PERSONAL THEORIZING:
A STRATEGIC APPROACH
TO THIRD WAVE FEMINIST THEORY

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ABSTRACT

With the institutionalization of women's studies has come the emergence of a group of young women who call themselves "the third wave" of feminism. Although third wave feminists thus far have failed to cohesively identify and agree upon what they call third-wave feminism, what they do share is a commitment to the use of personal experience in the production of feminist theory. This project stems from a concern that in spite of the apparent commitment of third wave theorists to what I call "personal theorizing", this rhetorical strategy is approached with a dangerous lack of specificity of intent. I propose an approach to personal theorizing that takes into account the potential negative effects of the use of the personal within the production of feminist theory, and instead offer a strategic way to engage the personal within feminist theorizing that takes third wave feminist theory a step further. Once approached from the perspective in which the personal is seen as a rhetorical tool that is only effective when used skillfully and precisely, I argue that personal theorizing offers a necessary and unique rhetorical strategy in order to fulfil specific third wave feminist objectives. Indeed, personal theorizing offers a strategy that fulfills three primary objectives of third wave feminism more efficiently than any other mode of theoretical production.
A large part of this project includes defining both "third wave feminism" and "personal theorizing". The definition that I propose for third wave feminism is grounded largely in the anthologies previously mentioned and offers a specific and politically viable explication of the third wave. Defined in direct opposition to the mainstream media's embrace of a "postfeminist era", I argue that the third wave is a stance of necessary political resistance to cries that "feminism is dead."

The analytical framework I use in my analysis of third wave theory is one of my own design. Drawing on various critics who discuss the use of the personal within the production of the theoretical, I argue for a rhetorical approach that is explicitly intended for the women who are in the process of forming what is and will be third wave theory. My hope is that a more specific articulation of the third wave, coupled with a more strategic engagement with the personal, can lead to a more useful and politically viable body of third wave feminist thought and practice.
Dedicated to my Mother
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I think readers want to know about each other. Sometimes, when a writer introduces some personal bit of a story into an essay, I can hardly contain my pleasure. I love writers who write about their experience. I feel I'm being nourished by them, that I'm being allowed to enter into a personal relationship with them. That I can match my experience up to theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, "yes, that's how it is." ¹

As an avid reader of feminist theory of the late 1980's and 1990's, I have shared the pleasure articulated by Jane Tompkins that comes from feeling that moment of connection with a writer when I am able to nod my head and say, "yes, that's how it is." With an initially uncritical embrace, I devoured the works of theorists who invited me into their world just a little bit -- writers like bell hooks, Patricia Williams, Nancy Mairs, and Carolyn Heilbrun, to name a few. Prior to looking at these texts as theoretical constructions, I did not realize that these theorists used the personal strategically. I did not consider that these writers used the personal as a tool to accomplish precisely what Jane Tompkins explains the personal

can do, that is, to invite this connection on the part of the reader. What is even more important, though, is that this connection was not the only end accomplished by the use of the personal. Feminist theorists who have used the personal to advance and complicate the theory they produce have illustrated that the personal can do more than invite an emotional connection on the part of the reader. While many who write about personal stories observe (like Tompkins) that it helps to build connections with the reader, this thesis will argue that such a goal is too narrow for third wave theorists as it surveys the reliance of third wave feminists on this form of theorizing.

As a feminist who situates herself within a historical moment that is being called “the third wave,” I was naturally thrilled when anthologies of third wave feminist theory came out in which the editors expressed an explicit commitment to write feminist theory that draws on personal experience. The three most cited of these recent anthologies are: To Be Real, edited by Rebecca Walker, Third Wave Agenda, edited by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, and Listen Up! Voices From the Next Feminist Generation edited by Barbara Findlen. Although these texts do not identify cohesively nor agree upon what they call third wave feminism, they do share a commitment to the kind of writing “that Moraga and Anzaldúa name ‘theory in the flesh’ and that bell hooks calls ‘lived theory,’ one that could articulate the historically situated experiences of our generation.” ² The result of this rhetorical commitment, in which these writers attempt to blend the personal with the theoretical, is a body of third

² Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 14.
wave feminist theory that is consistent only in its inconsistency. Often successful as purely autobiographical writing or as traditionally disembodied theorizing, the essays in these anthologies ultimately fail to achieve their editors’ claims, however, by failing to present larger theoretical analysis informed and illuminated by the writers’ lived experiences.

My project stems from a concern that in spite of the apparent commitment of third wave theorists to what I call “personal theorizing,” this rhetorical strategy is approached with a dangerous lack of specificity of intent. One unintended consequence of this lack of specificity is a body of third wave theory that is too easily appropriated by mainstream media to support claims that the feminist movement is over. In this thesis I intend to present an approach to personal theorizing that takes into account the potentially negative effects of the use of the personal within the production of feminist theory, and offer instead a strategic way to engage the personal within feminist theorizing that takes third wave feminist theory a step further. Once approached from the perspective in which the personal is seen as a rhetorical tool that is only effective when used skillfully and precisely, I argue that personal theorizing offers a necessary and unique rhetorical strategy in order to fulfill specific third wave feminist objectives. As we shall see, personal theorizing offers a strategy that fulfills three primary objectives of third wave feminism more efficiently than any other mode of theoretical production.

My analysis requires working definitions for three primary concepts: feminist theory, third wave feminism, and personal theorizing. The question of feminist theory — how it is done and for whom — has been
debated among feminists since feminists began to call their writing "feminist theory" in the early second wave of feminism. Defining feminist theory as "a proposed pattern to understand the world by"\(^3\) seems simple enough until we go on to ask whose world we are attempting to explain and realize that no one pattern is sufficient to understand the varied worlds in which women live today. Thus, that definition would seem to invite a proliferation of articles and books that can only agree that feminist theory -- how it is done and for whom -- is an open, ever-evolving question. For the purposes of my analysis of third wave feminist theory I find bell hooks' definition of theory particularly useful. Hooks envisions feminist theory as a space which enables us to "make sense out of what is happening, it is a place to imagine possible futures, where life could be lived differently . . .Is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask it to do so and direct our theorizing towards this end."\(^4\) Hooks also offers an answer to the question of whether or not the personal and the theoretical can coexist. For hooks, theory can come from:

\[\ldots\] efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences. \ldots Personal testimony, personal experience, is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it forms the base of our theory making. While we work to resolve those issues that are most pressing in daily life . . .we engage in a critical process of theorizing that enables and empowers.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) hooks, 70.
It is entirely logical that third wave feminists — who often came to feminism through the feminist classroom and have documented the impact that the writings of bell hooks had on their development of a feminist consciousness — would attempt to create third wave theory that fits within hooks' definition. Indeed, as I will illustrate in my analysis, viewing the third wave as a historical construct helps to inform why third wave theorists are committed to creating a body of feminist theory that combines the personal with the theoretical, albeit with the inherent difficulties this type of theorizing can present.

The difficulty in defining a moment of history which is still very much in the process of defining itself has led to a proliferation of definitions of the third wave. The definition of the third wave that I propose, grounded largely in the writings of Leslie Heywood, Jennifer Drake, and Deborah Siegel, recognizes third wave feminism as a historical construct and offers a specific and politically viable understanding of the third wave. In an effort to differentiate between second and third wave feminism, Jennifer Drake suggests that it is "more productive to consider how these terms suggest feminist movements understood as changing, informed by particular locations and specific struggles." 6 Viewing the third wave as connected to the second wave of feminism and in direct opposition to the mainstream media's embrace of a "postfeminist era" is crucial in any attempt to identify a politically viable definition of the third wave:

In the perpetual battle of representation and definitional clout, the slippage from ‘third wave feminism’ to ‘postfeminism’ is important, because many of us working in the third wave by no means define our feminism as a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement. Let us be clear: ‘postfeminist’ characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave. ...Whereas conservative postfeminist thinking relies on an opposition between ‘victim feminism’ and ‘power feminism’. ...to us the second and third wave are neither incompatible or opposed. Rather, we define feminism’s third wave as a movement that contains elements of the 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.  

This understanding of feminism as a movement that continues to grow, building on the work already done by feminists in the second wave, provides the groundwork for the most important objective of the third wave -- to guarantee the continuation of the feminist movement. Indeed, as Deborah Siegel argues:

> An insistence on the continuation of the feminist movement (I am the third wave) resists narrative scripts that imply that women’s movements are no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant. ...When used in this context, ‘third wave’ becomes a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium of feminism and feminists.  

Once a clear picture of what the third wave might do for feminism is established, the question becomes how exactly to accomplish these goals.

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7 Heywood and Drake, 3.

My objective is to offer a solution for one part of this question. If these anthologies propose to offer a body of third wave feminist theory, and if they are committed to the use of the personal with the theory they produce, how might they do it better? The analytical framework I use in my analysis of third wave theory is one of my own design. My primary source for justifying this rhetorical strategy is Nancy Miller's articulation of personal criticism in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* as "an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism."\(^9\) My desire to define personal theorizing beyond what Miller refers to as personal criticism stems from my conviction that the writers of third wave theory need an even more explicit way in which to engage the personal with the theoretical. In addition to Miller's explication of personal criticism, I look to Dale Bauer's discussion of the use of the personal as a "strategy of identification" which suggests that "the whole point of confession and personal criticism is identificatory."\(^10\) Drawing on these and other critics who discuss the use of the personal within the production of the theoretical, I argue for a rhetorical approach that is explicitly intended for women who are in the process of forming what is and what will be third wave feminist theory.

My approach, which I call personal theorizing, stems from my observation that third wavers do not consistently achieve their goal of presenting larger theoretical analysis that is informed and illuminated.

