Girlfight the Power: Teaching Contemporary Feminism and Pop Culture

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Some are ready to declare the third wave has crested (some claim it was never much more than a little swell). I'm not sure. What follows is an account of teaching a course entitled “Grrl Power and Beyond: Third Wave Feminism and Contemporary Popular Culture,” in the interdisciplinary American Studies Program at my college. I taught this class at the invitation/request of my colleague Catherine Lavender, the director of our American Studies program, who'd asked me for years to teach a “riot grrl” course. As a fan of punk in the early 1980s and a more distant admirer of the Riot Grrl phenomenon in the 1990s I was happy to do so. However, while researching the course I saw the need to expand its scope to include other aspects of “third wave” feminism. I assumed “third wave” would be a useful and appealing category for my students, both to help them see themselves in relationship to feminism and as a way into a set of pop cultural artifacts, as it generally designates the feminism of women born after the 1960s who take some aspects of second wave feminism for granted and critique other aspects (more on this below). I also assumed that third wave would be essentially neutral for me, that I would consider it from a distance, as I had Riot Grrl music and culture, a fan but not a member. The results were rather more complex. My students' varied backgrounds and attitudes, and what I discovered was my own under-interrogated relationship to feminism, raised a lot of questions for me.

In this essay I will lay out what my goals were in designing the course, and the ways that my students, my circumstances, and my classroom experiences modified those goals. I'll describe some of the texts we used and some of the specific classroom techniques that I found especially interesting and beneficial, in hopes that they will be useful to anyone planning a similar course. I'll also explain how the texts and the class worked upon the students and upon me, which leads to some conclusions about the usefulness of thinking and speaking in terms of third wave feminism in this moment. My thinking about our relationship to feminism and the usefulness of the category “third wave” had to evolve most specifically around the issues of appropriation of masculine forms of power as a mode of feminism, and the perceived problem of third wave's excessive individualism.

The Institutional Context

Denoted a research seminar, with producing a substantial paper as one of its key goals, the course was cross-listed with Women's Studies. My college is a public commuter comprehensive college in Staten Island,
an outer borough of New York City, with all the political and economic constraints that description implies—constraints that are intensified for interdisciplinary programs with their well-known hybrid/homeless status in college and university administrations. It was a piece of luck and goodwill that the class ran at all, with only twelve students; another women’s studies class had to be cut, and I had agreed to teach this one in the evening when classes are generally much in demand, so the dean consented to let it run with enrollment well below the norm.

Most college professors today have to deal with the mixture of negative and blank responses the term “feminism” evokes in their students, and I am no exception. My teaching experience also reminds me constantly that describing feminism’s waves in chronological terms obscures the fact that feminism in the United States is unevenly distributed in geographical terms: my colleagues and I joke that it’s still 1971 in parts of Staten Island. Clearly, as the enrollment attested, the term “feminism” in the course title had not been a huge draw. Indeed, in the past I have had students drop any number of sophomore survey courses on women and literature after I spent part of a first class meeting defining feminism, even though I had deliberately done so in the mildest and most “inoffensive” way. The association of feminism with anger and negativity is pervasive where I teach, and the pop culture topic and my humorous posters promoting the class had brought in only the few already-committed, the most bravely curious, or, in one instance, the most hardened and cynical souls.

Because of the “third wave” rubric, I had envisioned the class as for and about specifically young women: “third wave” generally refers to persons born in the late 1960s at the earliest, and Riot Grl, the female punk music/art/literature/activism scene that was closely associated with the rise of third wave in the 1990s, addresses itself specifically to the young. Self-published magazines (“zines”), body art from tattoos to piercings, do-it-yourself offbeat clothing, and above all punk rock are the markers of the primarily 1990s phenomenon of Riot Grl. Fueled by the angry rejection of male power and narrowly conventional feminine roles, Riot Grl crossed over (and back) from self-expression through pop culture into, for example, anti-rape activism. The term “third wave” denotes young feminists’ separation of themselves from a second wave feminism they, rightly or wrongly, decried as too white, too middle class, too heterosexist and/or anti-sex, and not enough fun. The demographic of my class defeated my expectation of a third wave audience for my third wave material. There were three Women’s Studies majors, two American Studies majors, a few minoring in each, and one or two students just looking for an interesting-looking evening elective to fill out their schedule; one man in his early twenties, six women in their early twenties, and, initially disconcerting to me, five women between forty and fifty. I should, of course, have expected this latter demographic, as “returning” students are a crucial and highly valued component of my college’s population. Meanwhile, though, of the entire group only two could be construed as serious consumers of alternative pop culture, and one of those punk fans confessed that she got all her CDs from her boyfriend, and that there were no female bands in her collection, the only female-fronted group being No Doubt. I was daunted at having to represent this “youth culture” as well as provide the terms for its historicization and critique. There were some serious generational disconnects along the way, as the women in mid-life could not as a group seem to embrace the anger and noise of Riot Grl. But ultimately it came to seem that in my class second and third wave politics and values were embodied as well as discussed, which turned out to be interesting and useful rather than the reverse.

