the book *The Fire This Time*, Walker explains that

We find that the nexuses of power and identity are constantly shifting, and so are we. We find that labels that seek to categorize and define are historical constructs often used as tools of oppression. We find that many of our potential allies in resistance movements do feminism but do not, intuitively, embrace Feminism.³⁵

Some do not want to associate at all with what they understand to be an oppressive movement. Smith states, “when I realized that feminism largely liberated white women at the economic and social expense of women of

color, I knew I was fundamentally unable to call myself a feminist.”³⁶ Lantigua further explains that feminism should be composed

of values that are important to you as a woman, not ideals arrived at by forced consensus to which you should adjust your own life. To me, that is the core failure of (North) American feminism — the alienation of women like my mother who don’t have the leisure to fantasize about a life free of the influence of men, who have the demands of an extended family and the rigors of defining themselves in a place between two real and often contradictory worlds.³⁷

The explanation we offer for the increase in the number of individuals who endorse feminist goals but reject the label deviates slightly from extant explanations, such as resistance to feminism’s oppressive past and/or dissociation from a movement and an identity successfully disparaged in popular culture. We argue that the four themes we will outline, that is, the core values of contemporary feminism, are antithetical to labeling *of any kind*. Third Wave feminism, by definition, precludes embracing a discrete identity, even, paradoxically, the identity of feminist. After all, implies the logic of the Third Wave, how can a movement be at once truly inclusive and wedded to an identity that necessarily creates boundaries? Before delving more deeply into contemporary resistance to the identity known as the “f-word,” we draw on this body of feminist writing to capture what feminism itself means today.

Our analysis yielded four key interrelated themes of inclusion, multiplicity, contradiction, and everyday feminism. Each theme highlights an important and unique identifier but it is the framework that considers the themes in relationship to one another that best describes the current feminist movement. We offer here not only a description and analysis of the emergent themes detected in these key texts, but also an interpretative framework that relates the themes to one another. We argue that the interrelationship between the themes is crucial and helps explain the resistance to the “f-word” so common (and often troubling) among young contemporaries.

**INCLUSION:
ROOM FOR EVERYONE UNDER ONE TENT**

Inclusion emerged as central to the authors’ understanding of contemporary feminism. The authors want to “debunk the myth that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment”³⁸ and to “defy stereotypes”³⁹ while “creating a feminist movement that speaks to and represents the experiences of all women.”⁴⁰ They seek to redefine feminism and gender roles to suit their life rather than mold themselves to fit a particular feminist

ideal.⁴¹ According to Leong, the feminist “tent holds scores of perspectives” and not only accepts but celebrates all forms of feminism.⁴² Bondoc describes her aim of wanting to “develop a politics of wholeness and three-dimensionality” so that she can be in the “real world with the rest of the sinners and fools where we can get down to some serious work.”⁴³ She explains that we have to be able to have faults and still be able to claim feminism. She contends that,

If the small-waisted, big-chested, white-capped tooth, porcelain-skinned woman is the unattainable ideal of modeldom, then the progressive ideal is equally unattainable: racist-free, classist-free, 100 percent antihomophobic, angry and able to fully articulate every political issue.⁴⁴

Inclusion suggests that there are no restrictions placed on how or when to be a feminist. This is a feminism that does not judge or place boundaries on those that identify with the movement. This moves away from dichotomies and allows for multiple possibilities. Inclusion is essential to building movement strength and solidarity and appealing to those activists for whom the feminist label felt too narrow and restrictive.

**MULTIPLICITY:
BRINGING OUR WHOLE SELVES TO THE TABLE**

A movement predicated on inclusion requires a reckoning with multiplicity — one that authentically acknowledges human complexity. In other words, without attention to multiplicity, there is no possibility of inclusion. This theme of understanding, examining and accepting diverse experiences and standpoints surfaced as integral to the movement throughout these anthologies. The writers in these collections focus on the intersections of multiple identities and all forms of oppression. They embrace their differences and see this supposed “fragmentation . . . as a place of power.”⁴⁵ Specifically, the writers focus on the “intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality.”⁴⁶ They honor and celebrate difference as essential to society.⁴⁷ They define feminism broadly and understand the interconnectedness of oppressions and domination. As Herrup argues, “we realize that to fight AIDS we must fight homophobia, and to fight homophobia, we must fight racism, and so on.”⁴⁸ To quote Audre Lorde, as Labaton and Martin do in their introductory essay, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”⁴⁹ They go on to state in their introduction, “To demand that people focus on one area of concern without recognizing the interconnection of multiple issues would be to demand a level of self-abnegation that does not mirror the way these issues are experienced in our

daily lives.”⁵⁰ Women must be able to “bring our whole selves to the table”⁵¹ and to do that, it is essential to gain an understanding of the connection to underlying power structures. In a powerful essay, Danzy Senna explains how multiplicity is lived in her life.

