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Examination of all known U.S. Third Wave feminist literature reveals that there is no coherent unitary theory. Explication of the Third Wave addresses the generational and cultural strife within the feminist family and provides a modern feminist response to the changing faces and locations of the isms. Identification of the wave’s primary characteristics leads to questions about the nature of womanhood, sisterhood, power and feminism. The Third Wave is a modern iteration of feminism that emphasizes multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance, cyber culture and relational power.
The Third Wave: Not Your Mothers’ Feminism

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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DEDICATION

To Mother and Dad who taught me to think. To Erik who reminded me to listen to my own voice. To David, my beloved, who heard me. And especially to Jacqueline Gail, my daughter, who taught me the power of a gentle whisper.

Thank you.
1. INTRODUCTION

The same water – a different wave.
What matters is that it is a wave.
What matters is that the wave will return.
What matters is that it will always return different.
What matters most of all: however different the returning wave,
it will always return as a wave of the sea.
~ Marina Tsvetaeva

The water of feminism has rippled through U.S. mores, culture and history since the drafting of the U.S. Constitution when Abigail Adams\(^1\) pleaded with her husband to “Remember the Ladies” (Rossi, 1988; Schneir, 1972). An emotionally charged political and social climate coupled with the media’s pronouncement that feminism is dead ushered in a new wave in the 1990s. Books aimed at consciousness raising in a younger generation of women and heightened awareness of institutionalized sexism and racism revealed by a contentious Supreme Court nomination drove the beneficiaries of Second Wave feminism to action. A swell in the feminist sea crashed on the shore of contemporary America. Third Wave feminism was born.

Established feminists both in and out of the academy debate the validity of Third Wave feminism. This thesis addresses the question “What is Third Wave feminism in the contemporary U.S. moment?” in order to demonstrate the wave’s claim to feminism. Explication of Third Wave U.S. feminism examines the generational and cultural strife within the feminist family and provides a modern feminist response to the changing faces and locations of the isms. Clarification of the Third Wave presents an opportunity for feminists to move away from destructive internal strife towards understanding and synthesis (Bailey, 1997). It creates hope for the future by offering an updated feminist response to new, emerging and familiar expressions of intersectionality (Flanders, 2009).
The Third Wave is a modern iteration of feminism that emphasizes multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance and relational power. The numerical designation and wave metaphor are used to demark a new forward facing form of feminism that is rooted in established feminist praxis. “Many young feminists today are choosing to call themselves the Third Wave in order to herald the future” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 69). In the course of writing this thesis, I discovered that I am a Third Wave feminist.

Declared a movement in 1992 by Rebecca Walker, Third Wave feminism is frequently mentioned, discussed and labeled however, explanations and definitions remain vague.

Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don’t prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminist feminist. I am the Third Wave (Walker, 2006, p. 5).

Third Wave feminism has increasingly become part of feminist conversation since the publication of Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future in 2000. Manifesta calls young women to action and emphasizes activism and awareness while offering bits and pieces about the Third Wave. Self identified Third Wave organizations support specific causes, age groups and goals without differentiating the newest feminist wave from its predecessors. The Third Wave Foundation, a prominent New York City based non-profit, identifies itself:

… A feminist, activist foundation that works nationally to support young women and transgender youth ages 15 to 30. Third Wave is led by a board of young women, men, and transgender activists striving to combat inequalities that we ourselves face as a result of our age, gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status, or level of education. By empowering young women and transgender youth nationwide, Third Wave is building a lasting foundation for young feminists around the country (Foundation, 2006).
This statement establishes feminist goals and a target audience in the name of the Third Wave without clearly delineating the meaning of the wave.

This inquiry into the nature of Third Wave feminism addresses adult individuals, groups and communities who identify as feminist. It speaks about feminist waves in general rather than specific people or subcategories. Groups such as Girls Gone Wild are excluded. The troubling “I’m not a feminist, but…” declaration is also excluded. Twenty first century Third Wave U.S. feminism is the primary focus.

1.1 Overview of a Wave

The phrase “Third Wave” originated in the 1980s from little known and nearly forgotten origins. Women of color used it to describe a new feminist movement that would recognize, analyze and fight against internalized racism. A never published Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press anthology by M. Jacqui Alexander, Lisa Albrecht and Mab Segrets, The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism, was to announce and explore the antiracist lens of the Third Wave (Gilley & Zabel, 2005; Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2007; Hammer, 2002). “Women of color and working-class women were far ahead of their time in envisioning a more pluralistic feminism” that addressed intersectionality as experienced by women of color and working class women (Jacob & Licona, 2005, p. 204). The publishing house closed without completing the volume, thus orphaning the original context of the Third Wave (Gillis, et al., 2007, p. xxiii). It now popularly refers to feminists who grew up with “feminism in the water” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 21).

Growing awareness of economic systems, global destruction, postcolonialism and internal critiques of Second Wave feminism coupled with anti-feminist backlash and the post-feminist movement have shaped the Third Wave. Work by bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins and others created a world where the matrix of oppression and the voices of the margin are a familiar part of feminist analysis (Labaton & Martin, 2004). Third Wavers acknowledge feminism’s struggle with
racism, classism and heterosexism. We reject homogenous definitions, analysis and solutions while expecting pluralism, diversity, alternatives and inclusion.

In the U.S., the Third Wave is primarily focused on cultural practices and individual rights. Its avoidance of overly homogenous definitions and categories allows analysis and problem solving that takes the multiplicity of experiences and identities into account. Community is built via confessional culture and cyber culture. “Part of this movement entails personal experiences and individual perspectives taking the place of identity politics or a monolithic theory” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004, p. 91). This signifies a shift from traditional feminism’s focus on group identity and legal rights.

1.2 Assumptions

This inquiry rests on four pivotal assumptions. They provide a platform of understanding that will not be argued here. First, women are oppressed. In the words of Marilyn Frye in The Politics of Reality, “Women are oppressed, as women. Members of a certain racial and/or economic groups and classes, both the males and the females, are oppressed as members of those races and/or classes. But men are not oppressed as men” [emphasis in the original] (1983, p. 16). Second, feminism exists and is a response to women’s oppression. I will not be addressing post-feminism or post-feminist theory.

Third, waves are a metaphor for the changes within feminism. I recognize the inherent racism, classism and heterosexism of traditional wave thinking that primarily connects wave development to privileged white women’s experiences. The First and Second Waves were marked by privileged white women’s goals and accomplishments (Jacob & Licona, 2005; Radford-Hill, 2002; Roth; Springer, 2002). Wave accomplishments were built on the back of women of color and working-class women:

If we consider the First Wave as that moment of organizing encompassing woman suffrage and the Second Wave as the women’s liberation/women’s rights activism of the late 1960s, we effectively
Third Wave emphasis on cyber culture signals that socioeconomic class remains problematic within feminism. I also recognize the European and North American focus of the applied wave metaphor. “I have noticed that Western feminists, especially American feminists, consider and treat their Arab counterparts as ‘other,’ that is third world women who do not understand the struggles of women in the first world” (Darraj, 2003, p. 200). As my focus is on Third Wave U.S. feminism, I am less concerned with this problem. It does, however, reveal a blind spot in U.S. feminist analysis in general.

Finally, the Third Wave exists as a social movement. A social movement is a large, formal or informal, collective of individuals and organizations devoted to social change. Although the Third Wave is younger, smaller and less developed movement than the Second Wave, it has been a documented part of both formal and informal literature since 1992. Books, articles, magazines, websites, blogs, social networking sites and tweets are and have been dedicated to the Third Wave. There are formal and informal cultural groups including political, social and activist groups focused on the Third Wave.

1.3 Terminology

Eight terms are critical to this inquiry: oppression, patriarchy, feminine/femininity, masculine/masculinity, woman, feminism, isms and waves. A brief overview of each term will clarify my meaning and set the tone for the remaining inquiry.

Marilyn Frye (1983) expertly defines oppression as being caught between barriers that are related in such way that one is reduced, restricted and/or immobilized. She describes oppression as a birdcage in order to provide a visual explanation of an experienced phenomenon. Individual experiences or facets of oppression are the
seemingly insignificant wires of the cage. Together all of the wires make an inescapable cage of oppression.

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold the institutional and personal power, dominate or rule over women. Kate Millett’s classic definition is helpful for understanding the depth and breath of patriarchy.

Our society…is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances – in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands (Millett, 1971, p. 25).

Men are granted this power not through their own merit or achievement but through simply being born male.

Feminine/femininity describes the set of behavioral and physical traits subscribed to women. Masculine/masculinity describes the set of behavioral and physical traits subscribed to men. Neither set is rooted in biology or physiology. Patriarchy values masculinity over femininity.

A woman is anyone who is perceived as a woman. She is one who is expected to be subservient to men. Catharine MacKinnon (1987) asserts, “Women/men is a distinction not just of difference, but of power and powerlessness. Power/powerlessness is the sex difference” (p. 123).

Lani Roberts defines feminism as being for women. Feminism seeks to affirm all women, to give voice to our inner selves and to release the patriarchal leash that holds us fast. “Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race and class oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 33).

Isms refers to a whole category of words including sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and ableism. The isms create an interlocking network of oppression and privilege that shapes one’s choices, experiences, community and life (Collins, 2000). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes the isms as a matrix of domination. The matrix is an “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate,
develop and are contained…a historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence” (p. 228). The isms weave a web of tightly interrelated oppressions that shapes our existence based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.

A three-part wave metaphor is used to describe U.S. feminist history. The First Wave encompasses the early feminist movement that agitated for women’s legal rights including suffrage, the right to own property, the right to sue and the ability to sign contracts. It is traditionally recognized as 1848 (Seneca Falls Convention) through the mid 1920s however, a more inclusive and accurate model dates to the early antebellum period.\(^3\) Often the ideas and practices associated with each wave existed before they were recognized on a larger level as a wave (Jacob & Licona, 2005). For example, Black female slaves resisted gendered violence before the call for sisterhood rang out in 1848 (A. Davis, 1995; White, 1985). I recognize that even this modified timeline/definition of the First Wave excludes other experiences of resistance such as Native American women and Chinese women in the U.S.

The Second Wave began with the revitalization of U.S. feminism in the 1960s. Second Wave feminism focused on expanding women’s rights to full human rights. Activists worked for professional and educational equal opportunities, reproductive control, childcare and continued legal advances that established women’s rights as human rights. The slogan “the personal is political” arose from the Second Wave women’s movement. The Second Wave “taught us that women could be strong and that [we] could use [our] strength to challenge patriarchal power and to fight to overcome oppression” (Shoemaker, 1997, p. 1116). An inclusive and diverse understanding of the Second Wave acknowledges its growth through the 1980s.

