EDITORS

Catherine Villanueva Gardner
Anna M. Klobucka (Executive Editor)
Jeannette E. Riley
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

ADVISORY BOARD

Debra Ann Castillo
Cornell University

Elora Chowdhury
University of Massachusetts Boston

Agnieszka Graff
University of Warsaw

Elizabeth Grosz
Duke University

Joy A. James
Williams College

Carla Kaplan
Northeastern University

Michael Kimmel
Stony Brook University

Gary Lemons
University of South Florida

Robyn Ochs
Independent scholar and activist

Karen Offen
Stanford University

Emma L. E. Rees
University of Chester

Nikki Sullivan
Macquarie University

Imelda Whelehan
University of Tasmania
TABLE OF CONTENTS

From the Editors

Articles

1 Moving Beyond “Slaves, Sinners, and Saviors”: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of US Sex-Trafficking Discourses, Law and Policy
Carrie N. Baker, Smith College

24 The SlutWalk Movement: A Study in Transnational Feminist Activism
Joetta L. Carr, Western Michigan University

39 Breaking the Gender Binary: Feminism and Transgressive Female Desire in Lucía Etxebarria’s Beatrix y los cuerpos celestes and La Eva futura/La letra futura
Lauren Applegate, Marquette University

54 Viewpoint
Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory
Susan Archer Mann, University of New Orleans
FROM THE EDITORS

We are delighted to welcome you to the fourth issue of the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, which offers a selection of articles that focus on phenomena of immediate interest and concern for feminist scholarship and activism: an analysis of the rescue narrative that underpins public policies to eradicate sex trafficking, an examination of the recent global protest movement of SlutWalks, an analysis of a groundbreaking literary conceptualization of female desire, and a “Viewpoint” article on third-wave feminism’s conflicting use of intersectional and poststructuralist epistemologies.

Carrie N. Baker, in “An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of US Sex Trafficking Discourses, Law and Policy,” demonstrates how current US discourse on sex trafficking takes the form of a rescue narrative that reinforces stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and nationality. This narrative frames and fuels current anti-trafficking policies with their dominant focus on the rescue of victims and the prosecution of perpetrators, which, as Baker argues, will not resolve the problem of sex trafficking. Instead, Baker suggests that public policies should address structural conditions—economic inequalities, poverty, the cultural devaluation of women and girls, and the commodification of sex—that produce vulnerable populations, and empower these populations to address the inequalities that lie at the foundation of trafficking.

In “Slut Shaming, Sexual Agency, and SlutWalks,” Joetta L. Carr offers an analysis of the global protest movement of SlutWalks. The SlutWalks movement is a very recent phenomenon and thus far there has been little scholarly work examining its development, import, and the debates it has generated. Carr’s article aims both to present a summary snapshot of the movement since its inception in 2011 and to interrogate its efficacy and potential as a strategy of resistance to patriarchal control of women’s bodies and sexualities. Carr argues that the SlutWalk phenomenon at the same time revives some memorable and successful tactics of past women’s and gay rights protests and reflects the unprecedented realities of twenty-first-century social and political environments around the globe.

Lauren Applegate’s article, “Breaking the Gender Binary: Feminism and Transgressive Female Desire in Lucía Etxebarria’s *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* and *La Eva futura/La letra futura*,” explores the deconstruction and rejection of binary gender categories in the writings of this acclaimed contemporary Spanish writer. While subjecting to probing scrutiny apparent gaps and contradictions in Etxebarria’s feminist discourse, Applegate argues that the character of Beatriz, protagonist of Etxebarria’s award-winning 1998 novel, provides a new literary model of female desire, a desire that is free to choose its object regardless of gender and refuses to abide by any fixed notions of gender identity or sexual orientation.

The “Viewpoint” essay continues with our now established practice of providing space for discussion and commentary on feminist scholarship and engagement. Susan Archer Mann’s contribution to our Viewpoint series, “Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory,” offers a critical reflection on the uneasy coexistence of these epistemological perspectives within the third wave of feminist thought and activism. While intersectionality and poststructuralism share a great deal of common theoretical ground, as Mann elaborates, at the same time they rely on distinct conceptions of power and political praxis. Mann dissects the claims of “polyphonic” thinking, unconcerned with contradiction and paradox, by many third-wave authors and concludes that the “lived messiness” of their epistemological positioning threatens political effectiveness of contemporary feminist agency, potentially leaving us with “scattered forms of resistance marching to different drums.”
Moving Beyond “Slaves, Sinners, and Saviors”: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of US Sex-Trafficking Discourses, Law and Policy

Carrie N. Baker, Smith College

Abstract: This article analyzes stories and images of sex trafficking in current mainstream US public discourses, including government publications, NGO materials, news media, and popular films. Noting the similarities and differences among these discourses, the first part demonstrates that they often frame sex trafficking using a rescue narrative that reiterates traditional beliefs and values regarding gender, sexuality, and nationality, relying heavily on patriarchal and orientalist tropes. Reflecting this rescue narrative, mainstream public policies focus on criminal justice solutions to trafficking. The second part suggests alternative frameworks that empower rather than rescue trafficked people. The article argues that the dominant criminal justice approach to trafficking—the state rescuing victims and prosecuting traffickers—will not alone end the problem of sex trafficking, but that public policies must address the structural conditions that create populations vulnerable to trafficking and empower those communities to dismantle inequalities that are the root causes of trafficking.

Keywords: sex trafficking, public discourses, rescue narrative, framing, public policy, feminism

Copyright by Carrie N. Baker

Awareness of sex trafficking has increased significantly since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000. We now regularly hear about sex trafficking from journalists like Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times, Hollywood movies like Taken with Liam Neeson, Hollywood celebrities like Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, with their Real Men Don’t Buy Girls campaign, and activists and survivors like Rachel Lloyd and Somaly Mam, who tour the country to speak out against sex trafficking. Even government-sponsored educational campaigns are attempting to raise awareness about trafficking. A plethora of activist organizations are working on this issue, including Polaris Project and International Justice Mission in Washington, DC, Shared Hope International in Washington State, and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Equality Now, and Girls Educational and Mentoring Services in New York City. These activists come from a range of political perspectives, making for strange bedfellows—some are feminist, some are evangelical, some are progressive, and some are politically conservative. For example, one of the key sponsors of the TVPA was conservative New Jersey Republican Chris Smith, but the bill was also supported by the National Organization for Women (Chapkis 2003, 925).

The diverse social movement against human trafficking at first framed sex trafficking as a problem that occurred in other countries, particularly countries in Southeast Asia and the post-Soviet Newly Independent States in Eastern Europe and Asia. The focus was primarily on sex trafficking; labor trafficking received much less attention. Gradually, the problem came to be recognized as existing within the United States, involving not only non-citizen victims but US citizens as well (Baker 2012). These origins have shaped how sex trafficking has been framed in mainstream public discourses over time. Government actors, anti-trafficking activists, the media, and Hollywood tell stories about trafficking that highlight particular causes of sex trafficking and particular solutions.
This article will examine anti-trafficking stories and images using a feminist intersectional perspective. Based on a review of a wide range of anti-trafficking materials produced by the US government, anti-trafficking advocates, and the media, this article analyzes selected representative images in order to discern common themes as well as distinctions among these discourses. The first part demonstrates how the US government, anti-trafficking advocacy organizations, and the media have, despite their differences, generally framed sex trafficking using a common, gendered rescue narrative: a heroic rescuer saves an innocent and helpless female victim from a cruel trafficker. This narrative of “slaves, sinners, and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4) relies heavily on patriarchal and orientalist tropes of passive, ignorant, or backward women and girls who are trafficked and of their powerful and/or enlightened male rescuers. It taps into deeply held cultural beliefs about femininity, masculinity, and American exceptionalism, and supports criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking. The second part offers an alternative framework for understanding and addressing sex trafficking, which focuses on empowering rather than rescuing women and girls. While a criminal justice approach is an important part of an effective response to sex trafficking, it will not change the conditions that make women and girls vulnerable to trafficking. This article will argue that the dominant criminal justice approach to trafficking—the state rescuing victims and prosecuting traffickers—will not alone end the problem of sex trafficking, but that public policies must address the structural conditions that create populations vulnerable to trafficking and empower those communities to dismantle the inequalities that are the root causes of sex trafficking.

Rescue Narratives in Anti-Trafficking Discourses

Rescue narratives have a long history, articulated in a range of contexts. In “Two European Images of Non-European Rule” (1973), Talal Asad argues that colonizers used discourses centered on rescuing colonized people from themselves to justify colonial rule in Middle Eastern and African societies. Alternatively, colonizers used narratives of interracial sexual assault and protection of white women as grounds for the brutal oppression of colonized men (Woollacott 2006). This rescue narrative reflected an attitude of paternalism—the idea of “restricting the freedoms and responsibilities of subordinates or dependents in what is considered or claimed to be their best interests” (Oxford English Dictionary). More recently, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Ann Russo (2006) have shown how rhetoric about saving oppressed Afghani women was used to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan. Dominant populations have long used rescue narratives to mobilize and justify interventions into the lives of oppressed peoples, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of power.

In the United States and Europe, the rescue narrative first appeared in the context of sex trafficking over one hundred years ago, in turn-of-the-century campaigns against “white slavery,” which was the term used by policy makers, advocates, and the media in stories about white women being forced into prostitution by immigrant men or men of color. This discourse generated a widespread anti-trafficking campaign fueled by anxieties about female sexuality and autonomy, as well as race and immigration, and resulting in laws restricting women’s mobility in the interest of protecting them (Doezema 2000). In the United States, Congress passed the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, otherwise known as the Mann Act, which prohibited the interstate transportation of women for “immoral purposes” and was used to criminalize non-normative, particularly interracial, consensual sexual behavior (Langum 1994).

