

RiDiNg the femINiSt WaVEs iN wITh the tHIRd?

by **Natasha Pinterics**

Cet article explore les caractéristiques de la 3e vague féministe et détermine les conflits, les tensions et les critiques entre la 3e et la 2e vague du féminisme et des féministes tout comme elle différencie la 3e vague féministe du post/anti-féminisme.

I set out to research third wave feminism with a fairly broad mandate; to discover and relay the theory and practice of third wave feminism, and the critiques made by and against third wave feminism. It proved to be an overwhelming task. Many argue that the third wave of feminism began in the 1990s with a new wave of anti-racist feminists who thoroughly deconstructed white mainstream feminism's maintenance of racist and classist oppression. Others maintain that the third wave of feminism is a generational phenomenon, comprised of generation Xers dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the rigidity of morals espoused by second wave feminism. Others still insist that the third wave of feminism is one and the same with the anti-feminist movement. I will argue that third wave feminism is an amalgamation of many different streams of theorizing—including that of women of colour and younger women disillusioned with what they perceive to make up the body of "second wave" feminism—in intrinsically different formulations than the theorizing coming from anti-feminists.

The Premises, Ideas and Influences that Inform Third Wave Feminism(s)

Underlying the theory espoused by many third wave feminist thinkers is the premise that the experiences leading women and men to feminism in the 1990s are significantly different than those that led previous generations to feminism. This is largely due to the fact that the second wave of feminist theory and actions have made way for significant gains in the lives of women, especially in North America (Alfonso). Indeed these gains have been great: we have seen white women's "place" go from the kitchen to the boardroom, we have seen the beginning of success with affirmative action, we have seen violence against women come to a place of being a recognized phenomenon in dominant discourse, and we have moved towards a place of greater acceptance of different sexualities, to name just a few. These changes have meant that young women have had greater freedoms than did our predecessors and have taken them, to some degree, for

granted. They have meant that many young women (myself included) were raised with the propensity to question what we were given as "truths," be they feminist, mainstream, or otherwise. It must also be noted that our

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generation, as with all generations, has been shaped by unparalleled historical circumstances and happenings. As Barbara Findlan notes:

We have been shaped by the unique events and circumstances of our time: AIDS, the erosion of reproductive rights, the materialism and cynicism of the Reagan and Bush [and Mulroney] years, the backlash against women, the erosion of civil rights, the skyrocketing divorce rate, the movement toward multiculturalism and greater global awareness, the emergence of the gay and lesbian rights movement, a greater overall awareness of sexuality—and of the feminist movement itself. (qtd. in Siegal 56)

Additionally, and perhaps because of the significant gains made by feminism, young women today experience sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism that is more underground, more insidious, and much more difficult to pinpoint than its previous incarnations.

Young women are questioning second wave feminist theory, and pushing the boundaries of who and what constitutes feminist community and defines feminist theorizing. What seems to have arisen through this questioning are new forms of feminist ideological frameworks. Within the body of third wave feminist thinking, there exists strains and influences of other feminist epistemologies, including standpoint theory, queer theory, postmodernist, poststructuralist feminist thought and anti-essentialism. According to Rebecca Walker:

We find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple posi-

tionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving. (xxxiii)

Much of third wave theorizing, particularly third wave anthologies, such as those collected and edited by Findlan and Walker, emphasize above all else the need for greater acceptance of complexities, ambiguities, and multiple locations, and highlight the dangers of reduction into dichotomous thinking: "Be it male/female, good/evil, or, that easy allegation of false consciousness which can so quickly and silently negate another's agency: evolved/unconscious" (Walker xxxv).

Many third wave thinkers have criticized the second

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wave feminist movement heavily for essentializing notions of "women" and "sisterhood," and for organizing and theorizing around women's "sameness," at the expense of our differences. The theorizing of "sameness," and perceived essentialism of second wave feminist thinkers have also been criticized by many woman of colour theorists, including Enakshi Dua, Sherene Razack, bell hooks, Himani Bannerji, and Ien Ang, among others. These writers have raised concerns about the fact that women of colour's experiences of gender in all aspects, including femininity, marriage, conceptualizations of family and relationships to paid labour varied immensely from those of middle-class, white women: "such differences raised the question of whether a universal experience with gender exists" (Dua 16). In the words of Ang:

Feminism must stop conceiving of itself as a nation, a "natural" political destination for all women, no matter how multi-cultural. Rather than adopting a politics of inclusion (which is always ultimately based on a notion of commonality and community), it will have to develop a self-conscious politics of partiality, and imagine itself as a *limited* political home, which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and pre-defined space. (57)

Third Wave Theories

Although it remains true that third wave feminist theorists rely heavily on the feminist tool of critique, it must be made clear that third wave theorizing consists of a great deal more than simply criticizing their predecessors. As mentioned previously, much of third wave theory

rests upon embracing and utilizing multi-vocality/locality. The use of often divergent personal narratives in anthologies, cyberspace, and zines are indicative of this theoretical basis, and of the third wave theoretical insistence on taking on feminist politics as they exist at individual, personal levels.

The introduction of Walker's anthology *To Be Real: Telling The Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, meticulously outlines the diversity of locations of the contributors, stating:

The group you will read here is an eclectic gathering of folks: a fundraiser for women's organizations, a lawyer, a video maker, an actor, a cultural critic, a professor, a musician, a director of special projects for a film company, a student, a writer of children's books, and yes, among others, two men and a "supermodel." (xxxvi)

Some of the essays in Walker's anthology work towards the same arguments, while some challenge each other outright. The overall effect seems to be that of a dialogue in progress, a move towards making room for difference instead of trying to build a cohesiveness that third wave theorists maintain should not exist.

Also implicit in the theorizing of the third wave is the usefulness of personal narrative in and of itself towards generating feminist theory. Walker maintains,

I believe that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory, and that by using the contradictions in our lives...we lay the groundwork for feminist theory that neither vilifies or deifies, but that accepts and respects difference. (xxxvii)

This conceptualization is a tool also utilized by third wave anti-racist feminists. Bannerji, for example, advocates using a reformulated version of standpoint theory. She argues that by mapping how women of colour are individually situated in the midst of complex and overlapping systems of oppression, we can simultaneously use these women's ideas and feelings (standpoints) as the starting ground and lens through which to examine how race, class and gender have been constructed in society. Bannerji states:

An adequate description of the smallest racist incident leaves room for reference or contextualization to slavery, colonization, imperialism; exploitation of surplus value and construction of the labour market through gender, "race" and ethnicity; nation-states to organize and facilitate those processes and practices; and concomitant reifying forms of consciousness. (qtd. in Dua 19)

There is much emphasis on synthesis, coalition building, and networking within the frameworks of third wave

theorizing. Synthesis refers to examining what works or doesn't from pre-existing feminist theories and combining these elements with new theories, "while continuously creating and regenerating theoretical maps of our own" (Carlson, Starace, Villano 3). Coalition building in the third wave analysis is meant to happen without the aid of larger umbrella organizational structuring, that is to say, smaller organizations would retain their own standings and mandates, and would co-operate with each other when prudent to do so, but only in the sense of using each other as resource bases (Carlson *et al.*). Occasionally, attempts by anti-racist feminists to bring such changes into existing organization have been met with backlash and resistance from white feminists, as exemplified aptly by the withdrawal of support by many white feminists from National Action Committee in the Status of Women (NAC) when two women of colour were consecutively chosen to head the organization (Dua). "The result of such resistance has been to entrench coalition and identity politics within these organizations" (Dua 17).

Another exceptionally important aspect of third wave feminist theorizing involves pushing the boundaries and limitations of gender definition, sexuality definition, race and class definitions. In pushing these boundaries, it is essential not only to explore the various ways in which we are oppressed by some of these identities, but also the ways we are privileged by them. The lack of self-inquiry into the ways in which privileges and oppressions go hand in hand has been a source of criticism of white mainstream feminism by feminist theorists of colour, and is echoed by the news strains of third wave feminism. Sherene Razack in her most recent collection of essays *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, maintains that:

Relying on the notion of an essential woman, the idea that all women share a core of oppression on to which can then be grafted their differences, has enabled a masking of how systems of domination interlock and thus how we, as women, are implicated in one another's lives. (21)

This sentiment is echoed by third wave theorist Gina Dent as she argues:

The current diversification of descriptive ... identities, and then more commonly accepted notion of the impossibility of ascribing to any of those identities a single perspective, necessitates another kind of language for feminism. (71)

Both theorists advocate a closer examination of the origins of second wave feminism, the dangers of essentializing women, and the absolute importance of examining the complex and overlapping relationships of aspects of oppressions and privileges among women.