Despite having chosen a course with “feminism” in the title, few of the younger students in the group were self-identified femi-
nists. Indeed I was disappointed to see how little this orientation changed in the course of the semester; even at the end of the course, feminism still seemed to them to belong to someone else (probably professors). Although several of the older women students did self-identify as feminists, I knew better than to assume that even basic definitions of what constituted feminism would be shared by the group. Thus bell hooks's *Feminism Is For Everybody*, though not a third wave text, was a crucial touchstone for our class. Although her text is too dense to be the completely approachable "read" hooks seems to have wanted it to be, it is nevertheless styled and usable as a primer. Everyone in the class seemed to embrace its forthright definitions of and attacks upon patriarchy, sexism, and sexist oppression. All the students who spoke about hooks seemed to honor her righteous anger rather than to shy away from it. And her focus on economics (throughout, but especially in Chapter 7, "Feminism and Class Struggle") clearly resonated with the students' experience as members of the working class.

Who Was I to be Teaching This Course?

My own identity as a feminist, or rather my idea that being a feminist is an identity category, were called into question through the teaching of this course. I came to the material as a consumer of "Riot Grl" music and culture, but not as a participant in it; as a student and teacher of feminist theory and—I believed—as a practitioner of feminist teaching, but with no background in feminist activism beyond writing letters and checks. Born in 1963, I fit "between the waves." My mother had been a somewhat battered pioneer, attending graduate school in international law and diplomacy in the early 1950s and working for the CIA and State Department before retreating to housewifedom with her PhD uncompleted. Volunteering in the 1960s for the League of Women Voters, the Urban League, and other organizations as a married woman, she had been a feminist activist a good ten to fifteen years older than the typical second waver, and although we wore our ERA pins, and my childhood best friend's aunt was Jane O'Reilly (the author of the famous "Click" *Ms.* article) we sort of sat out the 1970s. My older sister, graduating from high school in 1971 and attending all-woman Kirkland College (now folded into Hamilton College) and then going into community activism and justice work, was a classic second waver in some ways, but perhaps as much too young for it as my mother was old. By the time I dropped out of college in the early 1980s, my sister was burnt out and tired of being poor, and began to make her way into the corporate world via high tech data crunching, though she has never lost her vegetarian/ ecological/ peacenik consciousness. My mother's volunteer work morphed eventually into solitary genealogical research. We believed we were feminists but didn't do much about it, it seems to me, looking back.

So, for me, as for many third wavers, feminism was assumed but also had an aura of the "already" about it. hooks's focus on consciousness-raising groups (10–11) put me on notice that I was lacking something crucial: I missed out on consciousness raising because my consciousness was supposed already to have been raised—a fundamental misconception. Worse, I often had a casually patronizing attitude toward aspects of feminist activism, unconsciously attributing it with unsophisticated earnestness. My belatedness with respect to second wave feminism thus intersected with intellectual snobbery in a dangerous way that nevertheless protected me from ever having to examine my assumptions as I worked my way through Kristeva and Butler in graduate school. Thus, in the context of this class I was far more prepared and eager to help my students deal with theoretical definitions of feminism and critiques of Riot Grl music, third wave web-
sites, and movies by and featuring young women, than to confront my own and my students’ assumptions about what feminism was or wasn’t and what role it played in any of our lives.

What We Did and Read

Our first class meeting involved a viewing of an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and some Madonna videos, using excerpts from Susanna Mintz’s article, “In a Word, *Baywatch,*” to address, as she puts it, “the contradictory representation of women on television, particularly the way in which a single program can at once challenge and underwrite traditional attitudes toward gender” (57). This class introduced the crucial question of the difference between feminism/feminists and “strong women” (that is, the politically aware versus the individually powerful) since the latter are now widely available in popular culture and the former much less so. This was a distinction to which we returned again and again.5

Well knowing that my students fit their schoolwork in around work and home rather than the reverse, I had to find ways to present the ideas of the course without going over the students’ heads or exhausting their patience and good will. So, in keeping with the course’s title, we relied heavily on popular cultural texts, with a small admixture of the “scholarly.” Alongside hooks’s primer, we read Baumgardner and Richards’s 2000 *Manifesta* for its approachable overview of history and issues, especially its discussion of how each wave generalizes about the other—if the second wave is caricatured as too white, too bourgeois, and too unsexy, the third wave is equally caricatured as too individualistic, too focused on self and lifestyle, unconscious and ungrateful. I also assigned some relatively accessible scholarly articles and popular journalism approaching various music, movies, television programs, websites, and issues. We watched videos by Madonna and Missy Elliott, examined a wide array of magazines for women, surfed the Internet, pondered Barbie and Powerpuff Girls, and discussed feminism and activism.

Music was very important, of course. We listened to such musical groups and artists as feminist DIY folk heroine Ani di Franco, Riot Grrl founder Bikini Kill, fellow travelers Hole, strong women of hip hop Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill, feminist post punks Le Tigre, feminist-informed alt-pop Nellie McKay, and the hardest-rocking feminists in the world, Sleater-Kinney. I played selections from CDs in class, handing out photocopies of lyrics and passing the cover art. Looking back, it would have been wiser to make compilation CDs and put them on reserve in the library for the students to listen to before class as well, and to have purchased or borrowed a better portable CD player than the one the English department keeps around for playing poetry recordings—there’s enough distortion in punk songs without adding to it with bad technology. The in-your-face quality of Riot Grrl songs did not interfere with analysis for my students: they talked through the savage irony of Hole’s “Pretty on the Inside” (which inside, heart or crotch?) and proposed line-readings of Bikini Kill’s “Double Dare Ya” (according to one student it’s “double dare ya [to assert your rights] girl-fuckin’-friend” because the expletive punches through the giddily, “Valley” epithet). And they appreciated the difference between the “authentic” anti-expertise sound of some bands compared to the carefully orchestrated noise of Sleater-Kinney, noting, for example, how the drumline reinforces their antimilitaristic message on their “One Beat.”

