



Volume 4

Issue 2 *Harvesting our Strengths: Third Wave
Feminism and Women's Studies*

Article 1

Apr-2003

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Recommended Citation

Gillis, Stacy and Munford, Rebecca (2003). Introduction: Harvesting our Strengths: Third Wave Feminism and Women's Studies. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(2), 1-6.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss2/1>

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Harvesting our Strengths: Third Wave Feminism and Women's Studies

By Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munfordⁱ
(Guest Editors)

When we approached the directors of the *Institute for Feminist Theory and Research* (www.iftr.org.uk) about organising a conference on third wave feminism we were unsure what we meant by the term; what we were sure about was that our feminism was not the feminism of the second wave, although it was inextricably informed and enabled by it.

We have seen that interrogating cultural and sexual behaviour has not led to a thoroughgoing change in the balance of power. Feminism has many, too many, critiques of dress and pornography, of poetry and film-making, of language and physical behaviour. It has sought to direct our personal lives on every level. And yet women have still not achieved fundamental equality; they are still poorer and less powerful than men. Rather than concentrating its energy on the ways women dress and talk and make love, feminism now must attack the material basis of economic and social and political inequality. (Walter 4)

We recognised that the feminist entry into the academy in the 1970s – through women's studies – was an unprecedented historical moment. However, through exposure to a (third wave) generation familiar with poststructuralist, postmodern, queer,^f and postcolonial theories, this “discipline” of academic feminism has come under attack for being elitist, colonising, and heterosexist. Our objective for the *Third Wave Feminism* conference, held in July 2002 at the University of Exeter, UK, was to examine this particular moment in feminist theory and history that has come to be understood as the “third wave,” and to do so without acceding to the defeatism implicit in the backlash politics of postfeminism.

Bearing these tensions in mind, the debates at the conference were informed by the following questions:

- What is this third wave of feminism? What happened to the first and second waves?
- “Second wave” feminism is characterised at least in part by the praxis of activism: getting *real* things changed in the name of feminism. But social activism appears to have given way to academic practice as the dominant mode of “Western” feminism at the turn of the millennium. Since the aims of the women's movement have not been fully endorsed (*e.g.* equal pay for equal work, free childcare, wages for housework, autonomy of sexuality and representation), what has happened to the political agenda of the feminist project? Is this a strategic retreat, a postmodern fragmentation of metanarrative, or a backlash against the social shifts achieved during the 1960s and 1970s?
- If feminism is predicated on the social fact of the relative oppression of women, and poststructuralist modes of thought have deconstructed sexual identity, why do academics persist with the unfashionable notion of feminism?
- “Equality” has given way to “difference” in contemporary feminist work. How can this lead us anywhere but into static cultural relativism? If essentialism is anathema

to feminism, what kind of common ground is available to women, given the proliferation of difference under contemporary social and theoretical conditions?

There were no easy and obvious answers to any of these questions. However, as the essays collected here and in our collection *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* – some of which emerged from the conference – demonstrate, the discussions which these questions raised and encompassed made clear that, while the work of feminist activists and scholars of the past has impacted greatly on our lives, we are no longer in a second wave of feminism. Interrogating the monolithic assumptions of the waves of feminist history, the conference brought together those factions which had been gen(d)erated by the polemics of second wave feminism – including women’s studies activists, queer theorists, self-proclaimed “third wavers” and gender studies scholars – in order to define a feminism which could no longer, in any way, be identified as “victim feminism.”

What place can, or do, women’s studies and/or third wave feminism have within the academy if they are positioned outside of “victim” feminism?ⁱⁱ If feminist theory and practice are now incorporated into teaching and research across universities and disciplines, is there a need for the categories of women’s studies and feminism, third wave or otherwise? A starting point for these discussions would be an interrogation of the tensions between women’s studies and third wave feminism, centring on two key questions: what place does third wave feminism have within women’s studies? And, what place does women’s studies have within the academy in light of third wave feminist thought? In spite of the increasing inclusion of third wave texts on women’s studies syllabi, especially in the US, the intergenerational antagonisms between second wave and third wave feminisms are played out in this uneasy relationship. Yet, given the common ground between women’s studies and third wave feminism – a shared concern with the politics of female experience and identity – the polarity between the two is at times mystifying. The raw and – at times – overwhelming anger we experienced from many women’s studies scholars when organising the conference – largely directed towards the very notion of the “third wave,” as if it somehow stood for the outright demise of second wave feminism – testified to the need to (re)address this schism in order to rethink not only the causes of this antipathy, but to bridge a constructive dialogue between women’s studies and third wave feminism.