As in the past, rescue narratives have been powerfully articulated in contemporary discourses on the sex trafficking of women and girls. The rescue narrative that dominates trafficking discourses begins with an evil trafficker or pimp who abducts, deceives, or lures a young, innocent, helpless, and often naive girl into
a prison-like brothel and controls her with brutal violence until a heroic rescuer comes to save the day. The trafficker is often a man of color or from a foreign country, and the rescuer is often a white, Western man. In this narrative frame, the solution to sex trafficking is capturing and criminally prosecuting the trafficker. This rescue narrative appears, in different degrees, in images and texts produced by the US government, anti-trafficking organizations, and the news media, as well as in film.

The US Government

The United States government has been explicit in framing the problem of trafficking in terms of protection and rescue. The name of the law itself—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act—reflects this framing. The US government has used the language of rescue in its anti-trafficking efforts. To implement the Act, the US Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families created the Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking in order to identify and aid trafficking victims. This campaign asks people to become rescuers by helping to identify victims. In a public relations campaign called “Look Beneath the Surface,” one poster shows a vulnerable, innocent-looking, and scantily clad woman seated in a chair, leaning away from a looming perpetrator who is standing in front of her.


The text on the poster reads, “Ask the right questions and look for clues. You are vital because you may be the only outsider with the opportunity to speak with the victim.” The poster asks the viewer to rescue the woman, presumably by calling the 800 number provided. The image draws the viewer in and generates concern for the woman, but it does this by using traditional depictions of female sexual vulnerability, male aggression, and the need for rescue. In another Rescue & Restore Campaign poster, a woman of Asian descent is portrayed with little clothing, her lips parted and her head tilted deferentially to the side:
Both of these women are attractive, sexualized, and looking vulnerable. In the brochure using the second image, accompanying text encourages the viewer to rescue the woman by stating, “you can help liberate victims of human trafficking.” The brochure, directed at law enforcement officers, health care workers, and social service organizations, then states, “Many victims do not see themselves as victims and do not realize what is being done to them is wrong” (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013). The assumption is that the victim needs another person to inform her that the abuse she is experiencing is wrong. These posters and brochures construct women as helpless and ignorant, requiring rescue or saving by others who “know best” (Kempadoo 2005, xxiv). The viewer, on the other hand, is assumed to be knowledgeable, powerful, and potentially heroic.

The theme of innocence and female vulnerability appears in other government contexts as well. In 2003, the Federal Bureau of Investigation established the Innocence Lost National Initiative to address the “growing problem of domestic sex trafficking of children in the United States” (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2013). Children are certainly innocent victims of trafficking, and the work of the FBI is commendable. Still, the framing of the problem as one of the loss of innocence, rather than child abuse, is striking.

In the above image from the FBI’s homepage for the Initiative, this loss of innocence is portrayed in the form of a girl with pigtails placed next to a sexualized adult woman. Evoking the virgin/whore dichotomy, this image taps into American cultural anxieties about female sexuality, sexual vulnerability, and the loss of virginity. This portrayal is powerfully mobilizing, but also reinforces traditional gender and sexual norms.
A final example of the government’s use of female vulnerability to portray trafficking and mobilize action appears in the 2011 *Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report* (US Department of State 2011). Produced annually by the US Secretary of State as required by the TVPA, the TIP report documents the degree to which nations have passed criminal laws against trafficking and are enforcing them (22 US Code §§ 7106-7107 (2000)). Under the Bush administration, TIP reports focused almost exclusively on sex trafficking of women and girls and evaluated the anti-trafficking efforts of countries around the world, but did not evaluate the United States. This has changed under the Obama administration and the leadership of Hillary Clinton, who expanded the TIP report’s focus to include labor trafficking and male victims of trafficking. In addition, as of 2010 the report evaluates US progress on fighting trafficking. Nevertheless, this report begins with a focus on female victims and sex trafficking abroad. The second page of the report displays the following images:


Invoking the trope of the oppressed and veiled Third World woman, this image portrays a silent and helpless female figure, head tilted, hands clasped around her legs, crouched in what appears to be a wooden box. On the next page is a photograph of and letter from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Side by side, these contrasting images are a good example of what Elizabeth Bernstein has described as the “backward traditionalism of third world women that [is] counterposed with the perceived freedom and autonomy of women in the contemporary West” (2007, 140). Clinton’s letter begins by describing a visit she made to a shelter for trafficking survivors—children who had been “enslaved in a brothel.” While the report does address labor trafficking as well, the initial image and text focus on vulnerable females and sex trafficking, and call on the United States to stop traffickers, “because fighting slavery and standing up for human rights is part of our national identity.” Clinton calls on the United States to “deliver on our promises to protect victims, punish abusers, and restore the lives of survivors so that someday they will have the opportunity to realize their God-given potential.” Clinton frames the United States as a rescuer of vulnerable people around the world and promotes criminal laws and prosecution as the means to eradicate human trafficking.

The above images are typical in government anti-trafficking publications. They portray vulnerable women in need of help and frame the state, as well as health-care and social-service professionals, as women’s rescuers.
Anti-Trafficking Advocacy Groups

Activists against trafficking also use a rescue narrative, but they focus even more on innocent, young and helpless girls, and they expand on the rescue story line by including portrayals of masculine rescuers. Organizations like Shared Hope International (SHI), an evangelical anti-sex-trafficking organization, and Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), a service provider to sexually exploited girls in New York City, have brought attention to the issue of domestic sex trafficking, particularly of minors. The TVPA defines severe forms of trafficking in persons to include “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act,” when “force, fraud, or coercion” is present or when the victim is under the age of eighteen (22 US Code § 7102 (8) & (9) (2006)). Travel across national borders is not required for conduct to qualify as sex trafficking. Anti-trafficking advocates such as SHI and GEMS are fighting to raise awareness about underage girls who are sexually exploited in prostitution, framing this exploitation as sex trafficking because it falls within the TVPA definition. Testifying before Congress in 2010, GEMS founder and executive director Rachel Lloyd criticized US policy for ignoring domestic minor sex trafficking (Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law 2010, 14–17).

To counter society’s victim-blaming attitude toward sexually active young women, SHI, GEMS, and similar organizations focus on the theme of the threatened innocence of young girls. Rescue narratives require a worthy victim, and traditional sexual and gender ideologies heavily influence what makes a victim worthy: she is virginal and never complicit in her sexual commodification. This is achieved by portraying the victims as so young they couldn’t possibly be held responsible for their sexual victimization. At an anti-trafficking conference in Portland, Oregon in 2010, the founder and executive director of Shared Hope International, Linda Smith, and one of her staff members, continually referred to teenagers as “little girls.” The phrase “commercial sexual exploitation of children” is commonly used in the movement to refer to the sexual exploitation of any minor, including girls as old as seventeen. SHI’s “Protected Innocence Initiative” reports on whether states have criminalized domestic minor sex trafficking (Shared Hope International 2011). Similar to the FBI’s Lost Innocence National Initiative, the Protected Innocence Initiative is striking in the emphasis it places on innocence.

Innocence is portrayed in movement advocacy materials by using images of very young girls. In 2008, GEMS produced a film titled Very Young Girls about adolescent girls in the commercial sex industry (Schisgall and Alvarez 2008). Most of the girls featured in the film were in their teens, but GEMS promoted the film with this poster:

The pink Mickey Mouse socks and white sneakers powerfully represent youthful innocence. In 2011, Change.org promoted a Shared Hope International petition encouraging the North Texas Superbowl XLV Host Committee to take action to prevent child sex trafficking at the 2011 Superbowl. The petition, titled “Ask Superbowl Commission to Stand Up and Protect Children” and started by Melissa Snow of SHI, featured this image of a young girl, pouting:


By focusing on such young girls, the producers of these images seek to shock and motivate people to take action.

Another way in which advocacy groups represent innocence is by portraying girls as silenced or blinded, and in need of someone to speak or see for them. An example of the visual silencing of victims is the following image from the website of a Texas-based anti-trafficking organization named Beauty Will Rise:


In this image, dark male hands cover the mouth and grab the shoulder of a green-eyed white girl. Adult women too are portrayed silenced in this way and in need of someone to speak for them. Facebook’s Human Trafficking newsfeed contains an image of a woman with her mouth covered by the words, “Don’t be afraid to say it for her!”
Alternatively, women and girls are portrayed as blinded, as in this promotional poster for the independent film *Holly* about child sex trafficking in Cambodia made by anti-trafficking activists Guy Jacobson and Guy Moshe:


In *Holly*, a white middle-aged American man named Patrick saves a twelve-year-old Vietnamese girl Holly who had been sold by her impoverished family and smuggled into Cambodia, where she is forced to work as a prostitute (Moche 2006). These images portraying women and girls as mute or blind emphasize their vulnerability and helplessness, along with their need for rescue.

The portrayal of innocence and evil is perhaps most exaggerated in the independent film *The Candy Shop*, produced by several activist organizations in Atlanta, Georgia:
Told as a Tim Burton-style allegory, this short film portrays a demonic man who lures innocent and angelic young girls into his candy shop, where he has a machine that magically transforms the girls into candy, which he then sells to men. The candy-shop owner, who is the trafficker, is tall, skinny and effeminate, wearing garish, tight-fitting clothes, white face makeup, and dark red lipstick, depicting non-normative gender and suggesting nonnormative sexuality. He attempts to lure a twelve-year-old boy to be his apprentice, but the boy realizes what is going on and intervenes to save the girls. In the climactic scene where the boy and the man are fighting, the man falls into his own machine and is transformed into a lollipop. The boy then uses the machine to transform the girls back into themselves, freeing them from the shop and returning them to their parents. The boy’s defeat of the effeminate candy-shop owner and his rescue of the girls reestablish normative masculinity. While the film’s fairy-tale portrayal of evil, innocence and rescue is an extreme case of the rescue narrative, it shares with the previous examples a portrayal of worthy victims as innocent and helpless. This representation of innocence sets a high standard that could obscure many victims of trafficking, such as underage girls who are sexually experienced or women who are coerced into commercial sex because of poverty or drug addiction, and are thus not perfect victims, locked in a room or chained up. This film also represents a common theme of advocacy organization materials, also seen in the film Holly: heroic white males fighting to save young girls from traffickers.