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through their use of the personal. Therefore, I examine third wave theorizing to see if it first maintains a necessary and painstaking self-reflexivity on the part of the writer, and second, if it is committed to using the personal only as a tool to illuminate an object of inquiry that is outside the self.\(^{11}\) I have concluded that personal theorizing can only serve as a tool for third wave theorists if it meets those criteria. Then and only then will it serve third wavers’ three major objectives: the continuation of the feminist movement, the identification of ways to bridge theory and practice, and the articulation of a “politics of ambiguity”\(^{12}\), or, a postmodern embrace of apparent contradiction. Through an analysis of excerpts from the three major third wave anthologies, I propose a strategic approach to third wave uses of the personal that enables third wave theorists to avoid the pitfalls of the personal and accomplish more efficiently what the editors of these anthologies set out to do, that is, present a body of third wave feminist theory that offers broader theoretical analysis that is informed by the writer’s lived experiences. My hope is to offer a rhetorical tool to third wave feminists which enables them to use the personal in the theory they produce as a tool that can work for, rather than against, them.

\(^{11}\) It is important to note that the three third wave essays I use in my analysis are exemplar of two things -- their representation of a particular third wave objective, and a clear effort made on the part of the theorist to combine the personal with the theoretical. Based on this criteria, these essays are the best examples of third wave personal theory as represented by these anthologies. This is not to suggest that other essays in these anthologies are not valuable on a number of levels, only that these three essays are the best examples of personal theorizing in the third wave as I define it.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICIZING THE PERSONAL IN FEMINIST THEORY

Like the philosopher who wonders where the 'dream of
the innumerable would come from, if it is indeed a dream,' and the
poet who had already discovered that 'poems are like dreams: in
them you put what you don't know you know,' the dream of feminist
critics, I think already includes some linguistic knowledge of the
culture of another country, even if we haven't traveled there. 13

If Nancy Miller is correct in her articulation of the dream of the
feminist theorist, if part of the project of feminist theory is an exploration
that may lead to the discovery of a new set of discursive realities, then the
turn to the personal within the production of feminist theory has served as
one of the most crucial tools in this exploration. Indeed, the use of the
personal has provided one of the most effective rhetorical devices used
by feminist theorists in their attempts to expand the sometimes limiting
discursive frameworks offered by traditional, abstract theory. Although
cries of "the personal is political" have provided the groundwork for much
of the feminist theory that has been produced in the last thirty years, this
turn to the personal has been neither an easy nor an obvious solution for
feminist theorists struggling to legitimize the field of women's studies. As

13 Nancy Miller, Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts
(New York: Routledge, 1991) 89.
Jane Tompkins challenges in her much debated essay “Me and My Shadow”: “It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned?”

The commitment to the personal experiences of women’s lives within the production of feminist theory has historically come at a certain cost. The risks of being dismissed as “mere” women’s writing or as “too subjective,” as if other forms of writing avoid subjectivity, are risks that feminist theorists continue to face as they use their experiences to illuminate the theory they produce.

The idea of lived experience being used to inform or serve as the basis for feminist theory is not new to feminism. One of the most successful examples of this rhetorical turn is the much-anthologized *This Bridge Called My Back*.

In 1979, when feminist theorists were still very much in the process of figuring out for whom and what feminist theory was, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga offered a map of sorts in this groundbreaking anthology which attempted to articulate some of the discoveries that feminist theorists were in the process of making. Anzaldúa and Moraga, realizing that “there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks,” set out to build some of these bridges themselves.

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15 I cite *This Bridge* not because it was the earliest example of this type of writing, but because it is a text that is specifically referred to by many third wave theorists—such as Heywood and Drake—as being particularly influential in their own construction of a feminist identity.

One of the most significant tools used by the editors and contributors to *This Bridge* was the use of their own personal experiences to bridge the gap that they argued existed between theory and practice. In the introduction to “Entering the Lives of Others” Moraga and Anzaldúa coined the phrase “theory in the flesh,” which they articulate as:

> A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives - our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings - all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions of our experience... This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal. 17

Critical of the ways in which abstract theorizing failed to address the lived realities of their lives and the women with whom they identified, Moraga and Anzaldúa presented what has become one of the most useful articulations of how and why the personal can be utilized as a bedrock for feminist theories.

The fact that *This Bridge Called My Back* was written by and for women of color is certainly no coincidence. As feminists committed to theorizing difference have argued repeatedly, much of the feminist theory that was produced in the early works of second wave feminism, and the expectations surrounding the ways that theory was “supposed” to be, failed to address the lives of women of color. Barbara Christian, also a significant and early disruption of the notion of “objective” theory, explains the motivations behind her use of the personal in the production of theory: “I, for one, am tired of being asked to produce black feminist literary theory as if I were a mechanical man. For I believe such theory is

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17 Moraga and Anzaldúa, 23.
prescriptive - it ought to have some relationship to practice." 18 Christian was certainly not alone in her frustration, or in her commitment to identifying new ways to produce theory. Again, it is not a random occurrence that many of the most influential feminist theorists of color -- Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and bell hooks, to name a few -- have turned to the personal in their efforts to produce meaningful and relevant feminist theory that addresses women's lives lived at the intersections of difference. As feminist thought has incorporated postmodernism and difference as two primary considerations in the production of feminist theory, the work offered by these early practitioners of personal theory has led the way for other feminists to use the personal as a rhetorical device.

The use of the personal within the production of feminist theory has served both practical and political purposes. In an explanation of this turn to the personal, which Tonya Modleski identifies as "personal criticism," she suggests:

The move to personal criticism in the academy has in part been motivated, at least among politically committed critics, by the acknowledgement of difference and by the challenges a generation of critics has mounted to essentialist modes of thinking. . .The autobiographical critic declares that if she cannot speak for others she can at least speak for herself. . .Personal criticism does not relinquish the hope of illuminating the experiences of others, but is informed by an awareness of the problematic nature of speaking for others, as well as the provisional nature of any conclusions drawn in the process. 19


Seen in this light, the turn to the personal serves as a strategic disruption which allows the theorist to avoid and resist the universalizing theories that failed to represent themselves and others in the first place. The possibilities offered by the use of the personal in disrupting the patterns of hegemonic discourses that prevail in academic writing have been one of the primary motivations for feminist theorists in preferring this rhetorical strategy. Barbara Johnson evaluates the effects of the personal as a critical intervention and suggests a move that:

...reintroduces the personal...as a way of disseminating authority and decomposing the false universality of patriarchally institutionalized meanings. Not only has personal experience tended to be excluded from the discourse of knowledge, but the realm of the personal has been coded as female and devalued for that reason.²⁰

Clearly, the importance of claiming one's own experiences as a valid basis for an authorial voice has been a project of enormous importance in the production of feminist thought. What has resulted in this proliferation of experimental modes of theorizing, though, is a body of feminist thought "that cannot be straightforwardly classified."²¹

In an effort to trace the emergence of the use of the personal within feminist theory, Christie McDonald identifies two genres of feminist criticism that have emerged as a result of the institutionalization of feminism and feminist studies. The first and perhaps most readily acceptable type of theorizing is "abstract theory...[a] depersonalized kind

²⁰ As quoted in Miller, 15.

of exploratory work" that offers the kind of critical work that is familiar to an academic audience. The second type, which she identifies as "more experimental work in criticism" is "autobiographical work or personal writing which has become increasingly polemical and explicitly political." 22 It is this second genre of feminist criticism which pushes the boundaries not of only of thought, but of the discursive frameworks that dictate how we articulate our thoughts, that have transformed and continue to transform feminist political agendas. 23 If we are to understand how the contemporary feminist movement has come to be what it is today, we must find ways to speak critically about texts that merge the personal and the theoretical, and have had such a profound impact on the ways in which feminist thought is articulated today.


CHAPTER 3

THE PITFALLS OF THE PERSONAL

Exactly how to define this turn to the personal within the production of feminist theory is a challenge. Whether called "practical theorizing," "narrative criticism," "the autotheoretical," or "personal criticism," among others, what is clearly defined by each of these terms is an engagement with the personal within the act of theorizing. What is not so clear, however, is how to analyze or discuss this aspect of feminist theorizing critically. In an effort to emphasize some of the continuities to be found in the turn to the personal made by feminist theorists, Jackie Stacey suggests:

...the writing of the self that seeks to combine the positional with the theoretical does have its roots in the 1970s (but does not uniformly characterize feminist theory of that decade), it has continued to be rewritten during the 1980s (but not by a unified group of women who never questioned the problems of identity) and now in the 1990s there is a renewed interest in seeking to combine such modes of writing...Feminist theory that builds on the personal, then, might be seen to have been dismantled and renovated - to shape a variety of personal and less personal discourses at an oppositional angle to dominant critical positionings. 24

24 Stacey, 69.
Stacey raises a number of important points here, but what I want to emphasize is her recognition of the ways that these autobiographical turns have evolved, resulting in a mode of critical expression that is much more complicated than simply combining the personal and the theoretical. Nancy Miller takes this a step further when she suggests that “the spectacle of a significant number of critics getting personal in their writing, while not, to be sure, on the order of a paradigm shift, is at least the sign of a turning point in the history of critical practices.”  

In recognition of this turning point, a crucial step in the production of theory in the next wave will involve asking when it is useful to take this rhetorical turn, and what the implications of such a turn might be.

In one of the most thorough efforts to discuss the proliferation of the personal within feminist theory, Nancy Miller offers a key definition of personal criticism, defining it as “an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism.”  

This differs from other articulations of this mode of writing. For example, Kathy Young provides the term “autotheoretical” which she describes as “autobiographical works that are explicitly theoretical in nature.”

The difference in these two articulations of a very similar mode of expression lies in the focus of the author. Whereas autotheoretical writing is first and foremost autobiographical, personal criticism uses the autobiographical as a tool 

25 Miller, ix-x.

26 Miller, 1.

27 Young, 64.
that informs the theory the author is producing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer yet another way to differentiate between various turns to the personal within the production of theory, suggesting a split between “personal criticism” and “practical theorizing.” In practical theorizing, although the personal may be used in order to lead the reader to make larger social and political connections, the author’s object of inquiry is herself. Effective personal criticism, however, differs because the author is committed to an object of inquiry outside herself. She uses the personal strategically in order to illuminate her object of inquiry, not herself.  

