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## Opting out of oppositionality : toward an informed and engaged "third wave" feminism

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OPTING OUT OF OPPOSITIONALITY: TOWARD AN INFORMED  
AND ENGAGED "THIRD WAVE" FEMINISM

By

AMANDA ASHMAN

SENIOR SCHOLARS PROJECT  
COLBY COLLEGE

MAY 2003

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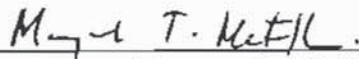
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Pamela Thoma".

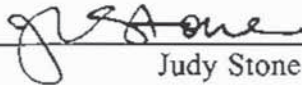
Pamela Thoma

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mary Beth Mills".

Mary Beth Mills

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret McFadden".

Margaret McFadden

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Judy Stone".

Judy Stone

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## INTRODUCTION

The third wave of feminism both builds on and differentiates itself from the second wave through its sustained homage to 1970s mentors and its sustained critique of the same. Third wavers—emerging and beginning to define themselves only since the mid-1990s in North America—are a diverse group of primarily young women, born into a world changed by feminism and other social justice movements and trying to put their diverse feminisms into practice in this world, acknowledged to be complex, contextual and ever shifting. For this generation, feminism should prioritize not just gender but all of the intertwining axes of identity and experience including race, class, ability and sexuality (Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian 352).

### *Prologue*

I begin by citing a definition of “third wave” from the glossary in *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms* at length because it communicates several key issues that I develop in this project. The definition introduces a tension within “third wave” feminism of building and differentiating itself from second wave feminism, the newness of the term “third wave,” its association with “young” women, complexity of contemporary feminisms, and attention to multiple identities and oppressions. Uncovering explanations of “third wave” feminism that go beyond, like this one, generational associations, is not an easy task. Authors consistently group new feminist voices together by age under the label “third wave” feminists without questioning the accuracy of the designation. Most explorations of “third wave” feminism overlook the complexities and distinctions that abound among “young” feminists; not all young feminists espouse similar ideas, tactics, and actions; and for various reasons, not all young feminists identify with a “third wave” of feminism.

Less than a year after I began to learn about feminism I discovered Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation*. Although the collection nor its contributors declare association with “third wave” feminism, consequent reviews and citations in articles identify it, along with Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Voice of Feminism*, as a major text of “third wave” feminism. Re-reading *Listen Up* since

beginning to research “third wave” feminism, I now understand its fundamental influence on my research questions as a starting point for assessing persistent exclusion in contemporary feminism, rather than as a revolutionary text (as it is claimed to be in many reviews). Findlen begins the introduction with the bold claim, “My feminism wasn’t shaped by antiwar or civil rights activism...” (xi). Framing the collection with a disavowal of the influence women of color’s organizational efforts negates, for me, the project’s proclaimed commitment to multivocality. Though several contributions examine persistent exclusion within contemporary feminist movement, the larger project seems to rely on these essays to reflect this commitment, suggesting that *Listen Up* does not go beyond the “add and stir” approach to “diversity.” Interestingly, this statement does not appear in the new edition of *Listen Up* published in 2001. And the content has changed with this new edition, including several more Latina contributors and other “corrective” additions.

Another source of frustration concerning three texts considered important or influential “third wave” works is their direct maintenance of the centrality of prominent, dominant second wave feminists, particularly Gloria Steinem. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2000), *Listen Up*, and *To Be Real* each pay heed to Steinem either in acknowledgements or textual content.<sup>1</sup> While I appreciate the sense of continuity of feminist movement her presence suggests, and this is a theme that will become more explicitly important to my project in later sections, other women, particularly lesbians, women of color, and working-class women, are not similarly positioned. The continuity I value is not with “dominant” feminists, but with

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<sup>1</sup> Steinem authors the foreword of *To Be Real*. To her credit, she raises an interesting critique of generational rhetoric within “young” feminism. While I doubt Steinem’s motivations for problematizing generational conceptions of feminism mirror my own, the conversation must begin somewhere. Steinem notes the involvement of women of color in earlier feminist movement, but does not mention their presence for any reason other than to reveal the “inclusivity” of feminism. Angela Davis’ afterword, along with several essays, does mention history, continuity and exclusion.

rather those who are too frequently erased from feminist histories entirely. Two anthologies I discovered during the course of my research add different voices to the often uniform portrayals of feminism and have fundamentally shaped my conception of a viable “third wave” feminism: *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* edited by Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman published in 2002 by Seal Press and *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms* edited by Allyson Mitchell, Lisa Bryn Rundle, and Lara Karaian published in 2001 by the Canadian Sumach Press.

*It's a generational thing...*

Popular discussions of “third wave” feminism equate young feminists with various characteristics, almost all of which are purported to be linked to generation. Candis Steenbergen enumerates some popular labels in “Talkin' 'Bout Whose Generation?!” her essay in *Turbo Chicks*. She explains that according to popular rhetoric, her age, twenty-seven, qualifies her membership in the “new feminism”:

Power-feminism. Career feminism. ‘Do-me’ feminism. Lipstick feminism. Babe feminism. Dissident feminism. Capitalist feminism. Consumer feminism. Postmodern feminism. Millenium feminism. According to mainstream media over the last few years, these tags, and variations on them define members of my feminist cohort. These labels characterize the ‘new faces’ of feminism and, in effect, popularly identify ‘the next generation’ of the women’s movement (256).

Other interpretations of “third wave” feminism get more specific by qualifying membership to women who grew up with Title IX (Detloff note 5), or very specific by suggesting a range of dates of birth of “third wave” feminists.<sup>2</sup> According to generational definitions, women born into specific social, cultural, and political conditions adhere to a unique feminism. Though “third wave” feminism is gaining attention as a movement with ideological rallying points, most

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<sup>2</sup> Several authors propose various ranges: 1964–1980 (Alfonso and Triglio), 1963–1974 (Heywood and Drake). Also, Ednie Garrison refers to the popular signifiers “under 35” or came of age during the 1960s and 1970s women’s movement (The Third Wave 4).



discourse adheres to generational understandings. Most discussions fail to grasp the revolutionary challenges posed by some young feminists whose call for a “third wave” of feminism represents dedication to the creation of a truly inclusive contemporary feminist movement. I suggest that “third wave” feminism cannot be defined generationally and that generational definitions actually hinder a deeper understanding of motivating factors, characteristics, and consequences of a declaration of “third wave” feminism.

Many authors (young and not so young) aim for an understanding of young feminists by seeking a basic statement of ideology, which they assume is contained within “third wave” feminism. For this they often look toward writings touted as the canonical texts of “third wave” feminism such as *To Be Real* or *Listen Up*, yet these anthologies do not offer a concise definition of young feminists. Instead, as Findlen explains in her introduction: “Generation X, thirteenth generation, twentysomething--whatever package you buy this age group in--one of the characteristics we’re known for is our disunity...maybe we’re just not categorizable” (xiii). Upon discovering that the closest thing to a “third wave” tenet is that there is no one way to be a young feminist, many get frustrated and give up. Rather than challenge the applicability of their question or approach to contemporary feminism, most write about frustration with the ambivalence of “misguided” young feminists. In the resulting accounts, disavowal of feminist predecessors (and corresponding ignorance of history), misguided idealism, self-centeredness, and lack of theorizing (all of which suggest ignorance) often overshadow the internal complexity among “young” feminists.

Addressing complexity beyond generational identity, some versions of “third wave” feminism supplement a generational definition with an ideological project of working toward an inclusive contemporary feminist movement. Aspects of this opposition to exclusionary feminism

are apparent in many expressions of “third wave” feminism, which purport to represent and address a “diverse” group of women. The thread of “third wave” feminism I focus on in this paper highlights inclusivity as a fundamental “third wave” concern. Attention to the multiplicity of identities and forms of oppression women face is prioritized as much as generation. This version of “third wave” feminism holds great potential to threaten the dominance of established, coherent, and stable hegemonic histories of feminism.

Despite claims of inclusivity, however, this “third wave” feminism replicates exclusionary tendencies of second wave feminism, such as erasing foundations in earlier feminist movement of marginalized women and by highlighting a generational definition that does not apply or make sense to women in all social locations. “Third wave” feminism expends an exorbitant amount of energy on establishing an oppositional relationship to hegemonic second wave feminism, overlooking its own complicity in exclusionary practices.

Rather than working toward a primarily descriptive analysis of the ways in which “third wave” feminism is not oppositional to second wave feminism, I examine the motives for, but especially the consequences of positing “third wave” as such. I explore the ways in which claims of a “third wave” of feminism can operate as an attempt to correct for previous feminist blunders. While this seems a worthwhile endeavor, “third wave” feminism expends much energy on establishing an oppositional relationship to second wave feminism. I consider whether claiming a “third wave” of feminism is a way for privileged feminists to maintain their centrality and re-evaluate feminism’s exclusionary past in their favor as an attempt at redemption.

Additionally, I explore whether situating “third wave” feminism as oppositional to second wave feminism motivates perceptions that inclusivity has replaced the exclusion previously associated with feminism. “Third wave” feminism replicates some of the exclusionary tactics of earlier

feminist movement, and understanding the relationship in terms of opposition detracts from internal critique and deters identifying the replication of similar exclusion within “third wave” feminism.

The continued inability to create a fundamentally inclusive movement challenges the utility of positing “third wave” feminism in opposition to earlier feminist movement. Perhaps identifying with a more continuous conceptualization of feminism would allow more attention to persistent problems. At least this connection with feminism’s past would emphasize that many of the obstacles “third wave” feminism faces are in fact restrictions of counter-hegemonic discourse that all forms of feminism encounter. Like second wave feminism, “third wave” feminism is a form of counter-hegemonic discourse, and as such is prone to replicate dominance.

Additionally, less emphasis on an oppositional relationship between “third wave” and second wave feminism might afford more attention to other forms of contemporary feminist movement (both supportive and antagonistic) that relate to “third wave” dilemmas. This attention could perhaps spark a broader, potentially revelatory conversation among co-existing discourses. The challenge posed to “third wave” feminists is to maintain an understanding of feminist movement as both continuous and dynamic, recognizing debts to earlier feminist struggles *and* refusing to abide exclusionary practices, while examining themselves for replication.

### *Summary of chapters*

In chapter one, I introduce how declaring a “third wave” feminism establishes distinction from and continuity with second wave feminism. For the particular thread of “third wave” feminism that I explore, seeking distance from second wave feminism seems motivated by a desire to gain distance from hegemonic operations. By situating itself in the wave framework of



feminist historiography, however, “third wave” feminism replicates exclusion. I assess historiographic claims of a “third wave” of feminism in an effort to analyze the oppositional relationship between “third wave” and second wave feminism that is implied or declared by many “third wave” feminists. Understanding a “third wave” of feminism as a political construction situated amidst the larger political project of feminist historiography reveals a sometimes strategic tension between seeking distance and recognizing similarities within second and “third wave” feminism.

In chapter two I assert that understanding “third wave” feminism as oppositional to second wave feminism facilitates the omission of vital historical information regarding past inclusive feminism enacted by marginalized women. I consider the consequences of an oppositional definition of “third wave” feminism in relation to second wave feminism. Conceptualizing the relationship between second wave and “third wave” feminism in terms of opposition detracts from recognition of historical continuity, contributes to inaccurate portrayals of “third wave,” and dissuades internal critique and identification of exclusion within “third wave” feminism. My belief that a more continuous conceptualization of feminism would allow more attention to persisting dominance and exclusion within contemporary feminism underlies this analysis.

Chapter three provides an assessment of multi-genre anthologizing as a device enabling alternatives to oppositional definitions of “third wave” feminism. The historical context of groundbreaking anthologies that offer an array of voices and de-center authoritative knowledge, suggests one possibility for highlighting the continuity of feminist methods. To this extent, I explore two recent anthologies, *Colonize This!* and *Turbo Chicks* that I argue offer alternatives to generational definitions of “third wave” feminism. These anthologies respond to stable and

over-confident definitions of “third wave” feminism and the oversimplification such assertions entail. By prioritizing ideological concerns over generational membership these collections allow readers to identify ideological continuity between “third wave” feminism and earlier movement.

In chapter four I attempt to decipher the limitations of oppositional discourse involving the relationship between “third wave” feminism and postfeminism. I propose replacing oppositional relationships with dialectical interaction among co-existing discourses pertaining to contemporary feminism. This dialogue could respond to pervasive ideas that young feminists are either postfeminists or “third wave” feminists. I suggest that the co-existence of postfeminists and “third wave” feminists within one generation complicates assertions of this generation as either a “third wave” or postfeminist generation. Replacing generational definitions of “third wave” feminism with explanations of ideology would strategically emphasize differences between “third wave” and postfeminism.



## CHAPTER ONE

In an interesting way, the wave metaphor captures the notion of continuity as well as discontinuity; waves are different from one another but are similar too (Bailey 27).

If the writing of history is itself a form of historical intervention, that is, if historiography is, as Susan Stanford Friedman suggests, an act in the present on behalf of the future, then it becomes necessary to interrogate the ways in which historiographic discourse is used as a power play in current feminist debates (Siegel 58).

Figuratively speaking, “third wave” feminism implies both a distinction from and continuity with second wave feminism. In declaring a new “wave” rather than an entirely new movement, “third wave” feminism acknowledges roots in earlier feminist movement. Yet the declaration of a new category of feminism also asserts a break from second wave feminism, suggesting that “third wave” feminism is a project distinct from second wave feminism. By emphasizing differences, the claims of “third wave” feminism go beyond merely stating continuation with second wave feminism.