Anti-trafficking activist organizations commonly use images of strong male rescuers. Shared Hope International has a program called The Defenders USA, which seeks to get men involved in the anti-trafficking movement. The Defenders USA website invokes a chivalrous masculinity to inspire men to act as saviors and rescuers (Shared Hope International 2013). A past version of the website asked visitors to “restore a girl” by making a donation. The website had pictures of young, innocent, vulnerable-looking girls with the quotation, “He rescued me,” next to pictures of middle-aged white men with the quotation, “I became a defender.” Another image caption appealed, “Be the One to Save Her Future.” The Defenders USA asks men to pledge not to buy sex. Past pledge cards had images of women and girls pictured in vulnerable positions:
The young women are posed looking up at the viewer, or looking away wistfully. They are sad, vulnerable, and bare-shouldered. The current pledge card and a T-shirt for sale on the website have these images:


Again, the girls are vulnerable, hunched over in a bed or looking up pleadingly, waiting to be rescued.

In contrast to the images of vulnerable girls, The Defenders USA advocacy materials portray men as strong and heroic rescuers and saviors. In 2010, The Defenders USA sponsored a motorcycle ride to raise money and recruit men into the anti-trafficking movement. In the publicity for the event, the organization used highly masculinized graphics, language, and even font:

In this image, a white arm with clenched fist grabs two red figures posed in the shape of a heart. The words are in boxy, all-capital letters. Another example is an image at the beginning of a current Defenders USA video directed at truckers, which is posted on YouTube and begins with a silhouetted line of men standing aggressively, legs apart and arms linked, with “The Defenders USA” written underneath them:

Source: The Defenders USA, YouTube. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFCXCEPER2U&list=UUWWWsX94Fy7R57mrBXQ1dWQ.

A brochure currently linked to The Defenders USA website, titled *Time to Man Up*, contains these images:

![Image of a man with fist raised, text: MAN UP. END DEMAND.](source)


The Defenders USA blog has posts titled “A Man to Fight for You” and “Let’s Be Heroes.” All of these expressions and images portray men as strong, aggressive, and tough. Another group, Truckers Against Trafficking, calls on men to be “everyday heroes” using the following image:

![Image of a trucker silhouette, text: Everyday Heroes Needed](source)

As one commentator has said, men are coaxed into participating in women’s and other humanitarian issues by being “granted the role of heroic rescuers and saviors” and given a “moral leadership role” (Bernstein 2007, 139).

Utilization of traditional masculinity, however, is not limited to evangelical organizations, as demonstrated in Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore’s Real Men Don’t Buy Girls campaign, which has produced a number of public-service announcements featuring celebrities like Kutcher and Sean Penn.

![Real Men Don’t Buy Girls](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL95E646AEEED5718)


In these videos, the men appear to be doing traditionally female tasks like laundry and ironing, but as the video progresses the viewer realizes that doing laundry for Kutcher amounts to throwing his dirty socks in the trash can and opening a new package of socks, and ironing for Penn is using the iron to make a grilled-cheese sandwich. After showing their incompetence at traditionally female tasks, both videos end with the words, “Real men don’t buy girls.” The intent is humorous, but the message is very traditional: men can refuse to engage in a traditionally male behavior—predatory sexual behavior—while still remaining real men who prove their masculinity by not knowing how to perform traditionally female tasks. While these videos challenge demand for commercialized sex from girls, they do so in a way that reinforces traditional gender roles.

The gendered nature of sex-trafficking discourses is apparent from the fact that males are rarely mentioned or portrayed as victims in anti-sex-trafficking campaigns, despite the fact that male victims certainly exist (Curtis et al. 2008; Saewyc et al. 2008). The following image appears on the website of a Texas-based anti-trafficking organization, Beauty Will Rise:

![Beauty Will Rise](http://beautywillrise.org/)


The assumption in the text is that only women and children are targets of sex trafficking. One scholar attributes the invisibility of men in trafficking discourses to the gendered assumption that, with regards to prostitution, “women are victims and men make choices” (Dennis 2008).
Similar to the US government’s anti-trafficking position, non-governmental anti-trafficking organizations utilize a rescue narrative that focuses on female innocence, helplessness, and sexual vulnerability. But whereas government materials tend to focus on the state or professionals as rescuers, anti-trafficking activists focus on individual men playing the rescuer role. This gendered contrast is amplified in popular media—both in journalistic accounts of trafficking and, even more so, in Hollywood movies.

The Rescue Narrative in Mass Media: Journalism and Hollywood Movies

Both journalists and, especially, Hollywood movies use the most extreme form of the rescue narrative when addressing the issue of sex trafficking. US media often represent women and girls as helpless victims in need of strong men to rescue them, to which is added a portrayal of other cultures, particularly in developing nations, as primitive and/or barbaric, thereby positioning Americans as saviors. The media regularly portrays the cultures from which trafficked women and girls come as backward and unrelentingly oppressive. For example, on the NBC Dateline special Children for Sale, the founder and CEO of evangelical anti-trafficking organization International Justice Mission, Gary Haughen, is seen in Cambodia raiding brothels and rescuing girls. In the opening scene of this film, NBC correspondent Chris Hansen describes Cambodia as “an exotic vacation destination, with ancient cities, bold colors, legendary temples, remarkable beauty—and horrendous crimes that go on behind closed doors” (NBC Dateline 2005). He goes on to describe this “dark place” and its “shameful secret.” Trafficking is framed as a problem “over there,” and privileged Western white men are the powerful moral figures who rescue Cambodian children from exploitative adults. This image from the film is of an American rescuer fleeing from a brothel with a terrified Cambodian child:

![Image of American rescuer and Cambodian child](http://www.nbcnews.com/video/dateline/4039095#4039095)


This recurring rescue narrative configures white men as needed to “rescue brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 296), often downplaying poverty and focusing on a deficient culture as the cause of trafficking. In doing this, “cultural communities are cast as ‘not yet’—not yet realizing feminist potential, not yet enacting human rights values, not yet as modern or progressive as their Euro-American counterparts (who are placed in the role of rescuer)” (Hua 2011, 65). The initial and still predominant framing of sex trafficking as a problem originating outside of the United States likely contributes to this cultural explanation of trafficking.

Sometimes journalists themselves are the rescuers (Hua 2011, 57). Examples include Canadian journalist Victor Malarek, author of the book The Natashas (2003) about women trafficked from Eastern Europe, and Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times, who has written many columns on sex trafficking, particularly...
about girls in Cambodia, as well as a book, *Half the Sky* (2009), with his wife Sheryl WuDunn. In many of his *New York Times* columns, Kristof himself is a character within the story, sometimes posing as a john to gain access to brothels in order to save a girl, a technique used by other journalists as well. In one case, Kristof actually bought two girls out of prostitution in Cambodia, which he described in a 2005 story. Perplexed when one of the girls returns to her brothel, he muses, “It would be a tidier world if slaves always sought freedom” (Kristof 2005). Attributing her return to “low self-esteem” and drug addiction, he reports a conversation where he warns her that she will die of AIDS if she stays in the brothel, telling her of “some young women I had just seen, gaunt and groaning, dying of AIDS in Poipet.” Nevertheless, she stays, which Kristof attributes to her being “broken” in a world that “poisons its victims.” Despite his heroic efforts, Kristof is unable to save the girl. In another story, a video “The Face of Slavery” (2009), Kristof, guided by a trafficking survivor, leads the viewer into the dungeons of Cambodian brothels, describing “unspeakable” torture and showing several close-ups of a girl whose eye had been gouged out by her pimp. While the work of Kristof in raising attention to the abuse and exploitation of women and girls around the world is certainly commendable, he follows a common journalistic pattern of portraying himself as a heroic rescuer of helpless women and girls of color in developing nations.

The rescue narrative is particularly strong in Hollywood movies about trafficking, like the 2007 German-US coproduction *Trade*, in which a thirteen-year-old Mexican virgin is kidnapped by Russian sex traffickers and her seventeen-year-old brother attempts to rescue her with the help of a middle-aged Texas policeman and father figure (played by Kevin Kline), who lost his daughter to sex trafficking years before (Kreuzpaintner 2007).

In this promotional poster, Klein’s character is featured gripping a flashlight and looking intensely beyond the frame. Across lines of age, race and nationality, the older white American male guides the Mexican boy on how to become a man by rescuing his young sister. The theme of threatened innocence is central to the movie. The plot is driven by the race to rescue the girl before her virginity is sold to the highest bidder. In another promotional poster for the film, the girl is dressed in a school uniform, looking down demurely, surrounded by hearts and flowers:
The girl's innocence is represented not only in her dress and demeanor: there is even a white halo around her face and shoulders. Her virginity begs to be saved from the rapacious red lust advancing toward her from all directions.

The themes of female sexual vulnerability, the heroic fight to protect a girl's virginity, and heroic masculine rescue are also central to the film *Taken* (Morel 2010), which grossed over $145 million at the box office. This film portrays a naive American teenager, who while traveling in Paris is abducted by traffickers, and is eventually saved by her father, a former CIA paramilitary operative (played by Liam Neeson), from Albanian traffickers and Arab procurers. Similar to *Trade*, the plot is driven by Neeson's race to rescue his daughter before her virginity is auctioned to a wealthy Arab man. In the film, Neeson is portrayed as hypermasculine—willing and able to kill anyone who gets in the way of rescuing his daughter:

Sources: The Movie Blog and IMDb.