Riot Grrl has pride of place in most histories of the third wave in relation to pop culture. Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald’s 1994 article “Smells like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock” laid out some of our most important theoretical terms. Their article is an expert deployment of Hebdi ge and McRobbie’s theoretical approaches to subculture in relation to Riot Grrl irony, which also lays
out such terms as subversion, appropriation, and anti-essentialism. Familiar to anyone who’s ploughed the fields of feminism, these were the words we put on the board and defined, and applied again and again to the music, movies, websites, and more that we examined. Personal narratives and political critique from the anthology *Listen Up!*, excerpts from Inga Muscio’s *screed Cunt*, and topical articles from such anthologies as *Third Wave Agenda* and *The Fire This Time* were also crucial. We watched *I’m the One that I Want*, Margaret Cho’s first concert film. *Girlfight*, a 2000 feature film about a female boxer, seems in retrospect to have generated the most exemplary student response.

The Case of *Girlfight*

Teaching Karyn Kusama’s 2000 film *Girlfight* is the piece of the course that in some ways encapsulates most of its problems and insights. This appealing film embodies many aspects of third wave feminism. It was made by a young woman (the writer and director was twenty-seven), about a motherless Latina high school girl growing up in the projects of Brooklyn. Eschewing the boy-crazy culture of her friends, and prone to rage and violence that echoes that of her abusive and traditionalist father, she takes up boxing to channel her anger productively and take charge of her life. She wins over her skeptical (male) trainer and through a series of coincidences beats her boyfriend in the ring; he comes to accept her power and expertise in the happy ending. A story of female empowerment, featuring a young woman of color who rejects the mainstream roles offered her and appropriates aspects of conventional masculinity—very third wave. Not much has been written about the film: B. Ruby Rich’s review in *Sight and Sound* places the film in the context of a history of women in boxing and films, including a documentary that she prefers to it; Stuart Klawans’ review in *The Nation* takes issue with the film as a liberal’s wish-fulfillment. I loved the film when it came out, but I wanted to offer a critical context for it to my students.

I juxtaposed the film with the history of Title IX and the discourse around feminism and women’s sport via Jan Rintala’s essay, and Don Sabo and Michael Messner’s analysis—looking at the move away from the essentialist argument that women are more collaborative than competitive, for example—to open up both the strengths and the shortcomings of the film. The fact that Kusama, the writer and director, chose a sport, boxing, that is played by an individual rather than a team, and that takes place outside rather than being sponsored by the high school, removes it from the context of Title IX. Indeed, the film depicts a girls’ gym class in which none of the protagonists’ classmates are in any kind of good physical shape. Eidling the progress that has been made around women’s athleticism, progress that came at the hands of second wave feminism, allows the film to skirt some aspects of the wider social questions around women’s sports and focus on the subversive in-your-face aspect of women’s competitiveness and athleticism, the individual invasion of a traditionally male space. But I argued to the class that Title IX is an important context for the film, a different approach to women’s athleticism that doesn’t buy into the single-hero model Kusama presents but that supplied the social precondition for her and her audience’s appreciation of women’s athleticism, whether she knew and acknowledged it or not.

The other, possibly conflicting context I offered for this film was some third wave approaches to violence against women, specifically excerpts from Inga Muscio’s *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*. Muscio’s “Womanifesto for the Categorical New Freedom Lady” redefines “self protection” (replacing “self defense”) in a variety of social and cultural ways including consumer choices and social behavior; for example, boycotting anti-woman products and getting your friends home safe (179–81). Muscio’s
book’s title is typical third wave, the ironic revaluation of a term of abuse, from which, of course, some students recoiled (and reading the book on the bus proved a challenge for me, too). Muscio’s advocacy of what she calls “Cuntlovin’ Public Retaliation” led to some disagreement and perhaps misunderstanding; Muscio says men should not be included in CPR actions (the humiliation of known rapists) because she says men react to rape with “self righteous indignation . . . because it gives them a chance to prove to themselves what good nonraping men they are. If men really and truly want to be ‘good,’ they can stand in the background and quietly support their friends and relatives while we stand up for ourselves” (169). This was seen by some as anti-man, especially by one woman who was furious at Muscio for making her afraid to be out at night, because she claimed she never had been before. Her response paper to the text was extremely angry, not at the existence of potential rapists for having undermined her sense of freedom and making her look nervously around the subway station but at Muscio for having done so—an interesting version of killing the messenger, I thought. Other students noted that Muscio’s advocacy of women’s strategic appropriation of violence seemed to cohere with Kusama’s vision of her boxer beating her violent father and cowing him with threats of more.

Some of the critiques of second wave feminism are its ignoring of women of color and issues of socioeconomic class. Kusama’s film, as an empowerment fantasy for a poor Latina, addresses that issue. One of the repeated critiques of third wave feminism is that it depends in unacknowledged ways on the accomplishments of the second wave, either taking them for granted or re-inventing the proverbial wheel; putting the film in the context of title IX highlights that issue. In addition, the limitations built into the strategy of appropriating masculine modes is a critique common to both second and third wave, whether it’s submitting to a masculin-ist workplace’s demands in order to succeed in the first case or ironizing but still depending on noise and rage in the second; using Muscio as a context for the film highlighted those issues.