Third Wave Actions

Evidence of third wave feminist actions can be found in a variety of areas: zines, hybrid magazines, cyberspace, and anthologies where theory and action are tightly bound together, but also in various forms of grassroots organizing, as illustrated by a myriad of grassroots organizations, including the Third Wave Direct Action Corporation, a non profit activist organization, co-founded by Rebecca Walker.

Zines are a way for young feminists to share political views and keep each other informed about a variety of feminist actions. A grassroots phenomenon, zines are usually handwritten or typed, and then photocopied for a

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limited distribution, largely through informal networks. Often a practice ascribed to the riot grrrl generation, zines can include poetry, essays, interviews, rants, manifestos, and articles ranging from how to make your own pads and tampons, to information about date rape resources. Zines are accessible to a wide range of people, largely because they are often given away instead of sold for profit. The production of zines, often by financially struggling young women, has also inspired other kinds of activism.

Kathleen Hannah, lead singer of the punkband Bikini Kill, often receives credit for coining the term "riot grrrl" and helping to promote this particular form of young feminist voice by co founding Riot Grrrl Press, a nonprofit distribution and printing press service for underground female writers. (Orr 38)

Hybrid magazines, such as *BUST* and *Fat Girl: A Magazine for Fat Dykes and the Women Who Love Them*, have also emerged from the space between established feminist journals such as *Ms.* and *Herizons* and the more informal zine networks.

Cyberspace has been a prime site to find information about third wave feminist theory and narratives, as well as to dig up facts about various organizations and actions taking place in different communities. Perhaps most importantly, it is also a forum for community building across a variety of boundaries, geographical, cultural, racial and sexual. "The recent expansion of feminist-centred cyber communities attests to the tenacity of young feminists in claiming the right to exist" (Zita 7). It is important to note that the use of cyberspace as an

action based tool also has limitations of accessibility. Belonging to an on-line community requires access to a computer, and some sort of leisure time to sit in front of said computer, which may serve to restrict women's access, particularly working class women who have far less leisure time and are less likely to have access to computers.

Anthologies, such as *To Be Real*, and *Revolution Girl Style* (a special edition of *Fireweed*), are a combination of



Angela Choi, *Untitled*, Print, 14" x 11", 2000.

political action as well as a source of young women's narrative based theory. The introduction of *Revolution Girl Style* is a compilation of ideas from its seventeen member editorial collective, comprised of young feminists between the ages of 17 and twenty one. They had a lot to say on the topic of anthologies and activism:

Revolution girl style is ... about representing young women differently, with complexity...it's a spring-board/call to action for other girls to do the same ... a coming together of women who aren't necessarily like-minded ... a challenge to feminist communities/feminist orthodoxies ... producing this issue is a form of political action. We're publishing young women's voices. That's political action to me. (Fireweed Collective 8)

Grassroots organization building is also beginning to take place both within and without the confines of colleges, universities and even high schools:

Nearly every college campus boasts a variety of grassroots women's student organizations— groups like Voice, Fearless, Womanist and Students Organizing Students—that have placed gender issues like date rape and biased curricula at the forefront of college activism. Even at the high school level, groups like FURY (Feminists United to Represent Youth) and YELL (Youth Education Life Line) are launching campaigns for better sex education, blowing the whistle on sexual harassment and fighting stereotypical female images. (Schrof 69)

Other organizations have evolved outside of the educational sphere, such as WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) which lobbies for affordable health care for poor women and WIN (Women's Information Network), a young women's career network and The Girl-friend Action Coalition (a Montreal based direct action group), which supports and distributes queer/girl positive works, recently released a CD compilation of local women artists and who cite their major goals to be "making the accessories for the revolution" (Revolution Girl Style Collective; Schrof).