For those who had been active feminists in the late 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s was a decade of integration, solidification, and institution building. Much of the theorizing at this time circulated around two general themes: the experiences of women of color and issues of sexuality (Siegel, 2007, p. 107).
The Third Wave grew out of this awareness and work. The dialog within and without feminism molded Third Wave perspectives on women, men, intersexed individuals, society and culture. Just as waves in the ocean overlap each other as one ebbs and the other flows, the Second Wave continues today.

Building on the First Wave’s fight for suffrage and the Second Wave’s emphasis on full political, cultural and economic citizenship, the Third Wave ushers in an increasingly multicultural and inclusive feminism.
Abigail Adams was married to John Adams, signer of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, contributor and signer of the U.S. Constitution and the second U.S. President.

Many people, especially young women, say, “I’m not a feminist, but I believe in women’s rights,” “I’m not a feminist, but I believe everyone is equal,” etc. They claim feminist ideas and values, but will not claim the feminist title/label.

The U.S. Antebellum period generally refers to the time after the American Revolution and before the U.S. Civil War. The period was roughly from 1789 to 1849. There is debate about the start and ends dates.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous 1792 work *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* was an influential component of U.S. First Wave feminism although the author herself was British.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been seventeen years since Rebecca Walker, daughter of renowned Black feminist theorist and author Alice Walker, officially launched the Third Wave. Library shelves and magazine racks are packed with writings lauding, promoting, criticizing and opposing feminism’s newest family member. There is no consensus on how to identify the Third Wave. The literature disagrees with itself.

In an attempt to bring order to the chaos of Third Wave literature and demonstrate the wave’s feminist nature, I have organized it into five themes: categories, characteristics, focus, controversy and the wave metaphor problem. My analysis further divides each theme into subsections and identifies additional questions and conflicts within the sections. This discussion is limited to U.S. Third Wave feminism. The goal of this literature review is to weave the multiple strands of Third Wave writings into a whole, identify the gaps in the theory and demonstrate how my thesis fits into the growing body of Third Wave knowledge.

2.1 Categories

Defining the Third Wave is difficult. The “who” of the wave is easier to define than the “what” (Coleman, 2006). Careful reading of the literature reveals three categorization strategies: generational rebellion, radical libertarian feminism reborn and cultural change.

2.1.1 Generational Rebellion

There are multiple descriptions of the Third Wave within generational thinking. The wave is defined as those who came of age in the 1990s (Henry, 2003; Jervis & Zeisler, 2006) or in the 1980s and 90s (Gilley & Zabel, 2005). It is everyone under 35 (Snyder, 2008). It also refers to young feminists activists (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Gilley & Zabel, 2005). “Young” remains hazily defined.
Generational thinking describes the Third Wave as a struggle between mothers and daughters (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Gilley & Zabel, 2005). It characterizes the generational split as a rebellion where Third Wave identity is formed as a rejection of Second Wave feminism (Henry, 2003). Younger feminists, we daughters, are rejecting establish feminists, our mothers, by committing “psychological matricide” (Rubin, 2005, p. 450) to separate and identify ourselves thus fulfilling our “romantic ideal of generational solidarity in rebellion” (Kelly, 2005, p. 242). A generational split between mothers and daughters is not new to feminism. Second Wavers split from their own mothers in order to connect with First Wavers, their grandmothers and great grandmothers (Rubin, 2005).

Describing the Third Wave as a generational rebellion disrupts cross-generational lines of communication by dismissing the daughters and demonizing the mothers. To illustrate: The definition of woman is a controversial topic between the Second and Third Waves. The Second Wave generally uses a biological or cultural definition of woman while the Third Wave views womanhood as a more flexible state of being that draws on multiple factors. Third Wave’s definition builds upon and expands the Second Wave’s understanding of womanhood. There is debate between the two factions about the validity of this change. Second Wavers are concerned that it disrupts the sisterhood by over generalizing and giving anyone access to the category without awareness or experience of gendered oppression. Third Wavers strongly believe an increasingly fluid definition of woman unites more than it divides. The generational rebellion lens distorts the debate into a us versus them split along age and ends the conversation. The daughters are depicted as complaining while the mothers are painted as condescending (Henry, 2003; Siegel, 2007; Snyder, 2008). Each faction fails to listen to and respect the other’s experiences, insights and accomplishments (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Seely, 2007; Siegel, 2007).

Patriarchy uses generational thinking to demonize feminism and reduce feminist discourse to family infighting. To further illustrate: Patriarchy points to the
debate about womanhood and says *Catfight! Down with feminism! Daughters’ reject Mothers’ ideals.*¹ Feminist conversations and contributions are completely dismissed as a tug-of-war between women. “It will take a while before feminists succeed enough so that feminism is not perceived as a gigantic mother who is held responsible for almost everything, while the patriarchy receives terminal gratitude for the small favors it bestows” (Steinem, 1995, pp. xix, xxii).

The mother/daughter or generational metaphor is limitedly useful for describing aspects of Third Wave (Gilley & Zabel, 2005; Jacob & Licona, 2005). The Third Wave is a fluid category (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004) that is artificially constrained by generational analysis (Seely, 2007). Women of color and working-class women have not experienced the same generational Second Wave feminist indoctrination or absorption (Rubin, 2005). The metaphor breaks down outside the privileged white paradigm (Lorber, 2010). For example: Access to paid work outside of the home was a key component of the Second Wave platform, however generations of women of color and working-class women were already working. For them it was a mark of necessity and neither a privilege nor a goal.

The division between waves is not a rebellion. Generational language is used to cover up real political differences between the Second and Third Waves (Hageland, 2001). The Third Wave is building on the Second, not working against it. “We have to make clear to our mothers, our foremothers and ourselves that our actions are not a rebellion but a necessity of speaking our truths; they [our actions] are not against [feminism] but for [feminism]” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 219). “Third Wavers want to live out the rights for which the second generation fought” (Coleman, 2006, p. 94).

### 2.1.2 Radical Libertarian Feminism Reborn

The Third Wave has been compared to radical feminism (Bobel, 2006; Siegel, 2007; Spelman, 2007). It has been called radical libertarian feminism reborn. A short review of feminist theory is helpful for understanding this categorization.
Feminist theory began with the liberal feminism reformist movement. It holds unequal laws and rights responsible for women’s subordination to men. In this view law creates social and political reality. Liberal feminism strives to level the gender playing field by removing all formal and informal barriers to women’s equality (Tong, 1998). Liberal feminism primarily focuses on de jure or legal barriers as the solution to reducing de facto or actual, regardless of law, barriers. The First Wave’s emphasis on women’s suffrage is an excellent example of liberal feminism. Activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul centered their public work on suffrage. They identified women’s inability to vote as the linchpin in our inability to participate fully in society. According to liberalism, attaining the vote and other legal rights would open the doors of equality for women.

Radical feminism moves past liberal feminism’s reform work to focus on oppression. It calls for a revolutionary new way of doing gender and being human. Radical feminism locates women’s oppression in the sex/gender system. The sex/gender system turns women’s biological facts such as reproduction, generally smaller muscle mass, etc. into femininity. It sculpts female babies into women who are eager to be used for men’s sexual, social, personal and cultural pleasure (Roberts, 2008). Rosemarie Putman Tong (1998) divides radical feminism into two schools of thought: radical-cultural and radical-libertarian. Each school offers a different solution to women’s wholesale oppression. Radical-cultural feminists want women to embrace our essential femaleness. We are to rid ourselves of male/masculine influences that pollute our superior female/feminine nature (Tong, 1998). Radical libertarians, on the other hand, seek monoandrogyny or the blending of the best of femininity and masculinity as the solution (Tong, 1998). Radical feminism is rooted in the Second Wave. It seeks to understand and works to define “what is woman?” among other concerns.

Third Wave feminism steps outside the boundaries of both liberal and radical feminism. The “demand for secular freedom [is] vintage radical feminist. But [our] hallmark call for multiplicity [is] Third Wave – as [is] the embrace of the Internet as a
form through which to explore it” (Siegel, 2007, p. 147). Unlike liberal feminists, Third Wavers are not content with the removal of de jure and de facto barriers to women’s equality. We want to move beyond barriers to a new concept of equality, inclusion and community. In contrast with radical feminists, the Third Wave doesn’t expend tremendous energy emphasizing or analyzing the differences between men and women. It neither seeks radical libertarian feminism’s androgyny (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997) nor embraces radical cultural feminisms essentialism (Bobel, 2006). Essentialism argues that there is a basic characteristic or set of characteristics that apply to all members of a category. Feminist essentialism identifies fixed biological or psychological traits that unite women as a group or class. Third Wavers generally reject essentialism. The emphasis is on coalition work rather than essential femininity or androgyny. We eschew concrete gender and sexuality definitions even in context of blending the best of gender’s components. Individual expressions and experiences of gender are valued over a generalized/homogenized ideal (Fixmer & Wood, 2005). The Third Wave negotiates the differences between individuals, groups and communities (Henry, 2003, pp. 215-216).

2.1.3 Cultural Change

The final subset of the literature places the Third Wave in cultural context rather than generational or revisionist (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Garrison, 2000; Jacob & Licona, 2005). This view of the Third Wave sees feminism as a quiet and constant force of cultural change. Feminism, similar to water, is everywhere and in everything. It is unavoidable. Assumed feminism or “feminism in the water” sets Third Wavers apart because we grew up with the privileges, benefits and cultural assumptions created by the Second Wave (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

A cultural shift created the Third Wave (Garrison, 2007; Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Seely, 2007). Third Wave feminists grew up with the benefit of Second Wave accomplishments (Bailey, 1997; Caputi, 2007; Garrison, 2000; Jacob & Licona, 2005; Merriman, 2006; Rundle, 2005). Second Wave achievements such as de jure equal pay
for equal work, Title IX and beauty myth discussions have broadened women’s social and cultural options. No longer limited to housewife, teacher, nurse, librarian or mother, we now have a broader range of professional and personal life choices. This cultural change created a platform or jumping off point for the next feminist vision and paved the way for a new feminist cohort that didn’t need to fight for every basic human right. Third Wavers want to live out and expand the rights the Second Wave worked to achieve (Coleman, 2006; Drake, 1997; Heywood & Drake, 1997).

Third Wavers grew up after the so-called death of feminism. It was considered unnecessary because gender equality was allegedly achieved (Bailey, 1997; Gilley & Zabel, 2005). Younger women’s budding awareness of the complex relationships between racism, classism and gender oppression coupled with the desire for change catapulted the Third Wave into existence. We realized that women were still not free. A new cohort discovered that “feminism enables revolitional forms of consciousness when it is understood as ideology-praxis that strategically invokes the experiences of women across different locals and identities” (Garrison, 2000, p. 160). The Third Wave “came to feminist consciousness in a different climate” (Siegel, 2007, p. 151). “Founded on Second Wave theory and activism” (Genz, 2006, p. 333), it is a revival of feminism. Second Wave feminism has been criticized for failing to deal adequately with sexual difference, sexual pleasure, race and transgenderism. But is also can be celebrated for opening up discussion of these issues and for inspiring the development of multiple feminisms that focus on precisely these matters (Gilmore, 2004, p. 387). The Third Wave is another shift within the organic family of feminisms (Braithwaite, 2002).