Smith and Watson take the discussion of personal criticism a step further when they make the important distinction of the ways in which we use experience in the production of feminist theory. They suggest:

[Personal criticism] is in part a response to the sterile evacuation of the personal voice in what has by now become institutionalized as theoretical discourse. . . . Personal criticism is widely practiced by women, in homage to the textual practices they work on but also as integral to their effort to reframe the critical act through feminist pedagogy and practice. . . . For some, it means to theorize personal experience, or in the words of Joan Scott, to see experience not only as an interpretation but as in need of interpretation. Thus personal criticism facilitates the reading of personal experience and theory through each other.  

Here, experience is no more “transparent” than abstract theory. Instead, it is a tool used to rework existing boundaries in feminist theory. Nancy


29 Smith and Watson, 33.
Miller explains: “The questions before us in critical theory might go something like this: can we imagine a self-representational practice - for feminism - that is not contained by pre-constituted tropes of representivity?” In the wake of struggles of representation brought about by feminist theorists committed to theorizing difference, feminists in the 1990's are painfully aware of the complexities of representation and use the personal within the act of criticism in order to write beyond “preconstituted tropes of representivity.” The turn to the personal in feminist theory can be used in our efforts to locate new forms of representivity, forms that will only be located when we use our “selves” strategically in the crucial effort to exceed discursive constraints.

In spite of the many successes that have been achieved by practitioners of these modes of writing, there remain many critics who voice their suspicions of writers who invade abstract theory with the voice of the personal. To be fair, many of the concerns expressed by these critics are justifiable. Beyond the number of feminist theorists who strategically use the personal to inform the theoretical, there are many writers who see the acceptance of this mode of writing as an excuse to use their personal experiences uncritically as the yardstick to measure the theory they claim to produce. In a discussion of this mode of writing, Meryl Altman separates women’s autobiographical writings into those which are and those which are not useful for a feminist politics. The useful ones are those “shaped by a consciously political intention to change the world (not just the self) by showing what was wrong, by

30 Miller, 98.
showing lives that were lived on the edge.” 31 Useful works ask what is the balance that needs to be maintained in order to successfully engage the personal and the theoretical? While I argue that the use of the personal within feminist theory does offer a viable rhetorical strategy, I share the concern with its critics that a blind embrace of the personal can lead to a sloppy, egotistical mode of writing that only serves as a mirror in which the practitioner can manipulate her own identity or the world.

Offering a critique of the proliferation of women’s memoirs identifying themselves as feminist theory, Meryl Altman argues:

At one time, writing the personal was harder, because it went against one’s training as a scholar and as a woman. Now, nobody is trained to do much of anything, and I am beginning to think that writing the personal may actually be easier. . . . Somehow to write the personal — in that first breakout from the stultifying academic voice — one claimed to be writing from the margins. Claimed to be breaking a silence. This was necessary, and it was true, but as it has solidified into a writing convention it can sometimes be embarrassing. 32

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson voice a similar concern when they caution: “In redirecting attention from the object of inquiry to the critic’s responses to the object, personal criticism can overwrite the subject of inquiry as the theorist’s textual preoccupation becomes herself. At its worst it can resort to a willful abandoning of theory for a simplistic identity politics.” 33 I would concur with each of these arguments, with one addendum: while it is true that a careless embrace of the personal may,


32 Altman, 5.

33 Smith and Watson, 33.
in fact, be easier, to engage in this mode of writing *effectively* is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges a writer can face.

The question that must be answered if the next wave of feminist theorists is to continue to embrace the personal in its production of feminist theory, then, is how to rise to this challenge? What are the questions that must be asked to avoid these pitfalls of the personal? In consideration of these questions, the following chapter will offer some strategic approaches to the embrace of the personal made so significantly by third wave feminist theorists.
CHAPTER 4

PERSONAL THEORIZING: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO THE THIRD WAVE EMBRACE OF THE PERSONAL

Although the three third wave anthologies that I look to in this analysis fail to agree on what the third wave of feminism is and should be, each of them shares a commitment to the embrace of the personal within the production of theory. In this chapter, I offer an answer to the “why” and “how” of this rhetorical turn. Why are third wave theorists so consistently making this rhetorical decision, how are they using the personal to inform third wave theorizing, and even more importantly, how can they do it more successfully?

The turn made by third wave feminists to the personal is clearly not a random event. Indeed, if situated within the historical context of the last thirty years and the academic institutionalization of feminism, it is completely logical for feminist theorists “joining the party” (so to speak) in the 1990’s to make this rhetorical decision. In the introductions to Listen Up!, To Be Real, and Third Wave Agenda each anthology editor explicitly expresses a commitment to the use of the personal within the production
of third wave feminist theory.\textsuperscript{34} The question of why third wave feminists look to the personal as a favored rhetorical device is best explained when situated within the historical context of feminist theory and the women's studies classrooms that have led to the emergence of a group of writers claiming to be the third wave. In the most recent of these anthologies, \textit{Third Wave Agenda}, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake explain why the contributors to this anthology turn to the personal as they attempt to find a space for their own voices within larger discussions of feminist theory:

\begin{quote}
Coming out of a turn in the academy that seemed to privilege feminist theory that often seemed like a disembodied language game...we wanted, needed, more than anything to see a kind of writing that addressed our historical perspective, a writing that was intellectually rigorous and heartfelt and unpretentious at once...We wanted the kind of writing that Moraga and Anzaldúa name "theory in the flesh" and bell hooks called "lived theory," one that could articulate the historically situated experiences of our "generation".\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Heywood and Drake's choice of theorists to whom they refer is telling. For third wave feminists, the use of the personal within the production of theory was a rhetorical strategy featured by such theorists as hooks, Moraga, and Anzaldúa, who embraced the personal as an act of resistance to existing hegemonic discursive frameworks. Third wave theorists are taking up that call in order to create a new space for future feminism.

Significant, too, is Heywood and Drake's emphasis on the "historically situated experiences" of third wave feminists. Deborah Siegel

\textsuperscript{34} Findlen, xvi, Walker, xxxvii, Heywood and Drake, 2.

\textsuperscript{35} Heywood and Drake, 14.
provides a useful analysis of the shaping of feminisms’ third wave and its theory:

Claims that the third-wave is a theory-free moment -- like the assumption that all theorizing takes place in the academy -- are epistemologically naive, historically inaccurate, and ultimately misinformed. An inquiry into the theoretical foundation of a third-wave consciousness must nevertheless begin with an analysis of the historical and political contexts in which such utterances are shaped.36

In considering this, Siegel urges us to remember that the history of the feminist movement offers explanations for third wave feminists' judgement that the personal is such a crucial component of the theory they produce. She goes on to make an interesting connection between the use of the personal by third wavers and the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970’s:

The use of the personal in third wave expressions both resembles and differs from its use in second wave feminism. Even if the third wave constitutes a return to the personal, and that return seemingly enacts a return to consciousness raising, third wave personal expression nevertheless differs from the personalizing of the political effected through consciousness raising.37

That is, the third wave uses the personal in a way that differs because it reverses the process of consciousness-raising that took place in the early second wave of feminism. This process manifests itself in third waver's use of the personal. While consciousness-raising went from a particular experience or idea to a more generalized level of shared experiences, the use of the personal in third wave writing takes the general feminist theory that has been doled out to them in the women’s studies classrooms of the


37 Siegel, 51.
80's and 90's and takes these generalities back to the particular. Thus, it redraws the connections between the general and the particular so they make sense to the young women these third wave writers hope to reach and appeal to through their writing. Third wave theorists use the personal in their attempts to illustrate how a body works and lives within the frameworks of feminist thought so that the next generation of women of who read this material are offered feminist theory that "makes sense out of what is happening [and] is a place to imagine possible futures, where life could be lived differently."\(^{38}\)

However logical or well-intentioned this rhetorical turn may be for third wave theorists, though, it is often because of their use of the personal that they fail to offer third wave theory that is useful to anyone but the theorist who is producing it or, at best, those in her generation and identity group. Moreover, third wave feminists embrace the personal in extremely different ways with varied and unpredictable results. This non-specific, non-strategic approach to the use of the personal within the production of theory results in a body of third wave feminist theory that often undoes itself, in a sense, as many third wave writers "focus on themselves with the unchecked passion of amateur memoirists who believe their lives intrinsically interesting to strangers...they write about feminism by writing about growing up."\(^{39}\) While this criticism is not applicable to all of the writing in these third wave anthologies, it does indicate that though these writers may know why they are using the

\(^{38}\) Hooks, 61.

personal, they are not necessarily clear about how and when it should be used.

The solution I offer for this confusion in third wave theorizing is a strategic approach to the use of the personal in the production of theory called "personal theorizing." With this approach I hope to offer a framework for third wave theorists which allows for a strategic engagement with the personal that fulfills the three stated third wave objectives: a continuation of the feminist movement, the specific and useful articulation of a politics of ambiguity, and the identification of ways to bridge theory and practice. This approach views the use of the personal as a tool that must be used skillfully and precisely. As such, the practitioner of this mode of writing must focus on the two primary purposes of personal theorizing. The first and more easily accomplished objective is the use of the personal in order to invite identification on the part of the reader and encourage the reader to engage in a kind of dialogue with the theory she is reading. The second, and more difficult, objective is the use of personal theorizing to complicate and expand existing abstract theoretical frameworks. This objective is met not by discarding existing theory, but using that theory along with the personal as a way to take existing theory a step further.

A crucial consideration in the production of personal theory is the recognition that experience, or "the subject," is no more transparent than the theory third wavers critique. As such, "it is no easier to say 'I' than to make theory,"\textsuperscript{40} and the use of the personal must be just as, if not more,

critical a process as the production of theory. Nicole Ward Jouve advocates the use of the personal, recognizing that "any writing constructs and betrays a subject" and reasons that "one might as well make something of the process. . . it is because subjecthood has become so difficult, has become so deconstructed, that there is the need to work towards it."41 Here the motivation for the use of the personal is anything but personal, rather, it comes from the recognition that the personal is always a component in the production of theory. Thus, the recognition of the personal that is always there in theory becomes a tool to be explored and utilized rather than something to avoid. Nancy Miller identifies this as a specifically feminist approach to theory:

Perhaps what seems to be most 'feminist' to me about the uses of . . . narrative criticism is the self-consciousness these modes of analysis tend to display about their own processes of theorization; a self-consciousness that points to the fictional strategies inherent in all theory.42

It is this strategy of self-consciousness that is missing from much third wave feminist theory. The self-consciousness that is present in the act of personal theorizing must be used to display the processes and subjectivity behind any critical act. Personal theorizing requires constant critical attention not only to the theory being produced, but also to the self being used to complicate theory.

