Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor

Kathleen A. Laughlin, Julie Gallagher, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, Premilla Nadasen, Stephanie Gilmore, and Leandra Zarnow

The waves metaphor to delineate feminist activism in the United States is troublesome, to say the least. Despite its problems, the waves model has tremendous staying power when it comes to understanding, analyzing, writing about, and teaching the history of U.S. feminism. In this collection of essays, historians revisit this model, highlighting the efficacy of feminist waves as we know them, but also challenging this model for eliding the experiences of women of color, men, young people, and others whose activist work falls under a capacious definition of feminism.

Keywords: activism / feminism / history / labor / United States / waves / women of color

Kathleen A. Laughlin: Introduction

Women's historians are getting seasick these days. Employing the first, second, and third waves to denote turning points in feminist activism over time was just the beginning; now historians are referring to tidal waves, cresting waves, and making waves. The ubiquitous waves metaphor remains the dominant conceptual framework for analyzing and explaining the genesis of movements for women's rights in the United States. The standard and widely accepted waves chronology identifies the first wave as a movement for civil and political rights, such as property ownership and suffrage, dating from the first women's rights convention in the United States (the 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls, New York), to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 granting women the right to vote. The second wave began in the mid-1960s, and has been described as a resurgence of activism that broadened the notion of equality to include a reexamination of men's and women's social
roles, and ending in the mid-1980s amid criticism, most notably from women of color and lesbians, that asserted that privileged, white heterosexual women determined second-wave goals, ideologies, and strategies. The third wave describes efforts by younger women and men to take feminism from what they perceived as an exclusive concern with dichotomous notions of gender toward consideration of the multiple identities of age, class, race, and sexual preference. This wave’s chronology, or variations of it, reappears across the web in a dizzying array of information about feminism, from scholarly journals and reference sources to Women’s Studies Web sites and third-wave feminist blogs. The authors of this article consider the consequences for the future of feminism in adhering to a metaphor that entrenches the notion that feminist politics only occurs in dramatic waves of revolutionary activism. As Premilla Nadasen suggests in her section of this article, “[o]ur adherence to the waves metaphor is intimately tied to our understanding and definition of feminism.”

The purpose of this article is to present to a broader audience the methodological and interpretative dilemmas of retaining the waves metaphor in light of interdisciplinary scholarship that, while recognizing distinct historical moments and contextualizing activism, documents the resiliency of feminist politics over time. Discussions about the consequences of the waves metaphor have occurred in several settings. Stephanie Gilmore and I organized roundtable discussions at the 2005 American Studies Association conference that emphasized the theme “Groundwork: Space and Place in American Cultures” and also at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 2006 to bring together a representative group of historians who have confronted the limitations of the waves metaphor in their own research. The contributors to this collaborative article participated in the roundtable discussions. We join others, including those who participated in the Rutgers University seminar “No More Permanent Waves,” as well as contributors to such anthologies as Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women’s Movement (Reger 2005) and Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy (Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce 2007) in a consideration of how feminist history is remembered and preserved.

The waves metaphor entrenches the perception of a “singular” feminism in which gender is the predominate category of analysis rather than, as Benita Roth (2004) advocates, “[f]eminisms that were plural and characterized by racial/ethnic organizational distinctiveness” (1). By emphasizing a feminist resurgence in the late 1960s and early ’70s, the waves metaphor equates feminism with a critique of gender relations by young, primarily white and middle-class “liberationists.” This narrow conception of the direction and meaning of activism has allowed critics almost from the beginning of the modern women’s movement to assume widespread hostility to feminist claims. Estelle Freedman (2002) posits in her book No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women that one reason it has been easy for the media to write an obituary for feminism
is because the word is linked with a single moment of mass-based social protest (10). With an expanded definition of feminism(s) that encompasses various types of collective and individual action in “a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth . . . with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies,” Freedman takes a long view of feminist politics that begins well before the waves begin to reach the shore (7). No Turning Back makes an “historical case for feminism” (7).

Despite Freedman’s intervention, recent anthologized interdisciplinary works have refined the waves metaphor to contextualize activism without recasting the definition of feminism that supports it or recognizing the conceptual flaws of confining most of women’s public activism to two waves. The editors of Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations have tried to address the ways in which the waves metaphor positions second- and third-wave feminists in opposition by turning to science: “Scientists find that waves do not exist in isolation but are connected to multiple sets of waves or wave trains. Rather than think about the ‘second wave’ and the ‘third wave’ as separate waves that we can count from the shore . . . we look to the horizon for the variety of waves that combine to produce a single wave train” (Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce 2007, 6). Similarly, Jo Reger (2005), in her introduction to Different Wavelengths, interrogates a metaphor that fails to include activists with diverse sensibilities. However, some form of the wave still prevails, whether in radio waves, oceanic waves, or other “wavelengths.”

This article collection places feminism in historical context by bringing to the forefront scholarship that has recognized and documented the adaptability of feminist politics in highly charged and altered political environments over time, which often demanded strategies that were more mainstream and institutionalized during times of conservatism and backlash, and were far less dramatic than either the first wave or the second wave. Our own scholarship contributes to broadening our understanding of who gets to be a feminist by suggesting that feminist practice has occurred and persisted in many different forms in various social, political, and cultural contexts. To be sure, the revolution of the 1960s and ’70s removed legal barriers to women’s full participation in public life and upended well established and stubbornly persistent social customs in a short period of time, but feminism(s) existed and persevered before and after the second wave. By implying that feminism did not survive sharp political and cultural divisions following women’s increased autonomy, but had to be revived with a mass-based movement of primarily white middle-class women in the 1960s and ’70s, the waves metaphor in essence washes away much of feminist history.

The following contributors explore the implications of creating a hegemonic feminism and offer alternative ways to chronicle the past that delineate historical moments and contextualize activism. By referring to recent scholarship and new directions for scholarly inquiry, especially of the third wave, the
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Contributors examine the issues of power and access inherent in a metaphorical chronology with clearly defined beginnings and endings. Julie Gallagher approaches the metaphor as an historiographical dilemma, reminding us that there are limits to all conceptual frameworks used to chart change and continuity in the past. Although there might be political implications of abandoning a metaphor that documents notable achievements in improving women's status, she argues that we should avoid “perpetuating a construct” that tends not only to simplify the past, but to determine what is significant to preserve and study. Dorothy Sue Cobble proposes an alternative to the limiting construct of the “two-wave model,” favoring the direction of scholarship on the history of the civil rights movement that has documented persistent struggles against oppression and discrimination over a long period of time. Premilla Nadasen considers how the metaphor of a river is employed by one scholar of African American history to signify variegated forms of struggle. If historians move beyond the two-wave model and consider feminist politics as separate but intersecting strands, as Eileen Boris suggests, we can trace feminist “genealogies” over time.

Moreover, the contributors apply their research and understanding of recent scholarship on the second and third waves to suggest more inclusive directions of inquiry. They argue that we should examine strands of ideology and groundswells of feminist practice in addition to the study of waves of resurgence in order to encompass divergent tactics and goals influenced by the politics of identity and place, and cite a rich and significant body of scholarship that documents continuities of activism behind the waves of change. A great deal of recent historical scholarship on feminism has focused, not on waves of change, but on the streams and undercurrents that made “the world split open” by the 1960s (Rosen 2000). But, as Leandra Zarnow argues in this collection, it is also time for historians to examine the contours of feminism in the midst of the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s, while at the same time reevaluating how the use of the third wave determines who can be feminist.

Boris, Nadasen, and Cobble consider how the language and process of feminist activism changes when feminist agendas emerge within race- and class-based organizations. A definition of feminism that incorporates activism from multiple standpoints raises questions about the power of naming. Boris highlights the legacy of socialist feminism, as well as working-class and Left politics in the past, to provide another feminist history, one connected to today's anti-globalization, immigrant rights, and trade-union insurgencies. Cobble proposes a different chronology of a “long women’s movement” incorporating various forms and locations of public activism in the 1940s and '50s in the story of the second wave, which would broaden our understanding of the origins and goals of the modern women’s movement beyond standard accounts that focus on a single generation. Her own work complicates the standard waves chronology by identifying working-class women's activism in the context of industrial unionism in the 1930s and '40s and tracing resurgent activism within public-sector union
organizing in the 1980s. Nadasen’s scholarship on the welfare rights movement and the recent scholarship on black feminism she cites depart from the standard waves chronology to include periods of movement abeyance. Preserving and writing history from different perspectives can alter our understanding of the dynamics of change over time.

Gilmore and Zarnow consider the limits of a metaphor that establishes feminist generations. Gilmore’s research on local National Organization for Women (NOW) chapters reinterprets the goals, strategies, and ideologies of second-wave feminism. In local “groundswells,” she finds that activists addressed issues and concerns related to personal identity and experience that were not necessarily consistent with national agendas. Her research asks how feminist activism changed everyday lives, and similarities rather than stark differences in the agendas of the second and third waves emerge from such work. Zarnow’s comparative study of the popular feminist magazines Ms., Bitch, and Bust puts the convergence of the second and third waves into the realm of culture, and she urges other historians to critically evaluate memoirs and personal narratives written by third-wave participants to historicize them. Initial attempts to make the third wave a focus of scholarly inquiry, she notes, raises questions about the generational differences inherent in the waves chronology. As an historian younger than most third-wave activists, Zarnow approaches women’s history from outside the waves generations and asks different questions as a result. Her essay sets out questions for further research that promises to deepen our understanding of the third wave in a way that now exists for the second.

As these essays indicate, historians have complicated what we understand to be the second wave. We have analyzed the collective experiences of women within mainstream institutions, such as unions, political parties, government agencies, religious groups, and civic organizations, and have explored coalitions across identities and generations—for example, in the essays in Gilmore’s anthology, Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second Wave Feminism in the United States (2008). Essays in Boris’s co-edited collection, The Practice of U.S. Women’s History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues (2007), present the past as context to explore the trajectory of feminism, antifeminism, and women’s activism. We are hard at work documenting and complicating feminisms.

New scholarship and resources place into sharp relief the problems inherent in such a powerful and persistent metaphor to describe the complexities of movements for social change. Certainly the interests and personal experiences of the historian shape our interpretations, as Cobble reminds us in her intriguing analysis of the power of “origin stories” and “origin myths.” We take our questions from current concerns though we construct our answers from the past, in which language, thought, and action take their own forms. The resulting body of work from ongoing inquiry and exchanges among diverse scholars generates a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the past. Freedman (2002) believes that recent scholarship has demonstrated that “feminism has passed
the test of time, largely because it has redefined itself in response to a variety of local and global politics” (12).

To paraphrase Judith Butler (2006), we could describe our work simply as “wave trouble.” It is not enough to retain the waves metaphor and then try to complicate it by considering conflicts among and within generations. The waves metaphor, like the earlier concept of separate spheres, has become a crutch that obscures as much as it organizes the past into a neat package. To make the feminist past understandable, if not relevant, to future generations, we must historicize both the creation of concepts and the lives and actions they categorize. One way to do this is to make our “waves trouble” part of the discussion of the feminist past and the Women’s Studies present.

Julie Gallagher: Revisiting Constructs and Their Tyrannical Inclinations

While reflecting on the question of whether to maintain or abandon the waves metaphor in writing and teaching about U.S. women’s history, I went back to an article in the American Historical Review written over thirty years ago by Elizabeth Brown, a historian of medieval Europe. Brown’s 1974 article “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe” is a valuable reminder that scholars in all fields grapple with the frameworks of analysis they employ. In her critique, Brown highlights the potential for constructs to influence research agendas and shape our understanding of the past. Specifically, she evaluates European historians’ continued use of “feudalism” as a primary framework within which to study social, political, and economic change over time and across regions in Europe. Her assessment leads her to challenge scholars’ reliance on and continued use of the construct, which she underscores by noting its “tyranny” over the field. She raises questions about two particular features of constructs that can inform a review of the “waves” metaphor: She explores the exclusiveness of a dominant construct, and she questions scholars who contend that constructs are indispensable to teaching or writing about particular historical phenomena. While not everything Brown includes in her analysis has relevance for an evaluation of the waves metaphor, some of the key points she raises are helpful in clarifying its benefits or limitations.

Gatekeepers

Constructs that we use to analyze the past can be exclusive, Brown warns. She notes that in using a model or an “Ideal Type,” scholars tend to “disregard or dismiss documents not easily assimilable into that frame of reference” (1063). This kind of exclusiveness gives a construct too much authority, she contends. In U.S. women’s history, the waves metaphor has significant influence over the ways the past has been analyzed and understood (Echols 1989; Evans 1979, 2003; Ezekiel 2002; Rosen 2000). As a construct, the metaphor creates and reinforces exclusivity; it illuminates only certain kinds of activism that were
engaged in by a limited set of historical actors. Brown insists that in its exclusiveness feudalism inheres a judgment, as it admits or bars historical material based on its alignment with the construct. The waves metaphor has a similar flaw. By reifying the metaphor, some scholars have consciously and others have inadvertently weighed in on the question of who and what deserves to be covered in the history of feminism, and in doing so have excluded the work and struggles of many women.