2.1.4 Evaluation of Categories

Third Wave literature may be divided into three categories: generational rebellion, radical libertarian feminism reborn and cultural change. Each offers a different perspective on the new wave. While the first two categories fail to
accurately describe the Third Wave, the final category makes a good start with its recognition of Third Wave as an emerging theory rooted in the Second Wave.

Generational rebellion narrowly categorizes the Third Wave as an age-based group characterized by generational conflict. This definition incorrectly makes wave membership age dependent. It portrays dialog between feminists as a catfight instead of a useful, albeit passionate, exchange of ideas. It reduces feminism to a club instead of a theory with ideas, vision and solutions. A strictly generational understanding of the Third Wave fails to answer the question “What is the Third Wave?”

Thinking of the Third Wave as radical libertarian feminism reborn is also inaccurate. The Third Wave is neither a rebirth nor essentialist. This perspective misses or glosses over Third Wave contributions to feminism. It omits multiplicity, playful resistance, the wave’s expanded/modified expression of woman and sisterhood and its evolving power dynamic. The Third Wave is not radical libertarian feminism reborn.

Cultural change is the most accurate description of the Third Wave found in the literature. It appreciates that the wave is not age-based, not a rebellion and not a repeat of an old theory. While not erroneously aligning the wave with other feminist philosophies, it does recognize that the Third Wave is born of the Second Wave. Unfortunately, cultural change is an incomplete description of the Third Wave. It acknowledges the wave’s roots, but fails to outline the body of the theory. Third Wave theory stems from women’s reactions to the alleged death of feminism in the early 1990s. Third Wavers, members or practitioners of the wave, can be any age. It is important to distinguish between the philosophy and its members when trying to understand the wave. Women of any age can claim the Third Wave. Describing Third Wave as cultural change is a good beginning, but still doesn’t answer the question “What is the Third Wave?”

Defining the “who” of the Third Wave sheds little light on the meaning of the wave. What is the Third Wave? What are its characteristics? How is it different from
prior waves? What new ideas, analysis or strategies does it have to offer the feminist and general community?

2.2 Characteristics

The literature ascribes a variety of characteristics to the Third Wave. These characteristics are presented piece meal and the literature frequently disagrees with itself thus failing to offer a complete description of the wave. For clarity, I’ve divided the characteristics into eight groups. The group labels are a mixture of my own and preexisting classifications.

2.2.1 Born of Second Wave

Third Wave feminism was born of the Second Wave. It arose from the challenges and critiques women of color posed to Second Wave white feminists (Heywood & Drake, 1997) and the political/cultural conflicts of the 1990s (Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Siegel, 1997). It is a “response to the debates [about racism, classism and heterosexism] of the 1980s that hobbled feminist theory and practice” (Snyder, 2008, p. 183). A good portion of feminist discourse in the 1980s was self-reflective. Instead of directly challenging patriarchy, feminists challenged patriarchal influences such as racist ideas and language within the movement. This internal work was needed in order to create stronger, more viable and inclusive responses to women’s oppression. Additionally, the Third Wave is an outcry against the deeply seated misogyny reveal by the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings (Lorber, 2010; Walker, 1995).

The Third Wave is “a generation wedged between old definitions of feminism that no longer work and new ones that have yet to be fully lived out” (Siegel, 2007, p. 158). The “old definitions of feminism” as understood and practiced in general society felt too rigid for many younger women who were raised to think of feminists as angry, bitter, hairy, man-hating lesbians. Feminism was, in their eyes, a narrow prescription
of ideas and behaviors with far more don’ts than dos. They certainly weren’t going
to identify with those nasty feminists who were out to rob men of their rights?7

In response to cultural events and frustration with popularly defined feminism,
young women started writing about their experiences as women and creating activist
projects that challenged traditional gender expectations. For example: Kristina Wong,
a young Asian American woman fed up with Asian porn, developed a mock porn
website featuring Asian women. Clients expecting an eyeful actually received an
earful including testimony, video clips and images about the harmful personal, cultural
and social effects of porn. Typical Asian American culture would never expect a
young woman to respond to pornography with mock porn. Feminism as understood by
Wong and other young women like her would also never expect a young woman to
engage in pornography as activism. Wong’s misunderstanding of feminism illustrates
younger women’s buy-in to the dominant culture’s stereotype of feminists as uptight,
sexually repressed women. She represents a large cohort of women who grew up
complacent with feminism’s achievements and ignorant of earlier activism. Wong
began redefining feminism when she channeled her anger and misinformation into a
Third Wave activism project. “What I didn’t realize until later was that, in challenging
what I thought was wrong with feminism, I was actually doing feminism” (Wong,
2003, p. 307).

Feminist discourse around racism, classism and heterosexism within the
movement shaped Third Wave thinking (Bailey, 1997; Baumgardner & Richards,
2000; Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Garrison, 2000, 2007; Gilmore, 2001; Guy-Sheftall,
2002; Harde & Harde, 2003; Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Seely, 2007; Valenti, 2007;
Wong, 2003). Recognizing that racism is still alive in feminism (Bailey, 1997; Bobel,
2006; Gilley & Zabel, 2005), the Third Wave rejects the whiteness of Second Wave
practice (Guy-Sheftall, 2002; Rubin, 2005; Valenti, 2007) and identifies with the
writings of Second Wave women of color (Rubin, 2005). “Third Wave Black
feminists openly state [their] appreciation for the Black Power movement and the
Second Wave Black feminists who went before them” (Pough, 2003, p. 235).8 The
Third Wave claims sensitivity to classism (Bobel, 2006; Gilley & Zabel, 2005) and heterosexism (Bobel, 2006; Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Wong, 2003) within the movement and in general society. It recognizes that “if we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire” (Levy, 2005, p. 200). This expanded awareness of human sexuality makes the Third Wave a welcoming home for trans issues (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). Born of the Second Wave, the Third Wave is emerging as its own multicultural, inclusive and pluralistic feminist movement that is working to transcend the race and class struggles of prior movements.

Daughters run the risk of inheriting both our mothers’ accomplishments and their errors. It is important that the Third Wave remember its roots. “Second Wave ideas must be kept in the Third Wave, and perhaps reinvented, in order to challenge society and Third Wave feminists, because there can never be one feminism” (Harde & Harde, 2003, p. 135). We also need to strike out on our own to find new solutions to our experience of patriarchal oppression. History “warns against the colonizing potential of dominant discourse” (Caputi, 2007, p. 28). The dominant voice in any discussion runs the risk of overwhelming and/or silencing its smaller counterpoint. The majority can win through sheer volume over the smaller minority.

The tug-of-war between Second and Third wavers may also be interpreted as a dialectic instead of opposition. A good dialectic synthesizes the thesis and antithesis. In this case, the Second Wave is the thesis or first/primary message. The Third Wave is the antithesis or second/contrasting message. Ideally an exchange between the two will create a new and better message or the synthesis, which then becomes the thesis. Unfortunately, Third Wave experiences of the conflict with the Second Wave do not reflect a dialectic relationship. It is my hope that an improved understanding of the Third Wave will facilitate future exchanges between the two waves. The Third Wave is new to the feminist pool and its contributions could be lost in the greater waters of the Second Wave. A balance is needed between remembering Second Wave accomplishments/insights and repeating the mistakes of the past.
2.2.2 Rejects Overly Homogenous “Woman”

Second Wave feminism built a collation around a generalized understanding of women’s experiences.

Classic second-wave feminism argues that in patriarchal society women share common experiences, and through a sharing of their experiences with one another in consciousness-raising groups, they generate knowledge about their own oppression. Once they realize what they thought were personal problems are widely shared, they can see the ways in which the patriarchal structure of society produces such problems, and the personal becomes political (Snyder, 2008, p. 184).

The Second Wave’s generalization of women’s experiences created a group that could struggle for progress and remain connected to each other (Caputi, 2007). This connectively was extremely useful for forwarding the wave’s critical social and political agenda however, it has also left the movement open to criticism.

Critics within and without feminism observe that expressions of this idea of womanhood are centered on privileged white women’s experiences (Springer, 2002), neglectful of transgndered realities (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004) and generally overly homogenous. For example, a great deal of Second Wave work centered on women’s access to the professions and the ability to work for a wage outside of the home. This goal focused on the needs and experiences of middle class white heterosexual women to the exclusion of women of color, working class women and others who were already expected to work outside the home. Women’s experiences and needs are broader than that offered by the lens of privileged white women’s reality. Useful Second Wave generalization has morphed into over generalization that excludes more women than it includes.

The Third Wave rejects the Second Wave’s definition of woman (Seely, 2007; Snyder, 2008; Wong, 2003) and objects to over generalized essentialism that creates
homogenized gender categories (Bobel, 2006; Lorber, 2010). The Third Wave deconstructs the category of woman via postmodernism (Gilley & Zabel, 2005) and asserts that womanhood is not a mold, but an expansion of revolutionary ability (Garrison, 2000). Like the Second Wave, the Third claims that sex/gender are learned or constructed characteristics not concrete biological facts and that there are multiple reflections of reality. It strives for an understanding of or articulation about gender built more on fluidity/multiplicity and less on essential characteristics. Building on privileges earned by the Second Wave allows the Third Wave to offer an expanded understanding of what it is to be a woman. “A new culture of open-mindedness is emerging in the Third Wave: there are many ways to be a woman” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004, p. 31).

Current Third Wave writing clearly identifies neither woman nor womanhood. It is uncomfortable with homogeny and alludes to an alternative that is neither fully defined nor explored. The question remains: What is woman or womanhood in the Third Wave?

2.2.3 Multiplicity

Rejection of the overly homogenous woman leads to an increasingly fluid conception of gender, sexuality and identity (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Seely, 2007; Snyder, 2008). This fluidity or multiplicity uses and instead of either/or to connect and analyze reality (Baumgardner & Richards, 2003; Bobel, 2006; Braithwaite, 2002; Caputi, 2007; Findlen, 2001; Gilley & Zabel, 2005; Gilmore, 2001; Henry, 2003; Seely, 2007; Walker, 1992, 1995). An individual may be multiple things or hold multiple positions at one time. “It [is] no longer a matter of either/or” (Siegel, 2007, p. 143). The and is about multiple options on a continuum or gray scale or web. It's about knowing that there are many ways of being that may change and are not limited to singular choices or sets of choices. This knowledge or understanding bumps up against a concrete binary or always yes/always no culture.
This move away from dualism is an outcome of Second Wave work on intersectionality (K. Davis, 2008). In short, multiple forces shape oppression and this multiplicity makes black and white answers inadequate.