The failure to maintain the strategic self-reflexivity required in personal theorizing often results in third wave writing that reads more like confessional writing than it does feminist theory. Confessional writing, or

41 Ward Jouve, 11.

42 Miller, xii.
what appears to be confessional writing, can be useful in fulfilling the first objective of personal theorizing, to invite identification on the part of the reader. Dale Bauer offers a useful approach to the use of the personal in “Personal Criticism and the Academic Personality.” Here, Bauer reasons that “the confessional mode in much feminist theorizing is an attempt to find community through theorizing one’s experience.”

Significantly, though, Bauer does not see confessional writing as an end unto itself. Rather, it is a rhetorical move made not to confess, but to invite the kind of identification that is so important to third wave feminists. Bauer calls this a “rhetorical strategy of identification” and urges:

. . . We need to be clearer about what rhetorical identifications want to persuade people to do. Personal testimonies and autobiographical criticism in general too often stop at identification, rather than spell out the persuasion or commitment that is always the next step of identificatory rhetoric.

This recognition, that the theorist must always be conscious of how and why the personal is being used, is critical if third wave theorists are to use the personal to further the theory they produce.

Along with the recognition that the personal is best used as a rhetorical strategy comes the question of where, precisely, the personal belongs in the text. Due to the tendency of third wave theorists to fall into the trap where the “theorist’s textual preoccupation becomes herself” I offer one absolute rule for personal theorizing in order to avoid this “pitfall

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44 Bauer, 66.
of the personal." B\textsuperscript{45} Borrowing from Smith and Watson's definition of personal criticism, I envision personal theorizing as a rhetorical strategy in which the \textit{personal} is used as a tool to illuminate an object of inquiry that is \textit{outside the self}. Thus, the only reason to use the personal in third wave personal theorizing is to shed light on the object of inquiry, revealing the gaps that may exist in traditional abstract theory and filling those gaps with personal examples that raise questions or offer constructive challenges to the abstractions.

In order to practice personal theorizing successfully, then, the theorist must maintain a commitment to a \textit{strategy of self-reflexivity}. A key component to this self-reflexivity is the theorist's understanding of the limits of her own experience, as well as its illustrative possibilities. The motivation behind the engagement with the personal should only be for two primary reasons. The first is in order to invite the reader to identify and become invested in the text. Personal theorizing, though, demands that the theorist move beyond this and consider what that identification is supposed to accomplish the expansion and complication of existing theoretical frameworks. A prerequisite for successful personal theorizing then, is a working knowledge of the existing theoretical frameworks that the third wave theorist is attempting to contribute to, and possibly, expand. Third wave personal theorizing cannot afford to resist completely all existing feminist theory. Instead it should offer a space in which to reclaim theory and "turn theory back on itself."\textsuperscript{46} Practiced with this goal

\textsuperscript{45} Smith and Watson, 33.

\textsuperscript{46} Miller, 5.
in mind and its requisite attention to specificity, personal theorizing is a rhetorical strategy which is uniquely suited to help the third wave.
CHAPTER 5

WE RECRUIT: THIRD WAVE EFFORTS TO GUARANTEE THE CONTINUATION OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave. . .the fight is far from over. . .Let the dismissal of women's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power.

As is demonstrated by Rebecca Walker's statement, the motivation behind many feminists' claim to a third wave is in large part a reaction to the phenomenon in which younger feminists are labeled as the "postfeminist" generation. Catherine Orr offers a useful description of postfeminism, one which is in direct opposition to the vision of a third wave for which I argue. Orr sees postfeminism as "the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism." Importantly, postfeminists claim that the women's movement has succeeded, that it is over, and that there is no longer any need for the fights to which second wave feminists committed themselves.47 Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, the popular press

picks up the words of postfeminists such as Katie Roiphe as they make their semi-annual declaration that feminism is dead. In the context of post-feminist hype, the third wave can be seen as a necessary stance of political resistance. One of the major objectives — perhaps the primary objective — of the third wave is a commitment to the continuation of the feminist movement.

Given the chronology of the first and second waves, Deborah Siegal argues for an understanding of the third wave in which:

The very invocation of "third wave feminism" signals a rejection of scripts that assume that the gains forged by the second wave have so completely invaded all tiers of social existence that feminists themselves have become obsolete. When used in this context, 'third wave' becomes a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists, a sound bite to counter the now infamous refrain "I'm not a feminist, but...".

Indeed, claiming a third wave is a strategic response to the refrain "I'm not a feminist, but," and it is much more than a sound bite. It must be if it is to successfully do what is necessary — to help guarantee that the struggle for women's rights is carried on by the young women for whom feminism has been a given. As illustrated by the writings in *Listen Up!, To Be Real,* and *Third Wave Agenda,* many third wave feminists were born into a generation of women for whom the feminist movement has always existed. As Jennifer Drake points out, "conversations that invoke these

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terms [second wave and third wave feminism] do point to generational differences, but the ‘wave’ metaphor also emphasizes continuities within feminist thought and actions and acknowledges differences within feminist movements." The third wave has been misunderstood to a large extent because its relationship to the second wave has not been made clear. It cannot be emphasized enough that the third wave is committed to a continuation of the struggle that has been and continues to be carried on by the second wave. With this established, the efforts of third wave feminists to “recruit” mostly younger feminists is seen for what it is -- not an attempt to “overthrow” the second wave, but a commitment to contribute to the progress of the feminist movement.

As a new generation of women come to feminism, an important part of their initiation into feminism is the determination of where exactly this new generation fits within the history and the future of the movement. Third wave theorists offer their perspectives in order to take part in the shaping of a constantly changing movement. These theorists write with the awareness that feminism must “continue to be responsive to new situations, needs, and especially desires, ever expanding to incorporate and entertain those who wrestle with it, and swear by it, including those who may not explicitly call its name." To a large extent, third wave theory is written to invite women who situate themselves outside of the feminist movement to realize that they are, in a sense, products of the feminist movement, and agents capable of continuing feminist change.

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50 Drake, 98.

Through their efforts to question and expand what constitutes “the feminist community” third wave theorists attempt to establish a more inclusive understanding of feminism.\textsuperscript{52} The hope is that those women who currently claim “I’m not a feminist, but” will realize that calling themselves feminists might not be as limiting as they have been led to believe. To the contrary, claiming the name of feminism is as crucial now as it was thirty years ago.

The turn to the personal within third wave feminist theory is both logical and intelligent as third wave theorists attempt to write theory that invites the women who read it to aid in the continuation of a feminist movement. They write their experiences to inspire identification on the part of the reader, making their understanding of feminism accessible enough that a reader not familiar with feminist theory can experience the connection made in which they can “match my experience up to theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, ‘yes, that’s how it is.’”\textsuperscript{53} This is, of course, the strategy of identification which is one of the major components of personal theorizing. Selecting the personal out of the “toolbox” of rhetorical devices is an obvious choice in third wave efforts to write theory that helps to advance third wavers’ goal to continue the feminist movement.

A prime example of the use of the personal to invite the reader to identify with feminism, thus drawing the reader into the lines of a feminist community as drawn by the theorist, can be found in Tali Edut’s “HUES

\textsuperscript{52} Walker, xxxv.

\textsuperscript{53} Jane Tompkins, 123.
Magazine: The Making of a Movement." This essay, found in the most recent of the third wave anthologies discussed here, Third Wave Agenda, is one of the strongest examples of third wave writing that uses the personal as a rhetorical tool of identification. The strength of Edut's use of the personal stems from her constant awareness that the personal is a tool used to shed light on an object of inquiry that is outside the self, and a tool that can be particularly useful to a writer hoping to inspire identification on the part of the reader. However, Edut's use of the personal also illustrates the third wave tendency to present one's own experiences and contributions to ongoing discussions in feminist theory without sufficiently interrogating or contextualizing those experiences and contributions. In the analysis that follows I argue that had Edut practiced the self-reflexivity and strategic use of the personal required by personal theorizing she could more effectively have contributed to third wave efforts to recruit young feminists and offered a more useful representation of the third wave.

In "HUES Magazine: The Making of a Movement" Edut traces how she, an Israeli, Jewish woman, came to found HUES magazine, a multi-cultural, multi-sexual publication for "real" women. She uses her own experience in order to illustrate the ways in which mainstream magazines for young women promote low self esteem, and how she found empowerment through her association with other women who loved themselves in spite of the media's representation of "real" women.

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54 Tali Edut, with Dyann Logwood and Ophira Edut, "HUES Magazine: The Making of a Movement" Heywood and Drake, 85 - 98.
Ultimately, Edut’s major objective is to show that there is still a definite need for feminist movement, and to situate her reader within that need.

Edut opens her essay ironically with a confessional trope familiar to almost any reader in this particular historical moment. She begins: “Hello, my name is Tali. . . and I was an addict. You see, once upon a time I had this problem. I just couldn’t stop myself from subscribing to magazines for women and girls ‘just like me.’ I confess that I was a victim of the ill mainstream media.” Her use of the phrase “girls just like me” is significant because this becomes an assumed phrase in Edut’s “confession” of her experiences. In fact, Edut spends the first half of her essay establishing that she is “just like you.” The “you” whom Edut is attempting to reach is never explicitly stated, but her examples suggest that she is writing to women of her generation and class. She situates her reader right alongside her as she admits: “Like most people, I wanted to be liked and accepted.” What saves Edut from falling into the trap when the personal becomes the only point of the writing is that Edut has a reason for using the personal that is outside the self:

This saga of my teen angst is not a cry for sympathetic greeting cards or a plea for a guest spot on a daytime talk show. Rather it’s an attempt to make a point about how miserable a girl’s life can be when she tries to follow the manifesto of the mainstream media.

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55 Edut, 83.

56 Edut, 85.

57 Edut, 86.
Edut shares this “saga of her teen angst” to invite the reader to identify with, and to encourage the reader overcome any resistance to feminism and join her in making the deliberate step towards a feminist consciousness that Edut herself has taken.