The waves metaphor highlights periods when middle-class white women were most active in the public sphere. The construct celebrates the stories of hard-won victories by women who were able to compel power elites to address their demands. However, in these time-specific and narrowly focused accounts, the multidimensional aspects of feminism too often are excluded. Women of color, working-class women, women with disabilities, lesbians, and older women who engaged in activism that responded to overlapping forms of oppression, including sexism, have rarely been incorporated into waves narratives in their own right. When these women do appear, it is generally for one of two reasons: First, their involvement in wave-related activism is invoked to demonstrate a sisterhood among women, rendering invisible other forms of activism, as well as tensions among women; and second, these women’s critiques of wave-related agendas are used to demonstrate the race, class, and other biases of “feminism,” presuming feminism to be always white and middle class.

In the first wave, middle-class white women’s efforts to secure the vote are the central action of this wave’s narrative. The early labor struggles of the Lowell Mill girls made famous by Gerda Lerner and Thomas Dublin are excluded from the first wave (Dublin 1979; Lerner 1969). Similarly, African American women’s antislavery activism and anti-lynching work are rarely told as part of the long first-wave history (Gaspar and Hine 1996; McCurry 1998; Tate 2003). Working-class and African American women are incorporated in the story when they take up the suffrage cause, however; their presence is often used to show the efforts toward, but ultimately the limits of, early sisterhood as class tensions and racism undermined fragile bonds.

The second-wave construct has been similarly problematic in its exclusiveness. In the prevailing narratives of women’s political activism in the 1960s and ’70s, the civil rights movement and 1950s labor feminism contributed to building the wave. At the cusp of the wave, however, neither activists like Ella Baker nor the “welfare warriors” share the spotlight with Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem, Redstockings, or the Miss America protesters (Nadasen 2005). Labor leaders fared somewhat better in second-wave narratives than the women who were deeply involved in struggles for racial equality. Long-time labor activists Esther Peterson and Katherine Ellickson were the driving force behind the President’s Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) in 1961 and received well-deserved attention in the second-wave story. The commission initiated the Equal Pay Act, and further, a number of women from the state commissions that
the PCSW yielded helped found NOW in 1966 (Harrison 1988; Kessler-Harris 2001). Yet far too much of women’s labor activism remains obscured by the waves narrative. Women of color and working-class leaders enter the narrative only briefly as members of NOW and other organizations. As with the first wave, in some cases their presence is used to illuminate the possibilities of sisterhood; in others, they serve as reminders that feminism remained white and middle class.

The exclusiveness of the waves metaphor has not been ignored, however. Many historians, feminist theorists, and feminist activists have addressed the problem of omissions in the standard narratives. Through writing and dialogue, we have begun to understand how the exclusiveness of the construct has diminished our understanding of women’s realities and underfed the political movements that are, in part, informed by a reflection on activism. For example, black feminist theorists and historians who write about women of color have been leaders in challenging the waves metaphor as it was constructed by white feminists. They have modeled ways to think more comprehensively about power relationships and about women who were left out of earlier historical accounts (Brown 1995; Collins 1990/2000; Giddings 1984; hooks 1981; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Lerner 1973; Ransby 2000). Many other historians of women’s activism have highlighted the limitations not just of the waves metaphor, but of the ways feminist history has been conceptualized and analyzed (Caraway 1991; Cobble 2004; Naples 2005; Ruiz 1987; Swerdlow 1995). By first recovering the history of women who were marginalized or excluded by the waves construct, and then by detailing how not only intersections of oppression but also resistance have functioned over time, these scholars have pulled the plug on the waves metaphor as a dominant model to write and teach about U.S. women’s history.

**Hard Habits to Shake**

Although a substantial body of literature exists that shows the exclusiveness of the waves metaphor, it still remains a dominant discourse. One has to look no further than the bookshelf to see how much feminist scholarship employs the waves construct. We talk of the “tidal wave,” the “missing wave,” “bridging waves,” “making waves,” “re-waving,” “catching a wave,” “surfing” and “riding the wave,” and “waving, not drowning.” And we worry about “being lost between the waves,” “surviving in the doldrums,” and “different wavelengths” (Cobble 2004; Davis and Frederickson 2003; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Evans 2003; LeGates 1996; Reger 2005; Rupp and Taylor 1987). Brown (1974) states that a similar phenomenon has existed with feudalism as well. She was among a handful of European scholars who urged their colleagues to eliminate the tyrannical feudalism construct from the historical discourse. Yet despite these medievalists’ appeals, challenges, and explicit calls to abandon the term, by and large Brown and the others met with resistance. Many historians, even as they expressed sympathy with Brown’s concerns, determined that it was too difficult to write
about the era without employing the construct. Feudalism, with its recognized limitations, was also seemingly indispensable to medievalists (1067). Similarly, the use of the waves metaphor has proven to be a very hard habit to shake.

A major reason for the apparent indispensability of the waves metaphor is that, like most constructs, it enables historians to explore change over time and to compare one time period with another. It does this by detailing the history of struggles for women's right to vote, equal pay for equal work, equal rights under the law, elimination of sexist job postings, and marital rape laws, for example. The waves narrative charts issues like these from their inception to their conclusion. These are substantial subjects, and the stories of how and why women succeeded or failed to bring about change over time on these issues are both compelling and easy to frame an historical narrative around. Moreover, the women who waged these struggles were often successful in attracting local or national attention at pivotal points in the fight. White middle-class women, by nature of their race and class privilege, were able to garner media or political attention more readily than women of color or working-class women. As a result, we can follow their activism through to some kind of conclusion—often a victorious one. Narratives of struggle and victory are appealing and fairly simple to tell.

Scholars also find the waves metaphor indispensable because it facilitates the inclusion of women's activism into the complex narratives of U.S. history. In the wake of social history's ascendance, a multiplicity of voices competes to be included in textbooks, as parts of classroom lectures, and in scholarship. The hitherto excluded voices of women, African Americans, the working class, and others who have long faced the challenges of marginal status struggle against one another to be heard. At the same time, they must all still vie for attention with the traditional subjects of U.S. history: Men in politics and men at war. So as not to have women's stories boxed out, feminist scholars have often relied on the waves metaphor to guarantee women's activism a place in survey courses and textbooks.

Finally, the waves metaphor seems indispensable because it has become part of our public discourse. Detractors and supporters alike use the waves to talk about events in the past. Critics in the popular culture often deride “Second Wavers,” particularly the apocryphal bra burners, for being overly aggressive and misguided regarding mainstream women's concerns. Young feminists describe themselves as “Third Wavers” in a deliberate attempt to distance themselves from their predecessors. Simultaneously, many feminist activists of the second-wave generation are justifiably proud of the strides made during the 1960s and '70s. They understand their work as part of a longer tradition of struggle against gender-based oppression. Second-wave feminists defend their achievements against both a hostile media and a new generation of women who seem somewhat unimpressed or under-appreciative of their efforts. The prevalent use of the waves metaphor in both academic and public conversations contributes
to the perception that use of the metaphor is essential if one wants to speak about feminist activism.

The waves metaphor allows for marking certain kinds of change over time, particularly for women in the public sphere. But these changes have not often liberated all women equally. The activism chronicled in the waves narratives represents the priorities of relatively elite women. When the priorities of some are represented as priorities of all, the measurements of change over time are too problematic to be retained. In addition, although the construct makes it easier to include women in the crowded field of historical actors, it undermines our ability as scholars, teachers, and activists to convey the richness of multiple feminisms, which is what we want our respective audiences to understand. Lastly, when we commit ourselves to teaching the history of U.S. women’s activism differently, we will ultimately change the public discourse to reflect more accurately women’s history. By holding onto or living under the “tyranny” of the waves construct, scholars and activists continue to deny us the insights, analyses, and deeper understanding of the past that a more comprehensive rendering of history yields.

**Breaking Free—Cautiously**

After leveling a fairly heavy blow to the feudalism loyalists, Brown (1974) reminds her readers that historians can and do find ways to write about the past that “emphasize complexity and the unique” rather than simplicity and conformity (1979). We, too, have many fine models to follow in letting go of the waves metaphor, including those written by my fellow historians in this article. But we have more at stake than medievalists, and that should influence how we move to abandon the metaphor. I offer here a caution: Politicians and the popular media are already hostile to feminism. Legislators need little encouragement to continue their assault on women’s political, economic, and social positions in society. The minimal number of women in the U.S. Congress, the differential in wages between women and men, and the whittling away of women’s reproductive freedom are only a handful of reasons to be mindful of how scholars engage the historical recounting of U.S. women’s activism. Furthermore, the popular media is preoccupied with “the end of feminism” and “post-feminism,” suggesting that there is no longer any need for women’s activism at all. As we acknowledge the tyrannical nature of the waves construct and move to abandon it, we do not want to disregard or diminish the significance of gains made by some of the earlier waves feminists. While there is much more to the history of women’s activism than has been suggested by the metaphor, feminists included in the waves stories achieved some very important goals. Young people have much to benefit from tapping into these rich traditions of struggle, including the activism and resistance of women whose stories are well-known, as well as those who will emerge in transformed feminist histories. We must also find a way to highlight and celebrate moments
of effective coalition building, but without privileging one group of historical actors over another.

I would conclude that the waves construct has been challenged, revised, and discarded by many scholars for very good reasons: It is exclusive and value-laden; it has too often enabled white middle-class women’s political agendas, which are frequently the essence of the waves narrative, to stand in for feminism more generally; the construct obscures the feminist activism of too many women, and in doing so, portrays the history of U.S. women as too simple, one-dimensional, and linear. We have enough excellent scholarship available to point the ways forward. In this article, for example, Dorothy Sue Cobble proposes that we reconceptualize women’s history to more fully acknowledge long and tangled histories of struggle; Eileen Boris suggests “streams” and “strands”; and Premilla Nadasen reminds us of Vincent Harding’s powerful “river” metaphor. These alternatives hold great appeal because they enable us to necessarily broaden and complicate our focus, while at the same time retain important lessons from past struggles. Stephanie Gilmore cautions us to be mindful of geographic biases in our scholarship as well as privileging nationally focused narratives at the expense of locally based “groundswells.” And as feminist activism and movements continue and proliferate, Leandra Zarnow advises us to look for points of connection between the movements of the late 1960s and ’70s and today. Our students and others concerned with gender-based justice will benefit if we move away from the waves metaphor, and scholarship will be equally enriched.

Dorothy Sue Cobble: The Long History of Women’s Freedom Struggles

In the last few years, the waves metaphor, the central organizing trope in the teaching and writing of U.S. women’s reform, has come under sustained scrutiny. There has been a growing skepticism about its uses and misuses, and concern about whether it obscures more than it illuminates. Recent “wave events,” to name a few, include the 2002 Organization of American Historians Panel “Re-Waving the History of Feminism”; the May 2005 conference “No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of American Feminism” organized by the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University; and the two panels at the 2005 American Studies Association (ASA) and the 2006 American Historical Association (AHA), which brought together many of the scholars contributing to this article. No doubt, there are, and will be, others.

And well there should be. The waves metaphor is ubiquitous and deeply embedded in our psyches and our historical texts—from Sara Evans’s (2003) most recent synthetic history of post-1960s feminism Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End, to my own claim that the labor feminists I chronicled in The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America (2004) represented a “missing wave,” which, if more fully restored to historical memory, would help make the “next wave” of feminism
possible. Tellingly, the wave that is invoked is almost always an ocean wave. Evans’s chapter titles in Tidal Wave—for example, “Undertow,” “Crest,” “Deep Currents”—all operate within this watery universe. We rarely explore other wave analogies such as radio waves or sound waves or even, as Nancy Hewitt pointed out at the 2005 Rutgers conference, the familiar waves of greeting and goodbye.

One response to the wave language, especially as the extended metaphors pile up and sea sickness sets in, is to “jump ship”—to use the phrase from the ASA and AHA wave-panel title—and throw out the ocean-wave imagery altogether. After all, the metaphor is complicit in perpetuating, if not helping to create, many of the current misconceptions and erasures in our historical narratives of women’s reform. But before recommending wholesale excision of ocean-wave terminology from our histories, let me contemplate a less radical intervention and suggest that we take another look at how waves operate in the natural world and re-wave our history accordingly.

The ocean-wave imagery is actually more flexible than our current literary uses of it. Much has been lost in translation from the natural realm to the literary. The homogeneous, univocal wave does not exist in nature. Up close, the ocean is full of cross-currents and eddies. Up close, it is hard to separate one wave from another, to see where one begins and another ends. Waves overlap, their currents mostly submerged, one spilling into another. They are continuous and multiple. There are little waves within big waves, and waves within troughs as well as within crests. Indeed, out on the sea of women’s reform, there is little still water in sight.

If used carefully and self-consciously then, the ocean-wave language could be stretched in some instances to accommodate the new scholarship in women’s history, which emphasizes the diversity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity of women’s activism. Yet a more fundamental overhaul will be needed if our waving practices are to reflect the realities not just of the natural world, but of the social.