In the promotional poster to the left, Neeson's character is posed in an aggressive stance, legs apart, pulling a gun out of his long leather jacket and looking as if he is about to whip around. In the poster on the right, he is dark and menacing, photographed from below, again with a gun, and with a superimposed quotation from the film where he threatens to kill his daughter's kidnapper. The central focus of this extremely violent film is the estranged, unemployed father’s restoration of his masculine authority through the act of rescuing his daughter. The extreme vulnerability of the daughter, the brutality of the traffickers, and the heroic Neeson character all convey a very traditional story of gender and rescue. Rescue as an exchange of women between men—the trafficker and the rescuer—constructs a form of heroic masculinity.
In both of these films, sex trafficking is portrayed in simplistic, individualistic, good-and-evil terms, where there are only “slaves, sinners and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4). The focus is on individual victims and perpetrators. Victims are almost always female (although sometimes they are boys); they are innocent, helpless, naïve, totally victimized, and needing to be rescued. Rescuers are white Western men. At the start of both films, the disruption of patriarchal authority is portrayed by the absence or the inadequacy of male protectors. The need for male intervention is occasioned by the vulnerability and naïveté of the females who end up trafficked. The plot development in both films centers around males learning or reasserting their manhood by rescuing females, thereby reestablishing patriarchal authority. The male rescuers in both films are former members of law enforcement, but rather than rely on the criminal justice system, they seek vigilante justice. The message to girls is also very traditional. *Trade* and *Taken* begin with girls defying their parents; they are abducted as a result of their defiance. The implicit message in both films is that girls should listen to and obey their parents, and stay close to home because the world is a dangerous place for them.

Men are usually the rescuers, but sometimes women are, although women usually fail in saving the central victim, as in the 2005 Lifetime miniseries *Human Trafficking* or the 2010 film *Whistleblower*. In *Human Trafficking*, a female US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, played by Mira Sorvino, attempts to save an undocumented woman trafficked into the United States. *Whistleblower* portrays a Nebraska cop (played by Rachel Weisz) who becomes a peacekeeper in post-war Bosnia and exposes the United Nations for covering up a sex-trafficking ring. Both characters’ failure to rescue the primary victims in these films stands in stark contrast to the success of male rescuers in *Trade* and *Taken*.

![Film Posters](Source: IMDb)

The portrayals of the female would-be rescuers on the posters for these movies are quite different than the portrayals of the men on the posters for *Trade* and *Taken*. Rachel Weisz’s character holds her arms close to her body and looks off to the side, warily. Mira Sorvino’s character strikes an aggressive stance, holding a gun with outstretched arms, but she has a distressed and unsure expression on her face. These poses make the women look weaker than the aggressive and determined poses of the men in the promotional materials for *Trade* and *Taken*.

When placed side by side, the portrayals of sex trafficking by the US government, anti-trafficking organizations, and the media exhibit some common patterns, but also distinctions. All three tend to focus on sexually vulnerable and helpless women and girls in need of protection and rescue. Whereas the government
discourses frame the state or professionals as rescuers, anti-trafficking organizations and the media focus on individual male rescuers. Hollywood distinguishes itself with an extreme and hypermasculinized version of the trafficking rescue narrative, where the rescuer is a former law enforcement officer turned vigilante and playing outside the rules. In all three mediums, race and nationality play out in predictable ways, with white Western men rescuing women and girls, often in developing countries, from traffickers who are men of color or Eastern Europeans. These stories reiterate conservative beliefs and values around gender, sexuality, and nationality. In this way, ironically and despite the good intentions that surely motivate many of the activists on this issue, rescue narratives reinforce some of the social and cultural conditions that make women and girls vulnerable to sex trafficking in the first place—sexism, racism, and xenophobia.

Reframing the Discourses

The film Trade was based on a 2004 New York Times Magazine article on sex trafficking by journalist Peter Landesman, titled “The Girls Next Door.” This article played a significant role in raising awareness about sex trafficking into the United States. In the article, Landesman quotes International Justice Mission’s CEO Gary Haughen saying, “Sex trafficking isn’t a poverty issue but a law-enforcement issue” (Landesman 2004). This perspective reflects the predominant view that sex trafficking is a criminal justice problem (Gulati 2011), a view that grows naturally out of the stories that are routinely told about sex trafficking. Rescue narratives portray the cause of trafficking to be individual deviant men or networks of criminals and the rescuers to be the state, health-care or social-service professionals, heroic male defenders, or hypermasculine vigilantes. This framing, however, obscures structural factors and the social, economic, and political conditions that create vulnerability to trafficking, such as wealth inequality and poverty, gendered cultural beliefs that devalue women and girls and commodify sex, and the denial of human rights based on race and/or nationality. These are the conditions that the state often creates, perpetuates, or fails to ameliorate through laws and public policies. The responsibility for trafficking is “shifted from structural factors and dominant institutions onto individual, deviant men: foreign brown men (as in the White Slave trade of centuries past) or, even more remarkably, African American men living in the inner city” (Bernstein 2007, 144), in the case of domestic minor sex trafficking.

With the support of many anti-trafficking organizations, the United States has concentrated on criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking. The TVPA focuses on “the three Ps”—prosecution, protection, and prevention—around which the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports are organized (US Department of State 2011, 16). The order of the three Ps reflects the priorities of the Act. The focus and the vast majority of the Act’s funding is directed toward criminalization, prosecution, and punishment. The Act created new federal crimes related to trafficking and provided abundant resources to prosecute traffickers. Relatively few resources are dedicated to helping victims directly. Aid for foreign victims of trafficking, including visas to stay in the United States, is very limited, and is contingent on the willingness of the victims to testify against their traffickers, an offer few have agreed to for fear of harm to themselves or their families by traffickers (US Immigration 2013). Even less has been allocated to victims of domestic minor sex trafficking (Baker 2012, 1004). The TVPA made only a modest attempt to address the economic conditions that lead to trafficking by providing limited funds to create economic alternatives to those vulnerable to trafficking, including microcredit lending programs, job training, and programs to keep girls in school (22 US Code § 7104(a) (2000)). The Act prioritizes criminal prosecution and protection of victims over prevention and empowerment of people vulnerable to trafficking.
The TVPA pressures countries around the world to adopt these priorities. Since 2001, the United States has issued an annual Trafficking in Persons report, in which it evaluates every country estimated to have more than one victim on whether it is taking appropriate action to combat trafficking. The United States has determined the criteria for evaluation, which include passing criminal prohibitions, prosecuting traffickers, and assisting trafficking victims. The Department of State ranks nations according to their compliance with these standards. The Act authorizes the President to withdraw non-humanitarian, non-trade-related aid to countries that are not in compliance (22 US Code §§ 7106–7107 (2000)). As a result, many nations around the world have adopted the priorities set by the United States government. The most dramatic example of the criminal justice approach to trafficking is the “raid-and-rehabilitate” method of dealing with sex trafficking, which the United States has supported by funding groups that forcibly remove people from brothels and send them to government-sponsored “rehabilitation” facilities, as was portrayed in the NBC Dateline special *Children for Sale*, discussed above. The federally funded International Justice Mission has sent its personnel to countries like Cambodia and India to conduct raids and sting operations in order to rescue women and girls from brothels and turn pimps and madams over to local law enforcement for prosecution (NBC Dateline 2005).

In response to US pressure and informed by the rescue narrative framing of trafficking, many nations have strengthened border controls and tightened immigration laws in the name of protecting women and girls from trafficking. For example, scholar Mary Crawford has argued that sex-trafficking discourses in Nepal, which, similarly to US discourses, portray perfect victims who are innocent, naive and backward, have resulted in policies that restrict the human rights of women and girls, including their ability to migrate, and do little to address root causes of trafficking like gender and caste (Crawford 2010; see also Parreñas 2008). These restrictions on women’s rights and mobility may actually have the opposite effect than what was intended—they may push women further into situations of violence and abuse. In her article on Chinese migrants to Canada, Nadita Sharma argues that concerns about sex trafficking have legitimated increasingly repressive state practices of immigration control in Canada while obscuring that migrants have been “displaced by practices that have resulted in the loss of their land and/or livelihoods through international trade liberalization policies, mega-development projects, the loss of employment in capitalist labor markets, or war” (Sharma 2005, 89). The anti-trafficking rhetoric, she argues, justifies restrictive national and international security agendas and more stringent limits on migration. The underlying assumption about migrants, particularly females, is that they are weak, submissive, and incapable of looking after themselves. The result is to dissuade women and girls from migrating in order to protect them from harm, thereby reinforcing the gender-biased notion that women and girls need constant male (or state) protection.

Rather than framing sex trafficking as a criminal justice problem, an alternative approach would be to view the root causes of trafficking as the economic, political, and social conditions that make people vulnerable to trafficking in the first place. Many argue that neoliberal economic policies have created extreme income inequality and poverty through laws that allow for the free flow of capital while restricting the flow of labor. These policies work to the benefit of corporations, but impoverish people (Barker and Feiner 2006, 95–117). Neoliberal policies forced on poor countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have required privatization of state industries and services and a shift from subsistence to export production, which makes populations vulnerable to economic forces outside of their control. These policies have also pushed the development of tourism (and the related demand for sex) and austerity programs that eliminate social services that help women and girls stay out of poverty (Davidson 2005, 45–46). As
Cynthia Enloe has argued, US corporations collude with militarized governments abroad to make women’s labor cheap, to erode labor rights, and to cast aside safety and environmental standards (Enloe 2007, 19–38). These neoliberal policies create economies that serve profit rather than people, thereby generating populations vulnerable to trafficking. In addition to economic conditions, political conditions like war or states’ depriving ethnic minorities of citizenship rights (Feingold 2003) are factors that might increase people’s vulnerability to sex trafficking. Finally, social conditions contribute to making people vulnerable to sex trafficking. Cultural belief systems that devalue women and girls, commodify sex, and legitimate male demand for commodified sex are among the root causes of sex trafficking. Effective solutions to sex trafficking must address these structural factors.