Conceptualizing “third wave” feminism as distinct from second wave feminism reflects an ideological project that responds to exclusionary practices of earlier feminism but in turn enacts its own form of exclusionary inclusivity. In a changing cultural context that consists of widespread backlash to feminism and an increasingly pronounced contingent of post-feminists, motivations for declaring a “third wave” of feminism can be understood to include adaptation to these conditions. “Third wave” feminism strives to counter these hostile forces by taking account of changing conditions and responding accordingly. This effort insists that “third wave” feminism can survive these potential challenges. Specifically, the strand of “third wave” feminism that I will focus on in this paper is motivated in part by a desire to integrate increasingly expanding and unstable understandings of “women” as an identity category around which feminists mobilize. As

*Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation* contributor JeYeon Lee

expresses,

These days, whenever someone says the word 'women' to me, my mind goes blank. What 'women?' What is this 'women' thing you're talking about? Does that mean me? Does that mean my mother, my roommates, the white woman next door, the checkout clerk at the supermarket, my aunts in Korea, half of the world's population? I ask people to specify and specify, until I can figure out exactly what they're talking about, and I try to remember to apply the same standards to myself, to deny myself the slightest possibility of romanticization. Sisterhood may be global, but who is in that sisterhood? None of us can afford to assume anything about anybody else. This thing called 'feminism' takes a great deal of hard work, and I think this is one of the primary hallmarks of young feminists' activism today: We realize that coming together and working together are by no means natural or easy (Lee 211).

"Third wave" feminism necessitates a form of inclusive feminism that allows for multiple, shifting, and contradictory identities. To what extent new forms succeed is a question I will explore later.

In this chapter, I will assess historiographic claims of a "third wave" of feminism in an effort to analyze the oppositional relationship between "third wave" and second wave feminism implied or declared by many "third wave" feminists. Understanding a "third wave" of feminism as a political construction, situated amidst the larger political project of feminist historiography, reveals a sometimes strategic<sup>3</sup> tension between seeking distance and recognizing similarities within second and "third wave" feminism that permeates discussions of "third wave" feminism. Throughout this chapter, I will consider the motivations for and effects of this tension between strivings for distance from *and* continuity with second wave feminism.

### *Feminist Historiography*

By declaring a new "wave" rather than an entirely new movement, "third wave" feminism locates itself within an established feminist historiographic model of "waves."

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<sup>3</sup> Discussing articulations of "third wave" efforts to gain distance from second wave feminism as "strategic" suggests a self-consciousness that I do not want to assert as part of all "third wave" articulations.

The wave framework of feminist historiography focuses, in particular, on the temporality of waves and the importance of situating feminist movement historically. Both feminist politics and oceanic waves are affected by the specific conditions of their context, though they can in turn affect their context.<sup>4</sup> However, just as there are many simultaneous waves in an ocean, so too are there multiple, simultaneous, and yet varied forms of feminist movement in action at a specific time.

Despite this multiplicity of movement, the wave framework identifies narrow, supposedly definitive enactments of feminism and declares them representative of a historical period. These articulations of feminism incur recognition as “waves” and dominate feminist discourse. An accurately complex representation of the myriad forms of feminist movement is hindered by structural restrictions stemming from this project of producing an “official” (i.e. dominant) history. In her contribution to *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha explains that she does not see the efforts she participates in recorded in “official” records: “We dark funny girls kick ass, change and make history, but the ass-kicking we do doesn't end up in the official records no matter how crucial we are. We don't kick ass the way white girls do, whether it's in NOW or riot grrrl” (3). Very often, feminists who construct “official” history have been, and continue to be, privileged white women whose knowledge of feminist movement is often limited to the specific forms in which they participate (Gluck, et al). It is crucial to consider who is bestowed with the responsibility

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<sup>4</sup> One rather unfortunate characteristic of the term “third wave” is an overwhelmingly pervasive attachment to various wave metaphors. Though I resist recounting them here, one in particular bears mentioning. Ednie Garrison critiques oceanic metaphors for reifying hegemonic wave historiography and thus strays from the common metaphor. She provides an intriguing suggestion to characterize “waves” of feminism as *radio* waves which fracture, overlap and encounter interference, representative of the contestable history of feminist waves (The Third Wave 283-284).



of feminist historiography, and what affect their location has on the actualization of a dominant feminist narrative. As Sherna Gluck explains, "Because so many of the white, middle-class activists themselves—or their admirers—initially charted the course of feminist history, it is no surprise that their own pasts have shaped how that history has been written" (33). The process of historicizing in which privileged women are responsible for compiling a dominant narrative record of the forms of activism that they are familiar with, ignores the myriad feminists and forms of feminism that constitute feminist movement.

Determining which forms of feminism comprise and are designated "waves" is an orchestrated project that by no means accurately represents the entire history of feminist movement. This fact is revealed by a brief review of a fuller version of feminist history than the wave model offers. In particular, the wave model posits white women's activism as feminist "waves" while neglecting to similarly accredit the organizing of women of color. Kimberly Springer provides a brief, useful summary of the inherently exclusionary operation of the wave model by outlining some of the race-based efforts that have historically prompted or complemented official "waves" of feminism. For instance, the skills white women gained in abolition efforts and learned from Black women with experience organizing antislavery, antilynching and suffrage efforts provided a vital foundation for what is considered the "first wave" of feminism. In a similar way, the Civil Rights movement provided strategy and energy that sparked "second wave" feminism. Denying these connections not only erases the significant foundations of feminism in anti-racist struggles, but also suggests that these race-based struggles did not involved gendered consciousness. Class-based and sexuality struggles have similarly

been subsumed by the wave model as part of feminist struggle rather than an influence on feminism. In a project of erasure, this historiography fails to acknowledge formative influences on feminist “waves,” asserting narrow conventions of what counts as feminist activism. This model does not adequately address varied forms of feminist movement, limited by the wave metaphor’s inability to portray a multiplicity of activism. The reality of counterhegemonic struggles are dispersed rather than concentrated.<sup>5</sup>

Conceptualizations of a second wave of feminism according to this dominant framework of feminist historiography do not leave much room for an understanding of “multiracial feminism.”<sup>6</sup> While the issue of representing “alternative” or “subordinate” histories is not completely absent from the records, which are usually composed by privileged white women, these accounts rarely reflect the varied and vibrant reality of feminist movement among marginalized groups. These are largely present in an unsatisfactory homogeneous and underdeveloped form that often sweeps marginalized histories even further into the margins. Barbara Findlen’s assertion (1995) that civil rights activism did not shape her feminism, for instance, denies the influence of women of color on feminist activism. In the same introduction, Findlen writes, “many women of color in particular struggle to...ensure that feminist scholarship, activism and institutions fully integrate the lives and realities and ideas of women of color” (xvi). This conception of women of color’s role in feminism suggests that women of color participate in feminism but do not have a formative influence. But it is important to maintain that marginalized women are not simply written into these countermodels or alternative

<sup>5</sup> The wave model’s limitations and focus on privileged feminism may be ideologically appealing or useful, even if unconsciously, for elite feminists. This motivation to maintain centrality and concentrate efforts/attention/power is important to examine, and indeed directly related to my general thesis.

<sup>6</sup> I cite Becky Thompson here because she provides a particularly useful timeline and discussion regarding multiracial feminism, although she may be seen as an exception to the rule that I am describing by discussing *white* anti-racist activism, and thus re-centering white women. Nonetheless, I find Thompson’s chapter on multiracial feminism to embark upon the kind of much-needed historical excavation.

histories without agency. In fact, convinced of their eminent erasure within feminism, they often resist by disavowing the feminist label. Referring to women of color, bell hooks observes that “these women have often felt that our only response to white, bourgeois, hegemonic dominance of feminist movement is to trash, reject, or dismiss feminism. This reaction is in no way threatening to the women who wish to maintain control over the direction of feminist theory and praxis” (28). Rather than form alternative ideas about feminism, many women reject feminism altogether, leaving dominance intact.<sup>7</sup> This rejection complicates feminist historiography by muddying issues of intent and forcing “dominant” women historians to risk accusation of projecting agendas by trying to appropriate marginalized actions as feminist.

In an exploration of the dilemma of feminist historiography, Gluck concludes her essay with a call to action to a “new generation” of feminists who are not as invested in a sense of ownership as older feminists, and, as a result, may be more able to resist enacting dominance through historiography. Whether or not Gluck had “third wave” feminists in mind as this “new generation,” I argue that “third wave” feminism should not be considered this “new generation,” because the project of “third wave” feminism is transparently involved in a historiographic project of claiming itself as a “wave.” This contentious debate is imbedded in a discourse of dominance in relation to second wave feminists, post-feminists, and ideological predecessors who have influenced feminism both directly and indirectly through involvement in class, race, and sexuality-based struggles, among others. “Third wave” feminists who establish an oppositional generational definition frequently miss a complete picture of past feminist movement.

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<sup>7</sup> I strive to draw a similar parallel to “third wave” feminism throughout this paper, questioning the effectiveness of “third wave” rejection of hegemonic second wave feminism rather than engaging in dialogue.

However, I think it is important to distinguish the project of historical excavation that I hope “third wave” will embrace as a historiographic project, and I will return to this point briefly in my conclusion.

*“Third wave” feminist historiography*

Read as part of a wave historiography of feminist movement, “third wave” feminism would seem to have obtained “official” recognition as a movement on its own. This claim of a new “wave,” however, is highly contentious. Many feminists, including Cathryn Bailey, are not convinced of the merit of this claim. Bailey insightfully explores the political nature of declaring a “third wave” of feminism. She sets out, as I hope to do, to explore a particular “strand” of “third wave” feminism that emphasizes a break from earlier feminism in order to understand motivations for claiming a “third wave.” While she identifies “third wave” as a political assertion, however, she does not suggest that the historiographic project of identifying waves of feminism is an endemically political construction, as I suggest. Instead, she interprets waves as a descriptive concept that reflects definable boundaries, and considers the lack of delineated boundaries the differentiated variable concerning “third wave” feminism. She correspondingly suggests that the first and second waves are not problematic, or at least not in the same way as “third wave” feminism. Even as she problematizes “third wave” tendencies to regard second wave feminism as a unified whole, her analysis of waves as bounded entities seems to depend on a similarly reductive interpretation of feminist historiography. As suggestive as her thesis of exploring the politically motivated declaration of a “third wave” of feminism is, Bailey’s analysis unfortunately does not go beyond proving the existence of such a political motivation.



I question how strategically viable this political project of self-consciously claiming a “third wave” of feminism actually is. Appropriating the wave metaphor and applying it to such a contentious cohort of feminists does undermine corresponding notions of authority and categorization and highlights the constructedness of the “wave” model. But by enacting this strategy “third wave” feminism participates in a problematic framework of history that has facilitated the erasure of collective efforts of entire groups of marginalized women. For the particular thread of “third wave” feminism on which I focus my attention and which strives to implement inclusive feminism, this maneuver creates a particularly crucial dilemma of inconsistency. Unless accompanied by a pronounced declaration of the dilemma, claiming a “third wave” of feminism perpetuates exclusion by indirectly implying historical continuity with first and second wave feminism. This association suggests that these waves represent the entirety of “third wave” foundations. By virtue of its location in the wave framework, “third wave” feminism also risks eclipsing other forms of contemporary feminist movement, as it is often considered *the* feminist follow-up to second wave praxis.<sup>8</sup> In entering the discourse of waves, “third wave” feminism enters a dominant narrative and as a result, threatens to eclipse its origins as well as contemporary, co-existing feminist movement. In order to understand the dominance of “third wave” feminism, we must understand the emergence and evolution of the phenomenon of “third wave” feminism.

#### *Etyymology of “third wave”*

By way of establishing some sense of history regarding the emergence of the term “third wave” feminism, Catherine Orr explains that, “the earliest mention of the term

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<sup>8</sup> I am referring to any form of feminism (loosely defined) other than “third wave.” I do not mean “postfeminism,” as I discuss in chapter 4, because media portrayals facilitate the erasure of everything else.



‘third wave’ took place in the mid-eighties when a diverse group of feminist activists and academics pooled their intellectual resources into an anthology titled *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism*. The emphasis was to be on multiracial alliances among women that grew out of the political and theoretical discussions of the early eighties on race and sexuality. Age did not seem to be *the* issue” (30). Though it is often not acknowledged, “third wave” attention to inclusivity of a multiplicity of women’s identities stems from these earlier struggles for inclusive feminism. The origin of the term “third wave” suggests that the ideas “third wave” feminism espouses are fundamentally grounded in earlier critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism offered by women of color, and I would add, borrowing from Ednie Garrison, working class women, and lesbians—women who challenged and expanded second wave feminism’s seemingly unitary focus on gender to acknowledge the importance of other identities in shaping experiences of “women” such as race, class, and sexuality. Such critiques “date” from the second wave, but are not necessarily considered a part of second wave feminism, by both second wavers, and, for different reasons, third wavers. Nonetheless, the foundation on which “third wave” feminists build was paved by women who were generationally second wave, though they may not have identified themselves as part of the second wave, or even as feminists.<sup>9</sup>

The origin of the tenets of “third wave” feminism in multiracial alliances in the eighties is frequently unacknowledged in “third wave” texts. When the rare mention of “third wave” feminism’s emergence from these critiques is made, this acknowledgement usually takes the form of an underdeveloped comment with little explanation. It is close

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<sup>9</sup> As I mentioned earlier, many marginalized women were deterred from identifying as feminists by the exclusive practices of hegemonic second wave feminism.

to impossible to find a discussion of “third wave” feminism that actually explores, and even harder to find one that focuses on, its foundations in these critiques.<sup>10</sup> Lisa Heywood and Jennifer Drake’s edited volume *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, is one of the few examples that explores these origins in any depth: “...the definitional moment of third wave feminism has been theorized as proceeding from critiques of the white women’s movement that were initiated by women of color, as well as from the many instances of coalition work undertaken by U.S. third world feminists” (Heywood and Drake 8). Though this reference too could be further developed beyond the introduction in the essays, the editors do assert that acknowledging “third wave” debts to the women-of-color feminists who challenged white second wave feminism is one goal of their project. This and other acknowledgements of “third wave” debts must adamantly insist on the maintenance of specific, marginalized histories to counter the forces of structural exclusion and erasure.

