

Feminist Porousness: Challenging the Isolationism of Oppositional Consciousness

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“Identity” can seem like a confounding and malleable term within academic discourse: it can be molded to fit variant critical goals and is too often left undefined or entirely unexplained. In the interest of beginning this discussion of contemporary feminist theory with a modicum of clarity, I want to first attempt a description of the aspect(s) of “identity” that interest me: I believe the concept of identity, and the “identity politics” that grow out of groups formed around shared traits or goals, offers a revelatory focus for multiple threads and conflicts that have stimulated, and continue to stimulate, feminist methodologies.

In *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, contributor Jo Reger’s summary of “identity” contains multiple points salient to my discussion. Before digging into the particular manner in which “identity” functions within third-wave feminism, Reger begins with a general definition: “Identities are ways in which people come to understand who they are in relationship to others and the social world” (Reger 2006, 181). What this brief definition already reveals is the intrinsic relationality of identity: who I am, or how I see subjectivity (and more specifically, *my* “self”), results from both my situatedness (class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.), and more centrally, from how I conceive of these positionalities based on my social environment. Reger goes on to explain the way in which “identity” functions collectively and the movement visible in feminism over the past thirty or so years away from a singular group identity toward a “diffusion of feminist ideology” that makes space, under the umbrella of feminist theory and activism, for “a multitude of contemporary feminist identities” (Reger 2006, 183). The road to this point--to the diffuse contemporary state of feminism, which I will argue Reger accurately identifies here--has not always been smooth. While a group identity, in the singular, offers up a sense of shared purpose and commitment that can be politically efficacious, the history of feminism has shown that specific methods of group identity formation arrive with problematic and potentially fracturing epistemological baggage. Reger identifies what I see as a central aspect of such inevitably self-implosive approaches: “one essential aspect of creating a feminist identity is the construction of boundaries to distinguish members from non-members. By doing so, movement communities develop what is called “an oppositional consciousness,” which helps to define their position and issues” (Reger 2006, 182). Although identity is intrinsically relational, must it take shape through such “oppositional consciousness”? Feminists have increasingly responded to this question with a convincing “no.”

Much early third-wave feminist writing engaged in a protest against the seemingly rigid boundaries that had been drawn, either explicitly or without acknowledgment, by prominent feminists during the second wave. In one of the earliest essay collections to proclaim itself as presenting voices from the third wave, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, editor Rebecca Walker initially represents feminism, from the perspective of her (the younger) generation, as a “strictly defined

and all-encompassing feminist identity” that does not allow for “contradictions and messiness” (Walker 1995, xxxi). Previously, Walker declared herself part of a “third wave” in a 1992 article written for *Ms.* magazine. This article is widely considered to be the moment the term “third-wave feminist” entered cultural consciousness; Walker became one of the figure-heads of this new movement (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 10; Heywood and Drake 1997, 7). As such, she and *To Be Real* also became a jumping-off point for contemporary feminists interested in exploring both the strengths and possible shortfalls of Walker and her contributors’ constructions of the new feminist generation. While one thread of this continuing conversation focused on the need to transform personal conversations into political action, another interrogated the confrontational relationship—captured in the passages I quoted above—that Walker articulates between the second and third wave. As early as 1997, just two years after *To Be Real* was published, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, editors of the academic collection *Third Wave Agenda*, pointed out that this essentially oppositional consciousness many writers evince when constructing a relationship to the second wave fails to account for the echoes and commonalities that exist between older and younger feminists:

We see the emphasis on contradiction as continuous with aspects of the second wave, whereas many writers in *To Be Real* seem eager to distance themselves from the second wave by forgetting or dismissing its legacies. The politics, however, that their essays advocate is very much indebted to the work of women of color who are generationally second wave—Walker’s mother among them. (Heywood and Drake 1997, 7)

Within Heywood and Drake’s collection, Deborah L. Siegel delves more fully into the complex historiographic creation of a monolithic and oppositional second wave, or as Siegel terms it, a “metonymic view of the second wave, in which a part of the second wave activity is substituted for the whole” (Siegel 1997, 59). Siegel credits “many third wave narratives” with the construction and use of this metonymic view, but what I believe is slightly muddying up the waters of this critique is Siegel’s own practice of using the title “third wave” without acknowledging the extreme divergence between the work of those her critique focuses on—Rene Denfeld, Naomi Wolf, and Katie Roiphe—and the voices in collections like *To Be Real*, or *Third Wave Agenda* itself.

