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## **Genealogies and Generations: the politics and praxis of third wave feminism**

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**ABSTRACT** This article interrogates the ways in which post-feminism and third wave feminism are used interchangeably, both within the academy and in the media. As it identifies the ways in which third wave feminism seeks to define itself as a non-academic discourse, it points up the tensions implicit in the contemporary feminist project. It outlines such popular components of third wave feminism as girl culture, the grrrl movement and *BUST* magazine, before addressing the arguments concerning agency in such icons as Courtney Love, Madonna and the Spice Girls. Positing that the metonymic gap between the personal and the political allows post-feminism to be a viable alternative to feminism, it argues that the wave paradigm paralyses feminism, pitting generations against one another.

[T]here have always been, and will always be, differing versions of what feminism is about, with the 'new' or latest trajectories invariably keen to mark their distance from the 'old'.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1999 Lynne Segal published *Why Feminism?*, both a summary of feminist debates over the previous twenty years and an outline of ways to move the debates forward. Asking herself 'why feminism?', she answered that '[t]he special legacy of feminism lies in its striving to keep relating the personal and the cultural to the economic and political, however forbidding and precarious that enterprise might be'.<sup>[2]</sup> *Why Feminism?* provides a cogent argument for feminism, whilst pointing up the dilemmas contained within the movement today.

Most have seen the dilemmas of feminism to be a result of the confusions generated between competing objectives. The first is its struggle to improve the lives and status of the majority of women, especially where they have appeared most vulnerable when classed as a

sex – whether in their sexual, reproductive, working or social lives. It is campaigning for gender justice or equality that feminism presents itself in its decisively activist mode, most reminiscent of the 1970s. The second objective is to reinvent the meanings of womanhood, to imagine the feminine in ways which radically subvert existing symbolic binaries of sex, gender and sexuality. This is the declared stance of a ‘nineties’ feminist post-structuralism (confusingly also often labelled ‘post-modern’).[3]

Segal positions these objectives as competing discourses that should be reconciled in both academic and non-academic feminism. But she dismisses another competing discourse: ‘the post-structuralist theorizing of phallogocentrism and women’s nomadic, multifarious but ineluctable “otherness” (the bedrock of those young women “Doing Feminism, Being Feminists” in the 1990s, some of whom call themselves “the third wave”).[4] What is this third wave that can be summarily dismissed, labelled in quotations and shored up against a bedrock of ineluctable otherness?

In so far as any notion of a ‘third wave’ implies that second wave feminism is over, it has too often been conflated with ‘post-feminism’. Post-feminism is itself an ambiguous and contested term that has been seized upon by a media all too eager to declare the demise – and failure – of feminism. As Susan Faludi describes in her study of anti-feminism, *Backlash* (1991):

Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that ‘post-feminism’ was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement.[5]

In 1982, the *New York Times Magazine* featured an article, ‘Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation’, which positioned feminism as passé, its aims met or unnecessary to the lives of everyday women.[6] Post-feminism has since become the keyword for mainstream media representations of feminism, where it most frequently describes:

a movement 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.[7]

Associated with the arguments of the media-friendly conservative feminists Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers and Camille Paglia, this

version of (post)feminism is underpinned by a binarised distinction between 'victim feminism' and 'power feminism'.<sup>[8]</sup> Power feminism has been positioned, by these writers, as the only viable way in which to counteract the supposed lack of agency in victim feminism.<sup>[9]</sup> The victim vs. power paradigm was and is a largely US-based phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, a more fluid understanding of feminist discourse – one which initially ignored the seduction of the antagonism implicit in US feminist debates – was heralded by the publication of Natasha Walter's *The New Feminism* in 1998.<sup>[10]</sup> Similar criticisms have been made of both this 'new' feminism in the United Kingdom and conservative feminism in the USA:

In Britain in the late 1990s, widespread publicity accompanied the appearance of a book declaring the dawn of a 'New Feminism': this time as a mainstream, majority movement in which women – from the Spice Girls to Cherie Blair and her husband's hundred new women MPs – can celebrate their own sudden power and achievements (in part thanks to Margaret Thatcher for normalizing female success) ... [This feminism is] a form of power-feminism, applauding women's growing success, identification with their jobs and their ability to help each other.<sup>[11]</sup>

The generational divide between second wave feminism and the new forms of feminism – whether it be a third wave or not – is one of the defining characteristics of the movement. Despite, or perhaps because of, these criticisms against it, this new generation of feminist voices is increasingly demanding to be heard, to be given credence and to claim a place in a feminist genealogy.