In spite of Edut’s initial self-proclaimed status as a “victim” of mainstream media, Edut shows the reader how she managed to go from being a victim to being a feminist agent capable of changing her life and affecting the lives of women around her. Edut recounts the challenges she and her partners faced as they attempted to create HUES magazine, a multi-cultural, multi-sexual publication that provided alternatives to the representations of women as provided by mainstream media publications. Edut’s evidence for her claim that there is still a profound need for feminist movement is based on two main points. The first is the way HUES was embraced by younger women across the country, supporting Edut’s claim that women – especially younger women – desperately need a movement that works to expand popularly accepted notions of womanhood. Secondly, Edut recounts the numerous rejections she and her partners faced when approaching advertisers who “counted on women having low - self-esteem” and concludes that “a magazine that encouraged women to use their minds threatened the very premise many companies cling to.”

Having invited the reader on a sort of “identificatory journey” Edut concludes with a challenge to the reader when she writes: “A reporter recently asked me if I thought a magazine like HUES could ever move into the mainstream and be as big as, say,

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58 Edut, 97.
Glamour. I guess that one is up to the women of the world.”\textsuperscript{59} Again, Edut is clear about using the personal strategically in order to promote identification on the part of the “women of the world”:

So, we asked ourselves, how could we package feminist ideals such as sisterhood and empowerment in a way that would speak to more than just a small segment of the female population? . . . It was like spoon-feeding feminism to the fearful, as opposed to ramming it down people’s throats. We preferred to show through personal anecdotes rather than preach from some political pulpit.\textsuperscript{60}

Perhaps it is in Edut’s attempts to “spoon-feed” third wave theory that she falls into some of the traps presented by the use of the personal without the specificity and strategic self-reflexivity required by personal theorizing.

While Edut does successfully use the personal to identify with a particular reader and to argue that there is a very real need for the continuation of feminist movement, her use of the personal also falls into some of the traps the editors Third Wave Agenda explicitly stated they hoped to avoid. Edut’s use of the personal violates Heywood and Drake’s promise that: “These are personal voices \textit{mediated by their grounding in research, theory, and social practice}.”\textsuperscript{61} Although Edut is clearly aware of the value of social practice, her use of the personal requires some of the “mediation” to which Heywood and Drake refer. Specifically, she does not ground the personal in research and theory. Thus, as she refers to a

\textsuperscript{59} Edut, 98.

\textsuperscript{60} Edut, 94 - 95.

\textsuperscript{61} Heywood and Drake, 2.
"new [feminist] movement," she completely ignores the fact that her views are deeply indebted to second wave feminism.

As we have seen, the clarification of the third wave as a continuation of feminist struggle rather than an entirely new movement is crucial if we are to achieve a politically viable articulation of third wave feminism. Edut's tendency to celebrate naively a "new movement that truly includes all women" stems from an apparent ignorance of the groundwork that has been laid by second wave feminism. Using her experience as evidence, Edut envisions a "new" feminist movement:

We envisioned a sort of sisterhood... We saw the need for greater loyalty among women... Sisterhood to us meant having a support network strong enough that a woman could stand up for herself without feeling crazy or alone. ...[we] wanted to see multiculturalism finally done right in a women's movement. It wasn't about hand-holding and singing cheesy songs. And we weren't trying to pimp "diversity"... Rather, we were looking for a forum wherein women of different cultures and classes could come together without losing their identities.  

Edut's envisionment is fine, but to present these ideas as revolutionary is beyond naive, it signifies ignorance of the feminist struggles that have been fought (and continue to be fought) by those labeled as second wave. Whether Edut's failure to contextualize her vision of a new feminist movement is due to a conscious decision or simply to a lack of historical knowledge is immaterial. The one thing that third wave feminist theorists cannot afford to do is reinvent the wheel. If we are to see feminist

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62 Edut, 98.
63 Edut 91 - 93.
movement as progressive, then the lessons that have been learned must inform the way third wave feminists envision a future feminist movement.

Edut’s lack of a historical framework could have been avoided had she grounded her personal experience in research and existing feminist theory. This is one of the key elements of personal theorizing. Here Edut seems to turn her back on theory rather than turning theory back on itself. Instead of using her experiences in forming the HUES collective to illuminate and add to feminist theories of difference and feminist work on collective/coalition building, Edut presents her experience without interrogating it in any significant way. She fails to engage in the strategy of self-reflexivity that is required by personal theorizing. Edut’s struggle to create an alternative women’s magazine could be used to highlight the need for continued feminist movement more effectively had she let existing feminist theory work for her, rather than struggling so hard to work against it.

Finally, Edut’s failure to interrogate her experiences as a college educated, twenty-something year old woman who “discovered” feminism in a women’s studies classroom -- the “self” she uses to illuminate the theory she is producing -- leads to a fairly limited target audience whom Edut never names. If a third wave objective is the continuation of the feminist movement, a question that needs to be explored by third wave theorists is who are we targeting in this effort to continue feminist movement? Obviously, it is not the responsibility of the personal theorist to offer theory with which every person can identify. However, it is negligent on the part of the theorist to assume that “we all” share any perspective that is based on one person’s experiences. This can be remedied, however, if the theorist maintains constant critical attention to
the self that is being used to illuminate the object of inquiry. Edut is speaking to an audience whom she assumes shares her generationally specific experiences and her privileged position as a college educated woman. Writing to a generationally specific audience is not the problem; rather, Edut’s failure to specify that her references are framed with that particular audience in mind indicates that she assumes that the continuation of feminist movement relies only on her target audience. Such a stance must be consciously avoided by third wave theorists if they hope to differentiate themselves from the “postfeminist” theorists who do want to clearly distance themselves from the second wave.

Tali Edut’s essay lays some valuable foundational work for third wave feminist theory, and it also makes good use of the personal in the production of theory. Does it further the goals of the third wave? The answer is yes and no. Edut’s use of the personal as a rhetorical strategy of identification is very effective because she is strategically using the personal with the objective of identification. Also, her use of the personal to lead into her larger claim, that women still need the feminist movement, works well because she is clearly using the personal to shed light on an object of inquiry that is outside the self. However, Edut’s use of the personal would be even more effective if she recognized it as the double-edged sword that it can be. Personal theorizing requires a rigorous strategy of self-reflexivity. Although Edut’s use of the personal is more strategic than that of many third wave theorists, it could be, and needs to be, more strategic yet. The failure of so many third wave theorists to contextualize their own experiences and perspectives allows them to remain blissfully unaware of the deficits of their own inexperience. As third wave theorists work to create a body of work that is useful to the
goals of the third wave they must be just as clear about what they do not want to represent as they are about what they do want to represent.
CHAPTER 6

PRACTICING THEORY: THIRD WAVE EFFORTS TO BRIDGE FEMINIST THEORY AND PRACTICE

To the ongoing discussion of how we define the third wave, Deborah Siegal contributes the following: "I envision the third wave as a moment that asks us scholars to re-imagine the disparate spaces constructed as 'inside' and 'outside' the academy as informing and intersecting spheres of theory and practice." The question of how theory and practice inform each other, or occasionally, of how they do not inform each other, is a question of particular significance to a generation of women who most often came to feminism not in their communities, not in a consciousness-raising group, but in a women's studies classroom. A crucial component of third wave feminism is the commitment to take what is learned in an academic setting and carry it over to more public terrain. Hence, the burst of third wave "zines" and other alternative venues of feminist expression. While this objective of accessibility to a larger audience is one that needs to be approached with caution, it is not a new objective for feminism. Now, however, is a moment in history when third

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64 Siegal, 71.
wave feminists see the need for the scales between practice and abstract theory to be rebalanced.

In the early 1970’s women found spaces in which they carved out feminist thought and forced it into the academy. Now, with the abundance of feminist thought coming out in scholarly works, the women who are reading it take on the responsibility of taking it back out of the academy and into people’s living rooms and basements, from which it emerged in the early 1970’s. The third wave commitment to bridge feminist theory and feminist practice is largely about how an individual works within and around feminist theory; how she takes feminist theory and uses it and tests it through practice and how, in turn, she derives feminist practice and theories out of those experiences.

Although the third wave commitment to practice is often read as an implied criticism of second wave feminism, the history of the second wave proves this criticism inaccurate. Rather, this commitment is best understood when historically contextualized, when we consider how many third wave feminists came to know feminism. In “Imagine My Surprise,” third waver Ellen Neuborne relates the shock she experienced when she was sexually harassed in the 1990’s and rendered silent. As a self-proclaimed “feminist since birth” and student of feminist thought, Neuborne had anticipated that she would know how to react when faced with this kind of situation. As a result of her failure to “practice” the
feminism that she “knew” Neuborne challenges:

. . . the feminism I was raised on was very cerebral. It forced a world full of people to change the way they think about women. . . Now let’s talk about how to talk, how to work, how to fight sexism right here on the ground, in our lives. . . I know that sitting on the sidelines will not get me what I want from my movement.65

This criticism of a “cerebral” feminism mirrors the criticism of Heywood and Drake who claim to come out of a turn in the academy “that seemed to privilege a feminist theory that often seemed like a disembodied language game.”66 Third wavers want to know how to practice the theory that they have learned in the women’s studies classroom.

Third wave theorists use the personal in an effort to address the question of how an actual feminist operates within the frameworks of existing feminist theories. It is useful here to consider, once again, the parallels that can be made between third wave uses of the personal and second wave consciousness raising. If consciousness raising went from a particular experience and took it to a generalized level that allowed women to recognize their shared experiences, third wave theorists use the personal to take these generalities back to the particular in order to illustrate how a body works and lives within the frameworks of feminist theory. Heywood and Drake’s claim that “we wanted, needed, more than anything to see a kind of writing that addressed our historical perspective” is a valid one.67 Whereas consciousness raising was about inventing

65 Ellen Neuborne, “Imagine My Surprise,” Findlen 35.

66 Heywood and Drake, 14.

67 Heywood and Drake, 14.
feminism, the third wave use of the personal is a strategic move made by
the theorist to overcome many young women's resistance to feminism.
The commitment to bridge theory and practice is connected to the third
wave objective to continue the feminist movement; third wave theorists
try to connect the feminist theory that they learned in the women's studies
classroom to their everyday experiences. They attempt to bridge this
perceived "gap" between theory and practice by illustrating how the two
intersect in their writing.