One of the most intractable problems of the waves metaphor has to do with the widely used two-wave framework. Currently, we have only two waves of women’s reform, with the first wave ending rather abruptly in 1920, and then, after a half-century of supposed quiescence, a second tidal wave follows, erupting in the late 1960s. This two-wave model assumes a half-century that was devoid of waves, which flies in the face of the now voluminous literature documenting activism during this fifty-year trough (for example, Cobble 2004; Cott 1987; Gabin 1990; Hartmann 1998; Laughlin 2000; Ransby 2005; Rupp 1997). One alternative would be to “wave” that missing half-century, adding a new wave between the first and second.

A second possibility would be to adjust the periodization. The first wave could be extended into the 1920s and ’30s, and the second wave lengthened as well, emerging earlier, in the 1940s or ’50s. In doing so, we would be acting in the spirit of Jackie Hall’s (2005) call to see the modern civil rights movement
as a “long” one, starting well before Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat in 1955. In an influential article in the *Journal of American History*, Hall expanded the standard boundaries of the civil rights movement, arguing for the need to incorporate more fully the movement’s economic justice agenda. With this broader definition of the movement, she then shifted its beginnings backward, into the 1940s. In a parallel move, we could make a case for a “long women’s movement,” one that had a broad social justice agenda rooted in the post-war era labor and civil rights movements that bears reclaiming.

After all, the second wave is awfully short, particularly in comparison with the first. Indeed, there are some interesting asymmetries between the first and second waves. The first wave is a long and inclusive one covering many generations. It takes in moments of mass organizing, as in the decade before the achievement of the suffrage amendment, as well as moments with considerably smaller swells of public-reform activity. In contrast, the second wave is essentially limited to one generation.

This very same generation, my own, is, in some cases, writing histories and memoirs that preserve these generational boundaries. Ruth Rosen’s *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (2000), for example, begins with the Betty Friedan vision of those pre-feminist days before the second wave, peopled with docile and unhappy housewives blind to the truth their daughters would discover. The discontinuities are emphasized, the gulf separating one generation from another, even to the extent of conflating feminism with the particular version of “feminist consciousness” that arose in the late 1960s. Now that the daughters are mothers, this generational tension is reproduced once again, with many younger feminists feeling the need to claim a third and distinct wave, rather than seeing themselves as part of a longer, more inclusive movement.

Why, one might ask, is the second wave so attenuated and self-contained and still often depicted as rising up “almost instantly,” “massive from the very outset”? (Evans 2003, 1). The waves metaphor may be part of the problem, but I doubt it is the primary culprit. Here, again, some comparative thinking across waves is illuminating. Historians of the first wave have raised the issue of “origin stories”—where the stories come from and the purposes they serve. We can now see, looking back on the nineteenth century, that the first histories of the first wave, written by the founders and participants, were as much about writing their own stories as they were about writing the story of the movement writ large.

Similarly, as the memoirs and histories of the second wave continue to pour forth—written largely by second-wave founders and participants—we will have our own set of origin stories and “origin myths.” The ambivalence many second-wave founders have about their foremothers, for example, is similar to that expressed by movement founders in other eras, who are also intent on regarding their movement as new and earth-shattering. Movement founders have a dual desire: They want both to claim a history, and to discover a truth
that stands outside of history. At times they end up believing that there were “no shoulders on which to stand,” to quote Evans’s depiction of the “unfortunate experience of many in the 1960s”—an experience that she hopes the children of the 1960s generation will escape (5).

We will need some humility as we try to write the first histories of our time. We will need to historicize the feminism of the 1960s, to see it as arising in a particular context and as reflecting the gendered imagination of a particular generation and a particular historical moment. As hard as it may be, we will need to contemplate the limits of the new feminism of the 1960s as well as its breakthroughs. Let me borrow a phrase from another Rutgers University colleague of mine, Leela Fernandes (2005). We need, in her words, more “transformative remembering” and less “nostalgic remembering.”

Yet the problems with the two-wave framework go beyond reconceptualizing the fifty-year period after 1920. Not only are there only two waves spanning 150 years of U.S. women’s history, but also there is only one wave occurring at any one time. We have essentially collapsed the history of women’s reform into a single, all-encompassing phenomenon. One intervention might be, as noted earlier, to add the multiple eddies and currents within the wave to make it conform more to the natural world of ocean waves. But once we begin to incorporate the multiple histories of women into the two-wave model, the problems only worsen. The reform initiatives of different groups of women are rising and falling at different historical moments, making it impossible to decipher a single crest or trough. The suffrage struggle for black women was not over in 1920, for example, neither did post–World War II black feminism peak in the early 1970s (Giddings 1984; Jones 1986; Thompson 2002). Similarly, working-class women’s activism, as I have argued, rose in the 1930s and ’40s with the emergence of industrial unionism, and it surged again in the 1980s with the massive public-sector strikes over comparable worth and pay equity (Cobble 2004, 2005).

Ultimately, we will need not only more precision with our wave imagery, but also new overarching frameworks for women’s history. Our continuing reliance on the two-wave model has kept us from facing the difficult problem of how to write the history of multiple feminisms. We need to be more precise about what we mean by feminism and the women’s movement and whose history is being captured in our current two-wave paradigm. If, for example, we take race and class to be as important as gender in restricting women’s freedom, then are not the movements organized around ending these discriminations also women’s movements? Isn’t the movement of black women to end race discrimination a women’s movement, and one that perhaps generated as big a wave as the so-called mother of all waves—the second wave?

But we want, I would assume, to avoid talking about who has the biggest wave. And here again, the waves metaphor, with its ups and downs, limits our thinking. Why not think of multiple feminisms, of various different but vital
strands within feminism, each of which has its own long, continuous history, varying over time and place. Why not assume that there are always movements for freedom and equality among women in every era, among every generation. The questions become then: What are the various strands of feminism? Why does one approach become dominant in one era and not another? Why does one vision of liberation predominate among one group of women and not another? Why did some women believe that equality could be achieved through separatism, while others rejected it? Why did some see their allies primarily among either men of their same class or race, while others rejected men as partners in reform?

The history of women's reform has outgrown its inherited framework. African American history is now seen as a long, continuous, and contentious struggle for freedom. Women's history also could be reconceived in a similar fashion. There is conflict; there are multiple and competing priorities. Women were united not around a single vision of sisterhood; rather, they found contingent solidarities and shifting points of convergence. This reconceived women's history would be a movement history come of age. If we are to create a new, more inclusive women's movement, we will need to write a history that shares this vision.

Eileen Boris: Feminism’s Histories

Historian Sara Evans begins her 2003 book *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* with a contrast between “the ‘first wave’ of women’s rights activism in the United States” and a “second wave” of the 1960s (1). While the first, she tells us, “built slowly from its beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century, finally cresting in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,” the second wave, while “riding this single, symbolic issue, . . . arose almost instantly in a fast-moving and unruly storm, massive from the very outset [despite] shifting winds and crosscurrents,” without a single focus and “at war as much within itself as with patriarchy” (1). The third wave she relegates to a younger generation that made their voices heard during the mid-1990s, learning their feminism through an academic discourse that had fractured any lingering “feminism as a sisterhood of sameness” (230).

Evans’s story has stood as the standard, propagated by popular culture, as well as by “hegemonic feminism,” the term that Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval (2000) has given to the dominant narrative’s placing of white middle-class women and their concerns at the center of feminism (see Thompson 2002). Evans’s periodization of the first and second waves resembles the categorization offered in 1968 by women’s liberation activist Shulamith Firestone (1970), who periodized the first wave as Stanton–Anthony through the winning of the vote. Firestone, as feminist critic Astrid Henry (2004) has reminded us, appropriated Stanton and Anthony as forerunners of her own radical feminism, banishing
their opponents to the realm of conservative feminism for resembling, as she saw it, those “liberal feminists” who sat on the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in her own day. Liberals, after all, worked within the system, while radicals challenged its very foundations.

The usable past for women's liberation that Firestone created elevated above others those feminist abolitionists who stepped out of a male Left to forge an autonomous movement, whose politics and strategies historian Ellen Carol DuBois would chart in her path-breaking work *Feminism and Suffrage* (1978). That they put sex above race and the wrongs to educated white women over men and women newly emancipated from slavery would soon taint their stature in the eyes of some, especially those who held that race was the central problem in U.S. society, and that it existed bound to gender and class (Aptheker 1982; Caraway 1991; Davis 1981). This pantheon of the “true” feminists of the first wave included Alice Paul and the National Women’s Party, not anarchist and birth-control crusader Emma Goldman or “girl” garment-striker Clara Lemlich (Falk 1990; Lunardini 1986; Orleck 1995; Rupp and Taylor 1987). Even Paul and other equal rights opponents of protective labor legislation for women, however, stepped outside the boundaries of a narrative that confined them to the early twentieth century. As I discovered in researching the relationship between sex and race in antidiscrimination policy, the National Women’s Party circle continued its push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) during the Great Depression and World War II and into the postwar years. They handed a legacy, though one tainted by alliances with Southern Democratic opponents of civil rights and Republican disparagers of trade unions, to those who renewed the effort to pass the ERA during the late 1960s and ’70s (Boris 2003).

To historicize feminism’s standard story—indeed, the waves metaphor itself—is to recognize that this narrative came out of the search for identity and struggles of some women in the late 1960s through their need for a sisterhood that was powerful. The generational terms surrounding the dominant narrative elide the significance of political disagreements, “taking as representative of feminism whatever discourse seems dominant at a particular moment,” as Joan Scott and colleagues have argued (Christian et al. 1990, 83). Feminism has been multiple and variegated not only over time and place, but in the same time and place. The waves metaphor, in contrast, has reified some women’s politics and actions as feminist over others. This tension leads me to ask: Does a waves metaphor, derived from a need to delineate feminist generations, carry too much baggage to encompass what historians have found over the last thirty or so years? Is it robust enough for use by activists who seek to form vibrant coalitions and advance feminist social justice? Is its “conceptualization of what counts as feminism and who can be defined as legitimate participants in the women’s movement,” to cite sociologist Nancy Naples (2005, 231), just too restrictive for the present of Women’s Studies and the future of feminist activism?
Attacking the second wave as white and middle class ironically reinforces the very history that excludes the theory and praxis of others who reject such identities by highlighting the hegemonic as "subject to debate" (Pollitt 2001). Is there another way to conceptualize the history of feminisms and women’s movements that refuses to turn a part into the whole? Can we acknowledge identities without reducing feminisms to mere embodiment, as if ideas and ideology, politics and strategies—albeit related to our social, cultural, psychic, and other modals of location—did not matter? Or are we always doomed to search for usable pasts, constructing our own counter-narratives for inspiration and to hope for the long haul of social struggle?

“What’s in a name?” is a powerful question and central to our deliberations: It references both self-naming and naming by others, and questions which labels are even available to us in the process of naming (Cott 1989; Hemmings 2005; Riley 2003). Waves occur not only in bodies of water; they are also a property of hair, whether natural or the product of beautification. Hair consists of strands. The concept of strand, I argue, provides an alternative to the wave, one that allows visualization of feminist genealogies over time that stand apart, but can also come together into braids. The weaving together of separate strands to form a whole might represent intersectionality in action. But braids also allow us to chart interaction as well as distinct paths. Growing from the roots and moving from the past into the present, each strand represents a tendency yet still mingles with others. When braided together, separate strands touch one another, offering the possibility for cross-influences.

Names change, but strands generate genealogies. During the last few years, I have been rethinking feminism’s history through teaching feminist theories, as much as I have from researching labor feminism, welfare justice, and domestic-worker organizing (Boris 2005; Boris and Baron 2007; Boris and Klein 2007; Boris and Nadasen 2008). The old categories of liberal, radical, and socialist feminisms reified feminist theories in one time period, when such courses entered the curriculum in the late 1970s and early ’80s. Like the waves metaphor itself, these were products of a particular time and particular group of women who had access to define or name feminism by publishing the first anthologies for teaching feminist theory (Jaggar and Rothenberg 1978).² Instead, I braid genealogies drawn from the rich historical literature that has transformed our understanding of women’s movements over the last quarter-century in dialogue with my own activism.

Many Feminisms
U.S. historians of women and gender have complicated narratives of feminism and women’s agency for women and their communities. We found the quest for self-definition and better lives in the black clubwomen who refused to have their reputations maligned in the 1890s and fought against lynching (Higginbotham 1989; Shaw 1996). We discovered white Southern liberals who rejected ladyhood
In the 1930s as well as in the ’50s (Fosl 2002; Hall 1993). Striking Jewish and Italian garment workers in the 1910s provided another feminist legacy, as did Chicana flappers in the 1920s (Enstad 1999; Ruiz 1992). Left feminists particularly found salient communist women who understood the connection between the exploitation of women and capitalism (Weigand 2001). Some of us have championed as feminists New Deal bureaucrats who sought consumer protection and enhanced purchasing power and their trade-union allies who fought for comparable worth—equal pay, child care, and shorter workdays (Cobble 2005; Storr 2003, 2006). Others have derived feminist inspiration from butches and femmes who dared to walk out together (Kennedy and Davis 1993). Poor black and Latina single mothers on welfare have expanded the claims of feminism (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2005; Orleck 2005). White women in the New Left came out of male-dominated organizations to form women’s liberation; black and Chicana feminists in the late 1960s developed organizations in response to the sexism of the men in their own communities and to fulfill their own goals, rather than in reaction to exclusionary acts by white women (Blackwell 2003; Roth 2004). Such feminisms forged in the cauldrons of social movements, associated with the second wave, differ considerably from creating one’s feminism in reaction to an older generation or by gaining such consciousness in a Women’s Studies classroom, as foundational tales of the third wave often recount the beginnings of their wave (Kinser 2004; Purvis 2004). In short, feminisms developed in various locations, sometimes tied to racial, class, religious, sexual, and other identities, sometimes based on political—in the broadest sense—philosophies, and usually derived from lived experiences as refracted through the interpretative terms available during specific times and places.