It is this generation of feminists which identifies as the third wave but which is labelled, more often than not, post-feminist. The slippage between the two terms may explain the caution with which the academy regards the possibility of a new 'kind' of feminism. Whereas second wave feminist activism introduced feminism to the academy, the academy is only just beginning to acknowledge the possibility of a third wave.<sup>[12]</sup> In the 1990s, third wave feminism's academic presence was confined to *Third Wave Agenda: being feminist, doing feminism* (1997) and a special issue of *Hypatia* (1997).<sup>[13]</sup> In July 2002, one of the first academic conferences on third wave feminism took place at the University of Exeter, bringing together theorists and activists, second wave feminists and third wave feminists. The conference identified the ambiguous relationship between those who identify as third wave feminists and those who identify their work as belonging to a field informed by post-structuralist and postmodern theories of identity and subjectivity. These tensions are explored in the special issue on third wave feminism and women's studies of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (2003) as well as in *Catching a Wave: reclaiming feminism for the 21st century* (2003).<sup>[14]</sup> *Third Wave*

*Feminism: a critical exploration* (2004) is the first collection to address third wave feminism as an academic subject – moving from feminist popular culture to new constructions of sex and gender – rather than as a subject that belongs only to those who identify as ‘third wavers’.[15]

Even a cursory reading of these texts indicates that third wave feminism does not have a comfortable position within the academy. This can be partly ascribed to academic feminism’s quick embracing of post-feminism rather than third wave feminism. This post-feminism is not the ‘after the fact’ post-feminism of the media; rather, it is understood as feminism within post-structuralist theory. Ann Brooks’s *Postfeminisms: feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms* (1997) defines academic post-feminism as ‘an expression of a stage in the constant evolutionary movement of feminism ... [its] “coming of age”, its maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding change’.[16] *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (1998) likewise links post-feminism with postmodernism in its desire ‘to destabilise fixed definitions of gender, and to deconstruct authoritative paradigms and practices’.[17] The academic split between post-feminism and third wave feminism is actualised in the companion’s identification of the third wave as ‘characterised by a desire to redress economic and racial inequality as well as “women’s issues” ... [it] has been viewed with scepticism by many as merely a short-lived fashion rather than a genuine indication that women have reached the next stage in the feminist struggle’.[18] Thus, the theoretical designation of post-feminism versus third wave feminism is fought across the equality/difference divide. Post-feminism, within the academy, has been positioned as a radical ‘conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference’ informed by post-structuralist and postmodernist theorising.[19] However, as will be shown, third wave feminist politics allow for *both* equality and difference.

To date, the majority of third wave feminists have been quick to define themselves as primarily non-academic.[20] *To Be Real: telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (1995), *On the Move: feminism for a new generation* (1999) and *Manifesta: young women, feminism, and the future* (2000) are guides to feminism for the popular audience, and have a lineage in such widely read texts as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970).[21] These self-identified non-academic third wave feminists subscribe to Naomi Wolf’s argument that:

[t]he prose style of the best feminist academic thinking ensured that the most fashionable and influential ideas would be drained of relevance to the real world of politics and action, and would be couched in what, to the millions of women and men outside the ivied gates who had no

incentive to master an exclusive and elaborate professional jargon, amounted to pig Latin.[22]

The academy, in the eyes of the self-identified third wavers, has failed to meet the needs of those women outside of it and has little impact on the material needs of women, which can only be redressed by activist activities. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards implicitly acknowledge this academic/activism schism with their 'roadmap to activism', which provides a crucial model of how to 'do' things.[23] This roadmap includes outing unacknowledged feminists, safeguarding the right to choice, raising awareness of evolutionary history, recognising the power of queer and acknowledging that 'although feminists may have disparate values, we share the same goal of equality, and of supporting one another in our efforts to gain the power to make our own choices'.[24] Tension between the 'real world' and 'theory' is nothing new and the blame can be apportioned to both sides of the feminist divide. What is of interest here is how third wave feminism emerged in the popular consciousness as a result of cultural anger and activist interventions and the academy subsequently has been trying to control it theoretically. One text that attempts to bridge the academic/activist divide is Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake's *Third Wave Agenda* but it provides no model for moving this circular debate forward. Although the collection positions itself as a third wave feminist critique, it sits more easily as an account of Generation X. It is these tensions and misunderstandings surrounding third wave feminism that form the basis of our argument.

Some of the strongest, and most self-consciously clamorous, voices of third wave feminism are those emerging from 'girl' culture. In spite of its homogenised media representation - and second wave reception - 'girl' culture is an extremely eclectic phenomenon which includes the Riot Grrrls of the punk movement, the Hello Kitty-accessorised and lipglossed Girlies exemplified by the writers of zines such as *Bitch* and *BUST*, as well as the more anodyne mainstream proponents of 'girl power' identified with the Spice Girls. Although these various groups are not always politically aligned, they do have in common a vigorous reclamation and recuperation of the word 'girl' as no longer a simply derogatory and disrespectful term but one that captures the contradictions shaping female identity for young women whose world has been informed by the struggles and gains of second wave feminism.[25] Centred on music and zines, girl culture foregrounds the relationship between feminism and popular culture that had been positioned by many second wave feminists as unavoidably antagonistic.[26] Heywood & Drake, for example, identify the third wave more generally as a generation of feminists who 'often take cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice'.[27] But the extent to which girl culture provides a site

of resistance to patriarchal structures has been contested by many second wave feminists. In *The Whole Woman* (1999) Germaine Greer decries what she describes as the ‘depressingly durable’ cultural phenomenon of “girls”, “girls behaving badly”, “girls on top”.[28] In many respects, it is not surprising that the very notion of girl culture has received scathing criticism from second wave feminists who had challenged the application of ‘girl’ to adult women because of its implications of infantilisation and belittlement.[29]