I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it, and that none of my “identities” are distinct from one another. To be a feminist is to be engaged actively in dismantling all oppressive relationships. To be black is to contain all colors. I can no longer allow these parts of myself to be compartmentalized, for when I do, I pass, and when I pass, I “cease to exist.”⁵²

Class, race, gender, and sexuality are not singular entities and cannot be separated within individuals, therefore, one should not expect that they can or should be separated in social justice work.

CONTRADICTION:

AT ONCE THE COLONIZER AND THE COLONIZED

In order to truly embrace inclusion and multiplicity, one must be ready to reckon with the ensuing contradictions that exist between and within individuals in the movement. That is, contradiction is inevitable in a truly inclusive and diverse movement. Contradiction was the most commonly used term when the authors of these anthologies attempted to explain their understanding of feminism. They want to accept and embrace the contradictions and ambiguities that exist within society and within themselves as individuals. Tzintzun captures this idea when she states, “I am mixed. I am the colonizer and the colonized, the exploiter and the exploited. I am confused yet sure. I am a contradiction.”⁵³ Walker further clarifies that by “facing and embracing their contradictions and complexities and creating something new and empowering from them” the authors move away from dualism and divisiveness.⁵⁴ This brings us closer to inclusion and multiplicity. Embracing contradiction means both acknowledging and accepting our oppressions *and* privileges and the role we play in the oppression of others. As Doza explains it, “I need to know that every minute of every day I am being colonized, manipulated, and ignored, and that minute by minute I am doing this to others who are not shining white and middle class. There is a system of abuse here. I need to know what part I’m playing in it.”⁵⁵ Honoring differences and accepting the contradictions that exist is essential to maintaining an inclusive movement that does not feed into the power of divisiveness that threatens the ability to build a strong and cohesive movement.

**EVERYDAY FEMINISM:
FEMINISM YOU CAN'T KEEP IN A BOX**

This vision of an inclusive, interconnected, contradictory feminist movement challenges the boundaries of what does and does not constitute feminism. Logically, it seems, a diverse and, at times, contradictory movement stimulates diverse action, action that falls outside a conventional definition of feminism. Throughout all four texts, there were many stories of women doing feminism without knowing or labeling it as such. Many authors cited their mothers as feminist role models for the ways they lived their lives everyday even though they themselves would never have labeled their behaviors as feminist. Brooks talks about the women “who organized against welfare cuts, and drugs in their neighborhood, for better housing and daycare, who would never call themselves feminist.”⁵⁶ Salaam considers her parents to be feminists even though they never uttered the word because they “injected the same power, pride and self-governance into [her] sisters’ upbringing as they did in [her] brothers’.”⁵⁷ Everyday feminism also includes daily acts of resistance that may or may not be enacted under the feminist banner. Lamm explains that for her, “for now, the revolution takes place when I stay up all night talking with my best friends about feminism and marginalization and privilege and oppression.”⁵⁸ Balli describes this aspect of feminism as:

the feminism that I can't keep in a box, that I can't fully articulate. It is the feminism that is more disposition than discourse and that doesn't even call itself feminism. It is the stubborn self-instruction that despite the setbacks, I have to keep trudging forward; the quiet assurance that even if things went terribly wrong, I would survive. This feminism measures achievement in everyday victories; a sister's new job, a redecorated room, a clean credit report. It celebrates the company of cousins and aunts around the kitchen table and cherishes our opportunity, finally, to complain, to laugh, to sing.⁵⁹

This approach incorporates all kinds of feminist action from traditional protests and marches to the everyday feminism described above. Young feminists are returning to the Second Wave mantra of “the personal is political” and using that as a stepping-stone to understand the needs and direction of the movement. As Lee explained, by finding a language and starting to explain her experiences she could begin to “link them to larger societal structures of oppression and complicity” and “find ways to resist and actively fight back.”⁶⁰