In uncovering many feminisms, then, historians discovered that no singular wave receded after suffrage or came suddenly crashing back in the mid-1960s—even if one takes an equal rights definition, such as presented by Nancy Cott (1989), that excludes those whom historians often have labeled “social feminists,” but whom Kathryn Sklar and colleagues (1998) more properly have named “social justice feminists.” Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (1987) convincingly have documented how elite adherents to this equal rights philosophy survived “in the doldrums.” Even when it came to the question of equality, feminism has encompassed many positions, with disagreements on how to achieve equal rights and what constitutes substantive justice. Nor can activism during a given period be reduced to members of any one organization: Think of the differences between Church Women United and Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH). The first consisted of women from various Protestant denominations who by the late 1950s were not only demanding more autonomy from the National Council of Churches, but were agitating for women’s rights as part of a larger liberal coalition by testifying before Congress (Hartmann 1998). WITCH, in contrast, engaged in feminist agitprop: Members “hexed” institutions of patriarchy like Wall Street and the
wedding industry (Rosen 2000). The standard story comes with diversity and debate over tactics and strategies that popular retelling portrays only to stress catfights among women.

**Toward a Genealogy of Left Feminism**

Along with women-of-color theorists (discussed below by Premilla Nasaden), labor and Left feminisms—the political traditions that bring class back into intersectionality—focus on substantive divisions among, as well as possibilities for, coalitions among women. Left feminism, as Landon Storrs (2006) defines it, “pursued a vision of women's emancipation that insisted on class and racial justice as well as ‘pure’ gender equality” (42). Ellen DuBois (1991) has explained that its adherents joined “recognition of the systematic oppression of women with an appreciation of other structures of power underlying American society” (84). Jacquelyn Hall (2000, 2006) has shown their fusion of economic and racial justice. But this strand has had to struggle for recognition as feminist not only because proponents—such as Caroline Ware, Mary Dublin Keyserling, Eleanor Flexner, and the League of Women Shoppers—strayed from a gender-only analysis, but also because they were most active during times, such as the 1930s to the early ’60s, when the waves theory claims that no women's movement existed (Winslow 2009). Not all Left women self-identified as feminists, even if they fought “male chauvinism,” named the harm of sexual harassment, and sought to define their own sexualities, choosing their own mates regardless of race, as did both black and white women in the communist Party (Davies 2007; Kennedy and Faue 2003; McDuffie [forthcoming]; Weigand 2001).

Even in the heyday of the suffrage movement, many socialist women were feminists and suffragists, who protested the high cost of meat, built trade unions, objected to war, and sought sexual emancipation (Frank 1985; Kennedy 1999; Tax 1980). Charlotte Perkins Gilman captured the bifurcated activism of such women in her 1912 poem, “The Socialist and the Suffragist,” which admonished those who claimed one cause as more liberatory: “The world awoke, and tartly spoke: / ‘Your work is all the same; / Work together or work apart, / Work, each of you, with all your heart— / Just get into the game!’” (qtd. in Buhle 1981, 214). As socialist leader Meta Stern argued: “Whether or not the suffragists as a body recognize the class struggle is of no consequence, for the suffrage movement is not a class question, but a sex question. . . . The entire female sex—that is disfranchised in the United States. . . . Therefore, the struggle for enfranchisement is a distinct and common cause of all women” (qtd. in ibid., 226). Membership in a class-based organization—whether a political party or a trade union—established no barrier to embracing feminist politics; indeed, their intersectional analysis prefigured those developed in the heyday of the second wave (McDuffie [forthcoming]).

The early post–World War II years, in particular, turned into a virtual cauldron for the politics of women’s issues, stirred by trade unionists, communists,
government officials, African Americans, and mainstream women’s voluntary organizations like the League of Women Voters. Groups and individuals once dismissed as not feminist because they often failed to embrace the Equal Rights Amendment (supporting protective labor laws for women instead) appeared to have paved the way for later explosions (Harrison 1988; Nasstrom 2000). Some of these women lived a new feminism—take Frieda Miller, for instance, who led the Women’s Bureau in 1944 (Laughlin 2000; Orleck 1995). She was in a long relationship with Pauline Newman, had an affair with a man, and had a child out of wedlock; she sought equality at work, explaining that “[e]qual wages [would] render justice to women in the different fields of employment” (CIO 1946). As the bureau and its supporters argued time and time again: “There is no ‘sex differential’ when men and women spend the money they earn. Grocery stores do not have double standard price tags, one for men customers, one for women” (Christman 1942). However, Miller and other defenders of wage-earning women did not name themselves “feminist” because the National Women’s Party had monopolized that name for this generation of activist women (Cott 1987).

That low-income, wage-earning women struggled for equal pay and quality child care to be good mothers who provided for their children did not make them “maternalist,” the term that historians of women use to describe the politics of reformers who promote maternal and child welfare through discourses that validate motherhood. Motherhood and feminism were not contradictory stances, but feminists have found motherhood a particularly fraught arena (Ladd-Taylor 1994). Women’s activism in the 1950s, for example, won state-sponsored child care in California, allowing for greater economic independence among wage-earning mothers (Fousekis forthcoming; Stoltzfus 2003). By some definitions, we might easily dismiss the efforts of these working-class women or those of the Women’s Department of the United Automobile Workers of America to gain time to do housework as re-inscribing women as caregivers (Boris and Michel 2001), but to do so is to participate in the disparaging of care work and to ignore actions that working-class women themselves designated as necessary for advancement in their unions, equality in their homes, and control over their lives.

Trade unions bred this “other women’s movement,” as Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004) aptly has named the search for economic and social justice that labor feminists championed into the 1970s (1). Beginning with World War II, millions of women fought against workplace discrimination on the basis of sex, race, age, and marital status, both seeking access to better jobs held by men and also enhancement of the light manufacturing, service, and clerical occupations in which the majority of them labored. They worked for equal pay, child care, and the right to combine employment and motherhood. These labor feminists sought equal rights as well as special accommodations, like maternity leave, to make equality possible. They would revalue housework and care work, whether performed for one’s family or for a wage; indeed, the worth of the first was central
to the upgrading of the second. The contemporary work-and-family agenda—such as paid family and medical leave, comparable worth, and remunerated care work—finds its past in the struggles of such union women who understood that the right to a job was not enough to obtain the economic equity on which first-class citizenship depends, and who refused “to privilege breadwinning over caregiving and . . . gender equity based on assimilation to the male sphere” as Cobble notes (2004, 120).

My feminism resembled these earlier seekers of social justice by rejecting a singular focus on women’s oppression; it derived from struggle as a part of and within movements against racial, class, and global inequalities. I was an antiracist before I was a feminist, but my feminism and New Left identities developed together. As socialist feminists, we moved to double the amount of meetings: Mixed sex and women only (Kennedy 2008). We redefined abortion rights as reproductive rights, including the right to have children as well as not to, to be free from forced sterilization, to be able to afford and have access to abortion, and to be in workplaces where toxins would not damage reproductive and general health (CARASA 1979; Fried 1990). We were concerned with women in prisons and with women as wage earners. In looking for a usable past, I turned not to Alice Paul, but to Emma Goldman, and later to Florence Kelley and Mary White Ovington, who were white women founders of the NAACP—all socialist women of a century ago (Sklar 1995; Wedin 1998).

The concept of strand is more helpful to me than that of wave in placing the socialist feminism of 1980 into an intellectual and theoretical context and comparing it with other strands that we sometimes merged with and at other times debated against. This strand had a number of components, but central was the concern that material relations, including class, structure the circumstances of gender and everyday life. Production and reproduction became major foci, definitions of which have shifted over time, with redistribution of power and resources—here and abroad—as a major goal (Holmstrom 2002; Petchesky 2002). Socialist feminists highlighted the significance of the domestic for women’s status, but did not agree on its meaning. This strand includes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1903 call to socialize the home, Mary Inman’s 1941 desire to treat housework as productive labor, Margaret Benston’s 1969 elevation of housework for both its use and exchange values, and Silva Federici’s 1975 demand of wages for housework. Those who seek the revaluing of care work—from academics like Eva Kittay (1999), activist intellectuals like Gwendolyn Mink (1998), and community organizations like Domestic Workers United (2007)—represent a particular twist to a strand whose adherents have had varied positions on housework and the labor of care. Whether they would socialize housework or insist that everyone pick up for themselves, most Left feminists would agree that abjection and the low pay of domestic labor is one lynchpin of the oppression of women, especially working-class women of
all races and women of color who have predominated as slaves, servants, and underpaid household laborers.

The strand of Left feminism seemed frayed, superseded by other forms of theorizing until historical circumstances shifted again. In the last decade, feminists have joined renewed transnational and local justice movements against capitalist globalization, sweatshops, empire, and imperialism. The organizing of hotel, hospital, home care, and other service workers—the majority of whom have been women of color, often immigrant—has transformed the face of the labor movement, leading feminists to look again at unions as a terrain of struggle. The reproductive justice movement led by women of color, the feminist opposition to welfare reform, renewed concerns with poverty, and the swell for immigrant rights have all renewed the Left feminist strand, now mixed with the praxis and thoughts of difference theorists—whether derived from U.S.–Third World feminism, women-of-color studies, or queer studies (Chang 2000; Silliman and Bhattacharjee 2002; Silliman et al. 2004).

Strands become braids when feminisms move with and against on another. At the crossing of the strands lay coalition politics—as when socialists joined suffragists to fight for the vote during the 1910s. Coalitions can develop even when class conflict simmers within them, and they can be effective if coalition partners share only some common interests. Thus NOW worked with the National Committee on Household Employment in the early 1970s to extend labor standards to both professional women and the household employees that many of those same professional women underpaid; both organizations shared a common interest in women’s rights, even if the economic interests of some members diverged (Palmer 1995). “Historical categorizations that fail to define feminism broadly will inevitably also fail to provide the analytical framework for effective coalition building across the diversity of differences that shape women’s identities and experiences,” Nancy Naples (2005, 217) has reminded us. Recognizing the many strands that join together though also fly apart with the shifting of issues and conflicting of interests enriches our history of feminisms, making it easier for those once pulled under or washed ashore by waves to reemerge in their own right.

Historical narrative is hardly static: Not only does standpoint matter in the construction of the past, but events of our own time push us to ask different questions and explain the origins of forces previously omitted, ignored, or dismissed. The search for usable pasts has shaped the story of feminism with a significant outcome: In seeking to understand our lives, we poke around in the attics of the past, look under previously missed stones, and rehear voices long muted. And so we pull together strands into a braid, connecting past and present, finding inspiration in those who have gone before, constructing genealogies of feminism for the future.
Premilla Nadasen: Black Feminism—Waves, Rivers, and Still Water

The waves metaphor has dominated our understanding of women’s history since the 1970s. It has given us a paradigm to make sense of feminism and the chronology of women’s activism in the United States. This metaphor has neatly packaged the women’s rights movement into peaks and troughs—highlighting the big media moments in the struggle, but perhaps obscuring the equally important day-to-day trench work done by thousands of nameless, hardworking activists. Yet no metaphors are perfect. In this section of the article, I would like to offer some thoughts on the limits and pitfalls of wedging ourselves monogamously to just one.

Our definition of feminism is intimately tied to our adherence to the waves metaphor. By framing the woman’s suffrage campaigns and the women’s liberation movements as the “waves” of feminist activism, this metaphor establishes boundaries on women’s activism, re-inscribing gender as the primary category of analysis that defines feminism. The waves of activism were, for the most part, populated primarily by white middle-class women who saw gender as their central identity. Privileging some women’s activism pushes to the margins other women who organized in a different time period or around a different set of issues. The framing of feminist activism in this way begs the questions: What do we mean by feminist work? Does feminism require adherence to gender as the primary category of analysis? Does feminism require commitment to an explicitly woman’s organization? How does the waves metaphor truncate the chronology of feminist activism?

Over the past twenty years, an abundance of new scholarship has helped us to rethink and expand our notions of feminism and women’s activism. This article draws on some of the recent scholarship on black feminism, as well as on my own work regarding the welfare rights movement, to address the implications of this literature for the waves metaphor. Much of this new scholarship calls for a broader definition of feminism and an extended chronology that takes into account the political efforts of women who fall outside the boundaries of traditional feminism, as well as that of women who organized during periods of diminished protest.