The missing acknowledgment of earlier “third wave” foundations beyond “second wave” feminism is matched by a now nearly universal description of the importance of generation to the project of defining “third wave” feminism. Helene Shugart privileges generation above all other characteristics of “third wave,” suggesting that “as a rhetorical phenomenon, third-wave feminism is more appropriately understood as a subculture of the larger rhetorical phenomenon of Generation X rather than a phase or contemporary incarnation of feminism” (134). The presence of this attention to age, and youth in particular, can be linked to several structural characteristics of the wave metaphor of feminist historiography and the concern with gaining distance from second wave

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<sup>10</sup> See Garrison and Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman for substantial statements of recognition of this debt to marginalized women’s earlier struggles.

feminism within the particular project of “third wave” feminism. But an important event also shaped the prominence of age in “third wave” feminist discourse. In 1992, when a group of about 100 young feminists gathered in New York City to form “The Third Wave” activist network,<sup>11</sup> the focus on multiracial feminist movement was supplanted by a focus on “young” feminists. The primacy of age established in part by this gathering has become a central point of unity for “third wave” feminists.

The temporal focus of the wave model of feminist historiography communicates generational identity better than race-based efforts, as I discussed above. In tandem with the “third wave” project of responding to a changing and increasingly hostile cultural context, structural omission in official history facilitates the dominance of generation in conceptualizations of “third wave” feminism. A more complete history suggests that much “third wave” feminist ideology concerning inclusive feminism is continuous with earlier ideology of women resisting hegemonic second wave feminism, lessening the importance of generation. Many second wave feminists have not come to terms with the need to correct for an often exclusionary past, however. They fear that a revisionist or supplemental history to the wave model which prioritizes these critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism also highlighted by the origins of “third wave” feminism, will discredit their authority. These second wavers fear that “third wavers” threaten to disavow important foundations by highlighting exclusionary practices without acknowledging the significance of second wave efforts. The second wave fear of being written out of feminist politics and history indicates an attachment to and an investment in history that also evidences the ideological motivations of the wave model. Unlike

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<sup>11</sup> The “Third Wave” activist network was co-founded by founding president Rebecca Walker in 1992 and is now officially called the Third Wave Foundation, though its website interestingly references the organization as “Third Wave” in a couple locations ([www.thirdwavefoundation.org](http://www.thirdwavefoundation.org)).



other critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism, however, “third wave” feminism has been assumed to emerge from a specific generation of young feminists. If generation is highlighted, hegemonic second wave feminists who fear erasure of their influence can pass off “third wave” critiques as emotionally rebellious tirades of immature “daughters,” mitigating the threat to second wave authority. A focus on generation thus can be received as an unwarranted attack in which “third wave” criticism is equated with disavowal of second wave feminist efforts. Yet again, by prioritizing generation, “third wave” feminism typically presents ideas as new, justifying some of these reactions. More importantly, generational understandings of “third wave” feminism as oppositional to second wave feminism erase the contributions of and critiques offered by a specific cohort of older feminists marginalized by the wave framework.

### *Erasure*

In concert with structural exclusion related to the deployment of the wave metaphor, a “third wave” feminist focus on establishing an oppositional relationship to second wave feminism threatens to overshadow and erase continuity with earlier, foundational efforts. I now turn to a discussion of “third wave” distancing from second wave feminism amidst shifting understandings and enactments of feminism as inclusive and generationally defined. A construction of oppositionality, exemplified by the prioritization of a generational conception of “third wave” feminism, is influenced by several efforts, though perhaps not deliberate, which erase important histories all the same.

“Third wave” feminism operates within the broader context of feminism as social movement working toward change, an effort which has typically depended on a point of

unity among participants. However, “third wave” feminists have further problematized the category “women” that hegemonic second wave feminism relied on in a somewhat unitary struggle against patriarchy until feminist theorists began to incorporate and develop poststructuralist insights. While some third wavers may see it this way, this is too static, in my opinion, since the essentialist vs. constructionist debate is pretty clearly understood as a major debate of second wave theory.<sup>12</sup> By enacting a project of challenging essentialized categories of shared identities or experiences, “third wave” feminism’s attention to a widely inclusive constituency with multiple, varied, and shifting identities, deters establishment of an easily determined understanding of commonality among its participants. With so little in common among “third wave” feminists, generational commonality is frequently identified as a point of unity.

Establishing distance from second wave feminism is central to the success of this generational cohesion. In emphasizing “third wave” difference from second wave feminism, however, a conception of “third wave” feminism as oppositional to second wave feminism often overshadows notions of continuity. Complemented by “third wave” feminists’ critique of exclusionary practices of hegemonic second wave feminism, this generationally bound conception of “third wave” feminism facilitates understandings that the differences between the waves overshadow similarities, even though “third wave” feminism actually shares many qualities with earlier feminist endeavors. This construction also implies young feminists’ universal identification with “third wave” feminism, a notion I will problematize further in chapter three. Though a wide range of young feminists associate themselves with “third wave” feminism, this is not a label espoused by all (or even only) young feminists. For example, “young” feminists may

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, second wave readers, such as Linda Nicholson’s *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (1997).

identify as girlie feminists, women of color feminists, Riot Grrrls, womanists, power feminists, etc.

In seeking distance from exclusionary practices of hegemonic second wave feminism, “third wave” feminism often accepts a metonymic and monolithic history of the second wave as entirely exclusionary (Siegel). It is important to examine what dissuades “third wave” feminists from embracing the entirety of feminist history. Lisa Hogeland laments, “it’s become a truism that the second wave was racist, for instance, no matter that such a blanket statement writes out of our history the enormous and important contributions of women of color in the 1970s” (118). This construction concedes second wave feminism to a monolithic constituency of white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists, an endeavor that does not account for many women who participated in and influenced second wave feminism, including the women whose critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism established the foundations of “third wave” feminism. It is also problematic to erase those white, middle-class heterosexual women who were involved in anti-racist and other progressive coalitions because beyond their own marginalization vis-à-vis white, middle-class heterosexual men, these women serve as examples of agents for social change in various “dominant” communities to which they have access and which are in dire need of progressive education (Thompson).

Partly, the omission of “third wave” foundations in critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism relates to the problem of exclusion within the project of feminist historiography. This structural exclusion affects the dissemination of information, implying that perhaps many young(er) feminists who are working to make contemporary feminism more inclusive do not know about earlier struggles of radical women. For



example, when I read “third wave” anthologies such as *Listen Up* or *To Be Real*, the similarities between these collections and earlier anthologies, such as *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminist Women of Color* are striking. Many of the “third wave” essays are based in the same frustrations as the earlier works, yet the authors do not make this connection. The responsibility for this ignorance is not only in young feminists, but is a much larger problem concerning the passage of historical information across generations. Frequently, the authors of these essays may be unaware of these earlier texts, or rendered myopic by strategic claims of a generationally based “third wave” that would be complicated by a more fluid historiography.

Motivation for ownership and claims of authorship of a new kind of feminism may also operate in this failure to recognize earlier works as significant influences.<sup>13</sup> White women’s resistance to explore their own racism and hear the anger of women of color results in the marginalization of these books despite, or perhaps due to, their potential to revolutionize all of our lives.

“Third wave” strategy seems to suggest that it is easier to write off the entire second wave rather than embark on a project of confronting past wrongs by embracing and learning from feminist history. Further, Hogeland suggests that a refusal to claim or own an exclusionary history of feminism “may serve to work for white feminists as a kind of inoculation against confronting the persistence of these forces” (118). Perhaps privileged white “third wave” feminists in particular fear that this historical exploration

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<sup>13</sup> Tangible manifestations of structural exclusion worked against the perpetuation of these ideas in some cases, such as with *This Bridge Called my Back*, which was out of print until a small press in Berkeley, Third Woman Press, republished it in 2002. Meanwhile, *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism* is yet to be published. Its publisher, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is no longer in business.

would threaten the reputation of their own supposedly more progressive movement. This association would motivate a much needed and thorough examination of the persistent exclusionary operation of their own "wave."



## CHAPTER TWO

My point here is not that young(er) feminists have nothing new to say—quite the contrary, in fact—but rather that notions of generational rupture or divides work effectively to prevent us from seeing the powerful persistence of political beliefs of specific women's issues, and of strategies for change (Hogeland 117).

For younger feminists to ignore the work of earlier feminists is not only to fail to wrap their hands around valuable tools, it is to join their shovels to the backlash forces that would bury the history and significance of feminism (Bailey 27).

The particular strand of “third wave” feminism that I focus on in this project, as I outline in the introduction and chapter one, strives to create an inclusive contemporary feminist movement. In previous sections I began to consider how “third wave” critiques of exclusionary hegemonic second wave feminism, an effort informed by a desire for more inclusive contemporary feminist movement, tend to downplay associations with second wave feminism and highlight differences. In chapter one specifically, I explored how in declaring itself a corrective response to exclusionary feminism typified by hegemonic second wave feminism, “third wave” feminism focuses less on revising history than declaring its own inclusivity. This approach prioritizes “third wave” distance from second wave feminism over continuity. “Third wave” feminists thus often disregard pertinent historical information and overlook previous critiques of exclusionary second wave feminism while maintaining that their contemporary feminism is inclusive.

In this chapter I continue the assertion that though a particular strand of “third wave” feminism exhibits awareness of an exclusionary feminist past of dominant feminists, the knowledge is incomplete. In this chapter I add that understanding “third wave” feminism as oppositional to second wave feminism facilitates the omission of vital historical information regarding past inclusive feminism enacted by marginalized women. I argue that conceptualizing the relationship between second wave and “third wave” feminism in terms of opposition detracts

from recognition of historical continuity, motivates inaccurate portrayals of “third wave” feminism, and dissuades internal critique and identification of exclusion within “third wave” feminism. Understanding “third wave” feminism as oppositional detracts from recognizing persistent exclusionary practices similar to those enacted by hegemonic second wave feminists. In short, in this chapter I will delineate the consequences of the assertion of a “third wave” relationship to second wave feminism that is oppositional. Underlying this analysis is my belief, which I will further develop in later chapters, that “third wave” feminist identification with a more continuous conceptualization of feminism would allow more attention to persisting dominance and exclusion.

I identify three broad, overlapping consequences of oppositional conceptions of “third wave” feminism in this chapter. I intend the list to serve as a starting point for an examination of the consequences of an assertion of a “third wave” of feminism rather than a comprehensive evaluation of effects. Unlike many writings that tend to get stuck on the interpersonal dynamics of generational rivalry, however, I assess the structural effects of hindered intergenerational dialogue and the language and concepts utilized in this construction. First, “third wave” claims of opposition to second wave feminism mask the origins of “third wave” feminism in critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism during the 1970s and 1980s, a consequence closely related to the structural erasure facilitated by dominant feminist historiography that I explored in chapter one. Second, an oppositional definition oversimplifies second wave and “third wave” feminism, resulting in inaccuracies highlighted by an alleged generational rift between second and third wavers. Attention to this rift often displaces other issues of “difference” and obscures ideological commonalities across generations. Third, and most broadly, attention to assertions of “third wave” difference from second wave feminism deters a much-needed “third wave” self-

assessment regarding persistent exclusionary forces and complicates the recognition of dominance within “third wave” feminism. Opposition to exclusionary second wave practices overshadows the importance of active measures to insure “third wave” feminism is inclusive and misleadingly suggests that “third wave” feminism is already inclusive.