Although I do not want to dig into another analysis of post-feminist texts, what I do want to suggest is that a politics of identity (both group and individual) sometimes credited to the third wave in general is more accurately ascribed to this limited, albeit highly visible, face of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. Within Walker’s introduction there is a visible tug between acceptance of the commodified version of second wave Feminism reconstituted by post-feminist authors (feminism with a capital “F”) and a more nuanced understanding of the multiple legacies of the second wave. After expressing the anxiety she sees many women of her generation sharing, of not measuring up to the demands of a prudish and regulatory *Feminism*, Walker in fact credits feminists for having created a model that enables representation of multiplicity, and for offering women an alternative to acceptance of normalizing social standards:

The complex, multi-issue nature of our lives, the instinct not to categorize and shut oneself off from others, and the enormous contradictions we embody are all fodder for making new theories of living and relating. This continuing legacy of

feminism, which demands that we know and accept ourselves, jettisoning societal norms that don't allow for our experiences, is a politically powerful decision. (Walker 1995, xxxviii-xxxix)

Walker's replay of the defensive posture that a monolithic image of feminism elicits renders the dangers of identity politics clear: claims to an easily delimitable and cohesive group identity open the door for a commodification of feminism. Once this occurs, and feminism becomes Feminism, possibilities for coalition are lost in contentious debates over who gets to define that capital F: who "owns" the public commodity? Walker's introduction replays this conflict, honestly showcases the impact of a falsely monolithic image of the second wave on young women's lives, and begins to encourage an alternative, coalitional view.

Within *Third Wave Agenda*, Leigh Shoemaker's discussion of Henry Rollins's cultural significance during the era of these internal debates regarding feminism's past and future points in interesting ways to the deeply intertwined roots of oppositional consciousness and isolationism, and suggests the capacity of a more general cultural mood to impact identity formation both for the individual and the group. Recounting her own identification with well-muscled punk figure Rollins, Shoemaker explores what it is he represents: a physically hard, rigidly bounded individual, resistant to the "mass"--a masculine fortress defined against the feminized forces seeking to disempower him through assimilation (Shoemaker 1997, 114). Using bell hooks' work to analyze the connections between her individual experience and feminist methodology, Shoemaker illuminates the political and group dimension of this personal/cultural feeling:

Hooks responds by addressing the need to redirect some of the energy for differentiation into community building, but not a community built "in reaction to" what threatens us. The reactionary community is a community built on a fascist model of bonding together in the face of the Other in order to control or destroy it. Alternative communities are built through the intentional tearing down of boundaries, through empathizing with the Other and allowing identification with that Other. (Shoemaker 1997, 118)

Initially convinced that she must change herself to fit an isolationist/individualist culture, Shoemaker realizes that instead what she/we (feminists) should seek to change is the culture itself. In this essay, Shoemaker's revelations mirror the dynamics of Rebecca Walker's introduction: after she acknowledges the negative impulse to adopt an oppositional consciousness in the service of self-construction, Shoemaker realizes the ultimately destructive impact that acceptance of this boundary enforcing approach to identity-building has both on the "I" and the "we" of identity and works to build a subject position within feminism through connections instead of negation. What seems to be emerging here is a shared narrative of the growth of feminist consciousness.