I am confining my comments to black feminist scholarship, but black feminists have not been the only ones to critique and rethink the meanings of feminism. Labor feminists, socialist feminists, queer theorists, Asian, antiracist, white, and Latina scholars, to name just a few, similarly have brought fresh insights into how to frame and where to locate feminist activism. As a result, a plethora of new terms, labels, and modifiers have been introduced into the lexicon of Women’s Studies (Albrecht and Brewer 1990; Boris and Janssens 1999; Breines 2006; Cobble 2004; Hartmann 1998; Roth 2004; Taylor 2000; Thompson 2002; Weigand 2001; Zinn and Dill 1996). This shifting discourse is emblematic of how scholars have mapped new geographies of feminism.
How black feminists have defined themselves and their work is key to understanding the need to break the waves metaphor, so to speak, in order to arrive at a fuller, more inclusive picture of feminist history. Although black feminist activism has a long history, dating back to the era of slavery, black Women's Studies as a field of scholarship took form in the 1970s. From the outset, despite differences and internal debates among themselves, black feminist scholars collectively rejected the notion of gender as the sole or primary identity shaping the lives and politics of African American women; instead, they suggested that the category of women is not homogeneous and that identity is never one-dimensional. They explored the way race, class, culture, and sexuality reshaped the meaning of gender, a paradigm that Deborah King (1988) referred to as “multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness” (see Collins 1990/2000; Dill 1983; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Springer 2005a; White 1990; White 1999).

I would argue, as would many other black feminists, that feminist activity can and often does take place in race- and class-based organizations, including labor unions, nationalist formations, and civil rights and socialist groups. Scholarship on the black freedom movement has been an important frontier in rethinking women's activism. Ella Baker, for example, offered a model of a feminist practice without being labeled as such. Barbara Ransby (2005), in her biography of Baker, demonstrated how she worked to empower women in the black freedom movement and consistently challenged male-dominated leadership structures. Baker offered an image and role model of strong, assertive strategic leadership over nearly fifty years that younger women could and did emulate. Many women, such as Barbara Omolade, Diane Nash, and Bernice Reagon, cited her as the inspiration for their self-avowedly feminist politics later in life (Ransby 2005). Another example is Womanpower Unlimited, an organization founded in 1961 in Jackson, Mississippi, that was deeply committed to social action and women’s leadership. Initially organized to aid the freedom riders, they engaged in voter registration, worked to desegregate public schools in Jackson, provided food and housing for Freedom Summer volunteers in 1964, and campaigned for international peace. Tiyi Morris (2005) suggested that they engaged in “womanist activism” that integrated an ideology based on “woman power,” race consciousness, and humanism (209). According to Morris, members of Womanpower were “long-term organizers in their community and represent the tradition of black women’s activism that has been a source of strength and leadership in the struggle for black liberation as well as a vital force for social change” (201). Belinda Robnett (1997), in her book on African American women in the civil rights movement, similarly reconceptualizes traditional understandings of leadership by examining the role of women “bridge leaders” (21). As grassroots organizers, these bridge leaders did not usually have access to traditionally male centers of authority, such as the church pulpit, but nevertheless they were instrumental in mobilizing black communities in civil rights
protest. By examining the layers of political organizing, these scholars paint a more nuanced and complex portrait of social movements and reveal the critical and often unexamined roles of women (Greene 2005; Lee 1999; Robnett 1997).

Much like other strands of the black freedom movement, the welfare rights movement was not founded with feminist intentions, yet women played prominent roles as both national leaders and on the grassroots level, as well as behind the scenes. More importantly, over the course of a decade, women welfare rights activists developed a feminist political agenda that sought to empower poor women and refashion social policy (Nadasen 2002, 2005). Their feminist agenda, crafted from the political, social, and cultural circumstances of their day-to-day lives, differed from that of other feminists. They were deeply committed to improving the lives of poor women on welfare and providing them with choices and opportunities. Interactions with the welfare department, grinding poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, and their experiences as single mothers were the platforms upon which they based their feminist activism. In response to welfare regulations that increasingly required women on welfare to take paid employment, they fought for the right to choose whether to work outside the home or not. In response to public and political discourse demonizing them as mothers, they strove for greater respect, value, and support for their work as mothers. Black women, and welfare recipients in particular, often had their sexuality closely monitored and regulated by welfare officials; forced sterilization and eugenics campaigns denied them the right to form families on their own terms. Consequently, welfare rights activists advocated complete control over their reproduction, including the right to bear children and have access to government economic support to raise those children. And within the organization, female members battled with male staff members over defining their political program and controlling the organization. So the welfare rights movement clearly addressed issues important to women, had a gendered analysis of the welfare state, and, by the early 1970s, espoused explicitly feminist goals, such as reproductive rights and personal autonomy. Yet until recently it was not considered by many mainstream women’s historians as a part of the struggle for women’s liberation.

Emerging scholarship on the Black Panther Party, as well, has examined the role of women in the Party and the ways in which they carved out a space for themselves. Robyn Spencer (2008) and Tracye Matthews (1998) have analyzed the heterogeneity and ongoing conflict within the Black Panther Party: Women Panthers challenged the Party’s masculine public identity, played important leadership roles, disproportionately participated in the community-organizing and -service components of the organization, and used their involvement in the Party as an avenue to develop their own political consciousness. These scholars have alerted us to the ways that women involved with the black power movement struggled with both the ideology and practice of gender and sexual politics
This new scholarship suggests that feminist activism does not have to take place only within women’s organizations; women organizing in class- and race-based formations can also espouse a feminist agenda. Issues of poverty, housing, employment, education, peace, welfare, and race have profoundly shaped the autonomy, life choices, and opportunities for millions of women. In this way, black feminist scholarship moves us in a direction of expanding our understanding of feminism, giving it more texture, breadth, and richness.

Where does this leave scholars of women’s activism? We need to broaden our definition of feminism to include the work of women of diverse race and class backgrounds. Our understanding of feminism has to be elastic enough to make room for different, perhaps competing notions of how to empower women. At the same time, there needs to be a common thread linking together feminists of different persuasions. Not all forms of women’s empowerment further the cause of feminism, as scholarship on conservative and right-wing activism has ably demonstrated (Blee 1997). Feminism, in the broadest sense, is a political program working to empower women, to ensure them autonomy and control over their lives in a way that does not impede the autonomy or contribute to the exploitation of other women. How women understand autonomy and how they push for empowerment will vary depending on their particular social location. Gender is an inherently unstable category; as such, we cannot have a specific, stable definition of feminism. Accepting the multiple interpretations of feminism will lead us down a path of a richer, more complex, and more meaningful understanding of women’s liberation strategies. The differences in these understandings should not debilitate us; rather, as Audre Lorde (1981) suggested, we should think of difference as a “crucial strength,” because such variety is the foundation for a more inclusive notion of feminism (100).

Who Gets Defined as a Feminist?
Closely tied to the meaning of feminism is the issue of who gets defined as a feminist. Power, in part, shapes our sense of just who is a feminist. Women’s historians rely largely on texts and archival collections to piece together movement histories; they also record oral histories of the most prominent individuals or those whose participation is most remembered. These sources often reflect the methods of documentation and preservation rather than movement evolution. Those activists who had less access to power, who did not have a public forum, or who were not able to publish a widely read political tract have been taken off the map of feminist activity, washed aside by the massive oncoming wave.

Because black women did not participate en masse in mainstream women’s organizations of the 1960s and ’70s, they have not appeared as central actors in feminist histories and sometimes have language and titles that get placed and discussed outside feminist historiography. Black feminists have had less

visibility and limited access to the press and channels of media. This does not mean that black feminists were not organizing—they were. But they did so in daily and sometimes less dramatic ways or in organizations that were not explicitly feminist. Black feminist scholars, out of necessity, have looked at women’s activism in other locations.

Some women have more readily adopted the feminist label than others, so self-identification cannot be the only measure of feminist praxis. For African American women, feminism might not be their only, or even central, identity. For example, many grassroots welfare activists got their political training in the civil rights movement; others were labor organizers; and some gravitated toward nationalism. Welfare rights activists, in some instances, saw themselves as part of a broader poor-people’s movement. The welfare rights movement, in addition, allied and worked with other women’s groups and feminist organizations: They planned a national march in Washington on Mothers’ Day and invited women like Coretta Scott King to speak; they participated in the founding of the National Women’s Political Caucus and the National Black Feminist Organization; they appealed to policy analysts and lawmakers to recognize their work as mothers. And Johnnie Tillmon published her landmark essay titled “Welfare Is a Women’s Issue” in the premier issue of Ms. magazine in 1972.

Despite these many elements of feminist thought, the welfare rights movement had a strained relationship with other feminist organizations. Racial stereotypes shaped the discourse around welfare and created an enormous gulf with other women’s organizations. Poor black women were cast as products and perpetuators of a dysfunctional black urban culture; both black women and men, it was believed, failed to conform to traditional gender norms. Many white middle-class feminists were immersed in their own struggles to break the chains that tied them to the home and may have found it hard to understand why some women wanted to return there. At the crux of it, middle-class white women and poor black women on welfare led such very different lives that they rarely found common ground (Tronto 2002). This tension led to divergent notions of feminism and sometimes insurmountable political divisions; so while some welfare rights activists identified as feminists, others were hesitant to do so. Taking cues from the media, the latter associated feminism with predominantly middle-class women’s liberation activists and thus felt alienated from the concept. Nevertheless, welfare rights activists advocated for a political program that ultimately sought to give greater autonomy and control to poor women on welfare (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2005; Orleck 2005; West 1981).

How do we name the politics of women if their activism seems directed at feminist goals, but they do not self-identify as feminists? Alice Walker (1983) coined the term “womanist” to distinguish the work of black feminists, who foregrounded race and class, from that of other feminists (81). We might also consider Temma Kaplan’s (1982) notion of “female consciousness”: To locate women who make political claims and organize on the basis of their gender
roles, but fall outside the circumscribed category of feminist. Should we limit the term feminist to those people who attached the label to themselves? I do not think so. Historically, certain women (especially women of color and poor women) were reluctant to identify as feminist because of the way feminism was popularly represented or the way its history was written. Historians offer labels to make sense of the past, though these labels are sometimes ones that our subjects would not or could not have embraced for themselves. I would suggest, as others do, that a black feminist practice existed before we had a label to define it.

**Continuity, Change, and Feminist Activism**

The waves metaphor has also shaped our understanding of the chronology of feminist activism (Evans 2003). Periodization can be, and often is, political. Historians date the beginning of the second wave of the women's movement to a number of key events, which include the 1961 President's Commission on the Status of Women, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, Mary King and Casey Hayden's 1964 memo that articulated the experiences of sexism in the New Left and the civil rights movement, and the formation of NOW in 1966. King and Hayden's memo is credited with raising the consciousness of many women who later became involved with the radical wing of the women's movement (Evans 1979). In one way or another, all these starting points minimize the political activism that preceded them; the implicit assumption is that prior to the watershed event, women were complacent or conformist. The waves metaphor does not take into account the extent of organizing in what Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor (1987) have called the “doldrums.”

When we move outside the wave model, however, we can take much more seriously the feminist activity that occurred from the 1930s through the '50s—including Sojourners for Truth and Justice, an organization of African American women in the early 1950s that fought for racial justice and equality for African American women and men, and women's involvement in the United Packinghouse Workers of America (Fehn 1998; McDuffie 2003). Scholars have looked at how women's activism during this earlier period laid the foundation for the mass protests in the 1960s and '70s. This emphasis on the continuity of activism—how activists built upon what came before—is extremely important for acknowledging that 1960s activism was not generated by the air people breathed or the tidal pull of the moon, but was a product of women's agency; rather than highlighting sharp breaks, historians have focused attention on the links that connect different moments of political protest. And this requires that we explore not just the waves, but also the undercurrents of movement in what seem to be still waters.

Because black women scholars have been forced to look outside traditional feminist formations to examine the work of black feminists, they have been participants in exploring a “long women's movement.” The welfare rights movement, for example, first emerged in the late 1950s when women in Los
Angeles began discussing problems with welfare and voter registration, and also in Ohio when a group called the Mothers’ Campaign for Welfare lobbied for higher monthly benefits. Women in local communities located welfare as a pressing political issue well before the watershed events that some scholars have identified as the beginning of the second wave. Perhaps the most important publication documenting the breadth of black feminist activism is Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (1995), which includes selections from a wide range of African American women including Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, and Frances Beale. The anthology chronicles a strain of feminism in the African American community since at least the nineteenth century. Similarly, scholars such as Kimberly Springer (2005a) and Becky Thompson (2002) see a rising tide of activism in the 1980s, when most standard accounts of the second wave chronicle receding waters.

**Conclusion**

The waves metaphor is a convenient way to encapsulate feminist activism; it helps identify the big historical shifts. The political, social, and economic climate of the 1960s inspired people around the globe to take to the streets to demand their rights. Millions of women came to recognize how sexism impacted their lives. They joined neighborhood groups and national organizations; they rethought their career choices and made profound lifestyle changes; they marched, protested, and demanded sexual equality at home and in the workplace. The image of the wave helps us to appreciate that mass movement, but the trade-off for this simplicity is that we lose the complexity of everyday women’s lives and feminist organizing.