“Third wave” feminists claim an inclusive movement largely by rejecting the exclusionary practices of their second wave feminist predecessors. The vast majority of “third wave” feminists seek distance from second wave feminists but also fail to cite other predecessors as influential to the formation of their praxis. “Third wave” feminists thus claim the project of seeking distance from exclusionary second wave feminists as innovative, ignoring earlier forms of resistance to hegemonic feminism. The erasure of earlier resistance is aided by a homogenous conception of second wave feminism in which little to no attention is afforded to the actions of other, previously subversive feminists. Accordingly, the origins of “third wave” ideology in the contributions of generationally second wave women of color, working class women and lesbians are rarely acknowledged. The lack of continuity with earlier feminist movement recreates an exclusionary feminist history that ignores the contributions of previous marginalized feminists, as I began to explore in chapter one. The “third wave” project of seeking distance from an exclusionary second wave is a narrow understanding that reifies the dominance of hegemonic second wave feminists by ignoring the presence and contributions of marginalized women.<sup>14</sup>

“Third wave” priorities rarely include recovering the voices of women excluded by hegemonic second wave feminism. Marginalized women’s responses to hegemonic second wave feminist exclusionary practices, an obvious source of advice for “third wave” feminists, is not included on “third wave” agendas. In failing to explore marginalized women’s agency and actions in response to hegemonic second wave feminism, “third wave” feminists overlook a

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<sup>14</sup> See Sherna Gluck’s “Whose Feminism, Whose History?”



crucial part of their own histories. Ignoring earlier foundations of “third wave” consciousness hinders the struggle toward a more inclusive definition of “women” prioritized by “third wave” feminists. “Third wave” priorities rarely include recovering the voices of women eclipsed by hegemonic second wave feminism. Instead, “third wave” feminism ironically focuses on espousing the inclusive nature of contemporary feminism. For instance, in her introduction to *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Rebecca Walker writes:

[Our generation has] trouble formulating and perpetuating theories that compartmentalize and divide according to race and gender and all of the other signifiers. For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving (xxxiii).

In establishing an oppositional relationship to earlier feminists rather than recognizing the continuity of methods, “third wave” feminists reproduce precisely what they claim to transcend in making these false claims. This order of priorities hinders the struggle toward the more inclusive feminist movement that progressive “third wave” feminists desire. “Third wave” feminists must consider how an oppositional stance to second wave feminism amplifies hegemonic second wave feminism while re-marginalizing other feminist histories.

Structural factors such as the dilemma of feminist historiography I explored in chapter one, complicate the transmission of accurately complex histories of feminist movement. Histories omitted from dominant accounts are not widely available to younger feminists who seek to navigate historical information to uncover complete feminist histories. However, structural obstacles do not entirely account for historical amnesia. Feminists have not expended enough effort towards unearthing histories and seeking out what *is* there through following leads in references and footnotes in the dominant histories, as literal margins are often the only space afforded to these marginalized histories. Similarly, many women who explore feminist histories do not search for accounts of feminist history written by marginalized women. There are sources

people can access, even if some are out of print. For example, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was republished in 2002, and newer histories by Becky Thompson and Mab Segrest are easily available, as well as those that are not technically considered “feminist.” Additionally, some privileged “third wave” feminists participate in the creation of feminist historiography. For example, in their book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards give Gloria Steinem considerable airtime, while giving women of color, lesbians, and working-class women's efforts mere lip service.<sup>15</sup> These omissions exemplify many dominant feminists' personal unwillingness/disinclination to learn about, participate in, and record feminist activities of “marginalized” women, thereby perpetuating the creation of incomplete and inaccurate histories. “Third wave” reluctance to embrace historical predecessors leaves structural dominance intact and as a result, many women who explore feminist histories do not search for accounts of feminist history written by marginalized women. That “third wave” feminists have conceptually equated exclusion with earlier feminism reemphasizes the perceived irrelevance of earlier feminist histories. Feminists must unearth the histories and seek out what is there, following up on references and footnotes in the dominant histories in order to excavate “hidden” histories and conducting original research.

The failure to acknowledge the historical origins of “third wave” feminism in the various critiques and contributions of second wave feminism prevents “third wave” feminists from understanding the extent of the connections and similarities between these works and their own. Third wave writings “often do no mention where these contradictions have previously been most powerfully voiced” and deprive earlier feminists from much due credit (Heywood 8). By

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter three for one take on *Manifesta*'s exclusion of the histories of women of color feminism in one contributor's essay in *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms*.

claiming ideas of contradiction and multivocality as unique to their generational location without acknowledging the ways in which their own consciousnesses have been shaped by the efforts of these earlier radical women, “third wave” feminists recreate the exclusionary practices of hegemonic second wave feminism they set out to avoid. They also miss out on useful information and lessons regarding feminist movement and thus reinvent what has already been done and learned, wasting energy and time.

An oppositional definition of “third wave” feminism in relation to second wave feminism motivates oversimplification, conflation, and misrepresentation of “third wave” feminism and its relationship to previous feminist movement. “Third wave” feminism maintenance of an oppositional relationship relies on a process of “othering” in which “third wave” feminism is defined against second wave feminism. This conception represents second wave feminists as racist, classist, and homophobic and, feminists, by extension, as monolithically white, middle-class, and heterosexual. By contrast, “third wave” feminism is represented as an all-inclusive movement. The process, in which detail and exceptions are pushed aside to make room for sweeping generalizations laden with value judgments, erases the heterogeneity of feminist movement concurrent with hegemonic second wave feminism. It also suggests an ideologically unified “third wave,” which I challenge in chapter three.

As with assertions of the existence of monolithic feminist waves, the conflation of generational location with ideological stance in “third wave” and second wave oppositional discourse eclipses complexity. A clear-cut generationally defined “third wave” or second wave of feminism does not exist, yet most discussions of “third wave” and related discussions of second wave feminism accept popular, generational definitions of “waves.” Adhering to the notion that “third wave” is generational erases many generationally second wave women who



advocated a different version of feminism than hegemonic second wave feminists. “Third wave” feminists’ ideologies most closely resemble the ideology of women who resisted hegemonic second wave feminism. Women who critiqued and resisted hegemonic second wave feminism may share more ideological similarities with “third wave” feminists than women of “their” generation. Defining “third wave” feminism in opposition to second wave feminism ignores ideological commonalities across generations. A generational conceptualization erases the complexity of feminist identifications, rendering the accreditation of these women’s formative influence on “third wave” feminism practically impossible. Through the conflation of generational and ideological “difference” in explanations of “third wave” feminism, oppositional discourse erases complexity.

Furthermore, many sources written by second or “third wave” feminists presuppose a generational rift over which they attempt to construct a communicative bridge. Authors frequently assume that generationally bound ideologies exist and complicate inter-generational dialogue. For example, Madelyn Detloff explains that second wave feminists “...may believe that a third waver’s criticism of the second wave (for its ethnocentrism, heterocentrism, utopianism, and so on) is tantamount to saying, ‘All your hard work was worthless.’ The accuracy of the specific criticism is beside the point in these exchanges, for the discussion rarely gets to the level of weighing and considering the potential constructiveness of a particular criticism” (86).

Detloff’s analysis points out the stultifying effects of a discursive generational rift. While I agree that tactics, style, and important issues seem to be concentrated among generational cohorts, accepting a notion of generational coherence in “third wave” feminism resembles a metonymic perception of second wave feminism constituted entirely of hegemonic second wavers. Just like

second wave feminism, “third wave” feminism is composed of a multitude of various constituents who may operate in similar sociopoliticocultural contexts but who ingest and are altered by and in turn alter these contexts in divergent ways.

This homogenization does not merely apply to the way some “third wave” feminists position themselves generationally. It also seems to be related to the discrepancy between “third wave” feminism prioritization of questioning and contradiction and the absence of an internal application of these tenets to “third wave” feminism as a discourse. Many “third wave” feminists contend that their lives are living examples of contradiction. Sometimes the issue of contradiction is used to explain the lack of definition of “third wave.” However, rarely is this example extended to suggest that “third wave” feminism, as a discourse, is also riddled with contradiction. The inevitability of contradiction does not impede the on-going campaign to rid feminism of exclusion, however, and “third wave” feminism must not excuse its contradictory tenets of exclusionary inclusivity. As I have established, positing “third wave” feminism as innovative and immunized against exclusion detracts from a recognition of continuity with second wave feminism.

A focus on generational rhetoric is one particularly clear manifestation of the oppositional discourse surrounding “third wave” feminism. Self-conscious “third wave” feminist distancing from second wave feminism deters an examination of the persistence of hegemonic feminism. Combined with widespread popular understandings of “third wave” feminism as youth feminism, “third wave” distancing from second wave feminism is frequently explained as generationally motivated.<sup>16</sup> Though most self-proclaimed “third wave” feminists belong to the generation following that of second wave feminists, the simplistic conflation of generation and ideology that I discuss above limits a fuller understanding of ideological

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<sup>16</sup> See Hogeland.



motivations for declaring a “third wave” of feminism. The prevalence of generational explanations of “third wave” feminism can camouflage the important political issue of addressing exclusion within feminism. Lisa Hogeland argues that “the rhetoric of generational differences in feminism works to mask real political differences—fundamental differences in our visions of feminism’s tasks and accomplishments” (107). The political project of recognizing past feminist exclusion is a difficult process, especially for second wave women who practiced exclusionary feminism, some of whom maintain positions as prominent feminists.

More popular declarations of a “third wave” of feminism are rife with ageism and seek to convince second wave feminist leaders to “pass the torch” to younger, more vibrant, and more in touch “third wave” feminists. Some motivations for declaring a “third wave” of feminism are more complex than a straightforward generational understanding. The assertion of “third wave” feminism that I focus on in this paper is more than a generational contestation. Interpreting “third wave” critiques largely as a part of a generational “rite of passage” mollifies the subversiveness of the project.

The alleged absence of an active intergenerational dialogue and presence of a deep generational rift between second wave and “third wave” feminists is often suggested as an effect of and reason for failed transmission of knowledge between second wave and “third wave” feminists. Although I disagree that such a clear-cut rift exists, I do not doubt that many feminists who subscribe to generationally-bound constructions unnecessarily perceive it as real owing to miscommunication. In these arguments, the persistence of generational divisions is yet another obstacle to effective cooperation that prevents feminists of different ages from engaging in dialogue and sharing criticism and wisdom as Hogeland suggests. This obstacle is highlighted by the construction of a familial metaphor in which “third wave” feminists are viewed as

rebellious daughters who view their second wave mothers as naïve and ineffective. Detloff identifies a particular burden for “third wave” feminists in this construction: “if third wave criticisms are tantamount to matricide, this generation bears a tremendous burden—that of ensuring that its criticisms, its expression of its own needs, do not ‘kill’ the feminist movement that the second wave worked so hard to advance” (86-87). I think Detloff introduces a particular limitation of the familial metaphor that invokes “third wave” resistance in this statement though she does not identify it explicitly. If “third wave” feminists who accept a metonymic view of second wave feminists as white, middle-class and heterosexual are considered to be the daughters of second wave feminists, it is a likely implication that “third wave” feminists are also white and middle-class. I explore how realistic this implication is in later sections. This problematizes “third wave” claims of diversity and, as a result, hinders desire for cross-generational dialogue.

Cathryn Bailey argues that cross-generational dialogue is crucial to the prospects of feminism and a lack of dialogue must be taken seriously and viewed in the context of the current pervasiveness of backlash that encourages us to disavow the importance of previous feminist movement. The situation is complicated, as Detloff explains, because feminists invested in second wave feminism often tend “to conflate third wave criticisms with conservative backlash or false consciousness” (78). Intergenerational collaboration and dialogue might help correct some of these misperceptions.

Positing “third wave” feminism as innovative and immunized against exclusion detracts from recognition of continuity with second wave feminism. When this distance is coupled with “third wave” notions that “third wave” feminists have attained what second wave feminists could not, it is often experienced by both as a rejection of second wave feminism. Deborah Siegel

explains that, "When third wave writers construct the second wave as a straw (or bad) mother, in the interest of asserting their difference (or independence), second wave women are bound to experience the third wave's irreverence as an insult and to understand their challenge as wrongful condemnation" (63). While "third wave" opposition to second wave feminism unfairly chastises some second wave feminists, second wave feminists must recognize the importance of the "third wave" project.

A "third wave" agenda to engineer inclusive contemporary feminist movement would include a thorough self-assessment of the success of their effort through an examination of persisting exclusionary forces. At the very least, in order to fulfill their basic claim to be a corrective force to exclusionary practices of the "past," "third wave" feminists must pay attention to exclusion that mirrors hegemonic second wave feminism. Yet somewhere between ambitious declaration of an inclusive feminist project and its deployment, a focus on self-assessment is replaced by self-confidence that "third wave" feminism is inclusive, at the expense of this examination. A closer analysis reveals that "third wave" feminism claims to be more inclusive than it actually is, and that the lack of a widespread "third wave" feminist self-examination perpetuates this complacency and misperception.

Situating "third wave" feminism as oppositional to a hegemonic second wave hinders recognition of persisting inequalities within "third wave" feminism. "Third wave" feminists must consider whether claims of inclusivity and prioritization of multivocality result in a truly inclusive "third wave." "Third wave" feminism claims to acknowledge the multiplicity of oppression that women face, including the concerns of women who have historically felt excluded from feminism. Yet in assuming this endeavor, "third wave" feminism has to encounter a deep history of exclusion.



Kimberly Springer examines the relevance of “third wave” feminism to Black women, a group of women historically marginalized by feminism, in asking, is there a “Third wave Black Feminism?” The consideration of a “third wave” of Black feminism complicates assertions that “third wave” feminism includes all women, suspecting instead that “third wave” feminism does not address concerns specific to Black women, and I would add, other groups of marginalized women. Although I do not think a “third wave” of feminism could or should strive to replace various feminisms, such as Black feminism, Springer’s question is one example of the importance of considering how a “normative” “third wave” feminism falls short of the inclusivity it claims.