In her relatively recent book-length study, *Not My Mother's Sister*, Astrid Henry makes a move quite similar to Deborah L. Siegel's, characterizing early third wave work as invested in an "ideology of individualism" that leads the writers in *To Be Real* and other collections toward political stasis: "unlike the second wave, the third wave does not move beyond these individual assertions of identity to a larger, collective political identity. The Asian bisexual can only speak for herself, not for other Asians or other

bisexuals. For the third wave, identity politics is limited to the expression of individual identity” (Henry 2004, 44). As Henry’s argument develops, the picture that is painted of third wave feminism becomes more complex; and yet, such flattened-out generalizations as the one above regarding The Third Wave (capital “T,” capital “W”) continue to appear. While it may be true that within collections such as Merri Lisa Johnson’s *Jane Sexes It Up*--one of Henry’s examples--the second wave is portrayed as a prudish and overbearing mother figure, increasing the already oversimplified public image of feminism co-constituted by the media and post-feminist authors, I do not believe that portraying this as the dominant voice in the third wave creates an accurate estimate of the movement as a whole (Johnson 2002). I do, however, agree with Henry’s insistence that third wave feminists need to remain wary of buying into simplistic and villainized representations of second wave feminism. In a collection focused on keeping activism at the center of feminism, Kristina Sheryl Wong’s description of what motivated her to take a humorous and “modern” (technology-based) approach to creating feminist art falls repeatedly into this well-worn oppositional groove. How can we incite other young, fun-loving women to proclaim themselves feminists? Wong enthusiastically proclaims, “Maybe a national billboard campaign needs to be launched. We need giant signs above every campus and freeway that read: ‘Hey, America! Don’t be afraid of the word ‘feminist’! It doesn’t mean man-hating or being humorless! There is a new thing called ‘third wave’ feminism that will open the door so you can embrace politics by being who you are!’” (Wong 2003, 296). Nowhere in the essay does Wong return to the dichotomy she’s established here to acknowledge that perhaps some second wave feminists had a sense of humor and were perfectly friendly toward men--or, more significantly, that many second wave feminists did not establish themselves as feminists only via rhetoric of rejection and negation. Reconstituting the popular media’s consumable image of “the Feminist” in her work, Wong exemplifies the pattern Henry, Siegel, and others identify, in which third wave feminists portray themselves as the fun-loving and playful alternative to a dour and judgmental mother feminism.

One of the central ways in which Astrid Henry challenges the oppositional mother/daughter relationship that some feminists fall back on when describing the shift from a second to third wave is through an exposition of the “intragenerational” diversity of views that actually made up the second wave. In my own desire to understand how “identity” and more specifically “group identity” has functioned within this shift, I would also like to briefly revisit just a small sample of second wave pieces. Even a brief reexamination of a few of the multiple statements of purpose and manifestos produced during the second wave reveals an interesting dynamic at work. Although certain well-known texts undoubtedly fail to acknowledge the positionality that informs their perspectives, they otherwise represent not only divergent interests, but variant approaches to community building. Even the arguably accusatory tone taken toward “all men” in the Redstockings Manifesto (1969), a possible target for third wave feminists such as Wong seeking to distance themselves from man-bashing, includes what many would consider a typically “third-wave” call to see all oppressions as feminist issues: “We repudiate all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women” (Redstockings 1969, 221). Despite the oppositional and dualistic group

identity that the Redstocking Manifesto proclaims more vociferously than most, of women united *against* men based on an unproblematized shared gender (Women versus Patriarchy), the roots of coalition are nonetheless here. And while Betty Friedan's widely read *The Feminine Mystique* features a "we" that clearly--based on the picture she paints of the dissatisfied American housewife--exists only through the silent exclusion of economically, racially, or sexually subjugated groups, the statement of purpose published by NOW--an organization Friedan co-founded--proclaims, "We realize that women's problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice; their solution will require concerted action by many groups. Therefore, convinced that human rights for all are indivisible, we expect to give active support to the common cause of equal rights for all those who suffer discrimination and deprivation" (National Organization for Women 1966, 212). While true integration of various groups into such a coalition might have been only a goal at this stage of feminist activism, the language used in NOW's statement demonstrate that it was central to the political identity feminists sought to create, rather than an invention or intervention of the third wave. When I engage in a discussion of contemporary feminist coalition-building at the end of this essay, remember NOW's words: the sentiment and phrasing of this passage reverberate in the voices of the third wave.