The waves metaphor privileges sectors of the movement that put gender at the center of their analysis. In this way, the metaphor re-inscribes race/class/seXIuality biases and omissions within women’s history; it obscures some of the local and low-key organizing in communities and masks the deep-running, seemingly still waters of everyday activism. What we miss when we highlight the wave is the nitty-gritty, day-to-day organizing; Women who stayed within male-dominated institutions; women who could not separate out their identity as women from their involvement in race- or class-based struggles; women who did not come together in explicitly feminist organizations. Hundreds of women with a feminist sensibility organized during the 1940s and ’50s to nurture the generation that would lead the second wave of the women’s movement. Thousands of women did not attend the women’s rights marches that occurred throughout the country in 1970, but nevertheless adopted a feminist platform and worked for the empowerment of women. The waves metaphor, by highlighting the “mass” of the movement, does not adequately credit or account for women who did not fit so well into a “mass” defined by gender primacy.
Mulling over the usefulness of the waves metaphor, I kept coming back to Vincent Harding’s (1981) metaphor of a river in his discussion of African American resistance. A river is always flowing, always moving; it expands and it narrows; sometimes it rushes faster, at other times it slows to a trickle, but there is always movement; it is fed by downpours, as well as by smaller streams; sometimes it splits into branches, at other times it comes together as one powerful force. Perhaps Harding offers us a more appropriate way to visualize feminist activism. The river metaphor recognizes alternate understandings of feminism and the diversity of local, grassroots struggles; it would take into account the women who organized in earlier periods without losing sight of the power of mass movements; it brings richness and complexity to understanding how women of different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds worked separately though toward a common goal for the empowerment of women.

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Stephanie Gilmore: Feminist Waves, Feminist Groundswells

In the history of U.S. feminism, the waves metaphor has tremendous staying power. I am not wholly uncomfortable with the waves metaphor, which I always see as oceanic waves (Garrison 2005). I am drawn to the way that waves crest and curl. And I rather like the idea of feminism, like water, covering most of our world and being fundamentally necessary to our lives. I also like the visual image of water stirring, crashing onto the shore, bringing both life and destruction and changing the landscape. As scholars of women’s activism brave these waters, we explore the forces that have brought about these waves—that is, we study not just “the movement” on a grand scale, but also the people who make social-movement activism possible. We acknowledge that there are not starkly distinct breaks in the history of feminism—indeed, the history of U.S. feminism is more complicated, and ongoing, much like waves of the ocean.

The waves metaphor is quite powerful as a way to think about feminist activism. It is especially useful when we think about social-movement activism not as a relic from the past, but as something with a past—and a present and a future. The waves metaphor keeps the movement—that is, momentum, energy, and action—in the women’s movement. We do not use similarly active metaphors to talk about other social movements, such as the black freedom or labor movements. Still, the waves metaphor is lacking. Our feminist waves offer a way to talk about feminism as a large-scale movement, but they often leave us with generational divides that compel us to highlight and even exacerbate differences, rather than to explore the continuities among generations of feminists (Gilmore
The periodization of the waves—first, second, third, and even a fourth—is rooted in the activism of certain groups of women, mostly white and mostly middle class. In building a broad and comprehensive analysis of the women’s movement (and of women’s movements), we have introduced a variety of adjectives to shape what we mean by feminism, both currently and historically: Black feminism, labor feminism, social justice feminism, lesbian feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, and so forth. By tracing the origins of these different kinds of feminism we can better navigate the waters of feminism. I do not argue here to dispense with the waves metaphor; rather, I believe we need to trouble these waters a bit more.

What is most unsettling—but perhaps not surprising—to me is how the waves metaphor privileges the coasts, allowing what has happened and happens on the coasts, most notably the East Coast, to stand for feminist activism everywhere. This focus reifies the idea that history moves from east to west, buttressing what historian Vicki Ruiz (2001) criticized as the “hegemony of a U.S. women’s history rooted in the lives of eastern elites” (22). The waves metaphor, while comfortable, continues to buttress the idea that, like fashion and culinary trends, feminism and its history start on the East Coast and move inward. Like these trends, by the time the powerful feminist waves get to the center of the country—the Midwest and the mid-South, as well as to the Southwest, Southeast, and Pacific Northwest—they are, well, somewhat watered down. Some scholars have offered local variance to the national story of feminist activism, but few have challenged how the “national” narrative is itself geographically rooted and how it obscures much of the movement.

What compels me to study feminism historically is a desire to know how feminists created change in their day-to-day lives, at the grassroots level. A grassroots perspective on second-wave feminism offers insight into the rise of feminist activism in the 1960s and ’70s not just as a single national movement, but as multiple local manifestations of feminist identity, organization, and activism. These local-level activities are not mere variations on a national theme, but are at the very heart of the complexities of feminism and the women’s movement. Feminists across the country may have been a part of a national movement that we can conceptualize as a “wave,” but they also created and sustained groundswells of feminist activism within their own communities as they addressed issues germane to their own lives and pursued feminist change locally.

We know by now that the women’s movement did not simply recede after securing (white) women’s suffrage in 1920, and it did not simply swell again in the 1960s as the waves metaphor would lead us to believe. After all, this simplistic framework does not allow us to contemplate, much less to contextualize the history of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women (1961), feminist gains in labor unions, women’s activism in political parties (including the Communist Party), and women’s civil rights activisms (Cobble 2005; Harrison 1988;
Hartmann 1998; Laughlin 2000; Robnett 1997; Weigand 2001). In my scholarly work on second-wave feminism, I join others who have raised significant challenges about who is included and omitted in the waves metaphor; like those who study the civil rights movement, I seek to explore the interplay between local activism and a national movement and question whether it is possible to understand the women's movement exclusively in a national context (Lawson 1991; Taylor 1995; Theoharis and Woodard 2003). The women's movement, I would argue, did not wash in from the coasts; instead, it sprang up in cities and communities across the country, from a variety of impulses and with a plethora of outcomes. In order to make sense of the second wave as we think about feminism and the women's movement, we must analyze the various ideological roots and practices of feminism in feminists' day-to-day lives.

Rather than simply push for more metaphors for feminist activism, I want to call attention to the importance of seeing grassroots activism as such, especially as it allows insight into the ways that feminists worked together on a day-to-day level. Doing so takes seriously the politics of location—that is, understanding how local political and cultural conditions affect available strategies and outcomes for social-movement activists (Ezekiel 2002; Freeman 2000; Gilmore 2005b). In this venture, we have much to learn from scholars who write about feminist activism outside of the United States, where it never makes sense to talk about feminism in the singular and where it is impossible to contemplate the history of feminist activism through a wave metaphor; instead, these scholars who embrace “the challenge of local feminisms” explore the terrain from which feminism emerges (Basu 1995; Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999; Kaplan 1996; Mohanty 2003; Naples and Desai 2002). When we view U.S. feminist activism similarly, we see differences and continuities, coalitions and conflicts, local agendas and national goals. In this way, we no longer privilege waves as defined by the action of the “stars” of the movement. Historian Temma Kaplan (1996) noted that “the media and public opinion are preoccupied with the spectacular, with the activities of celebrities” (6). As scholars, we, too, are similarly obsessed: The origins of second-wave feminism are marked by the actions of a few—Betty Friedan, who published The Feminine Mystique in 1963, and the convening of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1961. First-wave feminism is similarly demarcated, privileging the fewer than a hundred people who attended the meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, as the origin of this wave and the curling of it with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. But feminist activism happens—and has happened—more often among “ordinary women attempting to accomplish necessary tasks, to provide services rather than power bases” (6). Through this lens we can start to explore how feminists grew to identify as such, not because a national movement was afoot, but because of sexism in their own lives and in the lives of their friends. We see how women worked through differences of race, sexuality, class, religion, and neighborhood because, in the words of
one feminist from the Memphis chapter of NOW, “we had shit to do” (Dolbi 1998). And, well, they did it!

A national movement may have been underway, but what compelled feminists to act were local events, situations brought to light in their communities. What made their issues a part of any national agenda was that enough women in enough communities were talking about them at the same time. So when feminists in various cities formed NOW chapters—the subject of my own research—they did not do so simply because Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and, three years later, helped found the organization; instead, NOW became a recognizable vehicle through which they could come together and address local issues ranging from equal employment and on-the-job discrimination to rape and sexual violence—and only because these were what women in their communities needed to address. For example, feminists in the Memphis NOW were well aware that domestic violence—what they called “wife abuse”—was something that many women endured, and, to be sure, it was an issue that a wide range of feminists were speaking about. The national NOW acknowledged wife abuse as a violent act against women, but the impetus to form a local and active task force in the Memphis chapter came from a local woman who told her story of being repeatedly beaten and staying with her husband out of fear and nowhere else to go. Within a year, by 1976, the chapter financed and volunteered at a wife-abuse hotline, started a consciousness-raising group for a surprisingly high number of women in the chapter who had suffered domestic violence, and with the local women’s resource center, opened the city’s first shelter for battered women (Gilmore 2005b). This story may well have happened in nearly any city, to be sure, and we can see it as part of an anti-domestic-violence movement that sprang up in the mid-1970s (Pleck 1987). But what is interesting to me, and to the history of feminist activism, is how women stirred one another to action because of an injustice within their own communities. They identified as feminists not simply because a national movement was underway, but because sexism was pervasive in their own lives and the lives of their friends.

Analyses of grassroots feminist activism also reveal how feminists worked through differences, even if not easily. For example, Anne Valk’s (2008a, 2008b) work on women’s liberation activism in Washington, D.C., explores how, in 1969, the D.C. Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), which was predominantly white, and the Citywide Welfare Alliance, which was predominantly African American, joined in common cause around the issue of abortion as a “health right.” Although city statutes permitted licensed medical practitioners to perform therapeutic abortions, physicians at D.C. General, the only public facility that provided these abortions at no cost to low-income patients, mandated that applicants first obtain documentation from three hospital-affiliated doctors verifying that pregnancy or childbirth would jeopardize the woman’s life or health (see Nelson 2003). In response to this practice, feminists and
welfare rights activists—groups that were not mutually exclusive—organized mass demonstrations, set up counseling and public-education programs, pursued lawsuits, and joined regulatory boards—a wide range of collaborative activities to raise awareness about women's lives and public health in the city. Together, the D.C. WLM and Citywide Welfare Alliance protested not only increasingly difficult access to abortion, but also the gross malpractice of doctors sterilizing poor women who were disproportionately black and Hispanic—and they did so years prior to <i>Roe v. Wade</i> (1973). They were not simply responding to a burgeoning feminist discourse around reproductive rights—they were creating it.

Like the new language of reproductive rights, women's sexuality was linked to feminist identity; and also like reproductive rights, open and frank talk about female sexuality was more available in some cities than others. In 1971, for example, health educator Joani Blank worked as a pregnancy counselor in the San Francisco County Health Department. She counseled women who were seeking prenatal care and abortions, but also talked with women who had never had an orgasm or looked at their own clitorises. At the time, few resources existed to educate women about their own bodies; indeed, <i>Our Bodies, Ourselves</i> was only two years old and still a mimeographed packet rather than the more familiar glossy publication it became (Davis 2008; Kline 2008). Blank joined up with a small group of sex-education providers in the Bay Area to teach other women about orgasm, masturbation, self-exams, and sex with men and with women; they, in turn, linked up with other sex-education programs and created the National Sex Forum. Four years later, in 1975, Blank founded Down There Press, a small publishing house devoted to printing sex-positive materials for women and men; and, in 1977, she founded Good Vibrations, a sex-toy store that openly promoted safe and pleasurable sexual experience and “introduced thousands of women to sex-toy joy” (Marech 2003). What started as a “closet-size enterprise” became the hub of a feminist sexual revolution—years before feminists engaged in theoretical “sex wars.” It is highly unlikely that Blank’s press and store would have been as successful outside of San Francisco—and hers was only the second sex-toy store in the United States, following Eve’s Garden in New York City. Her story is an important reminder to look in a variety of places for feminist activism, understanding it from the ground up rather than from the top down.

Indeed, from this perspective, we are able to explore and analyze how and why feminists identified as such, what motivated them to act as feminists, and how they worked across differences to create meaningful feminist change in their own lives and in their communities. More to the point, we see that women’s liberation did not simply wash in from the East Coast; these feminist groundswells in Memphis, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco suggest how and why we should examine and analyze feminist activism from the ground up. Although “the movement” was happening “out there,” what made it meaningful was that it was happening in women’s communities, in their day-to-day lives.
Feminists may have been supported and encouraged by national leaders or by a national movement, but they pursued what one historian calls “distinctly local agendas” and engaged in campaigns to create feminist change within their own communities (Taylor 1995, 1). Just as it is not possible to understand women’s oppressions in simple terms, it is also impossible to understand feminism in the United States in a universal framework. Feminist waves matter, but they cannot explain the whole of women’s feminist activisms—their impulses, goals, strategies, and outcomes. Whether fighting back against wife abuse, demanding the legal right to abortion and reproductive control, or teaching women how to take control of their own sexual pleasure, feminists created and sustained the movement not by surfing a wave, but by creating groundswells beneath their feet.