Despite the critiques these accompanying articles made available, most students resisted taking a critical distance from Girflight until well after they had seen the movie. Its espousal of a very straightforward model of empowerment proved very effective for them, and the viewing left them as jazzed and happy as my first viewing had left me. They approved of the “realistic” detail of Diana, the heroine’s, unprivileged life: the constant noise of radios and car alarms around her project home, for example, and the long tiptoe she and her boyfriend have to do down his parents’ narrow hallway in search of his bedroom and some whispered privacy, set the stage for her character’s stress and anger and need to “get out.” They loved little moments of gender irony, when, for example, Diana chows down on a big burger while her boyfriend, trying to make his weight class, settles for salad. They mocked the pink satin outfits of women boxers and noted the anti-lesbian anxiety that probably motivated such choices. Many noted that they had not been repelled by the fight scenes, but were busily rooting for Diana, and insisted that she had found something “productive” to do with her anger, contrasting the ring with the scene where she pummels her father and thus, in their view, threatens to “become” him. The exception to all this approval was one student who had seen the film before; on second viewing she could see its moves a little too clearly, and expressed nostalgia for her first, simply positive and energized response. Later in the semester when the film came up in discussion, more students were able to register ambivalence about the appropriation of violence, volunteering bell hooks’s alternative assertion that appropriating patriarchal values like violence does nothing to undermine the culture that spawned it in the first place. But in general
the film seemed to reflect students' desires very well, offering an empowerment story whose appeal cut across generational lines. The very difficulty of eliciting critique actually seems to me a reason to show the film again and again.

Queens of All Media

I wanted us to engage a variety of media, not just movies and music. Through books and magazines, we paid attention to the materiality of print culture while arriving inductively at a sense of third wave feminism's self definition and its place in popular culture in a couple of different ways. For instance, on the second class meeting, I borrowed a technique from my colleague, the American Studies director, and had the class look over, as in an archive, a collection of the anthologies I had reviewed in preparing for the course: Listen Up, Colonize This, Third Wave Agenda, and The Fire This Time. At my prompting we noted marketing techniques in jacket design, discussed the size and kind of presses involved, examined scholarly apparatus and their exclusion, and noted how the authors and editors carefully and explicitly positioned themselves in terms of class, ethnic, gender, and generational identity, often offering bios, sometimes including dates of birth. Looking at as well as in a book and thinking about its many makers seemed novel and enlightening for the students.

My favorite class session in this vein involved women's magazines. We had read the account in Manifesta of women's magazines, and discussed the authors' request that rather than throwing out the glossies entirely we should try to take a "pro woman" approach to them—that is, not dismiss them out of hand but notice how within the limits of the form the glossies do address women's interests and needs in a way that general interest news mags fail to do (95–96 and 112–13). Baumgardner and Richards's assertion that "objectification is no longer our biggest problem" (102) led to some misunderstanding and outrage, even when I pointed out that they weren't saying objectification wasn't a problem at all, only that corporate and marketing-driven control of editorial content was a worse problem. This was something that some people—of various ages—could not let go of: their sense of the urgency of the issue of media harm to women's and girls' self-esteem was so intense that they couldn't see past it to anything else.

I had asked every student to buy a magazine aimed at women and to search for any interest in either "feminism" or "strong women"; they were to photocopy a two-page spread for every student and explain what they thought was important about the spread. One person arrived without a magazine and with a two-page typed explanation of why she had been unwilling, indeed in her own terms unable, to buy a magazine. She described numerous shopping trips around Staten Island, and her horrified rejection of the demands every magazine made on her to be beautiful or domestic or both. Another student, fulminating and quasi-defensive, had purchased Golf for Women at an airport, all other magazines appalling her, whereas, as she noted, she liked golf and had been happy to find an article about Muslim women playing golf competitively in hijab. Each of these women refused on principle to pay money for something they perceived as harmful to themselves. Others had found magazines they could stand, or else were amused and contemptuous of, and provided us with further occasions for continuing to distinguish between feminists and strong women, to look at the appropriation of feminist concerns in women's magazines and how marketing and advertising content undercuts it, and to practice, in some cases reluctantly, the "pro-woman" approach advocated by Baumgardner and Richards.7

We then turned to a pile of alternative magazines I had supplied, mainly Bust and Bitch with a little Fierce and Ms. thrown in, to discuss their advertising and edito-

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rial content. We paged individually through the magazines looking for evidence of how feminism was or wasn’t reshaping what a women’s magazine is (in future I might put the archive on reserve and send the students to look through it outside of class and bring their findings with them). The students then shared with the class what they had found to praise or blame. The advertising content seemed to win unqualified praise; the ability to buy “cute things” while opting out of the mainstream was embraced, but only, I must say, in theory, since no one’s sartorial habits turned DIY in the course of the semester. In terms of visual content, some people thought Bust was riffing on fashion layouts in an effectively subversive way, including alternative styles of femininity, ethnicity, size, and so on, while others saw reinscription of conventional femininity there. This conundrum reminded us of the problem of irony and how audience-dependent it is. Finally, the inclusion of activism opportunities was a place where the alternative glossies and more mainstream publications like Glamour (which sometimes has issue alerts) might overlap. In general, looking at the magazines in this way seemed good practice at critical consciousness of popular culture, and a step away from the kind of all-or-nothing response that some students initially presented.