I have culled these second wave pieces from a feminist theory reader published in 2005, and investigation of the titular patterns in sections devoted to second wave feminist work suggests one explanation for the knee-jerk response of critics who received their feminist history from such texts, who may imagine this period as one of battling identities rather than incipient coalition building. Two sections covering the years 1963-1985 include pieces titled "Statement of Purpose (NOW 1966), "The BITCH Manifesto" (1968), "Redstocking Manifesto" (1969), "The Woman-Identified Woman" (Radicalesbians 1970), "Why OWL (Older Women's Liberation)?" (1970), "Chicana Feminism" (1976), and "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) (Kolmar and Bartkowski 2005). While reading the texts of these statements reveals nuanced and diverse views of women's lives and feminism, both the act of writing a singular subjective position into group names and the starkly identitarian format for titling group statements lends itself to the impression that these political identities were forged through opposition and along stark lines of singular identification. Here is one of the dangers written into the future moments of such political movements: while the majority of these groups were likely motivated by a desire to enter into the conversation, expand the reach of feminism, and have their voices heard without seeking to drown out the voices of their neighbors, within their methodology and rhetoric one now hears the reverberations of competitive individualism. The visual impact of scanning down the page of this reader is instantaneous; before even opening the book, I can't help but feel that what I will be reading are manifestos in which women argue for ownership of Feminism based on an oppositional consciousness and competing agendas. Although to an extent, from a historiographic perspective, that sentiment is created as much by the design of this reader (which is fairly representative) as by the titles/group monikers themselves, there remains the feeling that identity commodification was unintentionally built into the foundations of second wave feminism. For third wave feminists, finding a way to alter this foundation and, as fully as possible, eliminate the oppositional streak most fervently

realized, as Henry argues convincingly, in the work of contemporary post-feminist authors, is essential to methodological strength: as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake argued over ten years ago, “Competition can appear to be the most readily available survival strategy even as we know it ensures our extinction. This is a contradiction that feminism’s third wave has to face: an often conscious knowledge of the ways in which we are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine us” (Heywood and Drake 2006, 11).

Returning conceptually to my analysis of Rebecca Walker and Leigh Shoemaker’s texts, what I hope my essay has begun to suggest is the inextricability of ideologies of identity that inform our senses of individual subjectivity and the construction and eventual shape of group identities within a given culture. I believe that feminism has already made significant motion away from oppositional/competitive self-fashionings and I believe one area of feminist theory that has significantly propelled this shift is work invested in critiquing the sex/gender and nature/culture distinctions central to early feminist work. The texts by Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Anne Fausto-Sterling that I am going to discuss as significant entries in the deconstruction of sex/gender dualism arose within a larger context I first want to touch on briefly, because it is an aspect of post-second-wave work so central to the shifting tenor of feminism: critiques of the universal subject. In 1985 Toril Moi published the influential *Sexual/Textual Politics*, an academic analysis of American liberal humanist feminism and French feminist work. In this book-length study Moi exposes the problematic ground American feminism creates by continuing to function unquestioningly within a phallogocentric system. Liberal humanism within feminism, according to Moi, leads women to adopt the universal and objective stance their work should instead challenge: “this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity. In the humanist ideology the self is the sole author of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male” (Moi 1985, 8). Moi’s description of the phallogocentric subject echoes the oppositional consciousness and isolation experienced by Walker, Shoemaker, and other third wave feminists. Clearly, an ideology of subject formation that deifies autonomy, detachment, and distance poses a challenge to community building. This lack of positionality and permeability also leads feminists to reconstruct an oppressive Us/Them or One/Other dichotomy along various axes of identity, class, sexuality, and race among them. A year after Moi’s text theorized generally the ideological conflict of adopting a universal stance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” demonstrated more concretely the result of liberal humanist feminist praxis. Mohanty’s essay exposes the manner in which some First World feminists--those who adopt a privileged and seemingly objective position--have effectively colonized “Third World” women, creating a static image of the third world Woman as the powerless victim of oppressive patriarchal forces, awaiting salvation at the hands of “free” and progressive western women. One thing Mohanty’s work brings to light is the fracturing capacity of oppositional positioning within feminism or amongst women. This move by western feminists relies on the negation of agency or active/emergent subjectivity in others for a construction of their own identity; such a move clearly creates a power-invested