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Leandra Zarnow: Bringing the Third Wave Into History

“For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it’s simply in the water” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 17). When Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards made this ardent declaration in their 2000 bestseller Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, they certainly did not foresee that their statement would be among the most cited characterizations of the third wave in scholarly works (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Henry 2004; Reger 2005). Rather, these white middle-class New York journalists and self-appointed spokeswomen of third-wave feminism had more immediate concerns. They were tired of being passed over at Ms. board meetings, where they worked at the time; they were enraged by the condescending way in which veteran activist Phyllis Chesler (1997) addressed their peers in Letters to a Young Feminist; they were sick of feminists their age being described as apolitical, self-absorbed, and disconnected, which they felt discounted the movement-building potential of the Third Wave Foundation and national pockets of issue-based political activism; and finally, they took issue with Time magazine’s infamous 1998 cover story “Is Feminism Dead?,” believing that feminism was not only alive and well in the 1990s, but was actually more fun, stylish, and girlie than in the past (Bellafante 1998). In fact, they argued, feminism was in vogue and ever-present, but more political and cultural work still needed to be done. And who was to lead the future fight for women’s rights? Culturally savvy, sexually exploratory, and (ideally) inclusive, poststructuralist, multi-perspectival third wavers like themselves. It was high time, Baumgardner and Richards asserted,
for a new feminist primer that popularized feminism, encouraging young women to “be whoever you are—but with a political consciousness” (57).

Since Baumgardner and Richards wrote Manifesta a decade ago, women’s historians have taken their articulation of the third wave of feminism at face value. Certainly, high-profile feminists who are well connected to the publishing world and feminist institutions such as Ms. magazine have been the most recognized participants of the 1990s feminist resurgence in both media coverage and academic studies. The few historical accounts that treat the third wave as an appendix to the second wave, such as Ruth Rosen’s The World Split Open (2000) and Sara Evans’s Tidal Wave (2003), consider Rebecca Walker, Baumgardner, and Richards to be its stars. In so doing, historians have created a narrative of the third wave that fits neatly within the existing wave framework. Yet the third wave is not simply a bicoastal phenomenon, nor is it solely an exclusive camp of white, heterosexual, and economically privileged women.

As a young scholar who came to feminist activism and academic feminism after the historical moment signified as the third wave, I am struck by how powerful the waves metaphor is embedded in the way we do U.S. feminist history. Of course, the application of the waves metaphor has implicated disciplinary fields beyond that of history. Take, for example, the dizzying number of dissertations, articles, essay collections, and conferences considering third-wave practice and thought that have been completed in communications, sociology, American studies, English, and Women’s Studies (Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce 2007; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Dickie et al. 2005; Garrison 2000a, 2000b, 2005; Gillis, Howie, and Munford 2004; Henry 2004; Heywood and Drake 1997; Kinser 2004; Looser and Kaplan 1997; Mann and Huffman 2005; Ort 1997; Reger 2005; Shugart 2001; Siegel 2001; Springer 2002). Applying the third-wave trope without hesitation, few scholars critically deconstruct why self-appointed third-wave leaders have self-identified using generational or age signifiers, rather than political and ideological distinctions (notable exceptions are Henry and Garrison). These studies also tend to bolster third-wave exceptionalism, while minimally exploring the historical roots of this movement.

Thus far, scholarship considering the third wave has been informed primarily by the writings of movement participants. From early works such as Barbara Findlen’s Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation and Rebecca Walker’s to be real to the recent The Fire This Time by Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin and Melody Berger’s We Don’t Need Another Wave, the numerous anthologies and manifestas published yearly are descriptive sources that enable scholars to get inside a movement as it unfolds (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Berger 2006; Damsky 2000; Edut 1998; Findlen 1995; Hernandez and Rehman 2004; Johnson 2002; Labaton and Martin 2004; Morgan 1999; Muscio 1997; Nam 2001; Roberts 1997; Shah 1997; Walker 1995). However, these works are shaped and confined by the authors’ personal engagement in the third wave and are often dismissive of earlier feminist ideas and activity. Equally significant, voices
represented in these works reflect the concerns of those women and men with the most access to publishing, so one has to wonder just how many powerful examples of everyday activism never make it to the page.

The first scholarly studies of the third wave sought to define and document the movement, as well as to gain authority for this new area of scholarship within the academy. A few collections point scholars in the right direction. For example, activist-scholars Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake’s *Third Wave Agenda* (1997) provides a self-reflective look at the movement’s messy hybrid of ideological and organizing roots. The authors recognize the legacy of earlier feminisms, correctly acknowledge the lessons learned from Third World feminism, and note the persistence of racism and classism in the movement as white and economically privileged third wavers pay lip service to inclusiveness. Similarly, Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier look critically at the cultural politics at the core of third-wave activism in their introduction to *Catching a Wave* (2003). They caution scholars to steer clear of the “seduction of the ‘feminist free-for-all’” inherent in third-wave writing, complicating the impulse of some factions within this movement to popularize feminism. While they understand some third wavers’ desire to challenge stereotypes of who a feminist is and what feminism should be, they contend that “this invitation to feminism must be politically rigorous” (17–18).

Hokulani Aikau, Karla Erickson, and Jennifer Pierce also seek to problematize the generational narrative that has defined the space between the second and third waves in *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations* (2007), which is largely a sociological collection exploring “the complexity of feminist generations in the academy”—specifically, the University of Minnesota between 1964 and 2000 (viii). Aikau, Erickson, and Pierce are correct to highlight continuities in political organizing strategies, conceptual ideas, and experiences across generations, as well as to locate differences within generations. As they aptly argue, “[w]aves of feminist thought have been uneven in their diffusion and reception in the academy across the United States within disciplines and institutional locations” (4; emphasis in original), yet they still do not get beyond the waves metaphor despite their critique of this conceptual framework. Instead, Aikau and colleagues call for a new flow or movement of waves. These improved waves would not be singular, but instead be “wave trains [that] flow within a given generational cohort as well as across time and space” (6). While the impulse for a multifarious wave-flow encourages thinking more inclusively, hanging on to the wave discourse inhibits scholars from ultimately thinking in new directions, beyond waves. Marking the beginning point of a feminist generation by when one entered graduate school rather than when one is born thus still privileges a limited group of individuals who fit within this criteria.

Jo Reger’s sociological collection *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women’s Movement* (2005) remains the most representative example of the dynamic range of scholarly study of the third wave. In her introduction,
Reger tackles the waves metaphor head-on. “Packaging history into neat and differentiated decades and goals provides a way to teach and understand feminist activism,” she correctly notes, “but this metaphor leaves out activists and forms of activism that do not fit neatly into this model” (xxi–xxii). Her collection is a reflection of “doing third wave” studies in a manner that reaches beyond the constructs of feminist waves. Certainly, Sally Hines’s “I am Feminist but . . . : Transgender Men and Women and Feminism” (2005), Florence Maatita’s “Qué Viva La Mujer: Negotiating Chicana Feminist Identities” (2005), and Kimberly Springer’s “Strongblackwomen and Black Feminism: A Next Generation?” (2005b) reflect the necessary application of intersectionality in studies of recent feminist organizing. Likewise, Stephanie Gilmore’s (2005a) examination of NOW members’ positions on sex and sexuality in the 1970s and Susanne Beechey’s (2005) study of young staff members’ perception of internal conflicts within contemporary women’s policy organizations illuminate the continuity of ideas and activism between the waves. Both articles substantiate Reger’s claim that “while the sense of ‘play’ may be new, many of the ‘playgrounds’ are not” (2005, xxii).

In Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism (2004), Women’s Studies scholar Astrid Henry offers a first rumination about the origins and characteristics of the third wave that provides scholars with a useful blueprint for future research. She correctly attempts to dispel the idea that the division between older and younger feminists is merely a generational conflict, thereby displacing this argument that has framed the scholarly discussion for far too long. Henry dabbles with historical analysis, comparing third-wave ideas about sexuality and race to early 1970s feminist thought. She uses this methodological technique to demonstrate how young activists borrow from the past without acknowledging their roots in an attempt to, as she argues, “be free to carve out a new feminism” (108). While Henry does attempt to situate the third wave more historically than Heywood and Drake (1997), her work nonetheless lacks strong historical grounding.

Henry and others have laid important groundwork for historians by theorizing and contextualizing the recent feminist resurgence, yet these studies are void of vigorous attention to historical context. It is time for historians to redirect the scholarly study of the third wave in three significant areas. First, we should question and qualify who is seen as a third waver and who is not, considering especially the positionality of activists who work for gender justice though may not self-represent as feminists. Second, we need to complicate its origin story by taking into account the multiplicity of roots of recent activism and the ideological frameworks and organizing traditions upon which this movement builds. And third, we must participate actively in conceptualizing how to preserve, research, and write third-wave history. Certainly, historians can be instrumental in the establishment of archives that move beyond the traps of documenting the most visible and well-positioned organizations, and instead
reflect the everyday practices of this nonhierarchical movement. The discussion that follows considers the difficulties of beginning our work in these three areas.

**Remapping Feminist History**

While senior historians acknowledge the presence of the third wave, the ebb and flow of the second wave remains the central focus of twentieth-century feminist histories. Synthesis histories of the modern women’s movement, such as Rosen’s *The World Split Open* and Evans’s *Tidal Wave*, describe younger activists mainly as feminist daughters who carried on the accomplishments of their own political generation.7 Evans, for example, couches discussion of ideological and organizing differences among recent and past feminisms in generational terms. “Younger women are often ignorant about and cavalierly dismissive of the struggles of previous generations,” she argues, yet “older generations have trouble listening to and supporting younger women’s effort to claim the movement as their own” (2003, 230). Furthermore, describing the third-wave moment as a group of women who “grew up believing they could do anything” bolsters her conclusion that the long, resilient “tidal wave” of second-wave feminism continues (232).8 This reading, however, overlooks and undervalues key flashpoints of divergence and fragmentation in late twentieth-century feminist history signaled by the advent of third-wave discourse. This treatment also reflects the author’s own subjectivity as a participant in women’s liberation, and it is this emotional investment in her subject that frames her reading of both feminist activism of the 1960s through the ’80s and the period that followed.

It is not surprising that women’s historians such as Rosen and Evans have an emotional stake in the feminist history they write; after all, the field of women’s history is inextricably linked to the social movement from which it evolved. However, historians must consider the problems of their continued investment in the second-wave trope and generational narrative of feminist history when beginning to document more recent feminisms. Sociologist Nancy Naples (2003) shares my concern: “This personalization of waves complicates the view of feminist activism by reducing the difference between waves to personal intergenerational struggles over definitions of feminism” (221).

The recent swell of feminisms is not merely an extension of a long, modern women’s movement, but instead is a distinct historical subject that fundamentally complicates our multilayered narrative of twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminism. As my co-contributors to this article have shown, historians are actively remapping feminist history. We ask: Should we even call the first, second, and third waves distinct waves or waves at all? My own dissertation, a study of the political and legal work of Bella Abzug, illuminates why Left women attorneys’ legal activism during the early cold war should be considered a significant thread in feminist history. The reevaluation of women’s activism immediately following World War II is an important corrective; just as integral, however, is an examination of women’s activism during the 1980s to the early
2000s—a moment when critics suggest that feminism was dead, and activists suggest that feminism was everywhere. Reger ends her introduction to *Different Wavelengths* (2005) by proclaiming: “It is up to third wavers to understand the many sources of contemporary feminism and how each source adds an important dimension to the movement’s goals and strategies” (xxiii). I would add that it is up to historians to explore the full gamut of continuities and divergences in recent feminist thought and practice without getting caught up in the protective breakwater of artificial waves.

**Problematizing the Third-Wave Trope**

Third-wave scholarship has been the domain of young activist-scholars. As the first to document the recent feminist resurgence, we must acknowledge that we too have an emotional investment in the history we write. This ardent interest, if recognized and considered, can lead us to important questions: How can activist-historians complicate the scholarly and public discourse of third-wave feminism? Is it useful to apply the language and conceptual frameworks developed by feminists who self-represent as third wave to historical study of this movement? Or should barriers be drawn?

Age signifiers alone expose the slippery slope of the third-wave trope. Born in 1979, I am a bit younger than the average third waver, who Rosen (2000) as well as Heywood and Drake (1997) define as being born between 1963 and 1974. Thus quite a few scholars actively documenting and participating in the recent feminist resurgence are technically not of this feminist moment. Take in point Amber Kinser, who declared “I am the mid-wave” in her 2004 article “Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism.” For Kinser, the third-wave identifier did not fit, since her feminism was first informed by women’s liberation texts that were more readily available in the Midwest during her youth than more contemporary though less accessible third-wave anthologies. Placing herself in between waves, she is compelled to “negotiate some room of [her] own between second-wave and third-wave thought” (125–26). Kinser’s positionality as a “mid-waver” is shared by others, such as Adela Licona who wrote: “I see the work many of us do, and have been doing, as feminists, queers, activists, and academics, as 2.5 or otherwise” (Jacob and Licona 2005, 201).