Springer suggests yet another reason that, in emphasizing an oppositional stance toward second wave feminism, “third wave” feminism alienates and excludes specific groups of women. She explains that, “there are still young Black women continuing feminist analyses of Black life, but they are not necessarily claiming the label of *third wave*. Their reasons, however, are different than those of women who fear feminism as an ideology” (Springer 1060). Springer concludes that many Black women emphasize generational continuity rather than the rift that many accounts purport exist between second wave and “third wave” feminism. This observation suggests an interesting possible assessment of “third wave” as ideologically motivated rather than generationally defined.

Some “third wave” authors cite their mothers’ involvement with second wave feminism as an incipient influence on their feminist consciousnesses. However, as I discuss in the earlier section about a perceived generational rift, I find a familial metaphor particularly problematic when discussing the inclusivity of “third wave” feminism. Many contributors to *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism* for instance, explain the alienation from their

mothers and other relatives they experienced when coming to terms with feminism in their lives. They explain the challenge of reconciling their own attachment to feminism with the example of their mothers who they perceive as practicing feminists although they frequently do not identify as feminists. Siobhan Brooks explains that her mother “did not relate to white feminism because the poverty of women like our mother was never an agenda for them” (101). Other contributors to *Colonize This!* struggle with a similar challenge of identifying with a movement from which their mothers felt alienated. Detloff suggests that “Culturally inflected familial relationships that differ from hegemonic white, middle-class domestic arrangements would produce different intergenerational dynamics” (79).

Dominant “third wave” women espouse ideas about multiple identities and oppression that strongly resemble earlier theories articulated by women of color, lesbians, and working class women. Interestingly and problematically, “third wave” feminism espouses an equal consideration of all women’s multiple identities, while these previous critiques posited marginalized women as central, situating the concerns of “dominant” women as peripheral. In this way, “third wave” feminism reframes earlier critiques without citing their origins, stresses the need for an actively inclusive feminism, and then inserts “dominant” women so they are centrally situated in these critical projects.

By withholding complete rejection of second wave feminism, third wave feminists could identify the similarities between their claims and those of earlier radical feminists, especially women of color as well as working class women and lesbians. The challenge posed to “third wave” feminists is to maintain an understanding of feminist movement as both continuous and dynamic, recognizing debts to earlier feminist struggles *and* refusing to abide exclusionary practices, while examining themselves for replication. A truly inclusive “third wave” feminism

would recognize the need for a corrective feminism that addresses persisting inequalities and accommodates internal and external criticism, without seeking redemption for earlier practices of exclusion or re-situating historically dominant feminists as central “third wave” feminists in appropriations of marginalized feminist theory. An informed, non-oppositional “third wave” feminism would recognize that there is still feminist work to be done, but that it must operate differently from hegemonic second wave feminism. It would acknowledge its foundations in its radical women predecessors whose critiques of hegemonic feminism during the second wave revolutionized feminism. The establishment of “third wave” feminism in a dialectical relationship to second wave feminism (many of whose participants still “practice” feminism) could address the need for dynamic feminist movement.

While it is important to challenge “third wave” claims of social inclusivity, it is just as important to exercise caution in accepting an ideologically homogeneous version of “third wave” feminism as representative of contemporary feminism. As with second wave feminism, a simplistic, metonymic understanding of “third wave” feminism cannot accurately represent the variety and dynamism of feminist movement at any time. Towards this effort, I explore the possibilities and limitations for a heterogeneous movement suggested by “third wave” tenets in chapter three.



### CHAPTER THREE

To counter this demon constituted by the homogeneity of white middle-class models of feminism, marginalized groups of women have created a new literary movement of multi-genre anthologies that enable them to announce their identities (individual and communal), participate in textual conversations and communities, and celebrate their differences (from white feminists and from one another) (Franklin 12).

The call to articulate one's own historical and intellectual particularity while understanding one's own situation within larger discourses also opens the space for women of different generations to experience affinities that do not depend on a boundary-dissolving sameness (Detloff 92).

In previous chapters I explored how and why "third wave" feminism defines itself as oppositional to second wave feminism and the consequences of oppositional discourse. In chapter one I examine how "third wave" entrance into the wave framework of feminist historiography deters historical excavation of marginalized feminist histories. In continuing the historiographic project of "waves" without adequately problematizing dominance inherent therein, declarations of a "third wave" of feminism perpetuate exclusionary practices while purporting to be inclusive. In chapter two I established that an oppositional definition of "third wave" feminism enacts exclusion by eclipsing "third wave" ideological continuity with earlier feminisms. Instead, "third wave" feminism is presented as emerging from a specific contemporary generation. The construction of "third wave" feminism as innovative ignores ideological predecessors and deters certain young feminists/women from identifying with "third wave" feminism. Thus, oppositional discourse surrounding second and "third wave" feminism detracts from recognition of exclusion within "third wave" feminism and stifles a potentially heterogeneous "third wave."

Continuing my assertion from chapter two that "third wave" inclusivity is a hasty and inaccurate claim, in chapter three I move toward an analysis of potential for a

heterogeneous “third wave” of feminism. The particular thread of “third wave” feminism I focus on in this project proclaims a commitment to an inclusive feminist movement unlike much of hegemonic second wave feminism. I maintain that prevailing dominant oppositional “third wave” discourse suppresses recognition of historical continuity with earlier critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism from marginalized women, and impedes “third wave” proclaimed inclusive feminist movement.

Starting from Cynthia Franklin’s innovative study on multi-genre anthologies and extending from Ednie Garrison’s chapter on anthologies as political projects, I assess multi-genre anthologizing as a device enabling alternatives to oppositional definitions of “third wave” feminism. Particular multi-genre anthologies, especially *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, are sometimes credited as influential to less generationally-defined “third wave” feminist claims, though the connection rarely gets much attention. If considered in the historical context of groundbreaking anthologies that offer an array of voices and de-center authoritative knowledge, these “third wave” anthologies suggest one possibility for highlighting continuity of feminist methods if not movement. To this extent, I explore two recent anthologies that I argue break down oppositional conceptions of “third wave” feminism by prioritizing ideological concerns over generational membership. *Colonize This! Young Women on Today’s Feminism* edited by Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (2002), and *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms* edited by Allyson Mitchell, Lisa Bryn Rundle, and Lara Karaian (2001) offer alternatives to generational-definitions of “third wave” feminism. In different yet related ways, these collections enable readers to identify ideological continuity between “third wave” feminism and earlier movement. These



anthologies respond to stable and over-confident definitions of “third wave” feminism and the oversimplification and erasure such assertions entail, successfully challenging oppositional constructions of “third wave” feminism.

*Could “third wave” feminism be heterogeneous?*

Some varieties of “third wave” feminism critique the unitary category “woman” that is fundamental to many hegemonic second wave feminists and that supposedly reflects the homogeneity of all second wave feminist movement. By extension, “third wave” feminists suggest that deconstructing the category “woman” and destabilizing essentialized identities reflects a heterogeneous “third wave” feminist movement. Though motivated by good intentions, many “third wave” feminists oversimplify the actions needed to overcome exclusion within feminist movement. In this case while “third wave” critiques of second wave feminism as exclusionary are important, they also erase marginalized women’s participation in feminist movement unless they are supplemented with a thorough account of women’s resistance to hegemonic second wave feminism. As I have attempted to illuminate in this project, “third wave” insistence on its own inclusivity hinders recognition of persistent exclusion. I associate the lack of inclusive contemporary feminist movement with the oppositional discourse that permeates definitions of “third wave” feminism. Positing “third wave” feminism as the opposite of hegemonic second wave feminism detracts from identification of historical continuity by eclipsing the efforts of marginalized women. Rather than owning exclusionary practices of second wave feminism and making corrective measures to create a more inclusive movement, most “third wave” feminists instead focus on distancing themselves from second wave exclusion. The distance claim thus operates as



an assertion of immunity to exclusionary practices. “Third wave” maneuvers to disown second wave feminism conceptually allow “third wave” feminists to disassociate themselves despite complicity in exclusion. Deterred by the fact of persistent exclusion and a fear that current and historical inclusivity is conceptually impossible within this construction, many women thus do not embrace “third wave” identity. As a result, rather than a heterogeneous, inclusive cohort of “third wave” feminists, “third wave” feminism tends to be dominated by women with identities similar to hegemonic second wave feminists, an idea I more thoroughly explored in chapter two.

Evidence of “third wave” exclusivity is found in the continual exclusion of earlier generations of women of color, lesbians and working-class women from “third wave” texts. Generational definitions of “third wave” feminism cut off ties to earlier efforts to expand unitary conceptions of “woman” by these groups of women. Although a generational focus threatens to eclipse the issue of diversity among many popular forms of “third wave” feminism, other “third wave” feminists challenge this attention. Ideologically-based conceptions of “third wave” feminism, for example, often still link efforts to expand the category “woman” to the current generation of young women. By focusing on ideology, however, they resist a strictly generational definition and potentially allow for more recognition of historical continuity. Recognizing the inadequacy of oppositional discourse to represent the complexity of “third wave” feminism, I insist that a “third wave” feminism which resists generational opposition and foregrounds historical ideological continuity could serve as a potential starting point for a discussion and enactment of inclusivity. Garrison seems similarly hopeful at the prospects of an inclusive contemporary feminist movement: “We now have more and

more feminists, who would and could very easily lay claim to the hegemonic model of feminism, working to resist these tendencies as insufficiently feminist strategies" (The Third Wave 141-142). The issues of diversity and inclusivity maintain a prominent, albeit tenuous position on "third wave" feminist agendas, suggesting a possibility for change. Ultimately, "third wave" attention to embracing contradiction, questioning, and informed dialogue—concerns that are characteristic of earlier feminist movement—paves the way for a heterogeneous movement.

*Strategy of multi-genre anthologies*

Multi-genre anthologies frequently represent successful coalition building of women across various identities. According to Franklin, these collections theorize and enact communities across ideological borders, breaking down borders between academia and "the real world" (5). Garrison similarly views anthologizing as a mode that can generate collectivity, even in circumstances where coalition seems improbable: "In some ways they're better collectivities than 'real' human collectivities because they can maintain unity in a way humans cannot. Anthologies are moments of coalition captured as objects we can hold in our hands long after the coalition has dissolved—and sometimes in spite of the inability of the material coalition to actually cohere" (The Third Wave 138). Successful anthologies can bind together heterogeneous perspectives through a particular identity or issue without erasing individual voices.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike "canonical" anthologies that purport to offer an authoritative and complete representation of a particular issue or field of literature, multi-genre anthologies counter the idea that one person or small group holds all necessary knowledge of a subject (The

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Gallop describes a kind of collectivity similar to that which takes place with the creation of multi-genre anthologies as "...a new kind of being in which...individuals are neither totally merged nor totally separate" (48). This reference from an issue of *Yale French Studies* is also cited in Franklin (11).

Third Wave 95-96). Of course, editors of a multi-genre anthology exert considerable influence in the determining the direction of the collection in terms of how they construct and disseminate a call for submissions, which contributors/contributions they select, and how they frame and organize the anthology. However, these anthologies do not offer complete, definitive interpretations, but instead offer readers a considerable amount of information to explore and from which they can generate further questions. Franklin suggests, "rather than proclaim their self-sufficiency and completeness, as canonical anthologies do, these anthologies mark their incompleteness, and they call attention to and detail the process of their making" (9). Multi-genre anthologies offer a process of coalition building, education, and further inquiry to replace rigid standards of "official" knowledge.

As processual objects positioned "...directly against white middle-class models of community based on women's sameness," multi-genre anthologies are grounded in a focus on "difference" (Franklin 11). The obvious link between multi-genre anthologies and the particular thread of "third wave" feminism that attempts to replace feminist focus on sameness with difference, suggests that anthologies could be an effective mechanism to explore a heterogeneous "third wave" feminism. A multi-genre anthology format could represent coalition among seemingly disparate groups of women within a "third wave" of feminism.

Several anthologies identified as "third wave" have been published, two of which receive considerable attention in academic sources: Barbara Findlen's *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation* (1995, 2001) and Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995). These anthologies are not



directed at a primarily academic audience, nor are they multi-genre. They present a wide range of voices from women with various identities and work to forge a community of “young” feminists responding to their own experiences. While women of color, working class women, and lesbians, in particular responded and expanded the narrow scope of hegemonic second wave feminism through anthologies in previous decades, “third wave” feminists claim to offer a fundamentally new form of feminism through theirs. A declared similarity between multi-genre anthology projects during 1980s and those “third wave” projects beginning in the 1990s is “innovation.” However, as I asserted earlier, “third wave” claims of innovation are unfounded, and in the area of anthologizing, “third wave” feminists explicitly borrow directly from earlier methods. Garrison discusses contemporary anthologies as a node of historical continuity with earlier feminist efforts; since the 1960s and 1970s anthologies have occupied a central role in knowledge production (*The Third Wave* 93).

Unlike earlier anthologies by women of color, however, these women share a general identity as “young.” This commonality is foregrounded as a point for coalition amidst attempts to embrace “difference.” Despite repetition of themes established in earlier multi-genre anthologies, such as multi-vocality and contradiction, these texts are heralded as innovative presentations of “new” voices. What is actually new about these anthologies in comparison to earlier, multi-genre anthologies, is the addition of dominant women’s voices and a limited focus on one contemporary generation. Though these two anthologies purport to be representative of a wide range of as many different women’s voices as possible, they actually discuss difference less than earlier texts. By highlighting generation as a point of unity, these anthologies often enact oppositional conceptions of

“third wave” feminism that again eclipse the importance of earlier multi-genre anthologies.