Using the personal to bridge theory and practice, and to illustrate
how third wave feminists "do feminism" is important, but personal
theorizing can do more than this. "The ability to communicate certain
realities can sometimes depend on the genre in which one writes."
Personal theorizing can offer third wave theorists a space to communicate
their realities in a way that no other mode of writing can. By using the
personal to inform and expand theory, third wave theorists show how
feminist theory "works" as well as how and when it does not work.
Personal theorizing offers a unique space in which the theorist can use
her personal experiences to test feminist theory and reveal gaps within
some theoretical frameworks. Further, the recognition that this mode of
writing demands that the theorist use existing feminist theory as a tool
rather than something to avoid can enable the theorist to use theory in
order to illuminate her own subjectivity. When personal theorizing is
used in this way, it can truly take feminist theory a step further.

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68 Young, 64.
It is historically and intellectually logical that third wave theorists use the personal to create feminist theory that “makes sense out of what is happening...as a place to imagine possible futures, where life could be lived differently.” Since many third wave feminists “knew” feminism before they practiced it, their writing reflects their commitment to bring these two together. Unfortunately, the essays in *Listen Up!, To Be Real*, and *Third Wave Agenda* too often fail to use the personal as a means to accomplish anything more than identification and/or accessibility. While using the personal to make feminist theory accessible and to show how a feminist exists within those theoretical frameworks is valuable, third wave theorists often fail to use the personal in order to expand and complicate existing theoretical frameworks. Perhaps even more importantly, third wave theorists fail to recognize that “experience is at once already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation.” It is not enough to use the personal to illustrate how to “practice” feminist theory. It needs to add to these theories and use these theories; third wave theorists are uniquely situated to use the personal to illuminate theoretical frameworks with their experiences and reveal the cracks within those frameworks by their own practices of those theories. The result can be a body of work that makes theory accessible to the body of readers whom the theorist hopes to “invite” to the feminist movement, and it can take existing theory a step further, contributing to new possibilities in feminist thought.

69 Hooks, 61.

70 Joan Scott, 61 - 69.
As was the case with the essay written by Tali Edut, the essays in *Listen Up!, To Be Real, and Third Wave Agenda* that try to bridge theory and practice occasionally achieve accessibility and/or identification through their uses of the personal, and they occasionally manage to use the personal to illustrate how they have tried to "practice" theory, but they seldom use the personal to contribute to or expand feminist thought. Tiya Miles’ "Lessons from a Young Feminist Collective,"*71* from *Listen Up!,* is one of the strongest examples of a third wave writer theorizing her own experience; in fact, it is one of the few essays in *Listen Up!* that can be read as anything more than a feminist "coming-of-age" story.*72* Miles uses the personal in order to illustrate how her feminist practices would have benefited from a consideration of existing feminist theory. However, as is symptomatic of most of these essays, Miles fails to take the next step. She stops short of using the personal in order to develop existing feminist theory in any significant way. This is crucial -- for all third wave writers-- who are attempting to form a body of work that can be looked to as third wave feminist theory. The goal of accessibility is not enough for third wave theorists. Theory must do more than "make sense out of what is happening," rather, it must be seen as space to "imagine possible futures where life could be lived differently."*73*

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*72* The use of the personal in *Listen Up!* is criticized by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, who themselves advocate the use of the personal in third wave theory, when they observe: "the writing rarely provides consistent analysis of the larger culture that has helped shape and produce those experiences" (2).

*73* hooks, 61.
Tiya Miles attempts to “make sense of what has happened” through a discussion of her own experiences in forming a feminist collective to create a feminist journal on the Harvard-Radcliffe campus in “Lessons From a Young Feminist Collective.” Here, Miles uses the personal to illuminate the ways in which difference and the failure of the feminist movement to address difference has weakened feminist organizations. Pointing out the failure of young feminists to familiarize themselves with the lessons to be learned from second-wave feminists, Miles prescribes a feminism that is committed to respect for diversity and intergenerational communication. As an explanation for why the women who made up the feminist collective responsible for *The Rag: a Feminist Journal of Politics and Culture* were unable to negotiate their own identity differences, Miles suggests: “Perhaps the main problem was our ignorance of feminist history. We should have read the warnings, reflections, and advice of the many older women who had already struggled with the dilemmas we faced.”74 To her credit, Miles is one of the few contributors to this anthology who advocates the need for third wave feminists to use the work of the second wave to their advantage.75 In an effort to “pinpoint a constellation of problems that have weakened many young feminist groups” Miles goes on to cite Audre Lorde and bell hooks at length.

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74 Miles, 172.

75 I note Miles’ recognition of the importance of second wave feminism as an exception because of the failure of many writers in this anthology to provide analysis which recognizes the ways in which second wave feminism “has helped shape and produce” the experiences about which third wave theorists write. (Heywood and Drake, 2).
order to illustrate how a knowledge of second wave theory could have improved third wave practice.  

Miles' essay successfully bridges theory and practice in the sense that it does show how feminist theory can and should be practically applied. However, Miles' failure to engage in the strategic use of the personal that is necessary in personal theorizing results in a reflective essay that only offers a "how to" approach to feminist theory as Miles retroactively applies second wave theory in an effort to make sense out of her own experiences. In contrast to Third Wave Agenda and To Be Real, Miles' essay is representative of several essays in Listen Up! that do not differentiate themselves as third wave in any way except for the age of the theorist. Indeed, Miles' essay, which applies second wave theory to her experiences as a young feminist, does little more than illustrate the viability of second wave theory. While this is certainly an important part of third wave theory, if third wave theorists hope to do what they claim they are doing -- that is -- create a body of third wave feminist theory -- then these theorists must specifically and strategically construct a body of third wave theory that contributes to feminist thought in a new way.

Had Miles practiced the self-reflexivity necessary in personal theorizing, her use of the personal could have bridged theory and practice and offered some new questions for feminist discussions. Miles uses the words of hooks and Lorde and applies them to the experiences of a group of younger women who are in the privileged position of being students at Harvard University. Her lack of self-reflexivity results in two major shortcomings in the essay. First, Miles fails to thoroughly consider the

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76 Miles, 171.
question of class even as she discusses feminist theories of difference. While she does recognize that class conflicts emerged in the Harvard-Radcliffe collective, she does not question how the third wave—which is theoretically represented by college educated women—speaks to issues of their own privilege. Secondly, Miles misses a prime opportunity to take feminist theories of difference a step further when she fails to consider how young feminists today might add to feminist discussions of difference and the possibilities of feminist collectives. While she considers what she and the young women in the Rag could have learned from theorists such as hooks and Lorde about how to compromise differences in identity, she misses a chance to consider how her experiences could add to existing feminist theory. For example, she could have discussed: How are issues of difference different for young feminists? What questions regarding the possibilities of feminist collective building do young women face that are different in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Does feminist practice look different to a generation of young women for whom feminism has been a given?

Third wave theorists are in the unique position of being the first group of women to have benefited from feminist thought at an institutional level, i.e., women’s studies. The question that they can answer then, is now that feminist thought has been institutionally accepted to at least a certain degree, and now that young women are entering the women’s studies classroom in increasing numbers, what do they do with the information that they learn? How do third wave theorists take what they have learned beyond the classroom and how do they add to these lessons? Personal theorizing offers a mode of writing which enables the third wave theorist to begin to answer both of these questions.
CHAPTER 7

CONTRADICTION, AMBIGUITY, AND THE THIRD WAVE: A
REFRAMING OF SECOND WAVE FEMINIST DISCOURSE

The characteristic that (rather ironically) is both the most and the
least distinctive characteristic of third wave feminism is an intentionally
vague embrace of contradiction, both in the self and in the theory of third
wave feminists. It is the most distinctive characteristic because it is the
only third wave commitment -- other than a commitment to the use of the
personal-- that is explicitly identified and addressed by each of the editors
of Listen Up!, To Be Real, and Third Wave Agenda. It is the least
distinctive characteristic because it is so seldom clearly articulated what,
exactly, an embrace of “apparent contradiction” is and what it might do
for feminism. In this chapter I argue that in spite of third wave claims that
this embrace of a “politics of ambiguity” is a distinctively third wave
characteristic, it is actually a reframing of second wave feminist and
postmodern discourse which focuses on the fluidity of identity and uses
these ideas to advocate a feminist politics based on issues rather than

77 According to third wave theorist Mocha Jean Herrup, a politics of ambiguity
recognizes that identity is always constructed, and that this recognition can allow for a
blurring of the lines of identity that keep us from connecting with one another. (Herrup,
247)
identity. The third wave embrace of apparent contradiction, or, a politics of ambiguity, refrares these ideas and presents them in contemporary discourse, thus making these concepts more palatable and appealing to the young women third wave writers are trying to reach. As I will illustrate in the analysis that follows, this oversimplified and often unclear articulation of a postmodern embrace of apparent contradiction results in a lack of third wave critical analysis. In conclusion, I propose a politics of ambiguity that recognizes its roots in second wave feminist theory and consciously reframes those ideas to make them meaningful and useful to a new audience, and contributes to a more politically and epistemologically viable understanding of third wave feminism.

