

Waving not drowning: Thinking about Third Wave Feminism in the US

From moment to moment we perform subtle psychological and social negotiations about just how gendered we choose to be. This tension – between needing to act as women and needing an identity not overdetermined by our gender – is as old as Western feminism... In every case, the specialness of women has this double face, though often, in the heat of new confrontations, feminists suffer a harmful amnesia; we forget about this paradox we live with. Ann Snitow'

In her 1989 *Dissent* article 'Pages From a Gender Diary,' Ann Snitow returns to journals and memories from her days as a young academic in the burgeoning and yet unnamed second wave of the women's movement. Acknowledging the ways in which paradoxical beliefs, experiences, and peer models informed her life's 'gender diary', the article was a call for feminists of her generation – many bitterly divided over differing doctrines within the movement – to re-examine and embrace similar qualities in their own feminist identities. Written as a new decade approached, Snitow's prose stemmed from her understanding that, regardless of the gender/less freedoms that feminism promised, women's sexed being still remained a necessary area of cultural and political intellectual inquiry. The urgency to address this permeates her essay and also seems to reflect the fact that it was written at a moment when the women's movement seemed at the threshold of change. It was soon to be either rejected or rejuvenated by a new generation of women.

During the 1980s, much had been made in the American popular media of the professional gains of women and their re-evaluation of the ability to 'have it all'. Much less was construed of their need for an organised movement to attain this elusive 'it'. By the early 1990s, as if women had somehow moved beyond or rejected the contemporary existence of feminism (an attitude perhaps best communicated in the work of Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfield), the term 'postfeminism' was bandied about to describe this new manner of (not) thinking about the female condition.² However, it was also in this atmosphere that a new generation of American feminists emerged concurrently to embrace the 'f-word' that many female youths and professionals had eschewed. Loosely-knit activist groups like Riot Grrl and theories like Kim Gordon's (Sonic Youth) 'foxcore' bubbled up in popular culture of the late 1980s to reclaim the spirit and title of feminism with a determined, reflective individualism that resembled the grab-bag of a movement Snitow had experienced in the 1970s. Growing up as a punk Hispana in the lower-to-middle class box-house suburbs of the Midwestern US, my own view of feminism's promise wasn't significantly different in the mid-1980s than it had been for Snitow in her youth, a little over a decade earlier. However, my female peers and I had never lived in a world

without feminism, and, frankly, those of us young enough didn't really know what feminism was 'supposed' to mean in the first place. We simply admired the movement as something that had not only inspired women to be paradoxical creatures, but also to piece together and dole out their contradictory identity in any way they damn well pleased.

By the mid-1990s, this generation of American feminists would be dubbed the 'third wave', and comprised of women from the ranks of both the second wave and those born in the midst of its formation (generally 'Gen-Xers', now 18-40 years old). Unlike conservative postfeminists, third wave feminists asserted the continued relevance of both the movement's history and of gender itself in their lives and work; facts acknowledged in the movement's given/chosen name, linking it to generations before them. To define the first two waves of the feminist movement briefly is to be outrageously reductive to its complexities (not to mention significant national differences within each.) For brevity's sake, however, I would like to draw at least a fuzzy chronological outline around these two fluid moments in order to explore the latter developments at hand.

The popular women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, arguably emerged as women acted on the idea that a revival and re-tuning of the work of female suffragists and early women's rights activists, or 'first wave' participants of the women's movement, was long overdue. This second wave of feminist activists took it upon themselves to herd up and scrutinise the many and varied goals of their hundred odd years worth of foremothers in an effort to settle upon a common agenda for contemporary women activists to build upon and work toward. A noble effort, except of course for the fact that, particularly as it shifted from a primarily activist to academic movement, much of this agenda was based on a decidedly white, Protestant, middle-to-upper class perspective. For all its affinities with earlier 'waves', a factor of the third wave agenda seems, to a large extent, to have been the result of a desire to question the second wave's well-intended but restraining dogmatism. The 'harmful amnesia' applied to the movement's pluralities is also challenged, as is so well articulated by Snitow.

Third wave thinkers have been comfortable with re-defining feminism to include any woman who believes that inequality between women and men exists, that it affects their lives, and that action is needed to balance the scales. As a pointedly individualistic and anti-elitist approach to feminism, it looks as much to pop culture as to politics for influences and strategies. Role models celebrated by this generation include women as visible on MTV as in the Bluestockings Bookstore – from bell hooks to Pat Califia to Courtney Love – in

an effort to locate the relevance of gender in even the most unexpected or superficial aspects of everyday lives. Very few academics have attempted analyses of, or publications about, the third wave. There presently exist only about a half-dozen anthologies of third-wave discourse.³ Of these, most sources come from outside of the academic or 'fine art' worlds, and include the work of authors and artists involved in the locally and cheaply-produced 'zines that characterise the broadly focused voices and issues of the third wave. Because of such sprawling, grass-root sources, voices represented often come from racial and economic classes beyond those typically present in the still overwhelmingly white and upper-class, American academic, consciousness-raising and gallery circles. The work available in these volumes riffs on diverse, even contentious, personal feminisms in the hope of touching on larger, common issues in other women's lives. In fact, as one anthology editor, Jennifer Drake asserts, perhaps the one thing that 'unites the Third Wave is our negotiation of contradiction, our rejection of dogma, our need to say 'both/and' [instead of 'either/or']'.⁴

Plurality, of course, has a price to pay in this movement; it is difficult to instigate focused and effective group activism based on a philosophy of subjectivity. Representative of critical second wave voices is journalist Ginia Bellafante who, in her now-infamous *Time* cover story on third wave culture, wrote: '...if feminism of the '60s and '70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.'⁵ Bellafante's questionable defence of this position aside (she never explains, for example, why she deems the vaginal imagery of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* 'honourable' but Glenn Close's performance – for a domestic violence shelter's benefit – in Eve Ensler's Obie-winning *Vagina Monologues* 'obscene'), her criticism of the lack of tangible and unified third wave political activism is valid.

However, what Bellafante did not take into account when considering the third wave was both the extent to which 'mere' sex still rallies women, and the solidarity that her sweeping criticism of feminism's evolution would engender. In the wake of her claims, *Time* had to publish special sections to represent properly the volume of letters challenging her position. Many of these were from 'model' second wave American feminists such as Gloria Steinem, who noted the same magazine's critiques levelled against them in their youth. As Debbie Stoller, co-editor of third wave 'zine *Bust*, succinctly put it: 'Obviously, there's just no pleasing *Time*: as far as they're concerned, we girls are either too feminist or not feminist enough.'⁶ While some have criticised the lack of cohesion (i.e. 'sisterhood') in third wave culture – pointing to the brevity of organisational