Third Wave multiplicity creates space for all sexualities and genders by recognizing the gray areas of the human sexuality and gender continuum (Gilmore, 2004). The wave’s engagement with sexuality is more complex than good/bad or for/against (Drake, 1997). Coupled with resistance to concrete sex and gender definitions, multiplicity makes the Third Wave a good home for transgenderism (Gilley & Zabel, 2005). This emerging awareness via multiplicity of trans issues contributes to the wave’s anti-essentialism (Bobel, 2006). As previously observed, anti-essentialism is the rejection of essential gender characteristics. Multiplicity allows us to see and experience many differing expression of gender as demonstrated by the trans community thus solidifying Third Wavers’ dissatisfaction with essentialism.

The trans community instantiates the binary and appears to undermine the wave’s claim to multiplicity, yet here is the magic of Third Wave. Yes, the trans community does support the gender binary by moving from one point to another. In a truly logical multiplistic world there would be no reason for transitioning between genders however, we all basically operate in this culture of binaries. We are labeled with a binary at birth - boy or girl. Third Wavers resist this binary or blur the line(s) between girl/boy or female/male or flow back and forth between the categories. This makes the Third Wave a good home for the trans community and gives it its claim to multiplicity.

Multiplicity applies to identity, theory and activism (Gilmore, 2001). Third Wavers recognize that while gender is a primary facet of identity it is not the only important identity factor. Race, class and sexuality are also critical and often are part of survival and solidarity strategies (Bobel, 2006). Building on the Second Wave, Third Wavers seek to bring multiplicity firmly into the theoretical/academic and popular fold (Gilmore, 2004).
2.2.4 Plurality

Closely related to multiplicity is the Third Wave’s prescription for culture and society. If individuals are a complex bundle of *ands* then collected groups will also be a mishmash of multiplicity. Multiplistic groups living side-by-side and together create a pluralistic society and culture. Theoretical pluralism instead of inflexible either/or binaries is more practical and accurate (Mack-Canty, 2004). Life is rarely concretely black or white. There are great gray areas that require examination, compromise, acceptance or change. Pluralism allows for this process by welcoming the multitude of expressions and experiences available in a single situation. It is more practical and accurate because, unlike binary analysis and theories, it closely resembles complicated reality. The Third Wave expects pluralism (Braithwaite, 2002; Caputi, 2007; Rundle, 2003, 2005).

2.2.5 Contradiction/Paradox

Contradiction/paradox is an inevitable outcome of the Third Wave’s multiplicity and plurality. Individual and group fluidity involves contradiction and it may create apparent paradoxes between various aspects of participants’ situation(s) and perspective(s) (Braithwaite, 2002; Gilley & Zabel, 2005; Merriman, 2006; Rundle, 2005). My life is an embodiment of contradiction/paradox. To the outside world I appear to be a stay-at-home wife and mother with a young child. In my professional or academic capacity, I am a feminist graduate student working on my women studies and philosophy thesis. These roles and subsequent group memberships seem to be in opposition to each other and their perspectives and needs often conflict however, neither role completely defines me. I am a baby wearing, natural childbirth, bed sharing, organic food eating, hands-on attachment parenting mother who is also a strong, independent feminist woman committed to intellectual and academic pursuits. Negotiation between these two aspects of my identity requires multiplicity and
plurality. While it may look like contradiction/paradox to an outsider, it is my experience of Third Wave feminism.

“Differences between women create fluid and contradictory identities” (Bulbeck, 1999, p. 7). The Third Wave and instead of either/or creates space for complex identities, experiences and realities. This space is filled with contraction/paradox. We, of the Third Wave, move purposely through this space creating solutions to match our needs. “We find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving” (Walker, 1995, p. xxxiii). In defining myself, neither graduate student nor mother is complete. The hybrid category of mother and grad student is also dissatisfactory. I am more mother one day then more student the next. It’s a place of constant change. Add in my positions/perspectives as daughter, sister, neighbor, voter, board member, idealist, etc. and the complexity increases. I’m in a place of flux, ambiguity and contradiction. Since feminist politics must address contradiction as it is women’s experience (Bobel, 2006), Third Wavers find ourselves “living comfortably with paradox” (Siegel, 2007).

Contradiction/paradox are not new components of the feminist experience. Second Wavers lived with complexity and contradiction, however the Third Wave has a heightened level of comfort with and acceptance of contradiction. Third Wavers are building on the work of our mothers. Their struggles paved the way for us to more comfortably approach contradiction. We embrace it with less guilt and use it to create our theory. We’re using our lived experience of paradox to inform our theory and create our own visions of the future.

2.2.6 Playful Resistance

The Third Wave critiques and resists misogyny and patriarchy via mimicry and reclamation (Wong, 2003). Reclamation is the transformation of a word, behavior, idea, etc. from a pejorative to a neutral or positive position. The transformation
usually begins within communities that are oppressed by the concept and eventually expands to general usage. For example, the term “gay,” once a pejorative for homosexual men, is now a commonly used identity label. Some Third Wavers now claim “bitch” and “cunt” as feminist language. ¹¹ The Third Wave is in the process of reclaiming girlie culture and femininity by demonstrating that women can wear pink/lace/ruffles, knit, have soft, manicured hands and be strong, capable, independent individuals.

Playful resistance contains “elements of Second Wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 3). Unexpected responses of the individual woman to the isms, such as playfulness in work (Bobel, 2006), mock pornography as a venue for anti-pornography demonstrations (Wong, 2003), reclamation of girlie culture (Gilley & Zabel, 2005) and femininity (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997), reworking of rock subculture (Schippers, 2003) and anti-war activism via humor (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007), offer new avenues of understanding and resistance (Caputi, 2007; Garrison, 2000). Playful resistance is a response to the “need [for] additional models for living feminisms as pleasure while clarifying connections between different forms of yearning including the yearning for justice” (Drake, 1997, p. 7).

Third Wavers use playful resistance to “combine diverse struggles of diverse women and social justice movements, rework a downer of a [popular] feminist profile and carry our vibrators proudly as we strive for greater and greater heights of political satisfaction" (Rundle, 2003, p. 15). Second Wave work around sexuality and pleasure informs Third Wave language (Zack, 2005), thus references to vibrators like the above quote from Lisa Rundle usually refer to female anatomical pleasure rather than traditional male penetration models. The primary focus is female pleasure regardless of
how it is achieve. Playful resistance communicates serious messages in fun and attention grabbing language and action.

2.2.7 Cyber Culture & Confessional Culture

Technology is a Third Wave cornerstone (Garrison, 2000; Rundle, 2003). The wave is immersed in cyber culture: computers, Internet, email, websites, blogs, social networking, texting and twitter. Sending an email, blogging or tweeting is as common in the Third Wave as making a phone call or photo copying a flyer was in the Second. A large mass of Third Wave culture exists online via websites and blogs. There is “an interfaced connection to technology” that shapes Third Wave identities, connections and communities (Garrison, 2000, p. 144).

The Internet and cyberspace connects individual Third Wavers across time, space and culture, thus allowing the wave to thrive as a community (Duncan, 2005; Garrison, 2000). This connectivity unites individual projects and group efforts into a collective sisterhood. Confessional culture or the public online airing of deeply personal narratives and insights is a key component of Third Wave connectivity (Gillis & Munford, 2004; Siegel, 2007). A blogger sharing personal anecdotes online that she would previously only tell to her closest friends is instantly connected to a greater community. This sisterhood and the feedback it generates expands her connectivity and strengthens her experience. Confessional culture allows the community to explore and problematize homogenous definitions inherited from the previous wave (Caputi, 2007, p. 7). Personal narratives shared via cyber culture are tools that fosters “ah ha” moments similar to consciousness raising events of the Second Wave.

One of my favorite blogs illustrates the power merger of playful resistance, technology, cyber culture, confessional culture and social change that is the Third Wave. In response to public criticism of breast feeding and suggestion that a nursing mother cover up her a baby it suggests, “If you don’t like it, put a blanket over YOUR head!” Imagine eating all of your meals with a blanket over your head. It would be stuffy, uncomfortable and quite difficult. I laughed until tears rolled down my check as
I read the blog. While reading on my hallway floor in the middle of the night, I was instantaneously connected with this woman and a whole community of pro-nursing mothers. The blogger used humor (playful resistance) to remind readers that the baby/mother duo has a legal right[12] to nurse in public. Posting her playful resistance online allows other mothers to connect with the blogger’s experience, their own feelings/experience and a great community of support. Sisterhood was created in a nanosecond. I’ve shared this moment with countless women and men who’ve mostly all responded positively. A single response to oppression spread across cyber space has touched lives, boosted morale and raised awareness.

Technology and cyber culture allow Third Wavers to plug in to each other and realize that “the personal is political” through a shared understanding of women’s experiences (Jacob & Licona, 2005). They connect and encourage people to realize that “feminism is taking personal responsibility for oneself, the struggle for justice and equality and consciousness” (Cooley, 2007, p. 309) instead of languishing in personal frustration. Third Wavers produce insights through technology (Garrison, 2007) and use the technology to connect, share and work for social change.

2.2.8 Popular Culture: Love/Hate Media Relationship

The Third Wave creates and critically consumes popular culture (Gilley & Zabel, 2005). Pop culture, especially the media, is frequently the site of playful resistance to patriarchy and the isms. The popular 1997-2003 TV series, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” is a good example of playful resistance in pop culture. Buffy is a blonde high school girl with the unusual task of killing vampires and other evil beings that wreak havoc on her community. She is feisty, strong, intelligent, capable and everything that the stereotypical blonde girl is not. Through a series of dangerous encounters with her various antagonists, Buffy offers an alternative to common thinking about blondes, high school girls and women in general. The show resists sexism, racism, heterosexism and classism via fantasy. It is playful resistance in action.
The wave’s intimate connection to cyber culture and confessional culture sometimes gives a false sense of control over popular culture (Levy, 2005). The tug-of-war between resistance and submersion creates a love/hate relationship with the media.

When Third Wave feminists [seek] not “power” as it is narrowly defined by fundamentally patriarch and capitalist standards but rather the cultural legitimacy of [our] multiple identities – transgender, bisexual, interracial, straight, religious, married, maternal queer, “crippled,” and so forth – [we] indicate the extent to which television has yet to grapple with the serious debates taking place within feminism or with its own conservative leanings (Mintz, 2003, p. 77).

Third Wavers pride ourselves in our ability to shape popular culture, particularly television, in our own image. While playful resistance can be an effective pop culture tool, its messages like that of satire are often lost on the audience, thus frustrating the wave and contributing to our love/hate of the media.