Yet girl culture has been too easily positioned as a depoliticised and dehistoricised product of the ‘backlash’ against feminism. Mainstreamed under the media-friendly ‘girl power’ slogan, largely associated with the Spice Girls, and couched in the rhetoric of a popularised post-feminism, girl culture has been deprived of its radical and activist history. For example, Rosalind Coward erroneously describes how the Spice Girls ‘coined the phrase [girl power] as a bit of promotional fun but it passed quickly into the wider culture as a good label to use in any situation in which girls might be putting themselves forward in new, brash, and “unfeminine” ways’.[30] The emergence of girl culture in the early 1990s, however, was less a post-feminist manifestation of the backlash than it was an outraged – and organised – response from young women to the designations of post-feminism. Kay Ebeling’s article, ‘The Failure of Feminism’, in the 19 November 1990 issue of *Newsweek* motivated Kathleen Hanna and her all-female band Bikini Kill along with other Riot Grrrl bands in Olympia and Washington, DC, to express their anger at the allegations of feminism’s demise by calling for ‘revolution, girl-style now’.[31] While co-opting its angry and noisy rebellion, Riot Grrrl bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and Babes in Toyland censured the fundamentally patriarchal structures of the punk scene, in much the same way as Queen Latifah intervened in the ‘hip-hop phallo-universe’.[32] In addition to concerts, the Riot Grrrls organised weekly meetings to discuss issues of sexual abuse, eating disorders and sexual harassment, as well as self-defence and skill-sharing workshops.[33] Through zines and girl-only moshpits, the Riot Grrrls forged a unique feminist space for young women (usually aged between fourteen and twenty-five) that was not structurally dissimilar to that sustained by the second wave consciousness-raising groups and support networks. The weekly meetings in Olympia and Washington spread around the country and, along with the Riot Grrrl Convention in Washington, DC in July 1992 and the burgeoning of guerrilla zines such as *Bikini Kill*, *Riot Grrrl*, *Girl Germs* and *Girl Power!*, called attention to the energy and presence of a network of young feminists in the face of the backlash rhetoric that feminism had petered out and failed.

Identifying the underground music community as a vital place of feminist activism, Melissa Klein aptly highlights the extent to which by

reconfiguring consciousness-raising groups in the girl-only moshpits, Riot Grrrls often deployed 'second wave activist techniques but applied them to third wave forms'.<sup>[34]</sup> While acknowledging the extent to which third wave feminism, and specifically its Riot Grrrl configuration, 'owes much to the struggles of the second wave,' Klein moves on to claim that such third wave forms are defined by 'a postmodern focus on contradiction and duality, on the reclamation of terms. S-M, pornography, the words *cunt* and *queer* and *pussy* and *girl* - are all things to be re-examined or reclaimed'.<sup>[35]</sup> With their dishevelled vintage dresses, short dyed hair, luminescent red lipstick and heavy combat boots, the Riot Grrrls re-present rather than reject conventional ideas about 'femininity' in order to create models of contradiction and conflict: 'We want not to get rid of the trappings of traditional femininity or sexuality so much as to pair them with demonstrations of strength or power'.<sup>[36]</sup> Although the use of a 'traditional' femininity could bear out Segal's 'ineluctable otherness', the explicit foregrounding of a transgressive sexual and political agency ironically underscores the Riot Grrrls' desires.

It is this acceptance of hybridity and contradiction that similarly underlies the feminist philosophy of the self-proclaimed Girlies. While the Riot Grrrls voiced their anger and protest through punk rock, the Girlies, an older group of young women, focused on popular culture, similarly forging a space of social agency and resistance through zines such as *Bitch* and *BUST*. Baumgardner & Richards offer the following definition of 'Girlie':

A Girlie-girl can be a stereotypically feminine one - into manicures and hairstyles and cooking and indoorsy activities. Girlie is also a feminist philosophy ... Girlies are adult women, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties, whose feminist principles are based on a reclaiming of girl culture (of feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave), be it Barbie, housekeeping, or girl talk.<sup>[37]</sup>

Like the Riot Grrrls, the Girlies foreground a celebration of the paraphernalia of 'femininity' - of make-up, fashion, etc. - that had previously been censured by second wave feminists as inextricably caught up in patriarchal definitions of female identity. For the Girlies, 'femininity' is no longer at odds with 'feminism', but at the very centre of an ideology of agency, confidence and resistance. Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, the editors of *BUST* - of which a selection of articles are collected in *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* (1999) - claim that the zine captures 'the voice of a brave new girl: one that is raw and real, straightforward and sarcastic, smart and silly, and liberally sprinkled with references to our own Girl Culture - that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas'.<sup>[38]</sup> Where early feminist engagement with popular culture had largely focused on the



oppressive ideology underlying media representations of women, the writers of zines such as *Bitch* and *BUST* built on the innovations of the mainstream *Sassy* magazine of the late 1980s to forge a space which combined a critique of dominant constructions of femininity and a reclamation and celebration of girlhood.