hierarchy. Although certainly there are complex and significant political differences in Mohanty's concerns and intergenerational conflicts, when post-feminists or third wave women rely on a dehumanized second wave straw-woman to position themselves, they repeat the problematic humanist practice Moi and Mohanty warned against. While western feminists built their One/Other schema along geographic and racial lines, denying third world women agency and reinforcing distance rather than seeking equality in coalition, contemporary feminists must be careful to avoid transforming their historical/temporal distance from second wave women into another grounds for objectification of women in the interest of oppositional identity-building.

If individual and group identity formation are intimately connected, then central to the transformation of feminist communities--and, perhaps, of all political communities--is a revolution in the dominant cultural narrative of individual subjectivity. This is why I believe feminist interventions in the sex/gender debate continue to be an essential part of shifting feminist consciousness: at the heart of these interventions lies a challenge to long-standing notions of the inviolable, discrete body that is so essential to oppositional consciousness. Twenty years ago academic feminists from various disciplines began to aggressively interrogate binaries circulating within feminism tied intimately to an enlightenment ancestry. This occurred coextensively with the incipient work in third wave feminism; body/mind, sex/gender, and nature/culture (aligned hierarchically) are all productively imperiled by Judith Butler's extremely influential 1990 publication *Gender Trouble*. Like Mohanty, Butler recognizes the feminist investment in a universal subject and sees this as a community-splintering practice. Yes, Butler acknowledges, "universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did"-- when Mohanty entered the conversation five years earlier--but the difference-hostile category "women" seems to persist. The result, Butler argues, is a continuing engagement in alienating identity politics:

The premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent suggests the necessary limits of identity politics. (Butler 1990, 6)

Butler throws a wrench in the universal category "women" by challenging one of the tenets on which it is built: notions of biology/embodiment as a stable shared "reality" upon which feminists can found a political identity. Butler's theory of performativity, in demonstrating the ways gender is an active and unstable series of acts rather than a direct offshoot of "natural" sex, does more than just challenge our cultural conception of gender. It also complicates the body itself. Butler seeks to transform feminist discourse that posits the body "as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed . . . a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related," in order to suggest instead that "'the body' is itself a construction" (Butler 1990, 12). Butler shows how the performance of gender, rather than simply embodying either a "normal" or improper representation of sex, actually brings the body into discursive being. *Gender Trouble* troubles the teleology of sex/gender, showing the fallacy of this

hierarchical binary, and in so doing, disturbs liberal humanist notions of the body/mind split as well.

While Judith Butler began pushing against the boundaries of the unyielding liberal humanist body through theorization of gender performance, Donna J. Haraway used critical analysis of scientific discourse and field study, alongside an exploration of human-technology relations, to suggest a new way of imagining feminist subjectivity. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Haraway undertakes a complex critique that explores the intersections of capitalist ideologies, the reconstitution of cultural narratives in primatology, and group dynamics in women's studies. Haraway's central interests, among them understanding how the cultural narrative of hierarchy and dominance has been written into scientific research, prefigure significant aspects of contemporary feminist theory. Interest in ecology and the environment, technology, and western capitalism all play a part in Haraway's text: three interlocked issues that inform various branches of contemporary feminism. What Haraway is interested in is identifying an alternative to the narratives of dominance constantly reasserted in scientific discourse (as elsewhere), and she believes that "efforts to come to linguistic terms with the unrepresentability, historical contingency, artifactuality, and yet spontaneity, necessity, fragility, and stunning profusions of 'nature' can help us refigure the kind of persons we might be. These persons can no longer be, if they ever were, master subjects, nor alienated subjects, but--just possibly--multiply heterogeneous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents" (Haraway 1991, 3). The conceptual alternative Haraway proposes is the "cyborg." As a "kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self," Haraway envisions the cyborg (a human fused "with animals and machines") as a counter to the dominant capitalist ideology that makes of the body a consumable possession that must be protected. A cyborg is, by definition, a split, inhomogeneous, heterogeneous body, intertwined with the environment: there are no inviolable boundaries around or within the cyborg (Haraway, 1991). Though popular images of smooth-surfaced, glinting steel robots might suggest a Henry Rollins-esque impenetrability, Haraway's construction of the cyborg challenges the popular, hyper-masculinized vision of technology to offer an alternative Leigh Shoemaker would appreciate.