The introspective meandering in much third wave writing often concludes with a less than clear picture of third wave feminism that is justified by an articulated resistance to definition and uses an embrace of apparent contradiction as an excuse for a lack of critical analysis. The rationale for this seems to be that a representation of feminism that is not clearly drawn is better at challenging restrictive and oppressive identity distinctions. This is noted in the introduction of all three of the anthologies I look to in this thesis. Heywood and Drake argue that “contradiction - or what looks like contradiction, if one doesn’t shift one’s point of view - marks the desires and strategies of third wave feminists.”^{78} Findlen attempts to justify what looks like a lack of coherence in third

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^{78} Heywood and Drake, 2.
wave feminist thought when she explains:

Generation X, thirteenth generation, twentysomething -- whatever package you buy this group in -- one of the characteristics we're known for is our disunity. . .what may appear to be a splintering in this generation often comes from an honest assessment of our differences as each of us defines her place and role in feminism.79

Rebecca Walker, often looked to as the "face of the third wave," offers the most comprehensive justification of a third wave resistance to presenting any sort of cohesive picture of what third wave feminism -- or feminism in general -- in her introduction for To Be Real:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity. . .We have trouble formulating and perpetuating theories that compartmentalize according to race and gender and other signifiers. For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result 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.80

The explanations offered by each of these women attempt to explain why third wave feminists seek to "accommodate ambiguity." However, what they do not do is offer any analysis which answers the question of what this accommodation might do to or, perhaps more importantly, for feminism.

79 Findlen, xiii.
80 Walker, xxxiii.
A potential consequence of the third wave embrace of apparent contradiction as opposed to a precise definition of feminism is a feminist movement that loses any meaning. If we resist any method of categorization or definition and blindly embrace “apparent” contradiction without demanding an explanation of what those contradictions mean, there are no tools with which we can say “this is a feminist project” or -- perhaps more importantly -- “this is not a feminist project.” Further, if we resist any definition of feminism, the process of articulating and practicing a feminist politics becomes difficult -- to say the least. The question, then, is this: Is the third wave embrace of apparent contradiction an end in itself, or is it simply a means to an end? If third wave feminists hope to utilize the concepts of ambiguity and apparent contradiction, the answer must be that this embrace is a means to an end. Thus, we need to inquire what is the “end” it seeks.

Mocha Jean Herrup attempts to offer an explanation for what an embrace of apparent contradiction can do for feminism in “Virtual Identity.” Although I will offer a more in depth analysis of her use of the personal later in this chapter, her articulation of a “politics of ambiguity” is useful if third wave feminists are to articulate how ambiguity works for, rather than against, them. Herrup’s definition of a politics of ambiguity is in direct response to her frustration with the limitations of identity politics. Herrup, recognizing that “there will always be a need to label - categorization is fundamental to our understanding of the world,” urges a more postmodern sensibility which sees these categories as social.

constructs that are often used to oppress and discriminate. In place of identity politics, Herrup advocates "a politics of ambiguity" that recognizes the constructedness of identity and also focuses on acquiring "the agility and flexibility needed to keep those [identity] categories fluid and open to future articulations." Most importantly, Herrup suggests what a politics of ambiguity can do. She clearly states that ambiguity is not a political end in itself, but rather a mode of communication and understanding that allows for human connection across identity categories, which identity politics often does not. It is important to note that Herrup's ideas are based largely on second wave feminist and postmodern theory. However, they are significant because they clear up the murky and potentially dangerous waters of third wave contradiction and offer an explanation for how and why these apparent contradictions can be used. Thus, a politics of ambiguity can serve as one strategy for third wave feminists in their attempts to expand and contribute to the "language of feminism." This reframing of the language of feminism contributes to the goal of third wave feminists to redraw feminism to appeal to and include the generation of young women who so frequently say of the feminist movement: "I'm not a feminist, but..." and to present a more fluid picture of feminism that enables young women to say instead: "I am a feminist. .

82 Herrup, 250.
83 Herrup, 250.
84 In To Be Real Gina Dent suggests: "The current diversification of descriptive American identities, and the (at last) more commonly accepted notion of the impossibility of ascribing to any of those identities a single perspective, necessitates another kind of language for feminism." (71 - 74).
...and I am able to identify in other ways that I had previously believed were incongruous with claiming a feminist identity.  

Only when the purposes behind the third wave embrace of apparent contradiction have been clarified can the use of the personal to contribute to these goals be justified. In a discussion of the various schools of feminist thought that have led to an emergence of the third wave, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake point out:

A third wave goal that comes directly out of these histories and working among these traditions is the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity.  

That the development of new modes of thinking is advanced by new modes of writing is not made explicit by Heywood and Drake, but it is assumed and made evident by their commitment to a mode of writing that uses the personal to expand traditional feminist theory. Rebecca Walker advocates the use of the personal to illustrate “the complexity of our lives.” Third wave theorists can use the personal to illuminate the constructedness of their own identity categories, not to explode these categories but to reveal these categories as permeable. This is important for two primary reasons. First, when the theorist presents the picture of a self who identifies as a feminist but does not always fit within stereotypical notions of the “perfect feminist,” the theorist can urge the reader to consider that even though she may not fit within whatever previously held

85 Heywood and Drake, 3.
86 Walker, xxxix.
stereotypes she had of feminism, she can still claim the name for herself. This is, once again, a means to further the goal of the continuation of the feminist movement. Secondly, if a politics of ambiguity is a means to reveal the fluidity of identity and introduce new ways to connect that are not readily apparent, the use of the personal in third wave theory enables the theorist to reveal this fluidity by illustrating her own “lived contradictions” as a feminist and how she uses her awareness of the constructedness of her identity to practice feminism.

Mocha Jean Herrup’s “Virtual Identity” is the clearest example of how the third wave theorist can use the personal to reveal the fluidity of identity and find new ways to make personal and political connections. However, Herrup’s essay also serves as a reminder that even when the personal is used to shed light on an object of inquiry that is outside the self, in this case the constructedness of identity, the failure to recognize that “experience” is no less constructed than “identity” contributes to a lack of clarity in third wave theory. The strategy of self-reflexivity required in personal theorizing requires constant critical attention not only to the theory being produced, but to the self, or experience, being used to complicate theory. In the analysis that follows I will show that while Herrup does strategically use the personal in order to illuminate an object of inquiry that is outside the self, her contribution to third wave feminist theory might have been more focused, and thus more useful, had she been as critical of her own experience as she is of categories of identity.

In “Virtual Identity” Herrup effectively compares cyberspace to society at large. Revealing that cyberspace has allowed her to explore the ambiguities of her own sexuality and helped her connect with people whom she would have thought she had nothing in common, Herrup
argues that although cyberspace accentuates it, all identity is ambiguous and dynamic. She calls for a politics of ambiguity which recognizes that identity is always constructed. This recognition of the ambiguity of identity, she argues, will allow for a blurring of the lines of identity that keep us from connecting with one another.

Herrup’s experience justifies her claim of ambiguity and illustrates how a politics of ambiguity can work. First, she establishes the way her inability to place herself absolutely within any existing sexual categories challenges those categories:

...and then things got a little queer. My lesbian identity didn’t always make sense. Equating my identity with my sexuality, despite all the political power and social support it brought, presented a problem when my fixed ‘lesbian’ sexuality no longer seemed to exist. ...Liberation has to do with challenging the very forces that categorize sexuality in the first place. That is why... I have moved from identity politics to a new domain of ambiguity.87

Once Herrup has established how constructing her own identity(ies) in cyberspace has allowed her accept her own apparent contradictions, those parts of herself that static categories of sexuality do not allow to exist simultaneously, she goes on to use the personal to illustrate how ambiguity facilitates new ways of connecting, both personally and politically. Herrup relates an encounter she had with an African-American female military officer with whom she apparently had no reason to identify. However, as a discussion between the two about gays in the military led to a connection about African-Americans in the military, both women came to question their own previously held notions of those categories as

87 Herrup, 240.
disparate. Herrup maintains that she and the woman with whom she spoke were able to connect because "for a moment, we let go of the contours between us, the identities that had kept us apart, and just let things be a little fuzzy." Modifying the famous feminist refrain, Herrup argues that politics is interpersonal, and that a feminist politics will be strengthened by an embrace of the apparent contradictions that have been keeping feminists from making the personal and political connections that the feminist movement needs. Clearly, Herrup is using the concept of apparent contradiction and ambiguity as synonymous with identity differences. This is, once again, an attempt on the part of the third wave theorist to reframe second wave discourse and make it more meaningful to a younger audience.

Herrup’s use of the personal to reveal the fluidity of her own sexual “identity” and how the concept of a politics of ambiguity might “work” is one of the stronger examples of third wave personal theorizing, but her argument would be much more solid had she been as critical of her own experience as she is of identity politics. The primary evidence she uses to support her claim that identity categories do not allow for the complexities that exist within an individual is her own experience. An unfortunate result of Herrup’s sometimes uncritical use of the personal is an essay that seems to view personal experience, in fact, the theorist’s own personal experience, as a “truth” which is universal and indisputable. Rather than using the tools of postmodernism which would have prompted Herrup to interpret her experiences from multiple perspectives, she holds up her experiences in cyberspace, specifically her explorations with

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88 Herrup, 249.
cybersex where she is able to enjoy “being a helpless boy being led around by an older, stronger, demanding master” and then go on to pose as “sassy chick” who “cruises around in cyberspace wearing a tight-fitting striped T-shirt, hip hugger jeans, and platform Pumas” to illustrate how cyberspace allows her to perform and identify as a lesbian, a gay man, and a heterosexual woman. She seems to assume that because in cyberspace she is able to “really feel like a gay man,” her feelings alone adequately challenge the identity constructs she is questioning.\textsuperscript{89}

Further, Herrup’s use of the personal goes beyond what is necessary to shed light on an object of inquiry that is outside the self, in this case the fluidity of identity, and falls into one of the potential pitfalls of the personal. Herrup falls into the trap where she forgets that she is using the personal as a tool to shed light on an object of inquiry that is outside the self and instead presents the personal as though it - by itself - is her point. Had Herrup maintained the self-reflexivity required in personal theorizing in which the theorist is constantly asking how and why the personal is being used she might have avoided the tendency Kaminer has noted to “focus on [herself] with the unchecked passion of [an] amateur memoirist who believes [her] life intrinsically interesting to strangers.”\textsuperscript{90} Herrup’s reliance on the “truth” of her experiences leads her to recount one experience or another without drawing for the reader the connections necessary to understand why she recounted that particular experience. Thus, her writing seems to stray from her critique of identity

\textsuperscript{89} Herrup, 243 -44.