If women’s studies emerged as a result of second wave feminism’s “demands for a ‘space’ and a ‘voice’” in the academy (Brooks 122), then the third wave critique of the limitations of women’s studies has focused on its “anachronistic” insularity, separatism and endorsement of “victim feminism.” Christina Hoff Sommers, for example, lampoons women’s studies as trite and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue that second wave activists’ denial of younger feminists’ “knowledge and experiences” (222) is mirrored in the university institution by what Diane Elam describes as the “Dutiful Daughter Complex.” This phenomenon, Elam proposes, occurs when senior feminists maintain that junior feminists be dutiful daughters and defend those feminisms which their mothers supported. Should these “dutiful daughters” propose new agendas they are greeted with hostility. In particular, some third wave feminists’ focus on popular culture has been construed as a form of postfeminist backlash, one advocating a generation of Ally McBeals and Bridget Jones. Debbie Stoller, an editor of *BUST* magazine, positions an indulgence in the popular modes of femininity as a feminist statement: “We love our

lipstick, have a passion for polish, and, basically, adore this armor that we call ‘fashion.’ To us, it’s fun, it’s feminine, and, in the particular way we flaunt it, it’s *definitely* feminist” (Stoller 47; emphasis in original). However, there are those in women’s studies who, for example, regard Madonna as suspicious: does she “offer a mockery of conventional femininity, or just another way to be fashionable and ‘sexy’?” (Marshment 147). The tension between the canonical and the popular has been largely dismissed other disciplines, such as cultural studies, as irrelevant but still manages to disrupt exchanges in feminist debates. Yet is this mutual suspicion not itself a product of the rhetoric and the stereotypes of the backlash – that old trick of pitting groups of women against one another?ⁱⁱⁱ

The articles in this special issue which engage with popular culture indicate the ways in which a rigorous and scholarly encounter with the popular – one that moves beyond criticising or celebrating the “new” feminists’ supposed obsession with fashion, make-up and sex – can illuminate our understanding both of the condition of woman and the history of feminism. Meryl Altman’s analysis of the sexual and textual politics of the popular, mass-market 1970s feminist fictions of Erica Jong, Alix Kates Shulman and Marge Piercy offers an account of the limits of the second wave polemics while investigating the current antagonism between the polemical and the popular. Similarly, Colleen Denney problematises the figure of the royal mother in third wave feminism. Tracing its lineage, she indicates how the theoretical positions of third wave feminism allow a reading of the maternal royal – as exemplified in Princess Diana – that is disruptive rather than reactionary. Karen Dias addresses one of the most contentious points of argument in second wave feminism – the body – and reconfigures it within cyberspace and third wave feminism. Her article on pro-anorexia websites provides a space for a positive dialogue between anorexia and female-centred communities. These arguments offer a model of how to integrate third wave feminism’s celebration of the popular within the academic scholarship promulgated by women’s studies.

The place of women’s studies within the academy has, of course, always been a site of contestation. Women’s studies found itself in a double bind: on the one hand charged with “not being academic enough” within the university and, on the other hand, accused of being “too academic” by feminist activists outside of the academy – not to mention the debates about essentialism and difference, politics and praxis, and the marginalisation of race, ethnicity, sexuality and class taking place within women’s studies itself (Robinson 17-24). Moreover, women’s studies was further problematised by the emergence of gender studies, queer, transgender and postcolonial theories in the 1980s and 1990s, which challenged the very category of “woman” and threw into question the founding premises of its identity politics. Do we, then, need to think beyond the monolithic frameworks of academic “disciplines” to move towards a more encompassing field of feminist studies? “Shaped by hegemonic privileges, white women’s paths to a coalition-based feminist consciousness have often been based in ignorance, contradiction, and confusion” (Heywood and Drake 12). To move beyond the contradictions would mean accommodating some of the criticisms levelled at second wave feminism.