I suggest that a more accurate similarity between “third wave” anthologies and earlier multi-genre anthologies is that both resist dominant discourses regarding feminism. During the 1960s and 1970s, dominant feminist groups and mainstream media frequently communicated only the concerns of white, middle-class, heterosexual women as feminist concerns, ignoring other women’s concerns. Women marginalized by this focus responded partly through the creation of anthologies, especially during the 1980s with collections such as *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, *Making Face, Making Soul/ Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, and *This Bridge Called My Back*. Franklin explains that these anthologies “...position themselves directly against white middle-class models of community based on women’s sameness” (11). Currently, “third wave” feminists similarly purport to respond to and resist models of “women’s sameness.” However, “third wave” generational spin promotes a false sense of innovation. Furthermore, though earlier women marginalized by hegemonic second wave feminism often invoked an oppositional relationship to hegemonic feminism/feminists, this opposition did not silence other women. “Third wave” feminism’s notion of a monolithic second wave of hegemonic feminists erases the presence of marginalized women’s efforts.

Rather than stressing innovation, “third wave” anthologies must recognize the formative influence of multi-genre anthology predecessors in order to prevent erasure. Garrison even explicitly identifies a causal relationship between anthologizing and “third wave” feminism: “the anthology form combined with this mode of discursive practice

makes possible Third Wave feminism (The Third Wave 139-140). As Garrison suggests, “third wave” feminism comes directly from this earlier mode of anthologizing, and fundamentally depends on this format to represent its multiplicity; this claim is reflected in the proliferation of anthologies and simultaneous dearth of monographs pertaining to “young” feminists/women. Like contributions to multi-genre anthologies before them, “third wave” writings are, as the editor of *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* points out, “autobiographical and experiential, giving the insiders’ ‘view from the heart,’ a glimpse of the social preoccupation and problems facing this ‘next generation’ of feminists,” qualities they share with earlier works such as *Home Girls*, *Making Face, Making Soul*, and *This Bridge Called My Back* (Heywood 2).

Unfortunately, “third wave” writings “often do not mention where these contradictions have been most powerfully voiced” and deprive earlier feminists of much due credit. They also potentially miss out on useful information about feminist movement and thus reinvent what has already been done, wasting time and energy (Heywood 8). I argue that as concrete examples of ideological continuity across generations, multi-genre anthologies represent one effort toward resisting a narrowly defined conception of an oppositional “third wave” of feminism.

#### *Ideological Continuity: a textual analysis of Colonize This! and Turbo Chicks*

Towards this effort of establishing ideological continuity through anthologies, I offer two more recent anthologies, *Turbo Chicks* edited by Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian and *Colonize This!* edited by Hernández and Rehman as examples of “third wave” potential for recognizing continuity. By extension these projects should be seen as motivating heterogeneity within “third wave” feminism. Similar to earlier “third wave”



anthologies, both of these collections present a heterogeneous pool of contributors and essays. But the factor that distinguishes these anthologies from *Listen Up* or *To Be Real* is that they go beyond including a diverse array of contributors. Unlike other “third wave” anthologies, *Colonize This!* and *Turbo Chicks* resist oppositional definitions of “third wave” feminism by focusing less on generational identity than on definitive ideological characteristics of “third wave” feminism. These ideological characteristics include multivocality, contradiction, and questioning and engaged dialogue. The focus on ideology facilitates the project of establishing “third wave” feminism as historically continuous.

Both anthologies address “young” feminisms/women, although *Colonize This!* also offers “women of color” as a point of the contributors’ convergence, while *Turbo Chicks* simply offers “young feminisms.” Neither collection boasts a majority of self-identified “third wave” feminists, though the vast majority of contributors are “young.” *Colonize This!* resists oppositional generational definitions by establishing the continuity between young women and their mothers, as I discussed below. *Turbo Chicks* similarly refuses to embrace opposition in accepting ambiguous definitions of young and old: “We don’t want to get too specific about what our definitions are about young and old because the more specific you get, the more you start to exclude” (Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian 17). By resisting conflation of “young” and “third wave,” these anthologies complicate a generational definition of “third wave” feminism. The presence of dissention regarding “third wave” identity in these collections represents that which exists within contemporary feminist movement, many adherents who do not identify as “third wave” feminists. By acknowledging a wide constituency, these collections recognize the

limitations of “third wave” discourse while expanding understandings of “third wave” feminism. Both collections challenge and problematize narrow, potentially monolithic generational understandings of “young feminism.” The refusal of both collections to offer a definitive or totalizing interpretation of “third wave” feminism foregrounds the contentiousness of the claim of a “third wave.” By accepting ambiguous definitions rather than distancing themselves from an imagined “other” or previous time in which feminist movement was exclusionary, these anthologies allow more room to recognize persistent exclusion within “third wave” feminism.

I offer a brief textual analysis of both collections by examining the theme of contradiction of identity. Recognizing that feminists can oppress others even in working to end oppression is a concern that appears in earlier feminism and both anthologies. *Colonize This!* and *Turbo Chicks* address contradiction of identity in different ways. *Colonize This!* explores the persisting exclusion within purportedly inclusive feminism, often citing and echoing the claims of historical predecessors. For example, Rebecca Hurdis notes her realization that many feminists discussed “...Black feminism or women of color feminism, but merely as another mark on their feminist timeline. Little time was dedicated to really examining the intersection of race and gender” (284). *Turbo Chicks* also identifies the importance of accepting contradiction in order to lessen exclusion within “third wave” feminism. The editors introduce the collection as a necessarily messy attempt to figure out how to talk about identities, representation, and voice: “In the following, pages, then, you will see us struggling with the issues, not smoothing them out neatly” (Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian 12). In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga and others emphasized the importance of contradiction in 1981 and credited its

theorization to the previous decade. Identifying links that reveal historical continuity of ideology such as this roots “third wave” feminist potential to revolutionize contemporary feminism in radical predecessors.

A notion of continuity with earlier struggles of women of color feminists is evident in *Colonize This!* The editors envision the book as “a way to continue the conversations among young women of color found in earlier books like *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Making Face, Making Soul*” (xxi). While the editors identify ideological continuities, many contributors to *Colonize This!* identify the falsity of purported generational rifts by closely relating to their mothers as formative influences on their particular forms of feminism. In her foreword Moraga praises this connection of daughters who see their mothers as “models of resistance from whom their daughters, through fierce loyalty to them, wield weapons of theory and practice” (xii). Rehman and Hernández state that, “As young women of color, we have both a different and similar relationship to feminism as the women in our mothers’ generation,” debunking the universality of popular “third wave” claims of that “young” women relate to feminism in fundamentally differently ways from women of the previous generation (xxiv). Moraga describes the contributors as those “who have read and been schooled by the feminist writings and works of the women of color who preceded them, and as such are free to ask questions of feminism more deeply than we could have imagined twenty years ago” (xi). Though most of the contributors to *Colonize This!* learned about “feminism” in women’s studies classes during college in the 1990s, and thus represent a specific strata of highly educated women of color, the vast majority of essays recount these women’s discoveries



of radical writings by women of color of the early and mid-1980s—those critiques which form part of the basis of “third wave” claims.

Many essays criticize the continued domination of feminism and women’s studies by the concerns of white women. Most of these women of color remember the classroom in which they learned about feminism as a bittersweet experience at best. Many contributors express discontent with the curriculum and white students’ refusal to fully address racism that persists in feminism, white students’ insistence on separating gender from race, and white women’s “need” to understand things in their own terms. The pressure these contributors identify to isolate one identity contradicts most of what is written about “third wave” feminism. Throughout the collection, a sense of profound disappointment in “white feminism” is evident. This focus reveals persistent exclusion within “third wave” feminism and the similarity of these women’s experiences to women of color in the generation prior. In her essay “Heartbroken: Women of Color Feminism and the Third Wave,” Hurdis calls out Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* for presenting only token references to women of color feminism, suggesting it is “a different kind of feminism” (287). She explains:

I found it astounding that there is no extensive discussion of women of color feminism...It is as if [white feminists’] work is the master narrative of feminism, with women of color feminism as an appendage. I had hoped that they would have considered such books as *This Bridge Called My Back* and Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* as groundbreaking, as they are deemed by most generation X women of color. These books were life-changing to me not only because their critiques have historical value, but also because what these writers were saying in the 1980s was still relevant in the 1990s (Hurdis 286-287).

Hurdis’ analysis of *Manifesta* reveals persistent exclusion within “third wave” feminism, evident through the continued centrality of privileged women such as Baumgardner and

Richards, whose operations mirror hegemonic second wave practices. Hurdís suggests that, most revealingly, *Manifesta* illuminates the importance of historical continuity through “a lineage for women of color feminism,” a claim many other contributors communicate in various ways by highlighting the importance of texts of women of color in previous generations (287).

Many contributors to *Colonize This!* express the importance of contradiction in understanding and coming to terms with their identification with feminism. Many contributors discovered and were intrigued by feminism, finding something to identify with in its analyses. However, as women of color, they frequently felt unable to fully identify with what they experienced as a prioritization of gender above race. Cristina Tzintzún found support in feminist literature which she could identify with but which ignored her experience as a Latina. Finding a version of women of color feminism that acknowledges multiple identities rather than encouraging isolation of identity as “woman” often helps women of color locate themselves within feminism. Contributors to *Colonize This!* also discuss white women’s resistance, in particular, to embracing a notion of themselves as potential oppressors. In a related experience with silencing, Siobhan Brooks recalls the white women who dominated her women’s studies classes: “...they could not see that while their participation could be personally liberating, it could be silencing for women of color (and the few men of color), who because of race and gender often did not feel entitled to speak” (110). These critiques strongly resonate with earlier claims of women of color regarding notions of immunity among hegemonic feminists.

*Turbo Chicks* similarly destabilizes generational oppositionality by synthesizing an ideologically focused interpretation of “young feminisms.” Rather than insisting upon age as a starting point for contributors’ analyses, many essays that comprise the collection question and challenge the accuracy of a generationally-bound “third wave” of feminism. The above consideration is reflected in the inclusion of contributors with various generations and in essays that complicate generational understandings of contemporary feminist movement.

*Turbo Chicks* communicates heterogeneity within “third wave” feminism in a markedly different way than *Colonize This!* However, both collections highlight familiarity with multiplicity, contradiction and uncertainty as a central aspect of “third wave” feminism. Unlike *Colonize This!* in which individual contributors directly problematize oppositional conceptions of contemporary feminism, *Turbo Chicks* more effectively addresses the notion of ideological continuity if the volume is considered, as Garrison suggests, in its entirety as a political project. In the introduction to *Turbo Chicks*, the editors assert that questioning is one central method of “third wave” practice and maintain that “...questioning is the way to informed decisions” (11). According to the editors, because “...questioning requires an ongoing conversation” (12) it thus does not allow static understandings of feminism. I interpret the editors’ call for discussion as a particularly relevant issue between second and “third wave” feminists. This attention reflects a broader trend of destabilizing “truths” and placing increased importance on individual voices in “third wave” feminism.

*Turbo Chicks* upsets what Deborah Siegel describes as “an ideal of collectivity” or “the dream of a common language” that permeated hegemonic second wave feminist



thought by uprooting identities and understandings which seem potentially stable in pursuit of fuller understandings of the mechanisms of oppression (59). Indeed, theory in the “third wave,” as Suzanne Luhmann articulately indicates, upsets existing (current and previous) notions of coherence and stability:

Second-wave feminism appealed to me in its display of self-certainty and self-confidence, a position that it could arrive at by understanding itself entirely as outside the oppressive patriarchy that it opposed. By comparison, the work I read today does not afford me such a comfortable position. Instead, this work unsettles me by demanding radical self-questioning. The work destabilizes earlier truth claims and pushes up against limits, ignorance and refusal—not only in mainstream thought but also in feminist thought. To call myself a feminist no longer affords me the safety of being ‘innocent,’ but asks me instead to consider how I too am implicated in the histories and present states of inequalities (36).

Luhmann notes the ability of “third wave” feminism to facilitate acceptance of oneself as both oppressed and oppressor, a claim that resonates with previous critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism (Garrison). Additionally, Luhmann explicitly locates herself as a member of a “sandwich” or “in-between-generation,” a claim that remains within a generational framework in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of such a model, reflected in her assertion that “there is no generational unity” (37). Luhmann and others contributors do not cite specific multi-genre texts as formative historical predecessors, a strength of *Colonize This!* that is missing from *Turbo Chicks*,<sup>18</sup> but they do resist generationally-bound explanations of “third wave” feminism.

By embracing contradiction, these anthologies make a historical connection conceptually possible. By challenging the accuracy of narrow definitions of who associates with “third wave” feminism, *Colonize This!* and *Turbo Chicks* also work toward establishing a more heterogeneous conception of contemporary feminism. While “third wave” feminism plays a significant part in the contemporary movement, these

<sup>18</sup> One exception to this statement is Carmela Murdocca’s essay in *Turbo Chicks* entitled “Her HOME/S.ca: Feminist Post-ings On-line” which cites *This Bridge Called My Back* as a formative influence.

collections clarify that an inclusive “third wave” must contextualize itself within other contemporary “feminisms,” an endeavor I set out to address in chapter four.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave (Walker 218).

... 'postfeminist' most often describes 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 (Siegel 75).