Donna Haraway and Judith Butler effectively engaged in discursive deconstructions of the body and the redolent binaries informing western conceptions of the embodied self: body/mind, sex/gender, nature/culture. In 2000, with the publication of *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling--with a background in both biology and women's studies--pushed this deconstruction a step further. Fausto-Sterling mirrors Haraway in her contention that the dualistic system that still informs western ontology in science and elsewhere must be replaced by the "developmental systems theory" that recognizes development as "a process of emergence" (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 27). Paying attention to the constant becoming of being will help us understand the co-constitutive relationships of sex/gender, nature/culture, etc. While portions of Fausto-Sterling's text draw a similar thread through scientific study of sex as that Haraway earlier articulated, showing the investment of cultural narratives in discourse that claims an "objective" and "factual" status, her work

focuses more exclusively on how this manifests in conceptualizing sexuality and the body. Fausto-Sterling propels identity critiques forward through her well-supported contention that “as we grow and develop, we literally, not just ‘discursively’ (that is, through language and cultural practices), construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh. To understand this claim, we must recode the distinctions between the physical and the social body” (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 20). How does Fausto-Sterling’s proof that the body itself--all of the various biological systems that make up “sex”--is in a constant state of becoming impact our (feminists and the broader political culture) concept of identity? While the dominant strain may still speak to us, as it did to Leigh Shoemaker and Rebecca Walker, of an oppositional response to the threat of dissolving boundaries, it is important that (again like Shoemaker and Walker) feminists see the promise that inheres within this lost faith in immutable corporeality. Taken together, Butler, Haraway, and Fausto-Sterling’s texts encourage their readers to recognize not just the schisms and instability of the self, a seemingly deconstructive experience, but to understand that this self is mutable because of how intimately connected our bodies are to all that surrounds us: nature, culture, technology, and possibly most significantly for feminist praxis, other human beings.

For me, the work that has arisen out of the sex/gender debate creates a positive rupture in theorizing identity central to what I believe is a productive and coalition-building feminist methodology. While attempting to plot out the shifting landscape of feminism and thinking through the methodological approach within contemporary work I wanted to articulate, I found myself drawn toward those feminists who propose a philosophy that privileges flux. For example, Rosie Braidotti’s focus on materiality leads to a particularly rich post-structuralist re-imagining of identity: For Braidotti, “the definition of a person’s identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation” (Braidotti 2). In this passage from *Metamorphoses*, as in Braidotti’s later work *Transpositions*, we hear clear echoes of Haraway. As is the case in many of these reconstructions, the focus is placed on movement, on the borders where identities collide and transform. Rather than re-illustrating the notion of flux, I want to ever-so-slightly shift this construction through the conception of personal/group porousness, making use of a metaphor in which man-made materials and nature collide.