*Bitch*'s mission statement claims that '[t]he much-touted "girl power" and "girl culture" have the potential to counteract the now-documented plunge in girls' self-esteem during their pubescent years ... *Bitch* is about formulating replies to the sexism that we see every day. It's about critically examining all the images of femininity and feminism that are thrown at us'.[39] Demystifying some of those second wave feminist stereotypes that functioned to 'fix' female identity, Girlie culture questions definitions of what it means to be a feminist by foregrounding the contradictions and conflicts shaping young women's experiences. Rebecca Walker captures the tensions and contradictions shaping the self-positioning of young feminists who are uncomfortable with what they see as the inflexibility of second wave identity politics:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad.[40]

Debates around the contradiction and conflict crucial to configurations of third wave feminist identities have been centred on one of the most prominent and public grrrl heroines: Courtney Love. The lead singer of punk rock band Hole and proponent of the kinderwhore aesthetic, Love has been positioned as a mouthpiece for both the Riot Grrrls and the Girlies and embraced by third wave feminists more generally for her dramatic subversion of the polarity between 'power' and 'victim' feminisms. Heywood & Drake posit that Love is a third wave feminist icon who:

combines the individualism, combativeness, and star power that are the legacy of second wave gains in opportunities for women (which arrived in conjunction with cultural backlash against such gains), with second wave critiques of the cult of beauty and male dominance ... Love bridges the irreconcilability of individuality and femininity within dominant culture, combining the cultural critique of an earlier generation of feminists with the backlash against it by the next generation of women.[41]

Still, Love's claim to be the postmodern feminist who harnesses contradiction and conflict for the politics of girl culture is difficult to reconcile with her own 'bad girl' philosophy that 'we like our dark Nars lipstick and LaPerla panties, but we hate sexism, even if we do fuck your husbands/boyfriends'.<sup>[42]</sup> Love's ironic 'postmodern feminism' might confound the dichotomisation of Madonna and Whore, empowerment and victimhood, but does it really dismantle these binaries?

Of course, we have been here before. These arguments have been well rehearsed in relation to the 'representational industry' surrounding Madonna, the postmodern icon and material girl *par excellence*.<sup>[43]</sup> Calling attention to female pleasure and sexual agency through endlessly recasting her public identity, Madonna reinvented the 'significance of dyed blonde hair, dark lipstick, padded bras, polka-dot bikinis or fishnet tights ... with female-to-female laughter and irony'.<sup>[44]</sup> More so than Love, feminist debates around Madonna have highlighted configurations of female identity and subjectivity across the intersection of postmodernism and consumerism.<sup>[45]</sup> Third wave feminism posits youth music culture as a productive site for activism: '[b]ecause contemporary rap, rock, and alternative music is produced and consumed primarily by persons in the third wave, music has emerged as a site for activist coalition and community building like no other'.<sup>[46]</sup> But to what extent does commodification neutralise feminist politics? Madonna may be reinventing herself but the question of whether she 'offer[s] a mockery of conventional femininity, or just another way to be fashionable and "sexy"' that remains attractive to the patriarchy needs further consideration.<sup>[47]</sup> The politics of subjectivity need to incorporate an understanding of the agency within self-representation as well as the appropriation of that agency. In short, the 'power' and the 'girl' in girl power need to be interrogated rather than dismissed outright. What Love and Madonna - and even Britney Spears - foreground is a shift from the second wave focus on the politics of representation to an emphasis on the politics of self-representation.<sup>[48]</sup>

Similar debates around girl power and 'the Selling of Feminism Lite'<sup>[49]</sup>, both within and outside of girl culture, have focused on the Spice Girls. Arriving on the pop scene in 1996 dressed in hot pants and platform shoes, Ginger, Scary, Posh, Sporty and Baby Spice issued their claim for international pop domination with their debut single, 'Wannabe', and championed 'girl power' as a popular philosophy based on the virtues of Thatcherism, the Wonderbra and an aversion to the 'f' word. With few exceptions, most notably Kathy Acker, the Spice Girls have received vehement criticism from both second and third wave feminists, largely centred on their co-option of the 'girl power' slogan as a crude marketing device.<sup>[50]</sup> The Riot Grrrl zines have been filled with angry indictments of the Spice Girls' lack of political strategy and they have been similarly

dismissed by the New Girl Order as representing the commercialisation and containment of 'girl power'.<sup>[51]</sup> Indeed, while the Riot Grrrls had transformed the underground music community into a space in which young women were organising themselves, the Spice Girls, as many feminists (and others) have hastened to point out, were the hand-picked brainchild of pop svengali Simon Fuller and 19 Management. Moreover, the neat pigeonholing of the five women into patriarchy-friendly facets of femininity has similarly roused suspicion about the extent to which the Spice Girls really were telling us what *they* 'really really wanted', or whether, as Greer suggests, '[t]he language of independence conceals utter dependence upon male attention, represented as difficult for a girl to get and all but impossible for her to keep'.<sup>[52]</sup> It is difficult to dispute Jennifer L. Pozner's argument that '[i]t's probably a fair assumption to say that "zigzag-ha" is not Spice shorthand for "subvert the dominant paradigm"'.<sup>[53]</sup>