2.2.9 Evaluation of Characteristics

Eight Third Wave characteristics, just described, are identified in the literature: born of the Second Wave, rejection of the overly homogenous woman, multiplicity, plurality, contradiction, playful resistance, cyber culture and confessional culture and a complicated relationship with popular culture. Although these characteristics shed light on the definition of Third Wave, they do not offer a complete picture. Each has its own merits and deficits. The sum total excludes relational power, a key component of the new wave and falls short of a full definition of Third Wave feminism.

Third Wave feminism is born of the Second Wave. It is a feminist response to the critiques of and conversations about problems within Second Wave. It claims an improved response to racism, classism and heterosexism. The results of this claim are mixed. Third Wave ideas about women draw on multiple expression of gender including those shaped by social race. The wave prides itself in sensitivity to classism, however this assertion is problematic as the wave ignores the realities of the digital divide. The digital divide or people’s contrasting levels of access to technology and
cyber culture remains a large social problem that contributes to the increasing divide between the haves and the have nots in the U.S. A great deal of Third Wave sisterhood is found online and those without access to the digital world are inadvertently excluded from a majority of the wave. Third Wavers are aware of access-based classism with location and socio-economic components, yet we have not developed an appropriate response. The movement is warmly inclusive of pluralistic sexualities. It seeks the insights and experiences found in various aspects of human sexuality. The Third Wave strives to build on Second Wave work around race, class and sexuality by broadening our understanding of oppression.

Characterizing the wave in this manner leaves it open to generational analysis and metaphors. I previously addressed the problematic nature of generation thinking (Please see 2.1.4.). Tension does exist between the Second and Third Waves or the mothers and daughters. This tension stems from the daughters’ differing experiences of oppression in a changing world. We face far more covert than overt oppression. Access to elite education is a good example of this shift. In our mothers’ time, women were asserting our right to attend Ivy League institutions. Now we have full de jure access, however it is under fire. Mainstream media stories about female Ivy League graduates returning to the home in droves do not examine the social, political and economic forces behind some highly educated women’s shift from the public marketplace to the home (Story, 2005). Instead, the media covertly suggest women do not belong in elite educational institutions.

Third Wavers reject overly homogenous definitions of woman. We are deeply uncomfortable with essentialism and embrace multiplicity, plurality and contradiction. Multiplicity shapes our responses to the isms especially sexism, racism and heterosexism. Gender is the primary source of analysis with an understanding that other factors also impact experience and identity. Plurality is multiplicity written large. Contradiction is the inevitable place that multiplicity and plurality meet. Multiplicity, pluralism and contradiction are all part of Third Wave’s expanded definition of woman. The literature does not explicitly define Third Wave
womanhood. The questions remains, “What is a woman in the Third Wave?” Without a strong understanding of this definition the wave’s claims to feminism fall apart.

Playful resistance is a common Third Wave characteristic. Unfortunately, it can appear fuzzy or unstructured to an observer unfamiliar with the wave’s definitions and characteristics. Awareness of Third Wave’s inclusive woman, multiplicity, plurality and contradiction are needed in order to place playful resistance within a feminist theoretical framework. Clear definition of Third Wave womanhood would strengthen the theoretical value of this technique. Playful resistance also leaves the wave open to co-option by misogynist forces. For example: Girls Gone Wild is sometimes incorrectly taken to be an expression of Third Wave feminism. While it may look similar to playful resistance (having “fun” with sexuality), it neither affirms all women nor challenges patriarchy. Additional academic work on playful resistance would shore up the value of this Third Wave characteristic.

Cyber culture and confessional culture are the cornerstones of the Third Wave. The use of technology for activism and resistance turns a traditionally masculine resource into a feminist tool. Both cyber culture and confessional culture contribute to Third Wave’s expanded definition and practice of sisterhood. The wave’s online presence connects feminists across time, space, culture, etc., creating a broad community or sisterhood. While an expanded sisterhood via technology is one the wave’s greatest strengths, it is also a great weakness. The wave runs the risk of falling into the classism trap via the digital divide.

Third Wavers have a complicated relationship with popular culture. We delight in our ability to manipulate/employ pop culture towards our goals and agendas. Technology is especially useful in this endeavor. We also resent the isms promoted by pop culture. Stronger mechanisms for shaping popular culture are needed to resolve our love/hate relationship with it. Otherwise, feminism remains vulnerable to patriarchal co-option.
A summary of Third Wave characteristics gleaned from the literature fails to fully answer the question, “What is the Third Wave?” Three additional questions arise from a review of identified Third Wave characteristics. What is a woman in the Third Wave? What is sisterhood in the Third Wave? What does the wave contribute to feminist discussions of power? Neither of the first two questions is directly answered in the literature. Except for a brief graduate student paper (Bruns & Trimble, 2001), power is missing all together from the description of Third Wave feminism. A whole definition needs to be teased out of the jumbled components and important questions must be answered in order to understand the Third Wave.

2.3 Focus

The Third Wave has two major areas of focus: cultural production and individual identity. Since the wave is comparatively young and still evolving, there are large gaps in the literature about its focus. Additional formal analysis of Third Wave work would help flesh out the academic understanding and documentation of the wave.

2.3.1 Cultural Production

Cultural production or the shaping and reshaping of language, ideas, art, science and community is the primary focus of the Third Wave (Bulbeck, 1999; Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Reclamation of the word “bitch,” mock pornography, the presence of strong, independent, successful and capable female characters in mainstream media and expansion of the feminist definition of sisterhood are examples of Third Wave cultural production. Widely disseminated informal magazines such as Bitch and BUST Magazine give voice to younger feminists’ concerns and experiences while providing a useful avenue for feminist pushback against oppressive cultural norms. BUST announces itself as:

The magazine for women with something to get off their chests. With an attitude that is fierce, funny and proud to be female BUST provides an
uncensored view of the female experience. *BUST* tells the truth about women’s lives and presents a female perspective on pop culture. *BUST*ing stereotypes about women since 1993. (Stoller, 1993)

Both the name and explanation of *BUST* draws on Third Wave playful resistance. The magazine combines humor, word play and women’s thoughts and experiences into a powerful cultural tool for pushing back at patriarchy.

*Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* offers its own twist on Third Wave cultural production. Its mission “is to provide a feminist critique and analysis of pop culture, to encourage discussion about how the media influences us, and to promote the connection between cultural critique and social-justice activism” (Jervis, Shaykin, & Zeisler, 1996). Both zines have active print and online communities that create a sisterhood of feminist resistance to patriarchy (Bates & McHugh, 2005). Third Wave connectivity to cyber culture and popular culture uniquely situates the wave to influence cultural production.

2.3.2 Individual Identity

Individual identity is the secondary focus of Third Wave feminism (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Multiplicity, pluralism and contradiction allow budding Third Wavers to examine, construct and define their identities in feminist terms. “[The] Third Wave starts on a personal level. Once we are confident in our own skin, then maybe it will be time to participate in public feminism” (Harde & Harde, 2003, p. 122). We frequently turn to our cyber culture resources for understanding and connectivity as our individual identity blossoms. This outreach in turn creates a cyber sisterhood of Third Wave feminists.

Once again I’m drawn to my own experiences as a graduate student/mother/feminist/woman to explain the connections between Third Wave individual identity and cyber sisterhood. I felt extremely isolated at the beginning of my journey as a pregnant, feminist, graduate student. The welcomed and joyous birth of my daughter only increased my disconnection from the academic feminist
community. There I was working to combine care of my infant/nursling, writing my thesis, working from home and walking a path vastly different from my women studies cohort, my friends and my neighbors. I was living in fluidity and multiplicity shifting from one position to another – mother, student, partner, care giver, woman, one part of a nursing duo, individual, etc. – feeling alone until I came across the blog mentioned in 2.2.7, “If you don’t like it, but a blanket over YOUR head!” I was instantly connected to hundreds or more feminist mothers with similar experiences. We all were in the fluid process of constructing and reconstructing our identity. We all shared parts of ourselves via confessional culture and cyber culture. We were all part of a Third Wave cyber sisterhood. I was no longer alone. The act of sharing our experiences and identities with each other, find commonalities and expressing our feelings united us in sisterhood.

2.3.3 Evaluation of Focus

The eight Third Wave characteristics identified in the literature fit neatly into the top two areas of focus. Emphasis on cultural production is an outgrowth of Second Wave activism. Multiplicity, plurality, contradiction and rejection of overly homogenous definitions contribute to the wave’s work on incorporating multiple ideas/expressions of womanhood into popular culture. Playful resistance is used to achieve this objective while cyber culture and confessional culture help spread the change. The wave’s attention to individual identity stems from awareness of the differing ways that one can be or experience being a woman. In short, it too is born of the Second Wave and a result of the seven other characteristics.

Several questions arise from the wave’s focus on cultural production. What about political power or production? Does the Third Wave contribute to feminist analysis of power? What about the academy? If Third Wave voices are limited to culture production without formal connection to the academy, then the wave won’t be part of academic feminist discourse and our ideas will be missing from the women’s
movement’s formal evolution. Are Third Wave contributions limited to popular culture?

An alternate set of concerns comes from the wave’s focus on individual identity. The Third Wave runs the risk of overemphasizing individual identity to the detriment of feminism’s sisterhood. Once again, the lack of a formally delineated definition of woman leaves the Third Wave open to criticism. In this case, it appears overly self-focused. What is a woman in the Third Wave?

Identification of Third Wave’s top two areas of interest coupled with its eight recognized characteristics still does not answer the primary question. The picture remains hazy. What is the Third Wave?

2.4 Controversy

Controversy ripples through the tides of Third Wave feminism. It rests on fundamental questions about Third Wave identity: What is the Third Wave? Is it feminism? These questions divide the self-identified feminist community across generational and cultural lines.

2.4.1 Questionable Theoretical Merit: Is it feminism?

Third Wave literature frequently asks or responds to the question “How is the Third Wave feminist?” This inquiry may be broken into three parts: What happened to “the personal is political,” Lost Sisterhood and It’s humanism, NOT feminism.

Critics of the Third Wave ask, “What happened to ‘the personal is political’?” They suggest that the Third Wave is self-focused and selfish, thus dismissing the wave as a trendy justification of personal indulgence instead of a sincere belief or commitment to feminist transformation (Jervis & Zeisler, 2006).

It [The Third Wave] is easy to swallow feminism, feminism that encourages you to pamper yourself and get rid of guilt and waltz through life…. Built on affirmations – “You go, girl! Work it” – it doesn’t make you feel bad about your vanity, as 70’s feminism sometimes did, or
The critics argue that over emphasis on personal pleasure takes the political out of “the personal is political” leaving merely a collection of self indulgent pop culture puppets (Siegel, 1997). Lacking political commitment or awareness, the Third Wave is lost with no clear platform or action plan. “Today’s young women don’t necessarily translate broad social issues into personal volunteer involvement, at least not in the overtly electoral or political sense” (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004, p. 81).