The vexed relationship of women of color to “mainstream” feminism was something we dealt with from day one, so I eagerly looked forward to our hip hop feminism day; however, the endeavor was more than a little hampered by the total absence of hip hop fans in the class. Nevertheless, having read excerpts from Joan Morgan’s When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost, “Do the Ladies Run This” by Gwendolyn Pough, Ann Powers’s New York Times article on Missy Elliott, and Michele Wallace’s New York Times discussion of Queen Latifah, we forged on, listening to Lauryn Hill, as well as Missy and Latifah, with some girl-power R&B from India.Arie for contrast. Real expertise would have been desirable, and as a class we took note of the problem of the complete absence of African Americans in a class discussion of aspects of African American culture. Nevertheless, observation proved fairly powerful on its own: the dual allegiance to strong women and a historical appreciation of African American culture was clear to us in all these artists’ music. Missy Elliott’s “Toyz” from This Is Not a Test is a wonderfully goofy assertion of independent identity and a refusal to be a “hurt woman,” dismissing a neglectful lover in favor of her vibrator. Even the younger students were able to identify the beat, the whistles, and the “oot oot” in the mix as an homage/goof on disco music, evoking and trumping the divas of disco days. Latifah’s Black Reign refrain, “Who you calling a Bitch?”—in a song whose foretitle is “U.N.I.T.Y.”—savages all opponents, male and female, to her successful self-assessment; it draws on reggae for its beats, which many students did not know was originally (and remains in some cases) a protest genre, before being appropriated and evacuated of its meaning by white frat boys. Lauryn Hill, in her equally even-handed preaching to African American men and women, “Doo Wop (That Thing)” in which she calls on them to return to authentic identity and to each other, is informed by the critique of African American male misogyny so briskly and convincingly surveyed in Chickenheads. Hill’s musical reference to doo-wop, one of many musical styles originating on street corners in African American neighborhoods before heading to the top forty, is thematically connected: chiding young African American women for their fake hair and nails, she implies that crossing over to succeed shouldn’t happen at the expense of authenticity. We had little to say about India.Arie’s song “Video,” beyond noting that it said all the right things about female self-esteem. But we seemed satisfied to note the blending of anger and historical consciousness, conveyed both through words and music, in all the women hip hop artists’ feminism—which the students were happy to call it, even while
understanding and sympathizing with the artists’ reluctance to do so themselves.\(^a\)

By contrast, Korean American comic Margaret Cho is an outspoken, self-identified feminist. Viewing Cho’s *I’m the One that I Want* in the context of the theorization of Riot Grl added to students’ appreciation of Cho’s comic strategies and reinforced their attachment to the theoretical terms they’d worked so hard to master. Cho recounts her difficulties growing up Korean American in general and in particular her struggles with Hollywood expectations when she landed a sitcom deal. Students readily identified Cho’s frank discussion of sexuality and bodily functions as subverting conventional femininity and stereotypes about Asian women in particular (while guffawing over her account of trying to insert a drunk boyfriend’s flaccid penis, or protesting after having first had sex with a woman, “I figured out I wasn’t straight, or gay—I was just slutty. So hey, where’s my parade?”).

To add more context for Cho, who deals extensively with her forced dieting and purging at the hands of Hollywood executives, we also read politicized, rather than psychologized, personal accounts of eating disorders and body dysphoria, from the volume *Listen Up!* In “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” Lamm writes: “The most widespread mentality regarding body image at this point is something along these lines: Women look in the mirror and think, ‘I’m fat,’ but really they’re not. Really they’re thin. Really they’re thin. But really I’m fat. According to mainstream feminist theory I don’t even exist. . . . Rather than just reassuring people, ‘no, you’re not fat, you’re just curvy,’ maybe we should be demystifying fat and dealing with fat politics as a whole. . . . All forms of oppression work together, and so they have to be fought together” (138).

Chernik puts her anorexia in context this way in “The Body Politic”: “I had been willing to accept self-sabotage, but now I refused to sacrifice myself to a society that profited from my pain. I finally understood that my eating disorder symbolized more than ‘personal psychodynamic trauma.’ Gazing in the mirror at my emaciated body, I observed a woman held up by her culture as the physical ideal because she was starving, self-obsessed and powerless, a woman called beautiful because she threatened no one except herself” (108). Chernik thus discusses the difference between seeing weight issues as issues of power related to patriarchy rather than as personal wounds or the need for recovered individual self-esteem. It was important to me to reinforce that idea since the rhetoric of individual responsibility too often forestalls my students’ situating their life experience in a context of power that could lead to recognizing how class and patriarchy work to narrow their choices in ways they are encouraged not to recognize. Although this way of thinking might seem to be an example of the individualism for which third wavers have been critiqued, it also intersects with the “bootstraps” discourse my working class students often use (even as their practice seems by contrast very collective and family oriented) and with the discourses of neoliberalism, as individuals become “governmentalized,” meaning, in part, that their systemic disadvantages are redescribed as their own problem to solve.\(^b\) These distinctions proved especially important in that most people in the class confessed to problems of body dysphoria, including the one male student who recounted having spent a year obsessively dieting and working out.