Within the United States, advocates against domestic sex trafficking have also focused on criminal justice solutions to the problem. For example, as discussed above, Shared Hope International presses state legislatures to pass and strengthen criminal laws against commercial sexual exploitation of girls (Shared Hope International 2011), as does the Polaris Project (2012) based in Washington, DC. This criminal justice framing, however, does not address the underlying factors that make women and girls vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. As in the international context, evidence suggests that social and economic factors play a role in creating populations vulnerable to trafficking in the United States. For example, in the late 1990s, shortly after the substantial weakening of the social safety net in the United States with the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, Atlanta juvenile court judges Nina Hickson and Glenda Hatchett noticed increasing numbers of young girls coming through their courtrooms on prostitution charges (Richardson and Boxill 2007, 143). After this law went into effect, the number of children receiving government support went down significantly, but not the number of children in poverty (Child Trends 2013). In 2010, 20% of children in the United States lived in poverty and 42% lived in families below 200% of the poverty level (Child Trends 2012). The high rates of child poverty in the United States and diminishing social support services for children in poverty and homeless youth, along with high rates of child sexual abuse, all contribute to commercial sexual exploitation of minors and their vulnerability to sex trafficking (Estes and Weiner 2001, 3; Anderson 2009).

Race and sexuality exacerbate poverty and increase vulnerability to sex trafficking. Black and Hispanic youth experience much higher rates of poverty—over 40% live below the poverty level and 60% are below 200% of the poverty level (Child Trends 2012). Native Americans on reservations have double the national rate of poverty, and many reservations have six times the national rate of extreme poverty (National Center for Education Statistics 2008, iii). Predictably, Native Americans also experience high rates of sex trafficking (Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center 2009). Poverty and homelessness are particularly acute among GLBT youth, making them especially vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation (Ray 2006, 1), so challenging heterosexist ideologies and institutions is also part of the solution to trafficking. High levels of poverty, in combination with extreme materialism in United States society and popular culture’s sexual objectification of young girls (American Psychological Association 2010), along with glorification of pimp culture (Lloyd 2010), make young people particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. The commodification of sex intersects with stereotypical gender roles to normalize male demand, which feeds off girls made vulnerable by poverty and a culture that sexualizes them.

A comprehensive solution to sex trafficking must include support for laws and social programs to ameliorate the poverty that makes many people vulnerable to trafficking—laws requiring a living wage, adequate healthcare, affordable housing, quality schools, especially for the poor, and strengthening rather than rolling back labor rights. Particular attention should be paid to policies that would reduce the
continuing segregation of women into low-paying jobs, wage disparities based on gender and race, lack of quality child care, lack of paid parental leave, the inadequate and punitive welfare system, and inadequate child-support enforcement. All of these factors contribute to the ongoing economic marginalization of women and children, making them vulnerable to sex trafficking. While criminal law has an important part to play in combatting trafficking, the criminal justice focus of the mainstream anti-trafficking movement obscures the deeper structural causes of trafficking and thus fails to prevent sex trafficking in the first place.

**Conclusion**

The mainstream discourses around trafficking in the United States reinscribe very traditional notions of gender and sexuality, where female sexual purity is in danger, girls and women need to be protected and rescued, and men are heroic rescuers. These paternalistic discourses also reinscribe relations of power based on race and nationality, and can be used to justify relationships of domination. In her book, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the War on Terror*, Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008) argues that sexualized racism is at the center of the war on terror and is used to justify the retreat from previously accepted standards of international conduct in conflict. Sexualized racism similarly pervades the discourses around sex trafficking. Discourses on sex trafficking both abroad and in the United States regularly portray “dangerous brown men” (Bhattacharyya 2008) as evil and barbaric others who threaten innocent femininity, setting up whites and/or the West to be the heroic rescuer. Perhaps the disproportionate focus on sex trafficking over other types of trafficking is connected to the political and cultural work that the issue is performing. The political work is the bolstering of the United States’ role as a leader in human rights at a time when this status is being called into question because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war on terror. The cultural work is assuaging anxieties around gender, sexuality, and race in a globalizing world with increasing female migration and decreasing US economic dominance.

To effectively combat sex trafficking, the anti-trafficking movement must move beyond the simplistic framing of the issue as a matter of “slaves, sinners and saviors” (Davidson 2005, 4) best addressed by a stronger state and aggressive law enforcement, to a more complex and nuanced analysis that attends to the root causes of trafficking—unjust economic systems and conservative ideologies of gender, race and nation. A feminist approach to trafficking must be one that focuses on empowering people, not just protecting or rescuing them. Sexually exploited people are often in the situations they are in because they lack power and control over their lives, so activists must be very conscious about articulating their activism in ways that do not reinforce that disempowerment. The rescue discourse “casts women as victims in need of protection from harm rather than as subjects deserving of positive rights” (Soderlund 2005, 82). But protection is offered selectively and at a cost; it only “stretches to those deemed innocent, while it persecutes, criminalizes, or ignores those who are seen as complicit in their victimization” (Soderlund 2005, 82–83). In the context of the West’s portrayal of Muslim women, Lila Abu-Lughod contends, “rather than seeking to ‘save’ others (with the superiority it implies and the violence it would entail), we might better think in terms of ... considering our own larger responsibilities to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the world in which they find themselves” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783). Similarly, in the context of trafficking, rather than using a rescue narrative to frame the problem, which focuses almost exclusively on criminal justice solutions to sex trafficking, activists must focus on the root structural causes of trafficking and work to enhance democracy to empower vulnerable populations most likely to experience trafficking.

Public policy needs to address how trafficking is rooted in political, economic, and social conditions. With this framing of the issue, solutions to trafficking become focused on systemic and preventative solutions
rather than individual, after-the-fact, criminal justice solutions. The experience of trafficking varies widely in different contexts, so local, grassroots solutions are key to addressing the situations of women and girls (Parreñas 2008, 158–66). Policy needs to reflect the issue’s complexity rather than relying on simplistic solutions. Particular solutions that address root causes of trafficking ask much more of people than rescue. In his excellent film on sex trafficking in Burma, David Feingold (2003) says, “Saving little Aspu has more emotional resonance than doing something about changing the conditions of her life.” Saving her is easier and asks less of society than changing those conditions. Changing the conditions of her life, on the other hand, requires people to face how they contribute to those conditions via economic policies that benefit the privileged, as well as deeply engrained cultural and social biases. Systemic changes are harder to achieve than criminal justice solutions, but they are necessary to eradicate sex trafficking.

Notes

1. The expression “slaves, sinners, and saviors” is drawn from Julia O’Connell Davidson’s Children in the Global Sex Trade (2005, 4).


References


The SlutWalk Movement: A Study in Transnational Feminist Activism

Joetta L. Carr, Western Michigan University

Abstract: In the past two years the term “slut” ricocheted through the North American media and showed up on signs and banners on every continent as young feminists and their allies launched a series of demonstrations under the name of SlutWalks. In January 2011, a Toronto police officer told students at York University that if women wanted to avoid rape they should not dress like sluts. This incident sparked international outrage, with protests spreading quickly throughout the world, and revealed the misogyny and victim-blaming vitriol that characterize contemporary patriarchal culture. In the wake of the global SlutWalk movement, important questions have emerged about “reclaiming” the word “slut,” whether this form of protest effectively challenges rape cultures, whether it promotes sexual agency while deplored slut-shaming, and whether it reflects the aspirations of women of color who face different historical and cultural realities without the cushion of white privilege. Using the theoretical framework of transnational feminism and drawing on social-movement research, the goals of this paper are to examine the global SlutWalk movement and to interrogate its significance as a resistance strategy that challenges patriarchal attempts to control women’s sexualities through sexual violence and slut-shaming.

Keywords: SlutWalk movement, slut-shaming, sexual agency, transnational feminism, feminist activism, patriarchy

Copyright by Joetta L. Carr

In the past two years the term “slut” ricocheted through the North American media and showed up on signs and banners on every continent. A new form of protest emerged called SlutWalks, initiated by young feminists who were furious with victim-blaming, slut-shaming patriarchal cultures. These protests were unlike any in the past, their mood upbeat and playful but at the same time deadly serious. People in outrageous attire with drums beating, bodies painted and dressed in vamp couture, comiled with mothers in jeans strolling babies, men, transgender people, nuns, and others. They marched, they carried homemade signs, they had speak-outs, they danced, they cried, and they shared stories of sexual assault and humiliation. The Toronto incident on January 24, 2011 that “went viral” was the comment of Constable Michael Sanguinetti, a Toronto police officer who spoke to a small group of students about personal safety at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, noting, “I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this, however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” (Rush 2011). Sanguinetti’s remark struck a raw nerve, and several young women responded by organizing the first SlutWalk in Toronto on April 3, 2011. They expected a hundred or so participants, but the event attracted several thousand people. Protests organized around the theme “Because We’ve Had Enough” opposed slut-shaming, sex-shaming and victim-blaming in society. Several thousand people in Toronto protested against rape cultures that perpetuate the myth that what women wear is a key component in getting raped. The invitation to join the SlutWalk in Toronto read, “Whether a fellow slut or simply an ally, you don’t have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve: we just ask that you come. Any gender-identification, any age. Singles, couples, parents, sisters, brothers, children, friends. Come walk or roll or strut or holler or stomp with us” (SlutWalk
Sanguinetti apologized for his remarks, saying, “I am embarrassed by the comment I made and it shall not be repeated” (Rush 2011). Organizers Heather Jarvis and Sonya JF Barnett were chosen as Utne Reader visionaries in 2011 (Aldrich 2011).