In contrast, a separate line in the literature asserts that Third Wavers “privilege embodied politics, which are personal acts that aim to provoke change by exercising and resisting power in local sites” (Fixmer & Wood, 2005, p. 235). Micro politics or “personal and daily gender-based struggles” (Genz, 2006, p. 333) are the focus of Third Wave political awareness. I practice micro politics every time I nurse my toddler without a blanket in public while reading the New York Times. I am a picture of feminist resistance/activism simply by going about my day without modifying my nursling’s behavior (covering up, hiding behind a bush, going to the car, etc.) or my need for intellectual stimulation. I am enacting and demonstrating an alternative to patriarchy’s oppressive message about mothers, sexuality and women’s breasts. I choose to support my daughter’s neurodevelopment and immune system with breast milk. I can be a mother and think. I can simultaneously nourish my child and enrich my mind. All of these things are daily expressions of embodied feminist politics.

The Third wave emphasizes everyday politics over a broad social action platform (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000) however, we create a sisterhood by sharing these everyday acts with each other. The community created via cyber culture connects individual sites of feminist resistance. My experiences as a feminist mother and graduate student again illustrate this connection. I read and post on feminist blogs for mothers, attachment parents, nursing mothers, women with children, general
interest feminists etc. This act of sharing with and learning about others creates sisterhood. In turn, the sisterhood encourages us in our individual push against patriarchy. Individual moments of resistant create small ripples in the water, sharing the moments via our cyber sisterhood magnifies the ripple into a wave and eventually the wave will alter the tide. “The personal is political” is alive and well in the Third Wave.

Another critical inquiry feels that sisterhood or the solidarity of women based on common experiences and concerns has vanished in the Third Wave’s murky waters. It claims that feminism is fractured by multiplicity (Sanders, 2007; Siegel, 2007) because overly fluid identities creates a sea of disconnected individuals who are unable to connect with each other (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Seely, 2007). The wave’s “extreme” anti-essentialism is problematic as it eliminates commonality between women leaving no room for connection across identity and experience (Sanders, 2007; Stone, 2007). “Individualism within context of greater society” (Caputi, 2007, p. 29) is needed to create a viable feminist sisterhood that is missing from the Third Wave.

When thinking about this critique, it is important to remember that Third Wavers have not eliminated all essentialism from our analysis. We are working towards an understanding of gender and the act of being a person that functions outside the learned patterns of male/female. We are striving to escape essentialism while recognizing that some unidentifiable element(s) ties us to the man/woman binary, thus making complete anti-essentialism impossible. The wave is deeply uncomfortable with linear essentialism and prefers to use a web or matrix to describe human existence.

In response to the claim of lost sisterhood, a thread in the literature recognizes technology – Internet and cyberspace – as the face of Third Wave feminist collective consciousness (Garrison, 2000). Solidarity is created through online venues. Blogs, websites, social networking and tweets electronically connect the Third Wave in previously unimaginable ways. A great number of Third Wavers were raised
immersed in the personal computing age. We’ve had personal computers and Internet access since early childhood. Today’s typical college freshmen have always had the Internet. Cyber culture truly is a function of Third Wave reality. The Internet connects Third Wavers to each other and the greater women’s movement. We dial into each other’s experiences of patriarchal oppression. We recognize that we’re targeted as women and work to improve our lot as women. The common goal of being for women, however woman is defined, unites us in a feminist sisterhood. “Coalition politics is replacing definitional politics” (Gilley & Zabel, 2005, p. 5). Inclusion not overly generalized essentialism creates sisterhood in the Third Wave (Bobel, 2006).

A quiet note running through the literature pegs the Third Wave as humanism instead of feminism. It accepts the wave as a collective movement working towards social improvement; however it claims that gender is not a primary focus. It suggests that multiplicity shifts the Third Wave away from feminism towards humanism (Sanders, 2007). The literature does not respond to this critique. I will address it in the next chapter.

2.4.2 Skeptical Academy

The academy is skeptical of and challenged by the Third Wave (Caputi, 2007; Gillis & Munford, 2004; Jolles, 2007). It has historically ignored the movement by dismissing it as irrelevant and/or excluding it from written, published and classroom dialog (Attwood, 2007; Caputi, 2007). The Second Wave academy struggles with the Third Wave’s differing expressions of femininity (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997). Second wavers worked hard to break down the confining walls of traditional femininity. Before the Second Wave women were generally expected to be quiet, soft, domestic and pretty. Now we have more room to express ourselves and the Third Wave is using that room to explore, reconstruct and claim femininity. The process is taking place primarily outside the academy and sometimes looks like a return to pre-Second Wave femininity. In the words of Germaine Greer and similar Second Wave academics, pop
culture femininity images are “post-post-feminism” and “ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behavior” (Jervis & Zeisler, p. 360).

The academy is trying to control the Third Wave – the unknown (Gillis & Munford, 2004). The Third Wave emerged from younger women’s activism not the mature academy. Believing that theory colonizes culture (Caputi, 2007), it is rooted in neither formal theory nor academic study (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997). The idea that “theory colonizes culture” means that theory falsely constrains growth or takes over culture, therefore theory needs to be limited so that culture can evolve unhampered by preconceived ideas. Third Wavers resist the academy out of concern that it will artificially shape us, our responses to the isms and extinguish our form of feminism. There is concern that the Second Wave academy will ultimately mold the Third Wave in its own image instead of recognizing and appreciating our contributions to feminism. Third Wavers are working to further fill the gaps between theory, critiques and lived experiences. The Third Wave is a modern iteration of the work initiated by the Second Wave.

2.4.3 Evaluation of Controversy

As a both an undergraduate and graduate student in women studies, I live and work in the swirling seas of Third Wave controversy. I have experience with both primary wave identity questions, however examination of the controversy does not provide enough information to define the wave. In combination with the wave’s characteristics and areas of focus, it simply brings us back to the same unanswered questions. What is a woman in the Third Wave? What is our sisterhood? What do we want? Without answers to these questions, there is no foundation, no dialog and no Third Wave feminism.

2.5 The Wave Metaphor Problem

The literature notes a handful of risks associated with wave thinking. Application of a wave metaphor to feminist development may over or under
emphasize the differences between groups. It incorrectly suggests that each wave was raised by feminists (Jacob & Licona, 2005). Over emphasizing the wave metaphor suggests that feminist parents or communities raised most members of each wave. It mistakenly creates a concrete generational link between each wave. It leads one to believe that waves are defined by a specific demographic generation (Snyder, 2008). This false assumption (Aikau, Erickson, & Pierce, 2007) drives generational rebellion (Jervis, 2006) and further divides the feminist family.

Wave based divisions run the risk of separating each wave from the ocean of feminist history (Siegel, 2007; Snyder, 2008). If overused, wave thinking loses sight of how all the parts fit into the whole (Gillis & Munford, 2004). Multiple histories need to be acknowledged and remembered (Gillis & Munford, 2004) in order to maintain forward momentum and continuity across time. We feminists need to honor the lessons and legacies of those who came before us (Drake, 1997).

The literature offers a vague or incomplete, at best, definition and description of Third Wave feminism. This review highlighted the conflict, questions and concerns swirling around the new wave. The Third Wave remains undefined despite almost two decades of conversation and practice.

Third Wave feminism has claimed a place in the feminist family for over twenty years. A handful of critical questions need to be addressed to validate this claim and place the wave in a feminist context. What is the Third Wave? What is a woman in the Third Wave? What is sisterhood? What is power? I will discuss these questions in the next chapter and demonstrate that the Third Wave is a forward facing iteration of feminism.
This is an example statement, not a direct quote, demonstrating how patriarchy uses generational thinking to belittle feminism.

Liberal feminism also addresses de facto barriers through laws that increase access to freedom such as Roe v. Wade.

They privately spoke of and wrote about radical social transformation; however, their primary public works were limited to reform. Susan B. Anthony especially emphasized the need to take small steps forward in order to reach a broader goal of social inclusion.

A provision of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibits employers from applying differing pay scales to opposite sexed employees of equivalent skills, effort, responsibilities and working conditions. This translated to some, but not all, equal pay for equal work. Congress and a series of Supreme Court decisions have further reduced the power of this provision by creating a broad shield of exceptions. The legal requirements for equal pay for equal work are very narrow with specific position requirements. In reality, women as a class are still paid less than our male counterparts. De facto equal pay for equal work has not been achieved.

The struggle for women’s rights as human rights is not over.

This slur was accepted with little or no questioning before the dawning of feminist awareness. Many Third Wavers grew up with this negative stereotype, discovered their own feminism and rejected this idea, especially the lesbian as slur portion. Third Wave theory does not accept heterosexism nor does it use lesbian/gay as derogatory terms.

Of course, feminism has never been about robbing anyone of his/her/its rights. This misrepresentation has been and continues to be used to control and defeat feminist messages of equality, inclusion, justice and human rights.

Many Second Wave feminists also express this appreciation.

Trans issues refers to gender identity, transgender and transsexual struggles ranging from access to bathroom facilities to political rights.

While the Third Wave still engages in the binary world, it hopes to someday make or find this unnecessary. It is not yet free of the either/or world of gender and power.

I personally claim neither “bitch” nor “cunt” as pro-woman terminology. I’d like to see the ever popular and male oriented term “vagina” transformed to the anatomically correct and female centered “vulva” in reference to women’s genitalia. Would this be a step towards reclamation of woman-centered sexuality as apposed to the current penis or male dominated paradigm?

Thank you, Second Wave feminism!

Technology such as computers, computer science/engineering, the Internet, etc.

I was fortunate to have contact with two generously kind and supportive academics at OSU during this difficult time. Thank you Lani Roberts and Rebekah Lancelin for all your encouragement, counsel, support and wisdom.
The Third Wave has not defined or concretely identified what a woman is outside of our understanding that she is one who is perceived as a woman. The definition is a work in progress.

Vanity typically refers to excessive pride in one’s appearance. Goldberg is referring to the time, energy and resources women commit to sculpting ourselves into objects for male pleasure. For example: wearing high heeled shoes to emphasize our calves even though the shoes pinch our toes and restrict our ability to move.

Affirmation of our choices is the reward of consumer culture. To continue the example from above (endnote fourteen): consumer culture tells us we look good wearing those toe pinching, movement restricting shoes. It tells us that we need another pair of high heels in order to look good in every situation. It fails to ask why we believe the shoes look good or question valuing sexiness over function. It affirms our choice to buy more shoes that we know are not good for our body.
3. THESIS

In feminist circles, the phrase “Third Wave feminism” evokes a multitude of images, catch phrases and memes. It incites a rainbow of emotions from disgust and apathy to curiosity and passion. The literature is filled with an abundance of reactions to and about the Third Wave, yet the wave remains essentially undefined. What is Third Wave feminism?