About ten years ago the expansive cement patio surrounding a friend’s pool showed undeniable wear, namely in the form of sizable cracks throughout. Various contractors presented replacement options, including, of course, new cement, despite the obvious failure of this technique to withstand the wear and tear of environmental shifts over time. What was eventually installed was a sand-based brick construction. In this method of paving, the contractors spread a thick, smooth layer of sand on the ground, after which red bricks are laid diagonally in an interlocking design. No chemical hardening substance is added to the sand. Nothing is poured between the bricks. Instead of a flat, perfectly uniform layer of gray cement quadrants, the pool is now surrounded by comparatively mobile bricks, in a system that recognizes the necessity of allowing for

environmental change and impact. The weather-driven expansion and contraction that create fissures in a cement patio over time do no damage, and the nearly constant rain that falls in Portland seeps right through the bricks and into the sand beneath, rather than being directed along flat planes toward plastic gutters. This new patio is porous. Through time, human contact, and environmental changes, the bricks erode ever so slightly, shift in tandem, and the patio changes subtly. And it is this ability of each individual brick's physical body to undergo change, along with the design that enables the entire compilation of bricks to shift together, that makes the new system stronger than the old. One thing I see drawing together the polyvalent work of contemporary feminists is not just a discussion of flux, but also a recognition of the perviousness or porousness of individual identity. If we acknowledge this state of being, illustrated so convincingly by Butler, Haraway, Fausto-Sterling, and others, then the multiple affecting elements touched on in their work must all be seen as relevant fields of feminist inquiry: science, culture, sexuality, ecology, technology, etc. What can help the thematically divergent work being done by feminists in these fields coalesce is the interest they share in exposing our porousness, our connectivity, and in doing so, replacing the hierarchy/domination-based thought that still informs many world systems. As feminists in multiple disciplines touch one another through intellectual and activist exchanges, individuals and fields (ideally) change shape accordingly, surviving the multiple shifts in academic perspectives toward feminist work and gender studies through the vigilant maintenance of a porous consciousness.

I hope that my brick-by-brick image of feminist community does not suggest a romantic, perfectly coalesced, and dissension-free vision of contemporary feminism. Not only is this not plausible, history has shown us that such a goal leads to a "universalist" stance and silenced voices. As many before me have demonstrated, such a form of group identity relies on a discursively violent oppositional consciousness that frequently leads to villainization of Others (whether those others are "patriarchy" or "Feminists" themselves) and rewrites the dominance hierarchy of liberal humanist ontology into the community. This is why I would rather see a foundation of sand than one of cement, and a series of mobile and constitutionally vulnerable bricks rather than flat planes of seemingly impervious gray matter. Many of the debates I have already touched on, and some I have not here discussed--the generation gap, theoretical versus activist work, the relevance of popular culture critique, in/exclusiveness of the movement, and fear of essentialist paradigms--continue to inform self-reflections on the state of feminism. In fact, each one of these debates constitute the subject of multiple essays in one of the most recent third wave collections, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Gillis, How, and Munford, 2007). But as Imelda Whelehan argues in her foreword, increasing awareness of the fracturing capacity of claims to a singular group identity have brought about a shift in the handling of these conflicts:

For so long we (I and other commentators on the second wave) have pointed out that while no one 'owns' feminism, the worst conflicts within feminist politics were effectively about ownership and colonization. Third wave feminists seem content to move forward on the basis that feminism is not owned – itself refreshing – and in so doing have thrown all the certainties up in the air, perhaps to resolve themselves as something new and challenging. (Whelehan 2007, xv)

In the collection's introduction, the editors seem less optimistic about bids for ownership; they continue to see this issue as a "contentious one," but simultaneously, their discussion demonstrates the expansion of a third wave interest in coalitions and continuities, rather than negation, as well as pointing toward the "rich and diverse intellectual and cultural terrain" of contemporary feminism (Whelehan 2007, xxiii, xxx). While the adoption of "third wave" as a collective identity may not encompass all of the work being done by feminists either in academia or as activists, it does help create a space for critical conversations about that work.