Although the SlutWalk protests emerged spontaneously from a groundswell of rage among young university women who were insulted by one police officer’s concept of a rape-avoidance strategy, they spread quickly throughout the world (Roy 2011). SlutWalks represent the spontaneous outrage of women, the LGBT communities, and pro-feminist men around the world against patriarchal rhetoric. Feminists of all ages and genders have participated in the SlutWalks. Selma James, a veteran feminist who attended the SlutWalk in London, wrote, “This was the new women’s movement, born of student protests and Arab revolutions, tearing up the past before our very eyes. It has a lot of work to do and it is not afraid.” James reported she had received much kudos for her placard that read “Pensioner Slut” (James 2011).

SlutWalks are new shoots of creative and edgy protests against the misogynist culture that promotes dress codes or sexuality codes to differentiate “good girls” from “bad girls.” This new form of activism emerged at the same time as Occupy Wall Street and the upheavals and protests subsumed under the label of Arab Spring. Judith Butler discussed these new movements and her experience of participating in a SlutWalk in Ankara in the following terms:

When I was in Ankara, Turkey, and I was on a march with a group of transgender women, queer activists, human rights workers and feminists, people who were both Muslim and secular, everyone objected to the fact that transgender women were being killed regularly on the streets of Ankara. So, what’s the alliance that emerged? Feminists who had also been dealing with sexual violence on the street. Gay, lesbian, queer people, who are not transgender, but are allied because they experience a similar sense of vulnerability or injurability on the streets. (Bella 2011)

The SlutWalk movement pierced the hold that rape cultures have on societies, turning the objectification of women on its head with its bold, audacious parody of the slut, and has become a unique and innovative form of protest against gender-based violence. While originating in North America, SlutWalks spread like wildfire to other continents and countries, including those in the global South. In 2011 protests took place in over 200 cities (including 70 in the United States) and at least 40 countries (Westendorf 2013; Global Voices 2012). Locations have included Spain, Hungary, Finland, Norway, South Korea, South Africa, Australia, Ukraine, Mexico, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Germany, Morocco, England, and Canada, among others. Common protest signs at these marches read, “My Dress Is Not a Yes,” “Stop Sexual Profiling,” “Walk of No Shame,” “It’s a Man’s World—Let’s Fuck It Up,” and “Slut Pride.” In Morocco, SlutWalk founder Majdoline Lyazidi, who is twenty years old, challenged women who are sexually harassed on the streets to “stand up for yourselves and demand respect. Shame has to switch sides!” (SlutWalk Morocco 2013). Instead of being defensive about expressing their sexuality, SlutWalkers are going on the offense, using street theater to make their points and garnering more media attention than mainstream marches for women’s rights. Rose Munro, a Scottish feminist activist who spoke at the 2011 Edinburgh SlutWalk, blogged about the significance of this event:

Since SlutWalk my friends have been talking collectively about rape and sexual violence as if victims have a right to be heard. Sentences have been uttered like: I was raped, my mother was raped. Friends who’d never heard this before started saying, I cannot any longer be a bystander to rape jokes, now I’ve heard this about you/your friend/your sister/your mother. It’s been a golden opportunity. We’ve gone some way to making victims less ashamed, which means the problem is becoming more visible to ordinary people. This is important progress. (Munro 2011)
From India to Australia, Denmark to Mexico, each protest has been locally organized with independent initiative and without any overarching organization, blueprint, bylaws, etc. Instead, these protests have taken many forms, some less focused on the “slut” image, especially in more conservative countries like India. Women in bikini tops have marched next to women in burkas, students marched alongside grandmothers and nuns, and significant numbers of men have participated in the events. Gay, lesbian, and transgender people have been well represented in the marches. One young Muslim woman in a burka held a sign stating that her burka had not protected her from rape. The message across the globe was loud and clear: Don’t focus on how we dress—focus on the rape culture.

Brazilians held SlutWalks in more than 40 cities in the summer of 2011 and in a dozen or so cities in 2012 (Garcia 2012). Brazilian blogger Lia Padilha wrote:

We Brazilians are faced everyday [sic] with the control of female sexuality. The religious-conservative conception is repressive and tells women that they should hide their bodies from society and save themselves for their husbands. On other hand, the voracity of capitalism has interest in the naked female body, and in this case, exposes, trivializes and violates female sexuality and attacks. (Freitas 2011)

Trishla Singh, media coordinator for the SlutWalk Delhi explained that for centuries words like “slut” have been used in India to hinder the development of women, and today the pejorative term is used against women who go out in the evening or take jobs at call centers. Before SlutWalk Delhi occurred on July 31, 2011, there was sharp debate in the media. Umang Sabarwal, a nineteen-year-old student who set up a Facebook page to support the event, said, “The way the men stare, you feel like meat” (Roy 2011). According to a global poll by the Thomas Reuters Foundation, India is the fourth most dangerous place in the world to be a woman, and rape is the fastest growing crime in India (Banerji 2011). In 2009, a group of young women were sexually attacked in a pub in Mangalore by men who called them sluts and justified their assault because the women were dressed “indecently,” consumed alcohol, and mixed with non-Hindu youth, according to Rita Banerji, a gender activist in India (Banerji 2011). The attack was videotaped and excerpts were shown on TV repeatedly.

More recently, in December 2012, the brutal gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman student in New Delhi by a group of men on a bus sent shock waves throughout the world and triggered tremendous upheaval in India. Protests shook many cities as women and men of all ages came into the streets day after day to express outrage over this vicious attack (Timons, Mandhana and Gottipati 2012). In India, many girls and women are regarded as a family’s property—either the family they are born into or the one they marry into (Banerji 2011). Parents, husbands, and in-laws decide everything, including whether the female relative goes to school, her clothing, whom she can marry, when she has sex, how many children she has, and whether she is allowed to live. To those critics of India’s SlutWalks who point to more serious women’s issues like female infanticide, female feticide, dowry violence, and honor killings, Banerji responds that

the issue at the crux of the SlutWalk is one and the same as for all the other above-mentioned afflictions. It is about the recognition of women as individuals with certain fundamental rights, including that of safety and personal choices, which no one, not even the family, can violate.... The basic message of the SlutWalks to society is this: “A woman’s body is her personal domain! And nobody else’s!” (Banerji 2011; original emphases)

SlutWalks are decentralized, manifesting many formats and cross-national variations. Digital social media and mass media have created cross-national flows of information regarding SlutWalk activities. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter appear to be the main organizing tools for the hundreds of local protests that were organized on every continent. Most events have a Facebook page with mobilization
plans, photos, and video clips, as well as statements of purpose, slogans, and mission statements. Jackie Smith writes in her study of the anti-WTO protests of 1999 that “both national and transnational social movement groups make extensive use of Internet sites and electronic list serves to expand communication with dispersed constituencies and audiences ... [that] allow organizers to almost instantaneously transmit alternative media accounts and images of protests” (Smith 2002, 220). Since the “Battle of Seattle” Smith documents, the role and importance of social media has greatly expanded, and the SlutWalk movement illustrates this expansion very clearly.

**SlutWalks as a Case Study in Transnational Feminist Solidarity**

For the purposes of this study, research methods used to obtain information and commentary about SlutWalks included online searches of public media and social media. I conducted targeted Internet searches of international press sources such as the Associated Press, BBC, Reuters, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, social media sources such as Facebook, and feminist blogs including *Ms.*, the Crunk Feminist Collective, Feministing, and Jezebel. Rich information and commentaries were found on Facebook pages for each city’s event. In addition, I studied dozens of YouTube videos of SlutWalk protests from around the world. Finally, I attended SlutWalk Chicago in 2012 and videotaped the event.

My case-study approach is similar to that employed by Valerie Jenness in studying the prostitutes’ rights movement (Jenness 1993). Jenness argues that the case-study methodology is the “preferred strategy when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being posed ... case studies allow for exploration, description, and theory building” (Jenness 1993, 11; original emphasis). In documenting and describing the prostitutes’ rights movement named COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), Jenness found that social movements representing stigmatized groups face added contradictions regarding legitimacy and morality, and she explored “how social movements associated with deviance and deviants operate differently” (Jenness 1993, 7). SlutWalkers are likewise building a movement that welcomes sex workers, transgender people, and other “deviants.” Drawing from Jenness’s case study of the prostitutes’ rights movement and its blurring of the distinction between “good girls” and “whores,” I argue that the SlutWalk movement has challenged the historical definition of “slut” and reframed its associated imagery. Additionally, SlutWalkers redefine
the problem of sexual violence as caused by men who rape, not by women who “ask” to be raped. Also at issue is legitimacy, as SlutWalks contest law-enforcement attitudes toward rape victims and the ideology underlying these attitudes while legitimizing the expression of female and LGBTQ sexualities. In close parallel with Jenness’s theory of reconstructed social problems derived from her study of COYOTE, the SlutWalk rhetoric reconstructs the problem of rape, similarly blurring the distinction between “good girls” and “bad girls” while upholding sexual agency.

The SlutWalk movement presents an opportunity for scholars to apply feminist theories to a new form of transnational feminist activism located at the margins of mainstream society. Drawing upon transnational feminist and social-movement theories, I argue that SlutWalks have the potential to open up “new spaces for political and intellectual engagements across North/South and East/West divides,” as Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar call for in their edited collection *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010, 14). According to Swarr and Nagar, transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time. (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 5)

Swarr and Nagar further suggest that “grounding feminisms in activist communities everywhere is a means to interrogate all forms of implicit and explicit relations of power (e.g., racist/classist/casteist), and to contest those power relations through ongoing processes of self-critique and collective reflection” (2010, 5; original emphasis). Feminist analysis of the SlutWalk movement can fulfill the potential to create the new spaces and directions in transnational feminist discourse and practice called for by Swarr and Nagar.