The Third Wave is a modern iteration of feminism that expands the definitions of woman, sisterhood and power through emphasis on multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance and cyber culture. Explication of Third Wave U.S. feminism addresses the generational and cultural strife within the feminist family and provides a modern feminist response to the changing faces and locations of the isms. To support my assertion I will identify and respond to the four unresolved questions underpinning my thesis and demonstrate how my thesis answers the original question.

3.1 What is Third Wave Feminism and Other Questions

People have been discussing and writing about the Third Wave for nearly two decades. Although library shelves are bulging and electronic megabits are amassing with opinions, assertions and analysis of the Third Wave, there is no comprehensive and cohesive definition of Third Wave feminism.

Third Wave literature is chaotic and contradictory. In the previous chapter I divided the literature into five themes in order to bring order to the chaos. Four of those themes, categories, characteristics, focus and controversy, are relevant to this chapter. The fifth theme, the wave metaphor problem, was discussed in chapter two.

The literature may also be divided into three groupings based on how it categorizes the Third Wave: generational rebellion, radical libertarian feminism reborn and cultural change. As discussed in Chapter Two, the first two categories completely miss the mark while the last hints at an understanding of the Third Wave. Cultural
change, the final category, identifies the Third Wave as an evolution of the Second Wave, however that is all it offers towards an understanding of the wave. None of the categories answer the question, “What is the Third Wave?”

Eight identified Third Wave characteristics may be teased out of the literature. Each contributes something to an understanding of the wave, yet the whole fails to completely described Third Wave feminism. Readers are left wondering, “What is a woman in the Third Wave?” “What is sisterhood in the Third Wave?” and “What is power in the Third Wave?” The existing literature does not offer a broad and consistent definition of the Third Wave that resolves these questions. The wave’s recognized characteristics and foci together create a hazy outline of Third Wave feminism. It appears to be a group of individuals who may identify as young, appreciate aspects of the Second Wave, reject homogeny, embrace multiplicity, plurality and contradiction, practice playful resistance, connect via technology and are drawn to the media while focusing on cultural production and their own personal experiences.

Unfortunately, the same set of questions arises from this combination. What is a woman? What is sisterhood? What is power? These concerns lead to another important question, “Is this feminism?” Exploring the focus of Third Wave feminism without understanding the wave as a whole fails to address the original question, “What is Third Wave feminism?”

Significant controversy is generated by the numerous unanswered questions about Third Wave feminism. It can be divided into two primary clusters: questionable theoretical merit and skeptical academy. Examination of the controversy identifies the same unresolved questions. A strong understanding of Third Wave feminism is necessary to address this controversy. It may even alleviate some of the disagreements that divide feminists, alienate Third Wavers from the academy and distract all of us from feminism’s important work.
3.2 Unresolved Questions

Four unresolved questions stand out of the literature. What is a woman in the Third Wave? What is sisterhood in the Third Wave? What is power in the Third Wave? Is the Third Wave feminist? Resolution of these questions is required to understand the wave and bring cohesive meaning to its characteristics. Current literature neither responds to these queries nor wholly defines Third Wave feminism. My original inquiry remains unfulfilled.

3.2.1 What is Third Wave Feminism?

The Third Wave, in the U.S., is a developing form of feminism that represents the evolution of the ideas and values of prior waves combined with cyber culture in order to offer additional responses to oppression. It is a modern iteration of feminism that expands the definition of woman, sisterhood and power through emphasis on multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance and cyber culture. An exploration of four underlining questions is helpful for understanding my definition of the Third Wave.

3.2.2 What is Woman in Third Wave?

The nature of womanhood in the Third Wave is a fundamental question for understanding the wave. In chapter one, I offered a restatement of Catherine MacKinnon’s definition of woman: A woman is anyone who claims to be a woman. She is one who is expected to be subservient to men. While this description also applies to Third Wave womanhood, it paves the way for additional questions and potentially amusing scenarios. For example, if a macho man walked into a room claiming to be a woman would a Third Waver believe him? If a nude model with clearly visible penis claimed to be a woman would a Third Waver believe it? If an outwardly masculine appearing person walked in waving double X chromosome test results and claiming to be a woman would a Third Waver believe this person? Is self-
identification all that is required for womanhood? What roles do DNA and physical characteristics play in a Third Wave woman? In short, who could believably claim womanhood?

Women are oppressed.¹ We are reduced, restricted and/or immobilized. We have lower status with greater expectations and fewer choices than men. We are bound to our cages. This is not a desirable position. Who would claim women’s oppression and expected subservience?

Womanhood is either formally assigned at birth or taken on later in life because one is driven to the category.² Third Wavers and other feminists know the oppressive nature of womanhood. The Third Wave definition of woman presumes this knowledge. It could be restated as a woman is anyone who claims to be a woman and this claim of an oppressive state is established at birth or taken on after great personal struggle. The answer to all three of the above womanhood scenarios is a qualified yes. A Third Waver would believe the macho man, the penis presenting model and the genetically tested individual if each seriously claimed womanhood because it is a weighty claim burdened by oppression. If one voluntarily steps into woman’s birdcage, then one’s claim should be respected. We women should stand together in sisterhood no matter how we came to recognize our position.

The Third Wave expands the operative definition of womanhood from a basically biological or cultural definition to a state of being that draws on biology, culture, self-definition and identity. This expansion is expressed through multiplicity, pluralism and contradiction. In the above examples, the behavioral, physical or biological characteristics conflict with traditional womanhood. Third Wave allows for this apparent paradox by embracing multiplicity which links characteristics with an and rather than either/or. Instead of being macho/XY/having a penis or being a woman, multiplicity presents the solution of and or both. In the Third Wave, one can be both things simultaneously.

It has been asked if Third Wave womanhood allows an intersexed person to claim to be both woman and man as it suited her/his needs. Yes, multiplicity and
contradiction welcome identities or states of being that shift from one point to another as the person navigates through her/his life. There is great potential for freedom in the space between concrete points as it allows for differing and complex perspectives. The Third Wave appreciates the insight that comes from standing both inside and outside traditional definitions.

3.2.3 What is Sisterhood?

Third Wave sisterhood or cyber sisterhood\(^3\) grew out of the examples set by Second Wave feminists. It uses cyber culture to create feminist communities that unite Third Wavers across diverse social, political and geographic locations. Second Wave sisterhood is based on a common recognition and experience of women’s oppression. The sisterhood was built though consciousness-raising sessions including formal and informal physical group gathering that connected women to each other through shared stories and experiences. The Third Wave uses Internet technology in addition to traditional get-togethers to accomplish this same goal. Similarly to Second Wave’s face-to-face meetings, cyber sisterhood including confessional culture raises awareness and builds bridges between people. Cyber sisterhood is an expansion of Second Wave sisterhood that uses modern technology to achieve the same goal of heightened feminist awareness and connectivity.

Questions about sisterhood commonly lead to questions about men.\(^4\) Can men join the sisterhood? Yes, men may be part of Third Wave sisterhood. Cyber sisterhood is open to anyone who claims feminism and feels connected to women’s oppression. This expanded inclusiveness of sisterhood is based on the expanded definition of women. The Third Wave is about fluidity and contradiction.

3.2.4 What is Power?

The nature of power is the third key element to defining Third Wave feminism. Power is typically defined in patriarchal terms. It is accepted as possession of control, authority or influence over others. It is viewed as a limited resource to hoard and
conserve. The isms classify, sort and rank human beings’ access to power. Women are assigned a lower rank and denied power (Beauvoir, 1989).

Three useful models for understanding power are power-over, power-to and power-with. Power-over is the ability to get another persons to do as one wants her/him to do. It is the primary model of power (Coontz, 1999). Power-to is one’s own capacity to act. Power-with is about engaging with another person to accomplish a goal. Second and Third Wave feminisms use power-to and power-with to construct collaborative models of power as alternatives to patriarchy. Although each wave offers its own model, the underlying commonality is access to power – power to shape, interpret, experience and engage in one’s own life.

Patriarchal power is hierarchical or power-over. It uses control and dominance to obtain its objectives. A traditional university classroom is a good visual example of power-over. The educator stands at the head of the room preferably on an elevated platform while the students are seated in rows. The students generally sort themselves by rank with the dedicated, privileged or secure students at the front nearest the educator and the less interested, underprivileged or uncomfortable students at the back of the room. The power and knowledge gradient runs from front to back with the educator in the superior position. Compliance, obedience and one-way communication are encouraged.

Second Wave feminism recognized the inequities of patriarchal power and offered power-with or egalitarian power as an alternative. Egalitarianism strives for equal power or a removal of the inequities between the parties. In contrast to the patriarchal classroom, an egalitarian classroom has everyone sitting in a circle. The educator and the students are on the same physical plane. There is no head and foot. Sharing, listening and two-way communication are emphasized with the educator and students learning from each other.

Second Wave power works to reduce oppression by leveling the power structure however, it fails to account for the built-in power differences between people. In a classroom, the educator is responsible for assigning grades. This gives
her/him power-over the students. Each student arrives in the classroom with her/his own set of prior knowledge and personal situation. The students and educator are automatically placed in a power hierarchy with the teacher at the head and the students filling out the ranks. Egalitarianism ideally challenges hierarchy by placing everyone in an equal position of respect. Sadly, this idealism falls short in application. The classroom is again a good example. Grades assigned by the instructor to the students are far more influential than the teaching evaluation given by the students to the instructor. No matter how respectfully deployed, the educator has more power than the students. The deeper issue here and in most power situations is sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc. Softening the blow of unearned privileges such as those granted by gender, race, class, sexual preference, etc. with informal titles (first names instead of surnames), reorganized seating and a preface of equality doesn’t change the power imbalance. Ignoring the power differential doesn’t eliminate it. Power can not be equalized in all situations.

Third Wave power is relational. It is power with and in relationship to each other. An outgrowth of Second Wave power, relational power combines all three power models to create a practical response to oppression. It blends the idealism of egalitarian power with the realities of hierarchical power and adds a heavy dose of respectful listening and communication. It creates space for additional positive power models that support individual, relationship and community growth.

The Third Wave recognizes that power-over exists in our culture. It is a fact, but it doesn’t have to be a negative or oppressive fact. Sometimes power-over is simply a description of the relationship between people. For example: an employer has firing power over the employee. If this power is not used to abuse the employee, then it may not be all bad. Alternatively, a parent has power over the child. A parent can threaten/coerce a child or she/he can lovingly lead the child. Hierarchical power is applied in the first instance. The second instance shows relational power. Both use power-over, but the lovingly or gently led relationship creates referent power. Referent power is “role model power” that “depends on feelings of affection, esteem and
respect for another individual” (Hackman & Johnson, 2004, p. 132). In order for referent power to develop, there needs to space in the relationship for communication, understanding and respect. Relational power creates this space.