\textsuperscript{90} Kaminer, 3.
categories to a recounting of her own experiences that she seems to assume the reader will find significant on their own terms. This is not the case because Herrup fails to clearly connect her interpreted experiences back to her object of inquiry. Herrup’s tendency to get carried away with the transparent validity of her own experiences takes away from the point she is trying to make and fails to carry her postmodern analysis to its logical conclusion by interrogating experience itself. When Herrup concludes a section of her essay with a cybersex experience by saying: “I love to picture myself in the arms of some big muscled, sensitive type, and it’s the ones who look sweetly in my eyes that get my blood racing,”91 the reader is left to ask the question that Herrup should have asked herself: “So what and what now? Why is this writer telling me this?” Thus, Herrup undermines a potentially useful articulation of what a third wave politics of ambiguity might do for feminism by failing to use the personal in a constantly strategic and self-reflexive manner.

Personal theorizing can be a useful tool for third wave theorists committed to revealing the complexity and ambiguity of the selves/individuals that are often used to define and represent feminism, and to show how an embrace of what looks like contradiction can actually open up news paths for feminist connections and coalitions. However, third wave theorists must approach this embrace of ambiguity with caution. First, the third wave theorist who attempts to articulate a feminism which doesn’t “compartmentalize according to race and gender and all signifiers” and does allow for the “individuality and complexity”92

91 Herrup, 245.
92 Walker, xxxiii.
that is so important to third wave feminists must make explicit what this accommodation of ambiguity within feminism can do for feminism. Second, in the process of using the personal to reveal these complexities and ambiguities, the theorist must be just as -- if not more -- critical of the experiences she is using to disrupt identity constructs as she is of the constructs themselves. Claiming a politics of ambiguity is a slippery slope, and if it is one that third wave feminists are committed to maintaining, in their efforts to expand and redraw feminism to include themselves and the women who they are attempting to "recruit," this embrace must be articulated in a such way that efforts to question the "meaning" of identity constructs does not render the label "feminist" meaningless.

The benefit for third wave feminism of a strategic embrace of ambiguity is two-fold. As we have seen, third wave theorists can use this strategy, which reframes postmodern and second wave feminist discourse, to appeal to young women by presenting a more fluid representation of feminism, but they can also use these same postmodern ideas to encourage their readers to practice the self-awareness fostered by these ideas in their lives. This is one of the greatest tools presented in second wave feminist and postmodern thought, and it is negligent on the part of third wave theorists not to make those connections. Third wave feminists can make a significant contribution by reaching a new generation of women, opening them up to the possibilities of feminism and urging these young women to be constantly aware of how their subject position affects their perceptions of themselves and those around them. It is this level of strategic self-reflexivity that must lead any third wave embrace of the personal or commitment to a politics of ambiguity if it
is to contribute to a politically and epistemologically viable representation of third wave feminism.
CHAPTER 8

THE NEXT GENERATION IS COMING. . .WHAT TO DO
ONCE IT’S HERE

In an essay from *Listen Up!* which speaks to the “daughters of the feminist movement” Ellen Neuborne exuberantly concludes: “. . .don’t be fooled into thinking that feminism is old-fashioned. The movement is ours and we need it. . .get used to the noise. The next generation is coming.” The proliferation of a group of young women calling themselves and writing about third wave feminism illustrates that Neuborne is correct. Indeed, the next generation is coming, and making a fair amount of noise. The question that follows is how to take what is now the somewhat cacophonous noise of third wave writers and transform these “noises” into something that more clearly speaks to and for the feminist movement. As we have seen, the move to claim a third wave identity is here, and along with that identity comes a generally agreed upon commitment to a particular kind of theorizing that incorporates the personal within the production of theory. What I hope to have addressed in this thesis, then, is how third wave feminists might more clearly

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93 Neuborne, 35.
articulate the objectives of third wave feminism, and how they might use personal theorizing to advance those objectives.

Clearly, before third wave feminists can determine how they intend to construct a body of third wave feminist theory, they must identify what they want that theory to do for feminism. What is the role of the third wave? The understanding of third wave feminism that I have proposed is one that is intentionally and strategically connected to second wave feminism. Third wave feminism is not a “new” social movement, rather, it is a continuation of second wave feminism and an attempt to rejuvenate a feminist movement that many young women have been convinced is no longer necessary. Indeed, as Deborah Siegel points out, “the very invocation of ‘third wave feminism’ signals a rejection of scripts that assume that the gains forged by the second wave have so completely invaded all tiers of social existence that feminists themselves have become obsolete.”

Thus, third wave feminism’s function as a stance of political resistance to cries that feminism is over and done. This stance of political resistance leads to the most important objective of third wave feminism – the effort to recruit young women to the feminist movement.

The essays in Listen Up!, To Be Real, and Third Wave Agenda speak overwhelming to a group of young women who “are doing what looks like feminism. . .without calling it that” in an effort to encourage those women to take the name of feminism for themselves. Jennifer Drake cites a Stella Mars postcard that proclaims “Redefine feminism so it

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94 Siegel, 51.
95 Dent, 82.
includes you." Third wave feminist theorists are using the personal to do just this -- to reframe second wave feminist discourse and make it palatable and appealing to a new and younger audience. The element that is missing in so much third wave writing, though, is a thorough knowledge of the second wave theory that they are trying to reframe. It cannot be emphasized enough that if third wave theorists intend to reframe second wave feminist theory they must have a comprehensive knowledge of that theory. The personal cannot take the place of theory; the personal must be used strategically to open up and inform theory.

The third wave objectives of bridging theory and practice, or applying feminist theory in everyday life, and articulating a politics of ambiguity, are more accurately recognized as extensions of the larger third wave goal of recruiting young women to the feminist movement. Third wave feminists use the personal to illustrate how feminist theory has proven useful in their lives in order to encourage other women to recognize the potential power of feminism in their own lives. However, third wave feminists must have a larger objective if they hope to create a body of feminist theory that reads as more than a "how to" book on feminism. Thus, third wave feminists must strategically use the personal both to represent the practice of feminist theory and to illuminate the ways in which that practice can contribute to and expand feminist theory. The articulation of a politics of ambiguity, which is merely a reframing of second wave postmodern discourse, demands a similar approach. The use of the personal to present a more fluid understanding of feminism contributes significantly to third wave efforts to recruit the audience of

96 Drake, 98.
"I'm-not-a-feminist,-but. . ." young women. However, third wave feminists should use the personal not only to reveal the fluidity and multiplicity of their own identities, but also to demonstrate their awareness of the constructedness of their own identities in the practice of feminism.

The third wave objective to guarantee the continuation of the feminist movement is vital, but it is not the only contribution that third wave feminists can offer to the feminist movement. Third wave feminists can offer an entirely unique perspective in their efforts to contribute to the larger body of feminist thought, and this contribution is one that will be drawn from their own experiences. As Barbara Findlen points out: "We are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives." Third wave feminists are the first generation of women to have benefited from feminist thought at an institutional level. The accessibility provided by the women's studies classroom has led to a generation of women who have had the opportunity to benefit from the proliferation of feminist thought that has poured out of the academy and has been worked into the fabric of society and popular culture in the last three decades. This puts third wave feminists in the exciting position of being able first to learn feminist theory, then to practice those ideas, and finally, to take the experience gleaned from both of these in order to revise and improve the body of feminist thought that has always and will always be in need of revision.

As the essays in these anthologies make abundantly clear, however, this objective is more easily said than done. Third wave feminists' commitment to use the personal in the production of theory, and

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97 Findlen, xii.
the deficits of youthful inexperience, bring some dangers that third wave theorists must be constantly aware of if they hope to achieve their goals. Personal theorizing offers an approach that can assist third wave theorists and provides the much needed strategic specificity that is absent in so much third wave theory, provided that they navigate the "pitfalls" that the personal presents. As we have seen, one of the most seductive pitfalls awaiting the third wave theorist is mistaking personal experience for a larger social analysis. The third wave desire to avoid what Heywood and Drake call the "disembodied language game" of much feminist theory can be achieved. However, third wave theorists must know the rules of the game if they want to respond to and expand existing feminist theory. As such, personal theorizing requires that the theorist use the personal with this objective always in mind. Not, as Nancy Miller explains, to turn one's back on theory, but rather, to turn theory back on itself.98

A comprehensive knowledge of feminist theory is a prerequisite for practicing personal theorizing, but the level of strategic self-reflexivity required while the third wave theorist practices personal theorizing is the true challenge presented by this rhetorical strategy. With the recognition that experience is no more transparent than theory comes the expectation that the theorist always maintains constant critical attention to the experience that she is using to complicate theory. If the third wave theorist can successfully maintain this level of self-reflexivity she will avoid many of the problems we have seen such as the third wave tendency to present third wave feminist thought without situating it within the larger context of feminist thought that led to an emergence of women

98 Miller, 5.
calling themselves the third wave in the first place. Further, this strategic self-reflexivity demands that the third wave theorist contextualize her position in regard not only to race and sexuality, but also in regards to class and what — for the writers in these anthologies — is an often unexamined privileged position as college educated women.

The strategy of self-reflexivity required in personal theorizing is somewhat easier to maintain if the third wave theorist commits to using the personal only to shed light on an outside object of inquiry. Therefore, the goal behind the use of the personal is never personal; it is always used with a specific goal in mind — to illuminate the possibilities and limitations of a chosen outside object of inquiry. If the third wave theorist is able to maintain this commitment there is no chance of falling into the trap where the “theorists textual preoccupation becomes herself.”

The next generation is coming. The groundwork that has been laid by second wave feminism has led to the emergence of a group of young women claiming to be the third wave of feminism. This claim of the third wave, and the potential contributions of this group of women, are a positive and necessary contribution to the feminist movement, but it is a claim that cannot be made randomly. My hope is that this articulation of the third wave, and more importantly, this recommendation for how third wave theorists practice personal theorizing, can lead to a more strategic and politically viable body of third wave feminist thought and practice. The level of knowledge and discipline that is required by personal theorizing may be somewhat daunting to the third wave theorist, but if she can learn to use the personal with this level of strategic specificity she

99 Smith and Watson, 33.
can avoid contributing to what is right now the murky waters of the third wave. She can, instead, help to form a vision of third wave feminism that continues and expands the crucial work done by those women who have made it so that, for many of us, feminism is a given.
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