Given that conservative pundits and some representatives of the mainstream American press have prematurely pronounced ours a "postfeminist" era, the need to continue to make feminist history—and to establish affinities within and between waves along the way—becomes increasingly urgent (Siegel 58).

I began chapter one with an epigraph from Deborah Siegel identifying feminist historiography as a necessary site for interrogating power. In that chapter I explored how declaring a "third wave" of feminism must be assessed in terms of the historical dominance of particular forms of feminist movement. In setting out to understand the limitations of oppositional discourse surrounding "third wave" feminism, I explored persistent exclusionary practices within "third wave" feminism and the reluctance of some women to embrace this label. I analyzed how "third wave" entrance into historiography often eclipses historical predecessors.

In earlier chapters I do not, however, contextualize "third wave" feminism among other forms of contemporary feminism. This is important, particularly for my assertion that "third wave" feminism is not synonymous with "young" feminism. In this chapter I extend Siegel's call to analyze hegemony in historiographic claims to the interaction between two forms of contemporary feminisms, namely "third wave" feminism and postfeminism. Manifestations of dominance, ownership, and redemption inform the exchanges among various contingents of young(er) feminists, similar to the interaction of second wave and "third wave" ideas and feminists. So far, "third wave" and



postfeminism have emerged as the most vocal and identifiable forms in discussions of contemporary feminism.

In this chapter I attempt to decipher the limitations of oppositional discourse involving the relationship between “third wave” feminism and postfeminism. I suggest that the co-existence of postfeminists and “third wave” feminists within one generation complicates assertions that this generation is either a “third wave” or a postfeminist generation. Instead, the landscape is complex, suggesting the inadequacy of a totalizing interpretation that an oppositional conception necessitates. As with “third wave” opposition to second wave feminism, oppositional understandings of postfeminism emphasize supposed inclusivity of “third wave” feminism by highlighting the exclusionary tactics of postfeminism. If “third wave” feminists replaced generational definitions with articulations of ideology, they could strategically emphasize the differences between “third wave” feminism and postfeminism. Meanwhile, they could also acknowledge the shared concerns stemming from the co-existence of postfeminists and “third wave” feminists within a similar cultural context with the differently experienced threat of media homogenization. In chapter four I continue my assertion from chapter three that recognition of ideological distinctions is most important in claiming an inclusive “third wave” of feminism. In this chapter, however, I want also to highlight that a dialectical examination of the similarities and differences between “third wave” feminists and postfeminists would also enable a more inclusive “third wave.”

In a cultural context of backlash and general hostility to feminism, the issue of whether to engage or disregard challenges to feminism is a particularly imperative issue for “third wave” feminism. I propose replacing oppositional relationships with dialectical

interaction among co-existing discourses pertaining to contemporary feminism. This dialogue would respond to less popular, but nonetheless pervasive ideas within discussions of “third wave” feminism that conflate age and feminist identity. “Third wave” feminists’ engagement with postfeminists would assist the formation of what Ann Brooks terms a “confident body of theory” in feminist discourse (1). “Third wave” response to postfeminism could increase the terms of conversation and reveal an intergenerational complexity that destabilizes popular conflations of generation and politics and could offer instead an introduction to an ideologically defined “third wave.” I locate my call to action for “third wave” feminists to engage other forms of contemporary feminism within the larger project of working towards a fully conversant inter-generational feminist movement.

First appearing in a *Ms.* column in 1992, Rebecca Walker’s statement, “I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave,” identifies the necessity of re-asserting the continued importance of feminism in a hostile cultural context (218). Walker’s declaration highlights the historical specificity of the emergence of “third wave” feminism in response to the prevalence of postfeminism and specific events, particularly the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings (1991). Other authors also cite the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials (two years following the court hearings) and the Rodney King beating as influential historical events necessitating an assertion of “third wave” feminism. The importance of these events in shaping a declaration of a “third wave” of feminism emphasizes the temporality but also historical continuity of the claim. While Walker’s claim is directly motivated by the immediate context of current events, she identifies a consistent need for feminism to address persisting inequalities.

Walker's assertion is widely touted as an influential statement of "third wave" feminism and clarifies a loose agenda for feminist movement in response to popularly appealing postfeminist assertions that feminism has run its course and is no longer needed.

A declaration of a "third wave" of feminism takes on particular importance as a strategic maneuver in relation to declarations of postfeminism. The term "postfeminism" has many different meanings. For the purposes of this chapter, I invoke Judith Stacey's definition of postfeminism as "the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism" (Orr 34). Specifically, postfeminism sets itself against a narrow, limited understanding of feminism in the second wave rather than considering the wide variety of feminisms that exist (Nurka 184-185).

An understanding of postfeminism as necessarily reactionary to the continuation of second wave feminism is particularly important. Postfeminists accept an unproblematic category "women" and thereby "deny differences among women" (Orr 36). Postfeminism thus embodies many limitations of hegemonic second wave feminism. By asserting that feminism is no longer necessary because "women" have achieved equality, they suggest a frightening return to those days when exclusionary notions of oppression ran even more rampant than within contemporary feminist discourse. Postfeminists maintain that women as a group are no longer oppressed, and women must now make personal choices to reinforce already enacted societal changes. They criticize those who remind them of their oppression and the interlocking nature of oppression that affects all women, accusing them of creating and maintaining a "victim mentality." They insist that feminists are the obstacles that remain between women and power, as feminists



frequently and unnecessarily label women as victims, depriving them of agency (Orr 34-35).

Importantly, these postfeminists have enough privilege from other dominant identities that they seek to gain power by refraining from calling attention to their marginalized status as women, thus appearing less problematic to men in power. Typically white, middle-class, heterosexual women, they do not experience or acknowledge the material conditions that oppress women in less privileged positions: “they imagine that there is some pure outside where women can stand free of both gendered oppression and other forms of exploitation” (Orr 35). While third wave consciousness attempts to uphold the existence of contradiction as a central tenet, “Instead of navigating contradictions, these authors deny that feminism necessarily holds contradictions” (Orr 35).

Following Walker’s lead, many “third wave” feminists understandably highlight their distance from postfeminism. Walker blatantly establishes an oppositional relationship between postfeminism and “third wave” feminism: she is a “third wave” feminist, not a “postfeminism feminist.” Other theorists also suggest that “third wave” feminism emerges as a response to a postfeminism: “the ‘third wave, as I understand the term, is a response to what one might call the cultural dominance of ‘postfeminism’” (Siegel 52). At the same time, however, an assertion of “third wave” feminism that defies postfeminism sets up an oppositional relationship between postfeminism and “third wave” feminism similar to the oppositional relationship between “third wave” and second wave feminism. As I discussed in chapter two with regards to “third wave” and second wave feminism, an oppositional relationship between “third wave” feminism and

postfeminism deflects attention away from the persistence of exclusion in “third wave” feminism. While the “third wave” oppositional relationship with second wave feminism motivates the conception that exclusionary tactics are contained in the past, in the case of postfeminism, “third wave” feminism locates persistent exclusion within postfeminism, again exporting it to be contained elsewhere.

Identifying “third wave” feminism as a response to postfeminism does not necessarily rely on or invoke an oppositional relationship between second and “third wave” feminism. Whereas many conceptions of postfeminism suggest that feminism is over, “third wave” feminism asserts the need for continued feminist movement. However, I do not accept constructions that identify a reaction to postfeminism as *the* origin of “third wave” feminism because this erases foundations in earlier critiques of hegemonic feminism.

Some “third wave” feminists and postfeminists similarly seek distance from second wave but do not acknowledge the multiplicity of contemporary forms of feminism (Siegel 69). Oppositionality oversimplifies the multiplicity of contemporary feminisms. Additionally, “third wave” feminists and postfeminists constitute only a part of the contemporary scene; the multiplicity of terms such as “feminist dissenters” (Orr 34), “pod feminists” (Faludi), or “antifeminist feminists” (Craig 36), who adhere to what Ednie Garrison groups under “postfeminist feminism” (The Third Wave 142), complicates a dichotomous understanding of feminists and postfeminists. Insofar as feminists espouse ideology hostile to the continuation of an inclusive, revolutionary feminist movement, I consider them postfeminists. Postfeminism thus represents an unstable grouping that includes considerable ideological variability, as there is within the

heterogeneous grouping of “third wave” feminists. These women call themselves feminists although they disapprove of much contemporary feminism. In fact, some have constructed “public personas by appropriating the term ‘feminism’ to promote distinctly unfeminist agendas” (Craig 36).

While establishing static opposition between “third wave” feminism and postfeminism, Walker’s vague definition of both “third wave” and postfeminism leaves room for either generational or ideological definition of “third wave.” Frequently “third wave” feminists respond to allegations that young women are apathetic, postfeminists, and so on with a declaration that young women are part of a “third wave” of feminism. Like “third wave” feminism, however, postfeminism also frequently deploys a generational definition. “Third wave” feminists must challenge problematic representations of contemporary feminism by clarifying that “third wave” feminisms are distinct from postfeminisms.

The co-existence of postfeminism and “third wave” feminism within contemporary feminism reveals the inadequacy of generational definitions of “third wave” feminism. If “young” women identify as postfeminists *or* “third wave” feminists, the standard conflation of generation with “third wave” identification common in “third wave” writings is revealed to be inaccurate. Further, similar to certain articulations of “third wave” feminism, postfeminism provides concrete evidence of a problem with understanding “third wave” feminism as generational, revealing the inaccuracy of an oppositional relationship between “third wave” and second wave feminism.

Like “third wave” feminism, “postfeminism” supposedly acknowledges and responds to the changing cultural context surrounding feminist movement. Both



postfeminists and "third wave" feminists exist in a similar cultural context of media-saturation in which mass media has power to control the terms of discourse (Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein 1995). A focus on youth facilitates a conceptual blurring of postfeminists and "third wave" feminists. The terms "third wave" and postfeminist are very loosely defined in mass media, and are often perceived as interchangeable forms of "young feminism." Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake insist that this conflation of terms signifies an erasure of the importance of continued feminist movement: "In the perpetual battle of representation and definitional clout, the slippage from 'third wave feminism' to 'postfeminist' is important, because many of us working in the 'third wave' by no means define our feminism as an over-and-done feminist movement" (1). The version of "third wave" feminism most often dispersed through popular media is a compromised form in which "third wave" feminism is the call to arms for "young" feminists. This notion of "third wave" feminism as separated from critiques of race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of identity in favor of the prioritization of age seems less disruptive than claims for multivocality. Julie Craig suggests that as a result of this common conflation, "[postfeminists'] faux-feminist rhetoric makes it easy for media outlets to cover 'feminism' without ever offering actual feminist views and activism..." (90). In line with the interests of the monopolies controlling mass media, postfeminists and feminist dissenters are often presented as the current face of feminism through popular media. Heywood and Drake acknowledge that "conservative feminists...are regularly called upon as spokespersons for the 'next generation'" (Heywood and Drake 1). When "third wave" feminism is mentioned, "what appears to be feminist—third-wave, in particular—representations are, in fact, repackaged and commodified versions

of third-wave sensibilities that ultimately serve to reinforce a dominant, patriarchal discourse" (Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein 207). Not only does media coverage of contemporary feminism prioritize postfeminism, but it does so through co-opting and threatening to diminish the subversiveness of "third wave" feminism.

Earlier I discussed a postfeminism that dissolves feminism, but I do not adhere solely to a notion of postmodernism as hopelessly politically retrograde. Just as I suggest a progressive strand of "third wave" feminism, so am I willing to suggest the presence of a politically viable postmodernist contemporary feminism. However, this viable postmodernism is not evident in many versions of postfeminism that only offer a watered-down postmodernism which typically maintains one or two decontextualized postmodern tenets.

"Third wave" feminists should consider the strategic deployment of language in the case of postfeminism. Although "post" in popular conceptions of postfeminism signifies a temporal association, it also invokes postmodernism, particularly in more academic discourse. Many notions central to postmodernism, such as destabilizing authority, truth, and subjectivity seem to resonate in "third wave" feminism.<sup>19</sup> Garrison suggests that "third wave" feminism bears many similarities to postmodernism:

[An] indicator of the 'postmodern' nature of the Third Wave is its reliance on networking among different cohorts of women who compose a movement culture that is disparate, unlikely, multiple, polymorphous. These are cohorts who remain indebted to their predecessors but who are simultaneously irreverent. They all share an interest in exploring what it means to be 'women' in the United States and the world in the 1990s, as well as how to resist identification with the object 'Woman.' Unlike many white feminists in the early years of the Second wave who sought to create the resistant subject 'women,' in the Third Wave, this figure 'women' is rarely a unitary subject (The Third Wave 149).

<sup>19</sup> Garrison asserts, "This Third Wave is as much a product of 'postmodern cultural conditions' as it is a product of the First and Second Waves, or of women's studies, or the media backlash, or violence" (U.S. Feminism 149). Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein suggest that "one of [third wave's] core sensibilities is an allegiance to diversity and a multiplicity of perspectives—a postmodern movement, to be sure" (208)

Though Garrison insists on the importance of recognizing historical origins of “third wave” feminism in earlier critiques of hegemonic second wave feminism, out of context this quote provides an example of the dangers of “third wave” associations with postmodernism. I resist tendencies to conflate “third wave” and postmodern feminism, believing that much postmodernism does not acknowledge earlier theorizations by marginalized groups of the fragmentation of the subject. Many postmodernist (including feminist) texts emerged after revolutionary books that shattered unitary conceptions of the “subject” like *This Bridge Called My Back*, but do not acknowledge the similarities between these projects. “Third wave” origins in earlier critiques of the category “women” by marginalized women, as I have established throughout this project, are often unacknowledged in postmodern accounts of destabilized identities.