To continue the education example from above, the relational power classroom sits in a circle while formally recognizing the power differences between each participant. Sharing, listening and multi-directional communication are emphasized while acknowledging the inherent power the educator holds over the students and the students hold over each other. Rather than washing away the hierarchy established by the student-teacher and student-student relationships relational power uses good listening and respectful communication in an attempt to bridge the gaps between each party. In a Third Wave classroom, relational power encourages referent power to develop between the educator and students.

Relational power is the least formally developed aspect of the Third Wave. While it is practiced more than documented, it has the potential to be a great contribution to feminist theory. “How we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them” (Lukes, 2005, p. 63).

3.2.5 Is Third Wave Feminism?

The first three questions in this inquiry all lead to the final and most important supporting question: Is the Third Wave feminist? In chapter one, I defined feminism in the simplest terms. Feminism is to be for women. Feminist theories commonly identify the source(s) of women’s oppression and offer solutions. Third Wave feminism follows suit.

The Third Wave stands for and with women. It is pro-woman. Cyber sisterhood and the expanded expressions of womanhood are centered on awareness and analysis of women’s oppression. Unlike humanism, which places the human need for dignity and self-worth on point, women are the primary focus of Third Wave
thought. Without minimizing race, class, sexuality, etc., gender remains the most important factor of Third Wave theory.

A fluid understanding of gender and sexuality is at the heart of the Third Wave. Multiplicity is the norm. Although its expression also extends to race, class, age, etc., gender and sexuality are primary. Playful resistance is the Third Wave’s twist on activism, which primarily focuses on gender and sexuality. For example, the Third Wave Foundation dedicates considerable economic and human resources to trans youth. Additional examples from chapter two include mock pornography and the reclamation of girlie. All three of these instances are oriented to gender and sexuality. The Third Wave is for women.

Chapter two revealed four unresolved questions about Third Wave feminism. What is a woman? What is sisterhood? What is power? Is it feminist? All four of these questions have been answered, thus revealing the nature of Third Wave feminism.

The Third Wave is a newer feminist movement that uses multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance and cyber culture to expand the definitions of woman, sisterhood and power in order to reduce oppression. It builds on the work of Second Wave feminism to offer technology and media friendly ways to fight the ism. It is a young, enthusiastic and growing wave in the feminist ocean.
Please see chapter one for additional discussion of oppression.

I am using the gendered terms of woman and womanhood interchangeably with the biological sex term female. At birth most babies are assigned a sex – either male or female. The assignment of female leads to womanhood as the girl grows and is molded into an adult woman. In short, female leads to girlhood leads to womanhood.

Cyber sisterhood is my own term. I haven’t encountered it elsewhere.

It is inevitable in our male dominated society that the conversation will eventually lead to men. Perhaps it will be sign of positive progress when our discussions become bi or omni directional instead of always turning back to the masculine position.

I understand that sometimes the room size or configuration and the number of students or course content dictates the student-educator positions.

The parent may lead a child if the child agrees to this leadership. This agreement is an example of referent power, which will be discussed near the end of this paragraph.
4. CONCLUSION

Feminism is dead. Equality Achieved! Women, Move On! These are the headlines from the world that I and other Third Wavers like me grew up in. No one talked about equality’s dirty little secret. It was an unachieved ideal vaguely supported by a handful of laws and legal decisions. Yes, significant progress had been made in woman’s plight. More opportunities were available for some women. If you were a white, middle class, heterosexual woman, then your reality was radically improved. We had broken into the academy, the sciences, the military and the professional workforce. Feminism was the new f--- word. It was unnecessary, scary and dangerous.

My cohort grew complacent with feminism’s achievements. We took our mothers’ hard earned rights for granted. Title IX (full access to sports, including gym class), the Pay Equity Act and reproductive rights were facts. We were oblivious to reality – pay equity has NOT been achieved (Still roughly 80 cents to a man’s dollar). Athletic access hasn’t opened the White House doors. Reproductive choice remains a hot political and social topic.

The political climate in the 1990s and the media’s subsequent assassination of feminism were a wake up call to a new generation of women. We wanted feminism, but not our mothers’ feminism. We drew on our feminist history to create a new wave – The Third Wave.

After nearly twenty years of dialog, writing and self-declaration, Third Wave feminism remained undefined. The purpose of this thesis was to explicate the existing Third Wave writings and offer a coherent definition of the wave. This goal was accomplished through a careful literature review and identification of and response to four unresolved key questions. The Third Wave is a modern iteration of feminism that expands the definitions of woman, sisterhood and power through emphasis on multiplicity, pluralism, contradiction, playful resistance and cyber culture. Feminism is alive in the Third Wave.
Third Wave feminism is young and growing. It is my hope that it will gain a legitimate place in the feminist academy without losing contact with its fluid and/or organic nature. The wave is at risk of becoming overly individual or self-focused especially in the current climate that stereotypes youth/young people as narcissistic and self-important. It could also lose its claim on broad inclusivity if it isn’t made explicitly clear that all sexualities including asexuality are welcome. We all need to remember to listen intently to each other in order to hear/see past the difference between our perspectives, experiences and desires. Relational power remains grossly underdeveloped in the literature. I’d like to see additional work in this area as it is the most transformative element of Third Wave theory. It could be the Third Wave’s version of “The personal is political.” Classism especially Internet access remains problematic within the wave. Perhaps the future will bring greater public access and decrease this concern.

Third Wavers are working to claim and reclaim previously oppressive characteristics including femininity. We are stretching towards new ways of living gender, however in our effort to claim femininity we may fall prey to Audre Lorde’s classic concern. Can the Master’s tools be used to dismantle the Master’s house? Will claiming femininity, a patriarchal construct, free us or tighten our bounds? The Third Wave needs the wisdom and formal theorizing of the academy to skirt this concern.

An expanded definition of woman leads to the question “How do we recognize a woman to be a woman when she enters a room?” Although the Third Wave is working to correct patriarchies biases, we grew up in this culture and absorbed these messages. A Third Waver knows a woman based on the traditional definition of looks, movement, expression, etc. We are also willing to accept that appearance isn’t everything and will take reasonable claims of womanhood at face value. We are able to separate the definition of from the recognition of a woman. The first is self-generated or comes from within and the second is outside us. We need to refine our theory of womanhood in order to answer the question without relying on patriarchal
constructs. Our expanded vision of womanhood may be dismissed or discounted if this concern remains unaddressed.

As I sit at my kitchen table writing out this chapter, I’m living Third Wave theory. My two-year-old daughter is standing next to me eating her soup (with a straw!) while I contemplate future feminisms. This is multiplicity and contradiction in action. What can be more unlike esoteric theory than concrete soup slurping? Sliding back into academic questioning and out of domestic observation, I wonder what will feminism look like when she blossoms into an adult? Will the Third Wave have gained a stronghold within the academy? Will relational power be common terminology? What form of sisterhood will follow cyber sisterhood? What I do know in all my identities – woman, student, mother, partner, daughter, voter, etc. – is that feminism is alive and well. The waves of resistance keep crashing into the rocky shore of oppression.

4.1 Third Wave Call to Action

A meaningful feminist call to action depends on a solid understanding of the source(s) of oppression. Third Waver’s holds the sex/gender system, patriarchy and limiting definitions of both woman and power responsible for women’s oppression. We especially emphasize the last two components as tools of patriarchy. This conclusion is a coupling of Second Wave analysis of oppression with the Third Wave understanding of womanhood and power.

The sex/gender system turns biological facts such as pregnancy/birth and smaller average size into femininity. It’s the socializing forces that mold female babies into women who are eager to be used/abused by men and male babies into men who find pleasure in using/abusing women.

Men rule in patriarchy. They shape our dominant ideas, values and choices. They hold a majority of power. Womanhood is narrowly defined by patriarchy. Women are tightly bound by a constricting set of a expected behaviors, prescribed
appearances and limited choices that all circle around men’s emotional, physical and sexual needs.

As noted in section 3.2, patriarchal power is defined as hierarchical power-over another. Power flows downward from the authority to the lesser and power less party. Patriarchy coupled with sex/gender system use womanhood and power to create and reinforce women’s oppression.

“Be yourself!” is the Third Wave rallying call and solution to women’s oppression. Although the deeper solution is more complicated and complex, in true Third Wave fashion, it can be summarized by this quick media sound bite. Being yourself involves discovery, resistance, reclamation and activism.

Discover who you are, what you are made of, what you want to be, what you want to do and how you can contribute to the feminist transformation. Go online. Get involved. Meet others who feel, question and are exploring like you. Challenge your expectations of yourself, your community and the world. Engage in conversation and thought about why you identify the way you do and what, if anything, you’d like to express differently. Share your experiences and listen to the experiences of others. Discover your feminist self.

Resist distinctly either/or binary answers. Embrace the option of and. Strive to let go of concrete definitions of gender, race, class and sexuality. Encourage pluralism in your own life and community. Accept the contradictions that come with fluid definitions and fluctuating ideas.

Add resistance to the mix once you begin to better understand yourself. Don’t give up on discovery. Expand it by resisting either/or analysis of the world. Resist patriarchy’s sex/gender system, the male norm and power-over model. Explore, practice and share your resistance with the feminist sisterhood. Keep connecting with and building your community – online, in person and in your private thoughts.

Reclaim yourself. Enact the personal changes you envisioned through discovery. Continue the resistance you began working on. Reclaim women’s choices and access to power by changing the conversation within and around you. When you
change your thoughts and responses the dynamic will change. Keep discovering. Keep resisting. Keep connected. Above all, keep thinking through your assumptions, ideas, desires and choices.

Bring all of your internal work – discovery, resistance and reclamation – to the outer world. Use play such as humor, mimicry, pleasure, fun and other light-hearted appearing techniques to communicate your serious messages about women and social change. Playful resistance is a useful tool for changing ideas, hearts and minds. Use it. Engage in activism in both your personal life and your greater community. Show your multiplicity and contradiction in your dress, manner, expressions and communication. Get political. Take your feminism to a larger stage.

Practice relational power. Recognize what each person has to bring to the table. Listen intently. Share your own knowledge and experience. Listen again. Acknowledge your power and position and that of the people around you. Don’t give into the hierarchy. Don’t pretend it doesn’t exist. Stand in relationship to and with the people around you.

Use the tools that you know best – cyber culture and confessional culture – for discovery, resistance, reclamation and activism. Start a blog. Tweet. Share your experiences on Facebook. Live, breathe, feel, do and experience feminism. Be your feminist self!
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