**EMBRACING FEMINISM,
BUT RESISTING THE F-WORD**

Is it possible, as *To Be Real* contributor Mocha Jean Herrup suggests, to have categories that are “dynamic ones, based not on transcendental truths but on the cultural forces of a particular place and time” that would allow for the “agility and flexibility needed to keep those categories fluid and open to future articulations”?⁶¹ bell hooks suggests using the phrase “I advocate feminism” rather than “I am a feminist” to transcend this dilemma.⁶² She states that the former allows for choice and free will whereas the latter insinuates absolutism and dualistic thinking. During the backlash toward feminism in the late 1980s, the term feminist was turned into the f-word and discouraged many from claiming the label, at least publicly. Today, there seems to be another possible explanation for this resistance to self-labeling that does not have its origins solely in the disparagement of the term from the Right. Not labeling as a feminist may represent a deeper understanding of systems of oppression that breed upon divisiveness and dualism. Walker suggests that:

whether the work . . . is called Third Wave, young feminism, hip-hop womanism, humanist global activism, or anything else matters very little. What matters is that this work is being done by women and men from various communities who slowly, step by step, find themselves working alongside those who previously may have been seen only as Other.⁶³

Many cultural observers have claimed the absence of a vital feminist movement today. But could it be that this appearance is deceiving? Much “feminist” work is being done under the banner of something else (peace activism, environmentalism, anti-racism, to name a few) and thus may give the illusion of the lack of a contemporary movement. We caution against drawing the conclusion that feminism today is not a vibrant movement in light of the features of emerging feminism as outlined above. Perhaps a feminism intertwined with other related anti-oppression efforts, a feminism engaged with the micro-political, a feminism that “you can’t keep in a box” is the shape of feminism today. As self-proclaimed feminists, we do not suggest that the identity of feminist is irrelevant. Rather, we regard this resistance to the label of feminist as a fascinating opportunity to know contemporary feminism more deeply. To us, the resistance to feminist identity is neither solely the product of anti-feminist backlash nor little more than a mark of a movement diminished. Instead, we posit, it is a signal of a movement redefining itself in a shifting sociopolitical landscape. If we look carefully at the values at the core of Third Wave feminism, we find a politics of anti-identity, but it is a politics nonetheless, even if partial, or in some

ways compromised, as some may argue. The contradiction at the heart of Third Wave feminism — doing feminism without being feminist — is complicated and merits further inquiry. This probing is preferable to turning away in frustration, a move that weakens the movement and leaves the analysis to those less sympathetic. The women's movement, since its inception, has been dynamic, resourceful, and creative. It still is. Feminism has endured because it emerges from the realities of women's lives in their current social contexts. Without the movement's willingness to shift and redefine, variously embracing and throwing off labels, it would surely wither away. We urge our readers to listen carefully to the voices of the Third Wave — diverse, inclusive, contradictory and everyday — that speak to us from kitchens and board rooms, dorm rooms and picket lines, rallies and shopping malls; these are the voices that embody the past, the present, and the future of feminism.

Notes

1. S.M. Burn, R. Aboud and C. Moyles. The Relationship Between Gender Social Identity and Support for Feminism. *Sex Roles*, 42 (11–12), 2000, 1081–089.
2. M. Liss, C. O'Connor, E. Morosky and M. Crawford. What makes a feminist? Predictors and correlates of feminist social identity in college women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 2001, 124–33.
3. K. Rowe-Finkbeiner. *The F-word: Feminism in Jeopardy, Women, Politics and the Future*. Seal Press, (Emeryville, CA, 2004).
4. M. Liss, C. Hoffner and M. Crawford. What do feminists believe? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24, 2000, 279–84.
5. Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, Third Edition (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2005).
6. Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms Magazine*, 1992: 41.
7. E.K. Garrison, U.S. Feminism-grrrl Style! Youth (sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave. *Feminist Studies*, 26, no.1, 2000: 141–70.