Chandra Mohanty’s groundbreaking theoretical work on transnational feminism, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1986), argues for the “need to highlight Third World women’s activism and agency, as well as to recast the category of Third World women to imagine new forms of transnational solidarities and collaborations” (quoted in Swarr and Nagar 2010, 5). This paper both highlights Third World women’s activism and agency and contributes to creating a springboard for transnational collaborations among scholars and activists. Critical transnational feminist models also challenge the dichotomy between feminist academics and activists (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 2), and feminist praxis provides a framework to synthesize the feminist political activism embodied in SlutWalks with feminist scholarship.

**Historical Context for the SlutWalk Movement**

The new form of transnational feminist protest represented by SlutWalks emerged within the historical context of the women’s liberation movement. The “second wave” of the feminist movement began as an activist movement in the sixties and was subsequently taken up by the academy. In 1970, at the height of the women’s liberation movement, Susan Brownmiller wrote that “the women’s revolution is the final revolution of them all” (Brownmiller 1970). Women in industrialized countries in particular made great gains in the sixties and seventies in terms of legal rights, such as making marital rape illegal, the creation of rape-crisis centers, workplace rights (e.g., naming sexual harassment), and reproductive rights. The SlutWalk
movement can be situated historically within the anti-rape movements of the sixties and seventies, which
spawned rape-crisis centers and Take Back the Night marches and rallies. In Europe, the first international
Take Back the Night event occurred in 1976 at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in
Brussels (Take Back the Night 2013). Over 2000 women from 40 countries participated. Under the name
Reclaim the Night, marches also occurred in Italy, Germany, England, India, and Australia. At the same
time, Take Back the Night marches emerged in the US and Canada. They have continued to be organized on
campuses and in cities throughout the world, focusing on eliminating all forms of sexual violence.

The women’s liberation movement in the sixties emerged during a historical period of great political
upheaval on every continent. From African liberation struggles to the worldwide student strikes, sit-ins and
uprisings against unjust wars, colonialism, and racism, from the Native American occupation of Alcatraz and
Wounded Knee to the Stonewall Tavern protest in New York City that launched the gay liberation movement
in the US, this cauldron of political activism created favorable conditions for feminists. However, soon after
the liberation struggles of the sixties and seventies, the New Right movement in the US was launched during
the Reagan era to clamp down on gains made by women and to roll back reproductive rights, affirmative
action programs, no-fault divorce, and LGBT rights, to name a few. Jessica Valenti, in a Washington Post
piece on SlutWalks and the future of feminism, commented, “In a feminist movement that is often fighting
simply to hold ground, SlutWalks stand out as a reminder of feminism’s more grass-roots past and point
to what the future could look like” (Valenti 2011). SlutWalks can also be situated within the recent wave
of worldwide grassroots protest movements led by young people that appear to be organized through and
fueled by social media (for example, the uprisings in Egypt, Turkey, or Brazil). While SlutWalks draw on
and in some ways resemble earlier forms of feminist activism, at the same time they represent radical new
shoots of feminist activism unfettered by mainstream organizations and partisan politics.

**SlutWalks Contest the Patriarchy**

The continuing subjugation of women to men in many parts of the world reflects social relations that are
based on traditional property relations under capitalist imperialism. Patriarchy, the prevailing ideology
of male domination that provides the framework for understanding sexual violence, is also an essential
part of capitalism, as Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty argue. Although they criticize “a notion of
universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way to subordinate all women” (1997, xix), they also make
the critical point that “global realignments and fluidity of capital have simply led to further consolidation
and exacerbation of capitalist relations of domination and exploitation ... as processes of recolonization”
(Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xvii). Marx and Engels argued that two radical ruptures were necessary
for revolution—of traditional property relations and of all traditional ideas flowing from these relations
(Marx and Engels 1848). Of course, social practices rooted in patriarchal relations take different forms in
different parts of the world, from bride burning in India to slut shaming in North America. While the basis
of the traditional patriarchal family has eroded as millions of women entered the workforce in the last few
decades, the capitalist system is still based on traditional social relations concentrated in the patriarchal
family (Avakian 1999, 15). Although patriarchy cannot be eliminated under the existing capitalist imperialist
superstructure, the seeds of its unraveling exist in revolutionary socialist movements.

The new form of sisterhood represented by the SlutWalk movement has defied patriarchal social control
over female sexuality and its insistence on defining appropriate sexual behavior. Protesters demand the
right to define their sexuality on their own terms while protesting rape cultures so predominant in most of
the world, which are characterized by misogyny, victim-blaming, sexual objectification of girls and women
in pornography and the media, popularizing rape myths, and attitudes of rape acceptance in society. In addition, the SlutWalk protests foreground the most outrageous social practices rooted in the patriarchal system, including incest, marital rape, bride burning, and the commodification of women and girls.

**Slut-Shaming as a Rhetorical Weapon**

The word “slut” conjures up a woman who has sex with random, indiscriminate partners and therein gets a bad reputation. Women and girls who are called sluts are shamed, shunned, and judged to be less worthy than other women (Tolman 2005, 7). They are fair game for sexual attacks, harassment, insults, and humiliation fueled by our cultural stereotypes about women. “Slut-shaming” is a powerful tool to attack and discredit girls and women whose behavior or speech is nonconforming and rebellious, or who dare to hold men accountable for their actions. This epithet, like the words “whore” and “bitch,” plays a vital role in invalidating, dismissing, silencing, and degrading women who fight for their humanity and for control over their sexuality and body. Long used as a weapon to humiliate and ostracize girls and women who break the sexual mores of societies or rebel against stifling convention, the term is now being appropriated by angry women who refuse to be dehumanized by the patriarchy.

Alice Walker was asked during an interview on June 15, 2011 what she thought of the SlutWalk phenomenon:

> I’ve always understood the word “slut” to mean a woman who freely enjoys her own sexuality in any way she wants to; undisturbed by other people’s wishes for her behavior. Sexual desire originates in her and is directed by her. In that sense it is a word well worth retaining. As a poet, I find it has a rich, raunchy, elemental, down to earth sound that connects us to something primal, moist, and free. The spontaneous movement that has grown around reclaiming this word speaks to women’s resistance to having names turned into weapons used against them. I would guess the police officer who used the word “slut” had no inkling of its real meaning or its importance to women as an area of their freedom about to be, through the threat of rape, closed to them. (Archer 2011)

As with Walker’s response reproduced above, many other commentaries on the SlutWalk movement have focused on its appropriation of the culturally pejorative term “slut.” For example, the FAQ section of the New York City SlutWalk website addressed the question of the event’s name in the following terms:

> Some SlutWalk supporters have co-opted the term as a means of reclaiming the insult and defusing it of its sting by wearing it as a badge of pride to indicate sexual self-awareness and humanity. Others have rallied around the word in order to highlight its inherent absurdity and illegitimacy; while still others seek to remove the word from our popular lexicon, believing it to be an inherently violent term. All these views are welcome at our march and in our organizing; a multiplicity of voices is the greatest strength against prejudiced monolithic ideologies. (SlutWalk NYC 2013)

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the origin of the word “slut” has been traced back to the Middle Ages in England, where it was used to depict a slovenly person. Chaucer used the word “sluttish” to describe a slovenly man in 1386. Another early usage was “kitchen maid or drudge,” and this reference to a dirty female continued through at least the eighteenth century. Similar words referring to a “dirty woman” are found in Dutch, German, and Swedish dialects. The sexual connotation developed later. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary’s first definition of slut is “chiefly British: a slovenly woman”; the second definition is “a promiscuous woman; especially prostitute”; and the third is “a saucy girl: minx.” The Oxford English Dictionary’s entry classifies the term as “derogatory” and switches the order of definitions.
so that a “woman who has many casual sexual partners” appears first and “a woman with low standards of cleanliness” is second. The unabridged Oxford English Dictionary defines slut as “a woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade.” Interestingly, the popular Bridget Jones series written by contemporary British novelist Helen Fielding at the same time emphasized the original meaning of the word and combined its distinct uses to connote dirty and slovenly habits in Bridget, a bold and saucy young woman (Fielding 1996). To further complicate the sociolinguistic nuances of “slut,” it is used as a non-judgmental slang term in gay, bisexual, and polyamorous communities, referring to individuals who openly choose to have multiple sexual partners. According to the book The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships and Other Adventures, “a slut is a person of any gender who has the courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you” (Easton and Liszt 2009, 4). Here the term is reclaimed to declare sexual agency and personal choice to lead a non-monogamous lifestyle.

During the SlutWalk in Boston on May 7, 2011, speaker Jaclyn Friedman said that although the original definition of “slut” was an untidy woman, now the term is used to label women who “stepped outside the line that good girls are supposed to stay inside ... it is used to keep us in line, separate us, police each other,” while “all we want is to enjoy the incredible pleasure that our bodies are capable of” (Friedman 2011). Germaine Greer, one of the leaders of the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 70s, brilliantly tied together the two definitions:

> Twenty-first century women are even more relentlessly hounded and harassed by the threat of dirt. No house is ever clean enough, no matter how many hours its resident woman spends spraying and wiping, Hoovering, dusting, disinfecting and deodorising. Women’s bodies can never be washed often enough to be entirely free of dirt; they must be depilated and deodorised as well. When it comes to sex, women are as dirty as the next man, but they don’t have the same right to act out their fantasies. If they’re to be liberated, women have to demand the right to be dirty. By declaring themselves sluts, they lay down the Cillit Bang and take up the instruments of pleasure. (Greer 2011)

> SlutWalkers are speaking in a voice that deplores sexual violence while embracing sex positivity. They have taken the sting out of a word that has been used to control their sexuality. They are refuting the virgin/whore dualism with righteous anger, humor, and creativity. The young women who sparked this movement have performed a semantic sleight of hand in appropriating the word “slut,” making it impossible to tell the “good girls” from the “bad girls.” They have adopted the slogan commonly seen on SlutWalk signs and banners: We Are All Sluts!