Thus the politics of body image were our immediate context for Cho. Later, Kristina Sheryl Wong’s article “Pranks and Fake Porn,” describing her website/public art project, “Big Bad Chinese Mama,” helped clarify the ways that stereotypes about Asian women and Asian Americans’ status as a “model minority” aggravated Cho’s struggles and shaped her comedy. Wong created a website parodying Asian porn and mail order bride sites, and used her HTML skills to link her site to real sites so as to lure the unsuspecting porn or bride consumer, as well as

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\(^b\) All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
political Asian Americans, to her site, thus creating a multidimensional audience for her art. The artist emphasizes the interactivity of the Web, allowing her to hear back from her dupes/audience members, as well as her ability to revise stereotypes through the use of irony, a quintessential third wave trope. For our class on feminism and the Internet, we used Wong's tactics as a source of theorizing the feminist use of the Web. We also read Lee's chapter from The Fire This Time about the persistence of the technology gap for girls and women, and talked about the Utopian dimension of discourse around the Internet and what might be problematic about it. Suicide Girls, an alternative pinup website that Bitch magazine had profiled (Tomlin), was another topic. Armed with criteria and questions about the feminist use of the Internet generated by these two sites and the associated articles, each student was asked, as we met in a computer lab, to explore some links I had provided and find a site or two where they believed they saw the Web being used in a feminist way and/or saw Third Wave values and politics reflected. The sites students chose were very varied, from public health sites debunking anti-masturbation myths, to a little site by a Richmond, Virginia, punk girl trying to make her conservative home town an easier and friendlier stop on alternative musicians' tours. In most cases irony and subversion took a back seat to community, interactivity, and diversity in students' hierarchy of preferences, though Big Bad Chinese Mama, Wong's site, did raise laughs and gasps that should have pleased her.

We devoted one day late in the semester to discussing feminism and activism. The Fire This Time provides the argument that feminism as a movement "exist[s] insidiously and simultaneously everywhere" (xxxi); that young feminists, having assimilated their feminism and expanded it to inform and include other aspects of their politics and identity, have taken their feminism with them into other arenas and other fights, rather than having disappeared. Baumgardner and Richards's Grassroots, we decided, might be more problematic. In an attempt to make activism seem less intimidating, it goes too far; it equates simple lifestyle choices with activism (recycling, switching to fluorescent light bulbs), no doubt in a strategic attempt to start people with little easy steps of awareness in the belief that they will lead to more. But some students, who found the focus on style/lifestyle pervasive in the third wave literature we had looked at, were dubious, while others seemed too easily persuaded that the small steps would be enough: resolving to shorten your shower to save water was too much like resolving to eat better, a governmentality approach involving self-monitoring for self-blame or approval just like those that we had elsewhere been situating and critiquing.

In short, it was too analogous to the "weak feminism" Amber Kinser points to in the article with which we closed the semester. In evaluating the initial and continued usefulness of a rhetoric of the third wave, Kinser points to the possibility not only of weak but of false feminism, parts of so-called postfeminism. For Kinser, false feminism can mistake a sense of entitlement for actual rights, and resistance qua resistance as feminism: "Feminism is false when it is confused with resistance per se . . . Part of the genius of postfeminism is to co-opt the language of feminism and then attach it to some kind of consumer behavior, that feeds young people's hunger for uniqueness" (144). She distinguishes this from weak feminism; while false feminism "results in no feminist movement, weak feminism results in minimal feminist movement, the kind that . . . placates feminists [but] is so negligible as to be wholly unthreatening to the status quo" (144–45). We used Kinser to help us conclude the course by discussing the appropriation/mainstreaming of feminism. Looking at and for concrete examples in pop culture, we read Driscoll's article discussing the Spice Girls, largely because of its attempt
to take on the issue of “identification” and make it more complex, to go beyond the pop psychological notion of positive role models, which in my view is an example of weak feminism. We brought this discussion of identity together with Baumgardner and Richards’s (much more accessible than Driscoll’s) assertion that Barbie, rather than being a role model, positive or negative, is a “blank screen” for some women “on which to project what was happening in [their] heads” (196)—a realm of freedom rather than of constraint. We were evenly divided, with some women maintaining that Barbie forces an identification that will make girls feel inadequate because they are not like her, while others argued with Driscoll that she enabled a looser kind of identification that allowed them to script her into their desires freely.10 Neither side could budge; nor were we divided along generational lines clearly, as one passionate Barbie-as-screen advocate was in her early 40s. Efforts to move everyone in a more dialectical direction failed signally. Another example of questioning the appropriation of feminism into pop culture involved the Powerpuff girls. Time and technical constraints prevented our screening episodes, but perusing character bios and reading an article that explains the series’s origin and surveys fan and parent reaction to this tale of five-year-old female cartoon superheroes created through the inadvertent admixture of either ingredient X or “a can of Whoopass” into a vat of “sugar and spice and everything nice” provoked a spirited discussion and a resolution on my part to get the Powerpuff Girls fully onto the syllabus for next time. The class seemed to think, however, that narratives like the Powerpuffs were less likely to provide screen-like flexibility for viewers and consumers; finding or writing Powerpuff fan fiction might be a rejoinder to that view.