However, while the Spice Girls might lack the political edge of the Riot Grrrls and the Girlies, it is unrigorous to ignore the extent to which they provided positive role models for pre-teen girls.<sup>[54]</sup> Rather than position the Spice Girls' celebration of 'girl power' as a diluted and media-friendly repackaging of the angry rebellion proposed by the Riot Grrrls and the Girlies, it is more useful to recontextualise its mainstreaming in relation to the Spice Girls' majority market – that is, pre-teen girls, rather than the adult Grrrls and Girlies who have reclaimed girlhood as a postmodern feminist strategy. For these young girls, who are not conversant with the lexicon of the underground punk rock scene, the Spice Girls represented the verve of female friendship, an eclectic range of versions of femininity with which to identify, a model of self-esteem and empowerment, and also enabled a surge in the mainstream pop music industry for girl bands such as All Saints, Destiny's Child, Mystique and, more recently, Girls Aloud. Thus, the Spice Girls functioned as an antidote to conventional paradigms of femininity by providing a vocabulary which yoked together such previously divergent terms as 'girl' and 'power'.

Katherine Viner is amongst those who have dismissed the individualism of girl power: '[s]uddenly feminism is all about how the individual feels right here, right now, rather than the bigger picture. The idea of doing something for the greater good – or, indeed, because the reasons behind the action might be dangerous or insecure or complex – has become an anachronism'.<sup>[55]</sup> How far can the 'Jell-O-shot versions of feminism' <sup>[56]</sup> – this celebration of Barbies and blow jobs – offered by zines like *BUST* really take us? While recognising the extent to which they have 'created a joyful culture that makes being an adult woman who calls herself a feminist seem thrilling, sexy, and creative', Baumgardner wishes that the Girlies discussed in *Manifesta* 'would organize as well as they onanize'.<sup>[57]</sup> Similarly, in spite of its early commitment to direct action and social change

at the beginning of the 1990s, by the end of the decade the Riot Grrrl movement had neither consolidated a clear agenda nor a programme for activism – in this respect, the girl-style revolution promised by the largely white and middle-class Riot Grrrls and the New Girl Order is a far remove from the carefully considered programme of political activism propounded by Baumgardner & Richards in *Manifesta*. Moreover, there is a very real danger that while third wave feminists, as exemplified by Walker, have expressed their discontent with the inflexibility of second wave identity politics, the insularity of Grrrl and Girlie culture risks instituting another set of conventions.

Viner attributes this reactionary response to second wave identity politics as symptomatic of a broader misunderstanding of that axiom of the second wave by pointing up that '[t]he personal as the political was never meant to be a prescription of how to live your life. It was never meant to be a rallying cry to shave off your hair or take up with the lady next door. But what it was really meant to do was create an awareness of how our personal lives are ruled by political factors'.<sup>[58]</sup> The phrase 'the personal is political' – invented by members of New York Radical Women – endorsed a politics sustained by concrete personal experiences of male domination. One of the tenets of third wave feminism is its insistence and reliance upon the confession as a tool of empowerment, one that is privileged over other models of empowerment (including academic theory).<sup>[59]</sup> *Third Wave Agenda* claims to fuse the confessional mode with the more analytic mode of the academy whereas *To Be Real* is predicated upon an equation of third wave feminist practice with anecdote, the personal providing the example for political action. But what alienates the academic from the activist are these sorts of claims: 'testimony is where feminism starts. Historically, women's personal stories have been the evidence of where the movement needs to go politically and, furthermore, that there is a need to move forward'.<sup>[60]</sup> Although this has its strengths – for example, Amy Richards & Rebecca Walker founded the *Third Wave Foundation* (see: [www.thirdwavefoundation.org](http://www.thirdwavefoundation.org)), a national organisation to get young feminists voting – this is a particularised understanding of politics as democratic action. Baumgardner & Richards can thus claim that the personal testimonies in *To Be Real* and *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* (the latter including such essays as 'The Mysterious Eroticism of Mini-Backpacks' and 'More than a Blow Job: it's a career') are 'the foundation of the personal ethics upon which a political women's movement will be built' and comparable with such events as the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991.<sup>[61]</sup> The unquestioning conflation of the personal and the political focuses on personal freedom, but at the expense of political equality, as Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones demonstrate. Third wave feminism lacks an acknowledgement of the tensions in 'the personal is

political'. Of course, positioning feminism as a politics that emerged out of personal experiences had its origin in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s. These consciousness-raising groups brought women together and encouraged them to share experiences, allowing them to realise that they were not alone. However, the metonymic gap between the personal and the political is what allowed post-feminism to emerge as a 'viable' alternative to feminism – the confusion between personal accounts and politicising the personal. Segal has pointed up 'the espousal of a new type of "feminized", personalized or therapeutic rhetoric ... borrowing the feminist consciousness-raising discourses of disclosure and shared pain'.<sup>[62]</sup> The widespread emotional equation in the West of the personal and the political destabilises its (re)appropriation by third wave feminists.