The more academic conception of “postfeminism”<sup>20</sup> explores “...whether feminism, as a term with explanatory power, can survive the differently inflected deconstructive critiques mounted by poststructuralist, postmodernist, or multicultural theorists” (Siegel 53). This academic postfeminism problematizes the term “feminism,” but is motivated by structural critiques involving the theoretical and cultural context of feminism, surpassing the typical postmodern hang-up about political agency at the individual level. For me, the more crucial question is whether appropriation of the term, especially by academics, will ever permeate a popular consciousness already attached to a specific conceptualization of postfeminism.

Considering postmodern conceptualizations of “third wave” feminism may offer an alternative to generational constructions. For instance, rather than referencing

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<sup>20</sup> See Brooks.



feminist generations or waves, postmodern theorist Marysia Zalewski distinguishes between postmodern and modern feminists, between which, she claims, exists a gulf. Aside from obvious limitations with her work—she does not discuss marginalized women’s efforts to deconstruct the category “women”—Zalewski’s efforts suggest an alternative to generational conceptions of ideological differences. Although there is often a chronological or developmental narrative within discussions of postmodernism and modernism, this tendency is less consistent than in generational constructions of feminism.

A closer analysis of the tendency of specific groups of women to eschew “feminist” labels is another way in which an analysis of postfeminism undermines a generational discourse of “third wave” feminism and postfeminism. Women traditionally excluded from feminist constructions of “women,” in particular women of color, eschew feminism for very different reasons than postfeminist women who think that feminism has already successfully served its purposes or who are afraid of being perceived as too “political.” Postfeminists, “feminist dissenters,” and women historically ignored by feminism typically express dissatisfaction with the prioritization of identity as “women.” But postfeminists and “feminist dissenters” insist that this focus reveals their weakness, while marginalized women suggest that feminism often acknowledges their identity as “women” at the expense of other identities and consequently prioritizes gender oppression over the multiplicity of oppressions they face.<sup>21</sup> In its preferred mode of homogenization and oversimplification, the mainstream media synthesizes these very different critiques into the conclusion that feminism is out of touch, and thus irrelevant to women today.

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<sup>21</sup> *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Home Girls* articulate this important point.

While many women who are traditionally marginalized by feminist movement remain weary of identifying as feminists, many women with postfeminist views strategically deploy the “feminist” label. This observation reveals that the label of feminism still signifies dominant subject position, an important realization for “third wave” feminists. Many dominant “feminist dissenters” have become conservative favorites, garnering funding and publicity (thus able to disseminate their ideas easily and widely) because they often mirror the derision of feminism that the right deploys. As Craig explains, “...these authors’ close ties to antifeminist organizations, combined with the potent selling power of all things controversial, have made them into media darlings—and given them access to the kind of publicity that writers with more, well, *feminist* feminist views rarely get” (Craig 37). If women who promote distinctly anti-feminist agendas call themselves feminists, we need to question the importance and viability of this label.

Indeed, questioning the meaning and usefulness of the label “feminist” has been a constant debate within feminism historically. Considering the continued importance of this question emphasizes a notion of historical continuity with such considerations. bell hooks, for instance claims that “Currently feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The ‘anything goes’ approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless” (hooks 25). Often postfeminists and “feminist dissenters” identify as feminists although they espouse anti-feminism. Their claims to be “feminists” seem motivated by the desire to embark on authoritative criticism of feminism that would be less destructive from non-feminists. This appropriation of the label “feminist” by postfeminists and “feminist dissenters” suggests that “third wave” feminists should



examine the utility of generally encouraging adoption of the label “feminist.”

Additionally, persistent beliefs that societal change requires populist support results in the internalization of a uniform counter hegemonic movement against patriarchy under one banner, “feminism.” The desire for success of feminism instills a competitive climate in which “non-feminists” are considered misguided or detrimental to change. This anxiety about feminist dissent creates pressure for as many constituents as possible to don the mantle “feminist.” But as Barbara Findlen reminds us, “...feminism is a movement for social change, not an organization doing a membership drive” (xiv). Indeed, in critiquing the women’s movement of the 1970s, one theorist comments that “simply increasing the number of women who identified with the Movement without attending to real political education and specific political goals and analyses was an insufficient, even misguided, strategy” (Hogeland 112). Contemporary feminism must similarly examine the strategic importance of “feminist” identification.

Unfortunately, a sense of solidarity motivated by the fragility of persisting feminist movement in a hostile sociopolitical context often stifles critique and dissent within feminism in favor of “feminist populism” (Jensen). Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, for example, advocate the importance of a unified “young” feminist movement in order to counter “right-wing” maneuvers: “Yes, all feminists deserve critique and debate, but save your political vitriol for the young babes who are right-wing and political” (258). The authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* realistically address the difficulty of sustaining feminist critique in a climate very hostile to feminism. It’s true that critique is difficult because feminism is so easily



misconstrued. Yet *Manifesta* tolerates an “anything goes” definition of feminism in refusing to challenge hostile “feminist” statements.

Craig argues that embracing all “feminists” except those who are “right wing and political” overlooks the real danger of “feminist dissenters.” Because “...the most basic tenets of feminism...are still not as widely accepted as they would need to be for these women’s contributions to not function as harmful,” she suggests the need to decipher and engage these strategies (90). Craig’s article “I Can’t Believe it’s Not Feminism” published in *Bitch Magazine* represents one such attempt to dissect some of these (anti) “feminist” arguments. Another example of an engagement with claims hostile to “third wave” feminism, and contemporary feminism more generally, is Siegel’s essay, “Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a ‘Postfeminist’ Moment” in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist Doing Feminism*. Though Siegel’s attempt recenters white women to a large extent by framing “third wave” and postfeminism in relation to the feminism of Steinem and similar contemporary postfeminists, her essay seriously addresses the threat of postfeminism. Because white feminists tend to dominate postfeminism, it may be difficult to avoid focusing on them when taking postfeminism seriously.

The issue of defining feminism permeates all feminist theory. The tension between resisting a strict definition of feminism as an identity and an amorphous “anything goes” conception is a quandary that I will not attempt to undertake here. However, in a context in which feminism is already constantly misrepresented and appropriated by mass media consumer markets, “third wave” feminists must consider whether they want to be defined on someone else’s terms. Michelle Jensen asks, “...why

should the broad spectrum of feminists be forced to define themselves negatively and homogeneously against a few shrill right-wingers?" (6).

By challenging a definition of feminism as what it is not, I do not mean to suggest that "third wave" feminists should establish a firm definition of feminism. As I established in the introduction, and as echoed by the editors of *Turbo Chicks*, firm definitions enact boundaries and necessarily exclude (Mitchell, Rundle, and Karaian 17). But the inapplicability of definitions must not hinder dialogue and constant revisioning and incorporation of various descriptions of "third wave" feminism. Indeed, most "third wave" feminisms claim to exercise inclusion and attentiveness to multiple identities/oppressions, a sort of ideological definition. That "third wave" feminism is undefinable must not mean that it is infinitely flexible, or as the authors of *Manifesta* suggest, definable only by hostile interests. As I suggest in this chapter, such an oppositional conception blurs attention to details of "third wave" feminism, including the need for discussions concerning persistent exclusion. Additionally, the persistence of postfeminism advises "third wave" feminists to exercise caution with language: use "third wave" to refer to specific manifestations of feminism that are clearly articulated ideologically. "Contemporary feminist movement" may refer to "third wave," various postfeminisms, second wave feminism, etc. Rather than arguing for a monolithic feminism in which all "feminists" are united in solidarity and perhaps even in common definition, I suggest that we resist closure of definition. A dynamic and multiplicitous movement, with no central core is less prone, after all, to dominance and ownership. First on this "third wave" agenda must be to "...dispense with the idea—itself an artifact of the backlash—that feminism needs warm bodies more than it needs theory or principles"

(Jensen 8). "Third wave" feminism should adhere to and monitor the actuality of ideological standards of inclusion.



## CONCLUSION

Feminists of different stripes must stop jockeying for control and ownership, must cease mistaking each other for the enemy, must begin to forge links with their feminist predecessors, if movement is to continue moving forward (Siegel 76).

Over the course of this project I have dabbled with, slept on, written about, and frustrated myself with what I consider major issues facing contemporary feminism. This paper represents my initial attempt to explain inconsistencies within “third wave” feminist discourse. I see this project as a case study of how one particular facet of contemporary feminism, “third wave” feminism, negotiates these dilemmas, none of which come with an easy solution. “Third wave” feminism initially piqued my interest because of its proclaimed “messiness”—I thought that perhaps it could be an example of how to address these issues that seem so complicated. A year and a half later I have more questions than answers, and I think that is the point. “Third wave” feminism—despite all of its exclusionary oversights—offers questioning and contradiction as viable options.

In the current political context of the U.S., it is increasingly difficult for feminists to stage even a meager counter-response to the increasingly well-funded and fundamental “radical” right. As a result, much contemporary feminism feels forced to adopt a populist strategy and enlist as many “warm bodies” as possible to increase the reach of feminist efforts for change. This endeavor pressures feminists to accept a clear-cut and consistent basic feminism that appeals to as many constituents as possible. Meanwhile, “third wave” feminism suggests that feminism cannot be boiled down to any concrete essence. Instead, feminism has to be fluid and adaptable to individual feminists: feminism is about allowing women choices.

I do not mean to suggest that “third wave” feminism has permeated social, or even feminist consciousness, however. Over the course of this research I recall many conversations with other young and not-so-young feminists who had never heard of “third wave” feminism. Most relied on familiarity with the notion of feminist waves as a reference point. This ignorance of “third wave” feminism questions the subversiveness of “third wave” invocation of the wave framework: understanding “third wave” declaration of a wave as a strategic maneuver requires knowledge of the strategy of this effort.

Throughout this project I have needed to step back and reflect on the implications of this paper. As a critique of a tenuous contemporary feminist movement, I have worried that my analysis will provide fodder for backlash forces. But then I would have an intense conversation about my project with a questioning feminist that turned into an intense discussion of the persistent exclusion within feminism that has deterred her from identifying with feminism. Or, I would discuss the misperception of an inclusive contemporary feminist movement with a woman who did not understand why or how exclusion persisted. In these instances, being able to make connections between the potential for contemporary feminism with earlier inclusive feminisms while suggesting that feminism is still exclusive sparked much-needed dialogue.

I intend this paper as a call to contemporary feminists, in particular “third wave” feminists, to reassess assumptions that “third wave” feminism is inclusive. While the prioritization of “diversity” suggests a hopeful turn for the better, away from hegemonic feminism, “third wave” feminists still have a long way to go if they are to enact a truly inclusive feminist movement. Basically, I agitate for the need of awareness of complex

histories of feminist movement as they inform contemporary feminism. I think many “third wave” feminists need a revisionist feminist education. A more explicit and fully developed historical excavation of the theorizing I identify as the origins of “third wave” feminism would serve as an important addition to this paper.

Other directions for future research stemming from this project include a closer examination of the role of consumerism in contemporary feminist discourse. Many theorists address the commodification of feminism in girl power, for instance, but rarely invoke a Marxist critique of this phenomenon. I also wonder whether “third wave” feminists’ indoctrination as “good” capitalists affects their attachment to the importance of individual determination of specific lifestyle consumer practices, i.e. wearing lipstick and shaving, or not. Additionally, the cultural specificity of discourse surrounding “third wave” feminism (generation-based experiences, for instance) suggests that “third wave” feminism is a U.S. or North American phenomenon. Where are the voices of third world women in other national contexts in “third wave” writings?

In conclusion, I identify some specific actions “third wave” feminists can take to strive toward an informed and engaged “third wave” feminism:

- *Challenge assumptions of the existence of generational cohorts and develop alternative conceptions.* Try to identify characteristics or perspectives shared by only “young” women. Develop alternatives to assumptions of generational unity. One example may be Ednie Garrison’s concept of “cultural geography” which she defines as “the material, political, social, ideological, and discursive landscapes that constitute the context-base, or environment of Third Wave feminism” (U.S. Feminism 141-142).



- *Declare an attachment to “third wave” feminism based on ideology, not generation.* This effort involves embracing some sort of definition of “third wave” feminism, an idea some “third wave” feminists who are attached to the idea of “third wave” as undefinable find abhorrent. An ideological definition of “third wave” challenges assertions of a generational rift and speaks to postfeminist claims.
- *Engage and challenge reading material.* Whether reading collections of “young” feminists’ personal narratives, feminist historiography, or an article about postfeminism and power feminists from the popular press, challenge exclusionary efforts. Too often, exclusion persists because we hesitate to criticize very subjective or objective accounts, doubting the grounds for, or utility of our critique. But not saying anything speaks just as loudly.
- *Embark on a project of historical excavation.* Read the texts cited in footnotes and passing remarks in “mainstream” texts. Consider why particular texts are marginalized in terms of the dialogue with hegemonic feminisms they imply. Identify where these texts are not cited but have clearly influenced theorizing. What accounts for their omission?
- *Consider whether an oppositional relationship is fundamental to the maintenance of a “third wave.”* If so, in plain terms, clearly delineate the reasons for this necessary opposition and any consequences that may result from this construction.

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