Third Wave Criticisms of Second Wave Feminism

In "Surfing The Wave: A Dialogue Between Two Third Wave Feminists," Rita Alfonso and Jo Triglio, two graduate students, published their cross country e-mails in *Hypatia's* special edition on the topic of third wave feminism. Alfonso and Triglio showed a great deal of concern regarding who has the ability and access to become a part of creating, accessing and understanding academic feminist theory. Echoed in sentiment by many of the third wave critical writings, they argue that distance-normalizing language prevents many people from understanding or caring about feminist theory:

I have serious problems about the difficult, specialized, jargonistic language in which much recent feminist philosophy is being presented.... [t]his type of language perpetuates elitists power relations associated with who gets to speak of oppression. (10)

This also invariably affects who gets to participate in the eradication of oppression, as feminist theory is often considered an integral part of performing feminist acts of resistance, and feminist actions. Another criticism is the perceived move away from the concrete realities of women towards increasingly complex issues stemming from aca-

democratic discourse which, according to Alfonso, “are not the socio-political problems ordinary women of different races, classes, sexualities, ethnicities face in their everyday lives” (Alfonso and Triglio 10). While I feel that it is important to point out that this is not the case with all feminist theorizing, it is undoubtedly a warning that we, as academic feminists, would do well to keep in mind.

An issue that comes up in much of third wave feminist thinking is who has the power to define and conceptualize what exactly comprises “theory” in the feminist realm. Many feel that the creation of feminist theory and discourse has largely been the prerogative of feminists within academia, and that correspondingly, has led to too narrow a framework. Katie King states:

An error feminists make over and over is to mistake the part of a particular theoretical Reading, especially a published reading, for the whole of the many forms theorizing takes: active thinking, speaking, action grounded in theory, action producing theory, action suggesting theory, drafts, letters, manuscripts, stories in writing and not, poem said and written, art events like shows, readings, enactments, zap actions such as ACT UP does: or for that matter, incomplete theorizing, sporadic suggestiveness, generalizations correct and incorrect, inadequate theory, images and actions inciting theoretical interventions and so on. (qtd. in Siegal 49)

The conceptualization of what makes theory, and who is allowed and/or supposed to make theory has a direct bearing on who has access to feminism. Third wave feminists, particularly anti-racist feminists, argue that academic feminism, while important and necessary, needs to be engaging in more self-reflection and self-criticism: “[a]nti-racist feminists found it equally difficult to challenge the pedagogical paradigms and canons of various disciplines, including feminist theory” (Dua 17).

The second wave of feminism took on the daunting task of deconstructing the regulation of women’s sexuality, and put forth extremely successful and important challenges to male-centred and controlled sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality. These challenges and their outcomes have been incredibly important in establishing discourse about the right of all women to sexual autonomy: putting the widespread problem of sexual assault into dominant discourse, greater access to birth control and abortion, and gay and lesbian rights. However third wave feminists seek to build upon the changes brought about by second wave feminists, and argue that alternative forms of sexuality and sexual expression need to be allowed into more accepting feminist frameworks, and that feminist theorizing needs to stop normalizing and essentializing some forms of sexual expression (i.e., lesbianism) and vilifying others (i.e., pornography, s/m, or sex trade work).

There has also been a concerted critical effort by third wave theorists regarding the relationship between second wave feminisms and sexuality. Triglio states:

I went to a dyke punk show the other night. It made me seriously think of the differences between second and third wave feminists. Two members of the band are hard core butches, one is a sexy femme complete with a low-cut shirt, and the lead singer performed bare breasted and with a big black dildo hanging out of her pants zipper. (Alfonso and Triglio 12)

Many younger feminists are now balking at what they perceive to be the anti-sex, anti-porn and anti-s/m stance of many feminist communities. During the 1970s and 1980s there were immense and huge debates, also dubbed “the lesbian sex wars,” about the political correctness of various forms of lesbian sexuality, including s/m, pornography and butch/femme relationships. The effects of these confrontations are still lingering in many feminist communities today, particularly the lesbian feminist communities. Trish Thomas writes:

After I published my not-rape story in a little magazine for no pay, a judge in Toronto declared it obscene, *The New Yorker* called me a “... San Francisco writer who has enjoyed some prominence in the field of lesbian erotica,” and Andrea Dworkin, when asked to comment on the judgement, said, “Lesbian porn is an expression of self-hatred.” (88)

Walker, in her introduction for *To Be Real*, speaks of her fears around feminist theorizing about sexuality: “[c]uriosity about pornography ... an interest in the world of s/m ... represented contradictions that I had no idea how to reconcile” (xxx).