8. Lynn Chancer, *Reconcilable Differences: Confronting Beauty, Pornography and the Future of Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 265–76.
9. Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition (New York, NY, 2000).
10. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. *Manifesta: Young women, Feminism and the Future*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 77.
11. K. Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?" *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27(41), 1059–1082 and C. Orr, Charting the currents of the Third Wave. *Hypatia*, 12, 1997, 29–40.
12. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
13. as cited in S. Gillis, G. Howie, and R. Munford, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.
14. Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 23.
15. R. Dicker and A. Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 2003), 5.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 12.
18. Ibid., 14.
19. Baumgardner and Richards. *Manifesta*, 15.
20. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.
21. Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister*, 3.
22. Gina Bellafante, It's All About Me: Want to Know What Today's Chic Young Feminist Thinkers Care About? Their bodies! Themselves! *Time Magazine*, 1998.
23. S. M. Burn. *Women Across Cultures: A global Perspective*. (Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 2000) and S. Pharr, Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism in S. Ruth, ed., *Issues in Feminism*. (Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 1988).
24. M. Fixmer and J.T. Wood, "The Personal is Still Political: Embodied Politics in Third Wave Feminism" in *Women's Studies in Communication*, 28 no. 2, 2005, 235–57.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) xxxvi.
28. Ibid.
29. D. Hernandez and B. Rehman, *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color and Today's Feminism* (New York: Seal Press, 2002), xxvii.
30. B. Findlen. *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation* (New York: Seal Press, 1995), xiii.
31. Ibid., xvi.
32. V. Labaton and D.L. Martin. *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xxiii.
33. J. Lofland and L. Lofland. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, third ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995).

34. L. Weiner-Mahfuz, "Organizing 101: A Mixed-Race Feminist in Movements for Social Justice." in Hernandez and ehman, *Colonize This!* 39.
35. R. Walker. "Forward: We are Using this Power to Resist" in V. Labaton and D. L. Martin. *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Press, 2004), xiv.
36. T. Smith. "What Happens When your Hood is the Last Stop on the White Flight Express?" in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize this!*, 62.
37. J. Lantigua. "Man of the House" in D. Hernandez and B. Rehman, *Colonize this!* 52.
38. Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real*, xxxiv.
39. A. Higginbotham. "Chicks Goin' At It," in Findlen, *Listen Up*, 17.
40. L. Weiner-Mahfuz. "Organizing 101: A Mixed-Race Feminist in Movements for Social Justice" in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 39.
41. S. Muaddi Darraj, "It's Not an Oxymoron: The Search for an Arab Feminist" in Hernandez and Rehman. *Colonize This!*; S. D. Curry-Johnson, "Weaving an Identity Tapestry" in Findlen, *Listen Up*.
42. P. L. Leong, "Living Outside the Box" in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 353.
43. A. Bondoc, "Close But no Banana" in Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real*, 184.
44. Ibid., 184.
45. V. Labaton and D. L. Martin., *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xxi.
46. A. Y. Davis, "Afterword" in Rebecca Walker. *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 280.
47. J. Breitbart and A. Nogueira, "An Independent Media Center of One's Own: A Feminist Alternative to Corporate Media" in V. Labaton and D. L. Martin. *The fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 22.
48. M. J. Herrup, "Virtual Identity" in Walker, *To Be Real*, 247.
49. Labaton and Martin. *The Fire this Time* 285.
50. Ibid., xxvi.
51. S. D. Curry-Johnson, "Weaving an Identity Tapestry" in Findlen, *Listen Up*, 53.
52. D. Senna, "To Be Real" in Walker, *To Be Real*, 18.
53. C. Tzintzun, "Colonize This!" in D. Hernandez and Rehman. *Colonize This!* 28.
54. Walker, *To Be Real*, xxxv.
55. C. Doza, "Bloodlove" in Findlen, *Listen Up*, 43.
56. S. Brooks, "Black Feminism In Everyday Life: Race, Mental Illness, Poverty and Motherhood" in Hernandez and Rehman. *Colonize This!* 116.
57. K. I. Salaam. "How Sexual Harassment Slaughtered, Then Saved Me" in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 328.
58. N. Lamm. "It's a Big Fat Revolution" in Findlen, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Seal Press, 2001), 134.
59. C. Balli. "Thirty-Eight" in Hernandez and Rehman, *Colonize This!* 197.
60. J. Y. Lee. "Beyond Bean Counting" in Findlen, *Listen Up*, 69.
61. Mocha Jean Herrup, "Virtual Identity" in Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real*, 250.

- 62 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Second Edition. (Boston: South End Press, 2000).
- 63 R. Walker, "Forward: We are Using this Power to Resist" in V. Labaton and D. L. Martin. *The fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xx.