My own positionality can best be described as 2.5 as well. My first intellectual feminist act I recall was writing a high-school term paper that explored women’s opposition to Clarence Thomas’s Supreme Court appointment. Yet my San Diego suburbia surroundings were far from the urban nuclei of this burgeoning movement. My college years at Smith (1997–2001) brought me closer to the New York hotspot of third-wave activity, but by the time I discovered *Bust* magazine, I wondered why it did not look and feel more like Ms. The lines between second- and third-wave feminism blurred further when I helped process the Gloria Steinem papers by day and debated the issues raised in *Manifesta* by night. Could girlie feminism really be liberating? Were
cultural politics truly the next feminist frontier? These were the hot topics that resonated among my classmates, many of whom were around, but not of the third wave.

My particular path to feminism illuminates why age, generation, and signifiers (such as liberal or radical feminism) are not good enough to fully explain the feminisms currently described as first, second, or third wave. As an historian striving to write history that reflects the diversity of women’s experience, I apply the term third wave with hesitation and much qualification. As with any group identifier, the third-wave trope invokes a notion of belonging. Consequently, historians must consider who sets the terms of who is in and who is out of the third-wave club. Returning to Baumgardner and Richards’s (2000) comment that third-wave feminism is like fluoride, I wonder: For whom is feminism like fluoride? What privilege is embedded in this statement? Are there voices that will not be heard in the historical record if we look mainly to those most vocal and well-positioned spokeswomen of third-wave feminism? Will we, as historians, do these seemingly silent activists a disservice by claiming the third-wave trope if they do not?

Women of color and queer scholars attentive to difference and hegemonic feminism have provided historians with a vital toolkit to construct the history of the recent feminist resurgence. For one, the deliberately hybrid nature of this movement cannot be captured without considering intersectionality and historical actors’ own subjectivities. White academics seeking to uphold the third-wave goal of inclusiveness, however, should consider their position of privilege when applying intersectionality to their work. Mariana Ortega’s (2006) cautionary words in “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color” are apropos: “The well-meaning white feminist who perceives with a loving eye to some extent uses the work of women of color . . . her discussion has the double function of (1) legitimating the words of the woman of color used . . . and (2) legitimating her own status as a third wave feminist (thus showing that in the end her use of the work of women of color is instrumental)” (62). Secondly, historians, such as Premilla Nadasen (2005) in her work on the welfare rights movement of the late 1960s and early ’70s, have shown that women of color and poor women doing significant feminist work often do not self-identify as feminists. American studies scholar Kimberly Springer (2005) finds that this hesitation to label oneself a feminist persists. She writes that “[y]oung, contemporary black women continue creating feminist analyses of black life, but they are not necessarily claiming the label of third wave” (5; emphasis in original). Thus the need remains to broaden our net to include the issue-based coalition politics intrinsic to recent feminisms. Surely, feminist-oriented activists’ contributions to immigration rights and anti-sweatshop movements connect to the broad goals of gender justice. And certainly, feminist political activism can occur outside the likely locations of electoral politics, the courts, and feminist institutions.
Complicating the Origins Narrative

So far, the birth narrative of the third-wave moment does not diverge greatly from any other wave-origin story. Henry (2004), for example, suggests that the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas sexual-harassment controversy served as the central spark, arguing that “the third wave, like the first and the second, owes its development not just to gender consciousness but to race consciousness as well” (164–65). Henry posits that the inception of the third-wave impulse fits neatly within a familiar pattern in U.S. history in which civil rights discourse fostered feminist politics. In this trajectory, the abolitionist movement nurtured antebellum women's rights, the black freedom movement sparked women's liberation, and the Thomas nomination hearings ignited third-wave activism. Henry's origin story correctly attempts to de-center the narrative maintained by popular media and early accounts of the third wave that emphasized primarily the activities of white women that were predominant in the Riot Grrrls scene as well as Do It Yourself (DIY) and girlie culture. However, the recent feminist resurgence had more varied roots, which are underplayed when emphasis is placed on a single cataclysmic event, such as the Thomas hearings, or on prominent individuals, such as Rebecca Walker.

Like the search for a single moment of inception, scholars have also looked for the first declaration of the third wave within public discourse. Four sources have been continuously referenced: Rebecca Walker's 1992 proclamation “I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the third wave” in Ms. (39–41); Naomi Wolf's (1991) proposal in The Beauty Myth that a third wave was needed to combat a powerful cultural backlash against feminism; Lynn Chancer's (1991) Village Voice article “Third Wave Feminism” calling for a revitalized radical feminism; and the earliest source, a late 1980s unpublished collection The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism, which articulated women of color's vision of an alternative third-wave feminism to combat the white-centric focus of the women's movement (Henry 2004, 23). Certainly, these first declarations of the third wave signal important shifts in feminist praxis; however, we must look more actively before and around these points, considering how each vocal feminist came to her voice and why other women and men listened.

Documenting the roots of recent feminisms without employing the third-wave trope is hard to imagine, since the waves metaphor is so entrenched in the construction of feminist history. What would the third wave look like without the wave? Women's Studies scholar Ednie Garrison (2005) offers one viable alternative: She suggests that scholars should look for paradigm shifts. The third-wave shift, then, “signifies multiplicity and complexity as requisites for and by-products of coalition and networking, and the subsequent commitment to these sometimes pleasurable and sometimes painful combinings, reconfigurings, and confrontations” (252). Garrison is hesitant to throw waves out entirely, finding the modulation of radio waves to be a more accurate conceptualization of feminist development than the ebb and flow of oceanographic
waves. Nevertheless, she provides a powerful critique of historians’ tendency to favor the measurement of “movements” over “moments”. In other words, their hyper-fascination with tracing the continuous progression of a women’s movement—albeit one subject to temporary abeyance—is favored over exploring the subtleties of feminist paradigm shifts. It is this ideological repositioning, as well as innovations in organizing tactics, that historians should seek to locate when beginning to document the feminisms of the 1980s to the 2000s.

**Prudent Preservation**

Historians tend to judge one another’s work by the number of archives visited, the amount of primary texts read, and the amount of oral histories conducted. This legitimizing process has led historians—myself included—to look first for the most obvious sources in the most typical places when developing an historical narrative of the third-wave moment. My own comparative study of Ms., *Bust*, and *Bitch* magazines reflects this tendency.

Examining their organizational history and content, I have found more similarities than differences among these popular feminist magazines; indeed, Ms. was linked both explicitly and symbolically to *Bust* and *Bitch* through *Sassy*, a teen magazine that was influential on the editors of *Bitch* and *Bust* that shared offices and owners with Ms. in the late 1980s. My interest in exploring the nexus between culture and politics, as well as the representation and self-representation of feminists in popular media, brought me to this project. The vast source-base I had at my fingertips did not hurt; after all, as a graduate student working toward a research-seminar deadline, time was not on my side. Locating a full set of *Bust* and *Bitch* magazines required a combination of archival work, eBay back-issue purchases, and visiting the San Francisco library—surprisingly the only institution in California that houses both magazines from their inception. To my delight, both *Bust* and *Bitch* had established archives at Duke University, and while these collections were quite limited and unprocessed, they revealed thoroughly the internal transition of these enterprises from “zines” to popular feminist magazines.10

My study of *Bust* and *Bitch* reveals historians’ inclination to follow the trail of sources, which is more difficult to do when public archives are not established. Certainly, the *Bitch* and *Bust* papers have been among the first formal archives created that document expressions of third-wave thought and practice. Only a handful of collections are available nationally, and these archives record primarily the activities of the most publicized movements, such as the Riot Grrrls, cultural production such as zines, and organizations such as the Third Wave Foundation.11

Yet the dearth of archival sources should not dissuade us from researching this rich historical subject because the analysis of recent feminisms requires the creative use of nontraditional sources, such as media, material culture, and online texts. If our goal is to render the most accurate and measured historical
narrative of the recent feminist resurgence, then we will need to revise our methodologies to best document its cultural, technological, and international dynamics. While library spaces feel more natural to scholars used to working with written texts, we must learn to navigate and document cyberspace as well. Undeniably, important ideological debates play out along textual threads that never get printed: Chat rooms, blogs, e-mail, and Web sites. Similarly, DIY culture, and especially homemade zines, are produced locally and are characteristically alternative and diffuse by nature. Although difficult to quantify, these sources are perhaps the most revealing of contemporary feminist paradigm shifts.

How will historians approach documenting these new geographies of feminist discourse and cultural production? Perhaps here historians can look to the documentary work being conducted by scholars in other disciplines who have better captured what Garrison (2000a) calls the “oppositional technologies” central to the “cultural geography of the third wave” (141, 151). Stacey Gillis’s (2004) analysis of cyberfeminism, Doreen Piano’s (2002) study of DIY subcultural production, and Gwendolyn Pough’s (2004) examination of hip-hop culture serve as three exemplars of the creative use of nontraditional source-bases that historians could draw upon.

In the tradition of Laura X’s Women’s History Research Center, founded to document 1960s and ’70s women’s liberation, historians could play an important role in facilitating the preservation of feminist thought and activity prevalent in the 1980s to the 2000s. It would be easy to follow the most public threads, such as documenting the activities of authors represented in widely available anthologies and the personal narratives largely published by Seal Press. Yet historians should engage in more prudent preservation work by actively seeking out the records of individuals, interest groups, and organizations that are typically overlooked in past narratives of feminist history. One possibility is to conduct localized campaigns to connect activists with oral historians and special-collections depositories. Looking beyond Baumgardner and Richards’s Manhattan to Brownsville, Brooklyn, for example, one finds a key site of feminist oppositional politics. Founded in 2000 by and for women of color, the organization Sister Outsider provides Brownsville women programming on issues ranging from self-defense to juvenile-justice organizing. Certainly, Rachel Pfeffer and Shawnta Smith, the founders of Sister Outsider, merit historical attention equal to that of their Manhattan contemporaries. If organizations such as Sister Outsider are actively encouraged to preserve their records and share their histories, we might avoid the blind spots of first- and second-wave histories that, as Benita Roth (2004) has shown, whitewashed the feminist movement.

Where do we go from here? We must move out of the waves (a difficult venture when the deep blue sea continues to beckon). Following new geographies, both of ideas and organizing spaces, are perhaps more useful ways in which to conceptualize feminist history. How do these ideological strands and organizing patterns move around and shift over time? What should we make
of the repositioning of feminist paradigms? How should we measure the “signs” in public discourse, such as the declaration of a feminist third wave, that signal underlying shifts in feminist thought and surges of feminist activism? It is my hope that historians will ponder over these questions as they begin writing the third wave into history.

Can we abandon the familial metaphor along with the wave? The “divide-and-conquer tactic” of describing ideological shifts using generational terms, Garrison (2005) cautions, “shifts attention away from differences that are vital collectively to the project of feminism as a transformational politics” (251). Lisa Miya-Jervis, former publisher and co-founder of Bitch, commented similarly in a 2004 Ms. article: “It is no mystery why the discourse that has developed around the waves is divisive and oppositional. Similarities are much more difficult” (57). The parallels between Garrison’s and Miya-Jervis’s statements suggest that debates within activist and academic circles often move in tandem. Just because our work is informed by a political movement does not, however, mean that we have to follow its directives; instead, we can strive to maintain both our personal identity as feminist political actors and our professional acumen as historical thinkers.

Historians continue to widen the once narrow construction of what constitutes feminism and to explore the accomplishments of groups and individuals beyond the purview of waves. As we do so, we should be attentive to correcting our past blind spots. We can recognize at the onset that the third-wave moment cannot be defined by a single identity, practice, or ideology, nor can single individuals, events, and organizations stand for the totality of recent feminisms. The success stories of past feminisms may not be the victories of the present, and new political centers—cyberfeminism, everyday activism, cultural politics—may feel different as well. Nonetheless, the most significant project that historians can undertake is identifying and closing the artificial gulf between waves, thereby exposing the continuities and divergences between past and contemporary feminist activism. Only then will we get beyond the waves.


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Notes

1. The authors of this article wish to thank Susan M. Hartmann for her contributions to the roundtable presentations at the American Studies Association annual meeting, 3–6 November 2005, Washington, D.C., and the 120th Meeting of the American Historical Association, 5–8 January 2006, Philadelphia.


3. Amber Kinser (2004) lays out but does not name this difference between the “second” and “third” waves: That one is grounded in preexisting social movements, and the other takes media and critique of an earlier “wave” as one starting point. Jennifer Purvis (2004) provides a critique of the heteronormativity of generations.

4. We did not always get it right. For a critique of Left feminism in terms of sterilization in Puerto Rico, see Laura Briggs (1998).


6. This idea springs from my reading of Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s Feminism without Borders (2003).

7. Ruth Rosen (2000) mentions the third wave once in her book, in a paragraph talking about the “committed young feminists” of the post-feminist generation. She observes that many vocal third wavers, such as Rebecca Walker, are daughters of prominent older feminists, and that the distinction between the waves is primarily a generational division, rather than the birth of a new movement (200, 276).

8. Writing three years later, Sara Evans (2003) exhibits a stronger sense of the breadth and depth of the cultural and political activism and ideological framework of the third wave, yet her treatment is still limited to two pages (230, 232).

9. My forthcoming article “From Sisterhood to Girlie Culture: Closing the Great Divide between the Second and Third Wave Cultural Agendas”—to be published in No Permanent Waves, edited by Nancy Hewitt (2010)—explores in greater detail the multiple roots of the recent feminist resurgence. See also the paper of the same title presented at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Claremont, California, in June 2005.


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