Second Wave Criticisms of Third Wave Feminism

While third wave theorists have had ample criticisms for those feminist theorists and theories that have gone before them, second wave theorist have not been silent in their critique of third wave theories. At a 1996 National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Louise Berkinow presented a talk titled “Political Matricide: Feminism’s Second Wave, Third Wave, and the Amnesia Problem.” She argues that:

The younger generation of feminists, has forgotten the multifaceted political struggles of its second wave foremothers and is swayed to ingratitude by a stilted vision of the second wave as privileged, homogenized movement typified by the National Organization for Women. (qtd. in Detloff 77)

While perhaps a bit venomous, what Berkinow seems to

be getting at, is that third wave feminists are forgetting the incredible battles it took to get the second wave achievements that women enjoy today.

Another criticism regularly levelled at third wave feminists is that they oversimplify ideologies presented by the second wave of feminism.

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

Others feel that third wave feminists, in their ardent espousal of individualism, are lacking the basis of organization and theory required of movements for social change. Catherine Orr, in "Charting the Currents of the Third Wave," states "I simply call attention to what seems to be a lack of theoretical, historical, organizational resources under which third wave feminists seem to be laboring" (33).

In researching this article on-line, I ran across an abstract for a paper to be given at a conference called "Just a Stage: The Rhetoric of Third Wave Feminism." The abstract was particularly critical (and I would argue offensively critical) of third wave ideologies, claiming that themes espoused by third wavers, such as sexuality and identity were a part of "growing up" and not something to base a feminist movement on: "These writers are young adults, and the common themes they espouse—sexuality and identity—are themes unique to a period of development known as young adulthood" (Ruffino 2).

She goes on to say propose that feminism cannot and should not be built on personal rather than theoretical writing and concludes that "the third wave represents a transitional period in feminism: a weak moment" (Ruffino 2). Interestingly, the themes of sexuality and identity are also central themes in second wave feminist theorizing, albeit differently, and it was after all, the second wave of feminism that popularized the much utilized adage "the personal is political."

Post/Anti Feminism and the Third Wave

Many second wave theorists have equated the up cropping of third wave feminism with that of anti-feminism, partially because of the timing, one surmises, but also because third wave feminists have been rather critical of many aspects of second wave approaches to feminist actions and theory. There are certainly similarities in some of the arguments of both groups of women; both maintain that second wave feminism has become elitist to a certain degree and relatively inaccessible to poor, uneducated women, and women of colour. However there are also some fundamental differences between anti-feminism

and third wave feminism. Unlike Katie Roiphe's public disbelief of rape statistics and the echoing sentiment of many anti feminists (Hoff Sommers, Denfield *et al.*), who suggest that feminism is all about training women to be victims, third wave feminists are very much active and vocal on a number of feminist issues, such as rape, violence against women, economic equality and other forms of the exploitation of women.

Orr sees crucial difference between "feminist dissenters" and third wave feminist views. Although similar to (and perhaps influenced by) post/anti feminist views, third wavers argue that the bulk of their political tools lie in, and are derived from, their personal experiences and individual styles and identities. They do not accept the idea that feminism has already "eradicated institutional sexism, or that the lines between privilege and exploitation based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, physical ability and body shape have disappeared. Nor do they disregard the need for organized feminist responses to oppressive institutions" (Orr 34). This distinction is echoed by Deborah Siegal, who claims:

When Rebecca Walker asserts in the pages of *Ms. Magazine*, "I am not a post feminist. I am the third wave," for example, the mobilization of the adjective "third" becomes an act of strategic defiance. Such an insistence on the continuation of the feminist movement ... resists narrative scripts that imply that women's movements are no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant. (52)

Where Do We Go From Here?

I must admit, I rather dislike the metaphor of feminism happening in waves. As far as water metaphors go (if water metaphors are really a necessity), tides might be more apt with their ebb and flow. Wave surge and recede too dramatically and with too much finality to seem accurate to the pace of emancipatory change that feminism has and continues to inspire. Despite the minor glitch in word choice, it seems to me that something very exciting is happening: feminism is going through yet another growth spurt, taking another great leap along the continuum of change. Among the various theory musings, and the feminist action building strategies I found a great deal of anger, defensiveness and frustration from both groups of women. I found myself, at times, relating to both sides of the arguments. But more than that, I also feel that these tensions have the potential to be immensely positive, because they can form and are already forming a dialectic process which could result in a much stronger, more diverse conceptualization of the boundaries of feminism, and of feminist practice. Without conflict, such growth and change would be impossible. In the words of one of my all-time favourite "second wavers," Audre Lorde:

The creative strength in women lies in recognizing the differences between us as creative and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth. (131)

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