Some Results

As noted above, this was a research seminar as well as a pop cultural and theoretical investigation. This was undoubtedly the smallest class any of the students will have taken, seminars being uncommon in the humanities where I teach, and those three hours and twenty minutes every Tuesday night could be intense and draining. The strongest final projects among the younger women embraced the idea of subversiveness and re-appropriation from Gottlieb and Wald and others and read them into cultural phenomena—punk and popular performers, and television shows. The strongest final projects among the older women brought feminism in general and third wave feminism in particular to bear on issues—specifically working motherhood and Christianity—crucial to the women’s own personal identity. Their projects were intellectually and emotionally powerful to the students, and they both recognized and called into question the ways third wavers believed they had resolved conflicts between feminism and other demands in new ways—specifically Ariel Gore’s rebellious Hip Mama and Alena Amato Ruggerio, who calls herself “God’s Grl.” Other projects dwelt on common obsessions such as body image and violence against women in ways that did not seem to me to reflect a serious engagement with the theoretical aspects of the course but that seemed meaningful to the projects’ authors, who were full of awe and anger at what they had learned. A critique of consumer capitalism, and the desire to resist the way their desires are mobilized, seemed to be one of the most powerful things the younger women were taking away from the class. The insight, old to me since the days of the Beauty Myth and before, that we were being taught that we “needed work” and that getting us to work on/buy our way to better versions of ourselves was distracting us from real political and material injustice, infused the class with periodic bouts of rage and inspired several research projects, including one on plastic surgery and one on the concept of “self objectification” as playing a role in body dysphoria.

What united the class were two things:
the abovementioned suspicion of consumer capitalism, and nostalgia for a unified feminism to which to belong. Even those that recognized the alternative models of feminist infiltration on the one hand, or of embracing marginality on the other, displayed this nostalgia and expressed wishes for the possibility of solidarity. What would be the mobilizing force for such solidarity was beyond our discussion (Labaton and Martin say it will be globalization [280]). But the desire alone seemed to me to be worth noting and pondering.

Changes

The ways I had failed to reflect on my feminism before teaching this course were borne in on me very early, and my classroom practice had to shift as a consequence. Encouraging personal narrative in the service of consciousness-raising was the first change I made. I had always included informal writing, student presentations, and group work, all the things we all do to de-center the classroom, democratize knowledge, and involve all student voices; these are basic tenets of feminist teaching that I have embraced and practiced for as long as I have taught. But in my intellectual anxiety and postfeminist embarrassment, with my narrow definition of what counted as serious, I had always focused on artifacts, textual or other, and had always hushed anecdotalists in the classroom as soon as would not be obviously humiliating for them. As I reviewed discussions of consciousness-raising in books and in Manifesta and looked at my students' lack of consciousness and my own, I knew I had to change for this class at least. So when Baumgardner and Richards discussed the second-to-third wave relationship as having been cast as a mother-daughter relationship in dangerous ways (210–17), I took this as an occasion to ask about my students' mothers' relationship to feminism and whether and how it had affected theirs. I hedged and hesitated, told everyone they could choose not to participate or, if they preferred, simply lie; but everyone chimed in in turn, in heartfelt and thoughtful ways, and I did too, going last. This set up a series of consciousness-raising moments, including personal narrative as evidenced in the question of Barbie and, on our day discussing feminism and activism, everyone answering Baumgardner and Richards's final question in their second book, Grassroots: what small thing could each of us do? Besides these all-inclusive personal discussions, confessional moments around domestic violence and body dysphoria (including in the latter case the one man, who was evidence in the assertion that this illness and the compulsions resulting have crossed gender lines) came up. As they did so it became clear we had learned how to go beyond the personal insights, though, and put them in a political context. For me, the principle that the personal is political and is not the antithesis of intellectual became real in a new way.

As noted, I felt myself between the waves, waveless in fact, while my students seemed more aligned with one wave or another. While most students ultimately affirmed with Bitch magazine co-founder Lisa Jervis (in a 2005 article in Ms. magazine) that the usefulness of the term "third wave" might be over, they nevertheless manifested aspects of the second and third wave divide in striking ways. The rejection of third wave unladylikeness among older women—who couldn't get past the punk aesthetic generally, or, especially, the story of the L7 performer throwing her used tampon at a heckler (Gottlieb and Wald 261)—and the critique of third wave individualism as excessive and detrimental to feminism as a whole, contrasted with younger women's willingness to focus on gains in contested cultural territory such as among pop icons' adoption of styles subversive of conventional femininity. Interestingly, my between-the-waves status seems to have been relatively unproblematic. I found myself, somewhat pathetically, wishing to seem cool, even dressing a little bit differently for class
and so on. But my pop culture expertise was simply assimilated, as far as I could tell, with my professorhood among the third wavers, who located me as older and thus other; if it mattered to them that I used to go out and bang my head to punk bands, I couldn't tell. The older students, while categorizing me as younger (though I was far closer to their ages than to the 20—somethings) appeared, in conversation, to attribute, say, my willingness to identify as a feminist with my education as much as with my experience or generational status. My in-between-ness, along with my status as professor, seems to have allowed both sets of students to identify with me in a limited way while distinguishing themselves from me in others, a useful feature, I like to think, in a teacher, but a structural phenomenon and not a personal strength I can claim as my own.