One criticism repeatedly and resoundingly directed at second wave feminism was its exclusion of third world and black feminisms. This has, to some degree, been recuperated by the political axis of women’s studies. However, the articles in this special issue that address non-Western feminisms indicate the extent to which third wave

feminism has learned how to incorporate, rather than to exclude, examining such points of contention as terrorism, the veil and globalization. E. Ann Kaplan's interrogation of the futures of feminism in light of the impact of 9/11 foregrounds the changing social and political contexts for feminist theory and practice. Focusing on the relevance of feminist ideology and perspectives, the histories and futures of knowledge-making in the academy, and the consequences of globalization and new technologies, Kaplan explores how links with non-US feminisms can occur in an era of globalization and terror. Daphne Grace interrogates representations of female space in Indian and Algerian literature. She draws upon third wave feminist arguments – specifically the reformulation of the personal to meet contemporary political agendas – to problematise “traditional” concepts of female space behind the screen of purdah, and within the confines of the harem or haveli. Finally, Winifred Woodhull's piece challenges third wave feminism and, returning to Kaplan's US-orientated argument, argues that it could repeat the exclusionary errors of the history of feminism. Her textual analysis of Lília Momplé and Nadine Gordimer indicates how neocolonial domination and the flow of capital, labor and commodities are addressed by feminists in Africa. These three articles offer a challenge to the argument that feminism excludes as they posit a (third wave or otherwise) feminism that might account for *all* women and for *all* women's conditions.

As is demonstrated by the articles in this special issue, the theoretical challenges posed by third wave feminism allow for a reconsideration of women's studies. We need a women's studies which is not “victim feminism,” a feminism which does not, as Daphne Patai suggests, “[hurt] itself with identity politics...simplistic stereotyping and ideological policing” (9). This form of women's studies can embrace the possibilities of third wave feminism, including its interrogation of popular cultural forms, and should be positioned as part of a broader interrogation of what “feminism” can mean under contemporary academic and social conditions. The final three articles here do precisely this, interrogating what it means to be a feminist, both in theory and in practice. Ashleigh Harris' article confronts the backlash politics of media and popular production and the myth of feminist politics. Foregrounding the ways in which “political correctness” has damaged feminism, she engages with the backlash rhetoric of media and popular production to re-examine the relationship between patriarchy and feminism. The very question of “waves” is opened up by Agnieszka Graff in her discussion of the historical and political paradoxes of contemporary Polish feminism. Relying upon the inadequacies of Anglo-American constructions of feminist history (as also explored by Kaplan and Woodhull), Graff delineates the inconsistencies and contradictions shaping the trajectory of Polish feminism. Although Polish feminism is engaged with typically second wave concerns (including founding women's studies programmes), Graff highlights how its activism employs strategies and forms associated with third wave feminism – all of which are undertaken against the backdrop of a “backlash” rhetoric. Finally, a resounding response to the myth of the “death of women's studies” is provided by Marysia Zalewski, in her provocative account of the debates surrounding its putative demise. Turning around the deconstructive critique of women's studies, she (re)deploys poststructuralist arguments to propose a model for its reanimation. It is by working with, rather than against, the paradoxes and contradictions of women's studies and third wave feminism, Zalewski proposes, that women's studies can become “exciting again.” The strategies

and anxieties in these three articles emphasise that truth that many feminists are reluctant to acknowledge – feminism does not exist. But feminisms do.

Feminisms can incorporate, and embrace, the points of convergence and divergence between women's studies and third wave feminist positions. The quest for equality and representation has been sustained by the powerful activism and scholarship of women's studies over the past thirty years gave birth to third wave feminism – just as second wave feminism had given birth to women's studies. However, Elam's model of "dutiful daughters" is a reminder of the divisions that have riven feminism. Women's studies can live within this new version of feminism but must sustain itself through a dialogue with third wave feminism, rather than turning its back on it – whether academic or activist. As Lynne Segal argues, "[i]t is only by finding ways to foster effective vehicles for change that feminists can still hope to open spaces for more women to flaunt the diverse pleasures, entitlements and self-questioning to which recent feminist thinking has inspired us" (232). These articles testify to the vigorous possibilities of a constructive dialogue between women's studies and third wave feminism by highlighting how the two need not be defined against one another, but in terms of their shared politics.

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ⁱⁱ For more on this see Sommers or Paglia.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this see Gillis and Munford's "Genealogies and Generations."

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