Indeed, perhaps what is most relevant about the Spice Girls is their celebration of the mother-daughter relationship in 'Mama' (1996). Relying heavily on the generational paradigm, both the Riot Grrrls and the Girlies are positioned – and position themselves – as the rebellious daughters who refuse to conform to the rule book of their second wave mothers. The call for a 'revolution, girl style now' not only represents a rebellion against the negative associations of patriarchal ideals of femininity, but also against the values of second wave feminism. The danger implicit in Grrrl and Girlie culture, then, is their reiteration and reinforcement of generational conflict. This threatens the progress of feminist politics. As Baumgardner & Richards reaffirm, '[i]n creating a feminism of their own ... Girlies are repeating a pattern as old as the patriarchy: rebelling against their mothers'.<sup>[63]</sup> In actively distancing itself from the second wave, girl culture risks disengaging itself from feminist history – foregrounding the dangers inherent in thinking in terms of the wave paradigm. The conflation of the personal and the political, and confession and activism, pits generation against generation and enables backlash politics. In order to counter this, feminist theorists and activists need to recognise that the problem lies within feminism itself, or at least within feminist historiography.

Feminist history is traditionally understood as a succession of waves. However, the trouble with this model is that generations are set up in competition with one another and definitions of feminism are positioned around the 'leaders' of these generations, whether it be the Pankhursts, Gloria Steinem or Germaine Greer. Current feminist figures are compared incessantly (and unfavourably) with these past 'leaders'. The wave paradigm also means that figures who write 'outside' of it – for example, Mary Wollstonecraft or Simone de Beauvoir – are regarded as anomalies at best or ignored at worst. This competitive generational model does not allow for a collective memory of female-based thought, empowerment and activism:

The fuzzy sense of where we've been plays out when something like  
*BUST* or Bikini Kill or the phrase 'girl power' turns masses of females

on to feminism – and then peters out after the first rush. Having no sense of how we got here condemns women to reinvent the wheel and often blocks us from creating a political strategy.[64]

The wave paradigm not only ensures that each generation must ‘reinvent the wheel’ but also lends power to backlash politics and rhetoric. Faludi has foregrounded, in minute detail, the ways in which the Reagan and Thatcher years were marked by a backlash against feminism. She identifies the way in which the wave metaphor is used against feminist thought and activity.

In times when feminism is at a low ebb, women assume the reactive role – privately and most often covertly struggling to assert themselves against the dominant cultural tide. But when feminism itself becomes the tide, the opposition doesn’t simply go along with the reversal: it digs in its heels, brandishes its fists, builds walls and dams. And its resistance creates countercurrents and treacherous undertows.[65]

The irony is, of course, that backlash rhetoric points up the supposed irrelevance and powerlessness of feminism – the same feminism which requires such a strong backlash to ‘contain’ it. The internecine and cross-generational arguments contribute to the potency of the wave paradigm and, ultimately, to the potency of backlash politics. Thus, the question surrounding third wave feminism is not so much ‘what is it?’ but ‘how does another wave contribute to the future of feminism?’

That it was only in 1998 that an international court denounced rape as a form of torture in prison and that nearly twice as many women as men are illiterate testify to the overwhelming necessity for engaged, politicised and active feminism(s).[66] As tired as this seems, and as obvious as it is to those of us who think about feminism, these statements of fact need to be made, and to be made repeatedly in the face of the generational divides that mark feminist theory and practice. The third wavers are keen in their assertion that they are doing something different from the second wave feminists – and second wave feminists are equally keen to dismiss this new form of feminism: ‘In the interest of affirming the difference of the third wave, many third wave narratives assume a metonymic view of the second wave, in which a part of second wave activity is substituted for the whole’.[67] Similarly, second wave feminists also use metonymic configurations of the ‘third wave’ (for example, the Spice Girls or Naomi Wolf) in order to dismiss its power (as demonstrated by Segal in the opening paragraph). The politics of the fairy tale – with successive mother figures threatened by the sexual agency of their daughters – have been analysed by numerous feminists. This model could be usefully deployed as a way of understanding and interrogating feminist history, rather than being simply a method of feminist analysis. The generational account of feminism – which third wave feminism is perpetuating – should be understood as merely another tool of the

backlash. As Misha Kavka notes in *Feminist Consequences: theory for the new century* (2001), '[f]eminism is not ... the object of a singular history but, rather, a term under which people have in different times and places invested in a more general struggle for social justice and in so doing have participated in and produced multiple histories'.[68] The lack of attention to multiple histories is evidenced by the fact that while tremendous work has been accomplished by activists and theorists since second wave feminism, third wave feminist texts still only provide a largely white Anglo-American perspective, with the occasional article on hip-hop.[69] One way forward in constructing these multiple histories is to build on the work of US third world feminists who have 'moved the concepts of difference to the foreground, reminding us that even if sisterhood is global, not all women's lives and experiences are identical'.[70] The lessons of the first and second waves need to be more fully learned – both as history and as warning – so feminism can break the wave paradigm.