Teaching this course also, as I have noted, led to some important personal reflections. I cannot believe that I am alone in having surrendered to an impoverished, excessively genteel and intellectualized (in the bad sense) notion of feminist teaching—one that internalizes and practices what are arguably masculinist notions of academic value, that fits its feminism too comfortably into a corporatized university promoting individualized narratives of self-help to its students, provided they will endorse the hierarchies that give them a ladder to climb. This course brought that awareness and the need to change flooding into my consciousness. Still neither second nor third waver, I'm other to both, a monstrous mixture without, sadly, much in the way of hybrid vigor. I'm not a tenured radical and I can't see myself as a "rebel girl" either — but the model of infiltration Labaton and Martin (xxx) offer is deeply appealing, and it's the one I hope to keep practicing and promoting as I profess.

Versions of the Future

While I was excited and happy with how the course turned out, there are of course things I'll change if/when it runs again. I have noted that I'd make the music more accessible outside of class. I'll also include more instances of coming-to-consciousness narratives, especially since the anthologies I've referred to above (Listen Up! and Colonize This!, for example) abound in good ones, to add to the consciousness-raising aspect of the course. One topic I'd like to make room to cover is motherhood. The "working mother" research paper that noted the third wave's take on this topic was very good, and the resources its author used are rich and accessible. Furthermore, one younger student in the class was vehement about how angry it made her that the culture around her seemed to demand that she consider herself always as a potential mother—a striking rebellion we didn't get to explore. Both the authors of Manifesta have become mothers since the book was published. And, finally, alternative motherhood and alternative families would allow, as would including more consciousness raising narratives, a fuller consideration of the place of lesbians in third wave culture, a topic that came up in everything from Riot Grrl to Margaret Cho but that always could use further consideration. Although the angry student would be made angrier by this syllabus addition, I can't help thinking it would be worth it.

Conclusion

My experience with teaching this course, and Girlfight in particular, demonstrated to me that although there are limits to the second wave/third wave opposition, as the continuities and interdependencies are many, nevertheless there is a heuristic value in the distinction for understanding my and my students' relationship to feminism and for locating the pop cultural texts we were examining. My findings, then, about the usefulness of looking at the artifacts of third wave culture echo, within a pop cultural critical context, Kinser's assertions about how the rhetoric of the waves has helped some
feminists position themselves and find their relationship to feminism. It may be that using the second/third wave divide to help in the project of historicizing artifacts of contemporary culture—culture that they share in part if not wholly—can enable students (and professors) to historicize their own attitudes about women and feminism in a useful and at least seemingly immediate way, even if the construct second/third wave is just that, a construct.\textsuperscript{11}

However, it clearly remains crucial to remind ourselves that feminism resides not in generations, nor in individuals, nor in artifacts, but in intersubjective relations, critical positions, and above all in actions. My students’ nostalgia for a unified feminist movement to which to belong is in my view less important than their response to each others’ oral presentations of their research: happy to laugh and comment appreciatively at the research on \textit{Sex and the City}, they nevertheless quickly engaged with and demanded more information from the author of domestic-violence and body-dysphoria papers. Women both know the difference between appearance and reality, \textit{and} know that \textit{difference} isn’t the only relationship between them. Therefore they want their stories and images of empowerment and believe they make a difference, even as they also acknowledge that those are no substitute for true health or simple safety. The feminism that will engage them and in which they will engage will be as mobile and multifaceted as their consciousness. To find and activate them, feminist mobilizers, regardless of their own generational positioning, will have to excel at the consciousness-raising technique of nonjudgmental listening. Only then will they be able to hear voices of experience and not feel matronized, and be fully able to realize how completely non-exclusive in young women are the supposed poles of irony and earnestness, screen-savvy and gut-instinct, self-involvement and sisterliness. It’s there that the illusion of a second versus third wave breaks down.

Thanks to Catherine Lavender, Miranda Sherwin, and the members of the \textit{Feminist Teacher} collective for their responses to drafts of this article.

\textbf{Notes}

\begin{enumerate}
\item On a similar topic, but under much more extreme circumstances, see Dodwell on teaching women’s literature among members of the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons).
\item Klein does an overview of Riot Grl’s inception from the point of view of a participant. Whether to call Riot Grl a subculture or a movement or neither is a somewhat vexed question; see Klein, and also Gottlieb and Wald, on this issue.
\item For a discussion of the continuities between second and third wave see especially Klein.
\item hooks refers to her text in her introduction as “a little book… concise, fairly easy to read and understand… easy to read without being simplistic” (viii).
\item Also compare useful discussion of “confidence versus consciousness” in Baumgardner and Richards, \textit{Manifesta} (82–83).
\item hooks's remarks about violence are addressed specifically to violence in the home: “patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force. . . . The term ‘patriarchal violence’ is useful because unlike the more accepted phrase ‘domestic violence’ it continually reminds the listener that violence in the home is connected to sexist and sexist thinking, to male domination” (61–62). My students pointed out that the film's heroine, by appropriating violence, was simply reversing the poles of domination, whether in the home or in the boxing ring.
\item Compare the exercises in Deay and Stitzel.
\item Although I did not give it to the class to read, I found Springer's essay extremely useful in grounding my reading of Morgan.
\item See Gordon for an overview of the concept of governmentality, and, specifically, for a very neutral discussion of its relation to neoliberalism, see pp. 41–45.
\item This seems to reinforce some of Reid-Walsh and Mitchell's conclusions that Barbie is “appropriated in multifarious and contradictory ways” (186).
\item I thank Miranda Sherwin for this observation.
\end{enumerate}
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