Is there a way to encompass all feminist work? As Alison Stone argues, expanding on a concept Judith Butler and others have described, it may be more efficacious and descriptively accurate to relinquish a linear or cohesive feminist history (present, and future) for a genealogical understanding. Stone ties feminists together through a "history of overlapping chains of interpretation, within which all women are situated" (Stone 2007, 17). This image seems equally appropriate to contemporary feminism: while feminists today do not all share an "agenda," they are tied together by overlapping investments in interrogating systems through a lens that has been at least tinted by established feminist discourses. And for those who are engaged in a critical conversation about feminism, the prevalent tone is one of expansion and inclusion through the illumination of various ways in which we might challenge a stolid/stable theorization of identity. Susan Stryker expands our notion of "transgender phenomena" to show how these moments "simultaneously threaten to refigure the basic conceptual and representational framework within which the category 'woman' has been conventionally understood, deployed, embraced and resisted" (Stryker 2007, 60). Stryker's essay is deeply interested in demonstrating one more challenge to a simplistic conception of "identity," as she convincingly argues that transgender, like woman or man, gay or lesbian, oozes through such identitarian boundaries into multiple cultural significations. And in an essay that seeks to address the often contentious issue frequently raised in debates over ecofeminist theory, Niamh Moore describes ecofeminist grassroots activism to challenge a dualistic vision that pits essentialism against anti-essentialism in a theoretical struggle. Moore shows the ways in which the "Friends of Clayoquot Sound" engaged "in a process of refiguring the project of feminism" as a methodology for "challenging all oppressions" (Moore 2007, 138, 135). And she encourages a vision of feminism as something that is constantly redefined "through processes... rather than through the construction of any identity politics" (Moore 2007, 135). Stryker and Moore's essays are linked both in the methodology that encourages them to challenge identity politics through recognition of a feminism of emergence/flux, and in their desire to tackle issues that are quite clearly tied to a sense of social justice, impacting both men's and women's lives now. These two important shared goals, in my mind, link many of the voices of contemporary feminism, demonstrating that the "personal"--for certainly our ontology of individual identity may be considered a personal concern--and the "communal" are intimately connected.

Struggles for ownership of feminism and oppositional consciousness still inflect some third wave texts, but the majority of work being done now is actively engaged in coalition building and invested with a sense of group-fortified individual purpose(s) that do not

envison internal differences as, by necessity, a source of disempowerment. For every moment when a feminist hyperbolically reasserts identity politics--for example, Merri Lisa Johnson's admittedly amusing image of the Feminist predecessor who is not just prudish, but actually a sadist bent on making her feel as if she must be "corseted in theory, sitting in a straight-backed chair, facing away from the screen in flawless self-abnegation"--there are a proliferation of texts that demonstrate movement away from acceptance of easily packaged identity commodities, or that simply shift the focus to feminism in action (Johnson 2007, 8). While it is true that imagining a conflict-free, static representative of oppression (poor Laura Mulvey wears black patent leather in Johnson's fantasy) can be politically efficacious, it is neither a necessary nor a philosophically advisable methodology for creating feminist community. How can third wave feminists, in all of their diversity, continue to avoid the commodification and attendant polarization that occurred post-second-wave? Many feminists are already producing this shift by rendering the two-fold engagement I described above manifest in their work: both the subject matter and the new feminist "identity" are constituted by a series of porous and mutable selves shifting together. The political significance of such coalition-building is made clear not only in intrafeminist conversations such as those that take place in Gillis, Howe, and Munford's *Third Wave Feminism*, but in the type of work being undertaken by contemporary feminists who are propelling forward critical analysis of globalization, technology, and corporate hegemony's impacts on civil rights. Inderpal Grewal in *Transnational America*, Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender*, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her powerful critique of globalization and domination-focused contemporary enactments of world religions, all ask how normalizing or hierarchy-based political practices materially impact people's lives (Grewal 2005, Butler 2004, Ruether 2005). Consciously or not, we project our own conceptions of subjectivity onto the groups we are a part of, whether a small local group or a larger community (class, race, gender, nation). As such, in order to maintain a productive coalition contemporary feminists must be conscious of the way a personal politics of identity impacts praxis. If I can truly begin to see myself as porous, shape-shifting, and elementally infected/affected by all the environments I move through on a daily basis, it becomes increasingly difficult to first, deny the importance of seeking equity and justice in daily practice, and second, to hold onto a notion of group coalition structured by hardened borders and oppositional ideologies.

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