### Notes

- [1] Lynne Segal (1999) *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics*, p. 205 (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 205. Segal's comment refers to Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake (Eds) (1997) *Third Wave Agenda: being feminist, doing feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- [5] Susan Faludi (1992) *Backlash: the undeclared war against women*, p. 14 (London: Vintage; first published 1991, New York: Doubleday).
- [6] Susan Bolotin (17 October 1982) Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation, *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 29-31, 103-116.
- [7] Deborah L. Siegel (1997) Reading between the Waves: feminist historiography in a 'postfeminist' moment, in Heywood & Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, p. 75.
- [8] See Naomi Wolf (1993) *Fire with Fire: the new female power and how it will change the twenty-first century* (New York: Random House); Katie Roiphe (1993) *The Morning After: sex, fear, and feminism* (Boston: Little, Brown); Christina Hoff Sommers (1995) *Who Stole Feminism? How Women have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster); and Camille Paglia (1992) *Sex, Art and American Culture: essays* (New York: Random House).
- [9] 'Never in history have women been freer than they are here. [This] bitching ... it's infantile, it's an adolescent condition, it's *bad* for women. It's very, very bad to convince young women that they have been victims and that their heritage is nothing but victimization' (Paglia, *Sex, Art and American Culture*, p. 274; emphasis in original).

- [10] Natasha Walter (1999) *The New Feminism* (London: Virago). The book was proclaimed as 'feminism as phoenix, and as blazing torch lighting the way to a new century' by Michèle Roberts on the front cover.
- [11] Segal, *Why Feminism?* p. 228.
- [12] For example, see *Third Space* ([www.thirdspace.ca](http://www.thirdspace.ca)), an online community and peer-reviewed journal for 'emerging feminist scholars'.
- [13] Heywood & Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*; Jacquelyn N. Zita (Ed.) (1997) *Hypatia: Special Issue on 'Third Wave' Feminisms*, 12(3).
- [14] Stacy Gillis & Rebecca Munford (Eds) (2003) Special Issue on Third Wave Feminism and Women's Studies of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4(2); Rory Dicker & Alison Piepmeier (Eds) (2003) *Catching a Wave: reclaiming feminism for the 21st century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press).
- [15] Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie & Rebecca Munford (Eds) (2004) *Third Wave Feminism: a critical exploration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).
- [16] Ann Brooks (1997) *Postfeminisms: feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms*, p. 1 (London: Routledge).
- [17] Sarah Gamble (Ed.) (2001) *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, p. 298 (London: Routledge; first published 1998, London: Icon).
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- [19] Brooks, *Postfeminisms*, p. 4.
- [20] The very fact that third wave feminists often define themselves by their date of birth is an indication of the movement's disavowal of academic rigour and practice. For Baumgardner & Richards, the third wave is 'women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the seventies', while for Heywood & Drake it is those feminists born between 1963 and 1974. Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards (2000) *Manifesta: young women, feminism, and the future*, p. 15 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux); Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake (1997) Introduction, in Heywood & Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, p. 4.
- [21] Rebecca Walker (Ed.) *To Be Real: telling the truth and changing the face of feminism*, (New York: Anchor); Natasha Walter (Ed.) *On the Move: feminism for a new generation*, (London: Virago); Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*; Betty Friedan (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton); Germaine Greer (1970) *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin).]
- [22] Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, p. 125.
- [23] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, pp. 278-281.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- [25] A distinction needs to be drawn here between girl culture and the girl's movement. The girl's movement, a second wave feminist initiative, is an attempt to reach across the generational divide so as to inspire and



introduce pre-adolescent girls (aged between nine and fifteen) to feminist history and to offer them an alternative to 'the pink and frilly ideal' (Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 185). In the USA, for example, there is a movement called *Girls Speak Out* which is led by second wave feminists who go into schools and run seminars for girls under the age of ten. This movement ignores young adult feminists – those same feminists whom Segal dismisses. It is this latter generation who identify as third wave feminists.

- [26] For more on this see Rebecca Munford (2004) 'Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss': gender, generation and the (a)politics of girl power, in Gillis et al, *Third Wave Feminism*, pp. 142-153.
- [27] Heywood & Drake, 'Introduction', p. 4.
- [28] Germaine Greer (2000) *The Whole Woman*, p. 399 (London: Anchor; first published 1999, London: Doubleday).
- [29] This notion had previously been central to the first wave feminist struggle against the alignment of women with children in relation to suffrage.
- [30] Rosalind Coward (1999) *Sacred Cows: is feminism relevant to the new millennium?* p. 22 (London: HarperCollins). The 'girl power' slogan had in fact been deployed several years previously by the Riot Grrrls.
- [31] Kay Ebeling (19 November 1990) The Failure of Feminism, *Newsweek*, p. 9.
- [32] See Eisa Davis (1995) Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance, in Walker, *To Be Real*, p. 130.
- [33] For a more detailed account of early Riot Grrrl activities see Ednie Kaeh Garrison (2000) U.S. Feminism – Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologics of the Third Wave, *Feminist Studies*, 26(1), pp. 141-170.
- [34] Melissa Klein (1997) Duality and Redefinition: young feminism and the alternative music community, in Heywood & Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, p. 215.
- [35] *Ibid.*, p. 208, emphasis in original.
- [36] *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- [37] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 400. Girlie culture has some resonance with the success of, for example, Martha Stewart in the USA and Nigella Lawson in the United Kingdom. Some of the anger with which Girlie culture is regarded by second wave feminists can be partly ascribed to its similarity with neo-conservative movements, such as the Surrendered Wife.
- [38] Marcelle Karp & Debbie Stoller (1999) The Birth of *BUST*, in Marcelle Karp & Debbie Stoller (Eds) *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, pp. xiv-xv (London: Penguin).
- [39] So What are We Doing Here Anyway? [www.bitchmagazine.com](http://www.bitchmagazine.com)
- [40] Rebecca Walker (1995) Being Real: an introduction, in Walker, *To Be Real*, p. xxxiii.
- [41] Heywood & Drake, 'Introduction', *Third Wave Agenda*, pp. 4-5.

- [42] Courtney Love (1999) Bad Like Me, in Karp & Stoller, *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, p. 313.
- [43] Brooks, *Postfeminisms*, p. 148.
- [44] Walter, *The New Feminism*, p. 98.
- [45] For more on the debates surrounding Madonna, see the essays in Carol Schwichtenberg (Ed.) (1993) *The Madonna Connection: representational politics, subcultural identities, and cultural theory* (Boulder: Westview).
- [46] Heywood & Drake, 'Introduction', *Third Wave Agenda*, p. 17.
- [47] Margaret Marshment (1997 2nd edn) Representations of Women in Contemporary Popular Culture, in Diane Richardson & Victoria Robinson (Eds) *Introducing Women's Studies*, p. 147 (Basingstoke: Palgrave).
- [48] For more on the pornography debates see Andrea Dworkin (1981) *Pornography: men possessing women* (London: Women's Press); Susanne Kappeler (1986) *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Pamela Church Gibson & Roma Gibson (Eds) (1993) *Dirty Looks: women, pornography, power* (London: BFI); and Pamela Church Gibson (Ed.) (2004) *More Dirty Looks: gender, pornography and power* (London: BFI).
- [49] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 138.
- [50] See Kathy Acker (3 May 1997) All Girls Together, *Guardian Weekend*, pp. 12-19.
- [51] Marcelle Karp (1999) Herstory: girl on girls, in Karp & Stoller, *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, p. 309 (London: Penguin).
- [52] Greer, *The Whole Woman*, p. 407.
- [53] Jennifer L. Pozner (1998) 'Makes Me Wanna Grrrowl', *Feminista!*, 2(1), [www.feminista.com/v2n1/pozner.html](http://www.feminista.com/v2n1/pozner.html)
- [54] For more on this see Shelley Budgeon (1998) I'll Tell You What I Really, Really Want: girl power and self-identity in Britain, in Sherrie A. Inness (Ed.) *Millennium Girls: today's girls around the world*, pp. 115-143 (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield).
- [55] Katherine Viner (1999) The Personal is Still Political, in Natasha Walter (Ed.) *On the Move: feminism for a new generation*, p. 22 (London: Virago).
- [56] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. xix.
- [57] *Ibid.*, p. xx.
- [58] Viner, 'The Personal is Still Political', p. 18.
- [59] For more on this see Deborah Siegel (1997) The Legacy of the Personal: generating theory in feminism's third wave, *Hypatia: Special Issue on 'Third Wave' Feminisms*, 12(3), pp. 46-74.
- [60] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 20.
- [61] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- [62] Segal, *Why Feminism?* p. 204.
- [63] Baumgardner & Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 137.

- [64] Ibid., p. 152.
- [65] Faludi, *Backlash*, p. 15.
- [66] Throughout *The New Feminism*, Walter provides a coherent and incisive account of the injustices and inequalities still experienced by millions of women.
- [67] Siegel, 'Reading between the Waves', p. 59.
- [68] Misha Kavka (2001) Introduction, in Elisabeth Bronfen & Misha Kavka (Eds) *Feminist Consequences: theory for the new century*, p. xii (New York: Columbia University Press).
- [69] For an examination of race and third wave feminism, see Winifred Woodhull (2003) Global Feminisms, Transnational Political Economies, Third World Cultural Production, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(2) and the 'Challenges' section in Gillis et al, *Third Wave Feminism*.
- [70] Rory Dicker & Alison Piepmeier (2003) Introduction, in Dicker & Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave*, p. 9.

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