**SlutWalks and Sexual Agency**

One strong message of the SlutWalk movement is that women have the right to be sexual beings without being judged, raped, discounted, or harassed, as well as the right to express their embodied sexuality by appearing on the streets in “slutty” attire and revealing clothing. In doing this, they are exposing mass media’s objectification of women’s bodies to sell movies, liquor, magazines, music, cosmetics, underwear, and thousands of other products and services. By reclaiming their sexuality, women are not only rejecting the rape myth that what you wear can lead to sexual assault; they are also challenging the dominant discourse that sex is dangerous for unmarried women and only “bad girls” are overtly sexual (Tolman 2005, 80). There is a very thin line between being viewed as a slut and being viewed as a respectable young woman, and this line can shift and become a moving target as young women attempt to “walk the line” and
maintain their reputations. SlutWalks represent the rebellion of thousands of young women and others against having to walk that tightrope.

Cultural scripts for girls and women regarding sex carry a double standard that is confusing and paradoxical. While boys are encouraged to express their heterosexuality as a sign of masculinity, girls are supposed to remain virgins or at least wait for a serious monogamous relationship and become the object of their lover’s affections (Tolman 2005, 5). Sexual subjectivity means being the subject in the development of one’s sexuality instead of being a sex object. In order to become the subject instead of the object, one must develop sexual agency. As Deborah Tolman (2005) discovered in her interviews with teenage girls, the girls who are able to develop agency with regard to their sexual lives are better equipped to make informed and conscious decisions about when, with whom, and what they choose to do or not do sexually. She defines sexual subjectivity as “a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices and who has an identity as a sexual being” (Tolman 2005, 6). In critically deconstructing and then embracing the traditionally derogatory label “slut,” women are expressing their sexual agency and subjectivity.

Never before in history have girls grown up in a culture that encourages five-year-olds to strut onstage in sexy clothes and heavy makeup to compete as beauty queens on TV, where pole dancing is taught at the local gym, and where middle-school girls are pressured to give oral sex to their male schoolmates. Girls often hurl the term “slut” at other girls whose sexual behavior is out of line with the cultural double standard, or as payback for perceived wrongdoing. Today’s girls and young women have grown up in the age of cybersex, cyberbullying, sexting, sexual violence in video games, increasingly violent pornography, and media saturated with sex. The “pornification” of mainstream culture, the attacks on women’s reproductive freedom, the epidemic of sexual violence, and the widespread use of the label “slut” create a toxic brew. It is in the context of this hypersexual culture that SlutWalks have emerged as a new form of protest.

**Feminist Debates about SlutWalks**

Of course, the SlutWalks have their thoughtful critics and have stirred up controversy in feminist communities. Feminist scholar Gail Dines, author of the book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (2010), and Wendy Murphy insist that young women cannot reclaim the word “slut” in a pornified society:

> The term slut is so deeply rooted in the patriarchal “madonna/whore” view of women’s sexuality that it is beyond redemption. The word is so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment that trying to change its meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources. (Dines and Murphy 2011)

Along the same lines, Samantha Berg, the feminist blogger and activist who founded the Stop Porn Culture movement, expressed the following view in an essay entitled “On the Feminists-in-Underwear Walks”:

> In 2008 frat pledges at Yale held signs declaring “We Love Yale Sluts” in front of the campus Women’s Center and in 2010 another frat’s pledges chanted, “No means yes. Yes means anal!” Young pornfed men have been giving women proof long before SlutWalks that positively sexy feminist tactics aren’t working. “Yes Means Yes” is a useless strategy for stopping men who are turned on by the thought of violating a woman’s “no.” Such men view women enthusiastically wanting sex as a challenge to find something more degrading than they believe merely poking a woman vaginally already is (in this case anal sex is the next level) and will never be happy with hordes of lovely ladies begging for it. Like the global appeal of sex with virgins, the whole point is to break something irreplaceable. (Berg 2011)
Another major criticism of SlutWalks appeared in an “Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2011). This letter was signed by dozens of activists, scholars, anti-violence advocates, and organizations serving Black women, and it begins with a commendation to the SlutWalk movement:

First, we commend the organizers on their bold and vast mobilization to end the shaming and blaming of sexual assault victims for violence committed against them by other members of society. We are proud to be living in this moment in time where girls and boys have the opportunity to witness the acts of extraordinary women resisting oppression and challenging the myths that feed rape culture everywhere.

However, the letter then goes on to argue that the legacy of slavery and the dehumanization of Black women through rape make it impossible for the signers to reclaim the word “slut,” or the related term “ho,” more commonly used against Black women:

As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves “slut” without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations. Although we understand the valid impetus behind the use of the word “slut” as language to frame and brand an anti-rape movement, we are gravely concerned. For us the trivialization of rape and the absence of justice are viciously intertwined with narratives of sexual surveillance, legal access and availability to our personhood.

While applauding the organizers of SlutWalks for their spirit and acknowledging their well-meaning intent, the authors of the letter also challenge the movement to change its name and bring Black women’s voices to the forefront. They cite the historical patterns in the feminist movement of excluding or marginalizing women of color and declare that justice for women is “intertwined with race, gender, sexuality, poverty, immigration and community” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2011).

Leaders of SlutWalk Toronto, the movement’s original group, have embraced these criticisms and shared the letter with other SlutWalk collectives, challenging them to engage in serious introspection and dialogue and to address privilege, intersectionality, and inclusivity (SlutWalk Toronto 2011).

The leaders of SlutWalk NYC have also engaged in serious reflection and self-criticism after a young white woman held a sign at their event that read, “Woman is the Nigger of the World,” quoting the title of a song written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1972 (Simmons 2011). Although Ono, a woman of color, coined this slogan, the song was banned on airwaves in many countries in the early 1970s as too inflammatory (Hilburn 1972). The image of this placard, which referred to women’s oppression by citing the most derogatory racial epithet used against African American people, went viral and caused a strong backlash in the Black feminist community and beyond. Black feminist blogs and forums criticized the white women’s position as privileged and misguided. SlutWalk NYC issued a formal apology to the Black community, and the organization held forums and discussions on strategies for greater inclusion of more Black women’s voices. They also described the rich diversity of SlutWalkers, including women of color, transgender and queer people, sex workers, and men across much of the globe. After months of discussions and analysis, the NYC SlutWalk leaders announced on Facebook that they were rebuilding their coalition and that they were currently focusing on reproductive freedom struggles. On March 4, 2012, their last post to date on Facebook was signed by “former SWNYC organizers”:

As we have been indicating over our various social media sites for several months, SWNYC has splintered. Many of us realized too late that working under the “SlutWalk” moniker was too oppressive to many communities that
we should be allying with. How could we claim to be creating an intersectional and safe feminist community with such a privileged name? Many former organizers have moved on and have been working on forming new feminist organizations since the fallout.... We cannot forget our past mistakes. If we do, we'll never be better feminists; that's what we want more than anything.

Salamishah Tillet, a Black professor of English and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania who spoke at DC SlutWalk, expressed a more nuanced view of the movement. Although she voiced some of the same criticisms as the Black Women’s Blueprint group, she also stated the following in an article in The Nation:

I would raise the question, “Are black women confident enough in their respectability and femininity that they can wear shorts and a halter and say I am still someone worthy of your respect? Someone who is worthy of being respected?” (...) As a longtime activist against sexual violence who has seen the way survivors are consistently silenced, the idea of a march that brought attention to sexual violence and celebrated its survivors was too compelling to ignore. I had to be there.... For me, walking alongside women who confidently wore the clothing in which they had been sexually assaulted was exciting and empowering. As a black woman and a rape survivor, it was one of only times in my life that I felt like I could wear whatever I wanted, wherever I wanted, without the threat of rape. (Tillet 2011)

Janell Hobson, a Black women’s studies professor and scholar at SUNY Albany, also wrote a response to the Open Letter from Black Women on the Ms. Magazine blog, expressing concern about the “politics of respectability” that became a theme among SlutWalk critics:

But instead of seeking respectability, what would it mean to confront the danger of a word that was historically constructed to support economies of slavery and legal segregation? (...) The truth is, white women have historically benefited from the racialized virgin/whore dichotomy embodied in words like “Jezebel” and “slut.” That can encourage black women to distrust white women, especially those whose privilege has blinded them to considering what a SlutWalk would look like in solidarity with black women, with low-income women, with immigrant women, with queer women, with sex workers.... I’d suggest that black women, rather than oppose SlutWalk, should think of the ways it can be appropriated to serve our needs. I would like to see a SlutWalk with black women front and center. (Hobson 2011)

In the wake of the global SlutWalk movement, important questions have emerged for feminists and gender scholars. Does “dressing like a hooker” minimize the forced prostitution of millions of women and children who are trafficked in the sex industry? Can we uphold sexual agency while deploring sexual objectification of women and girls? Some criticize SlutWalks as titillating spectacles that reinforce the objectification of women. At the same time, however, this movement has captured the imagination of many women, men, and transgender people around the globe.

The SlutWalk protests portend sharpening battle lines between women and the patriarchy throughout the world. The palpable global outrage of women and gender-nonconforming people at rape-culture rhetoric strengthens the struggle against gender oppression. Who controls women’s bodies and women’s sexualities is not a settled matter, but without such control we have nothing. Women in the US have lost ground in the area of reproductive freedom, and we are dangerously close to turning the clock back to the time when there were few options available to women who wanted to control their fertility and their sexuality, a situation that still exists for millions of women throughout the world. Reproductive freedom was a key demand of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, as women carved out space to express their sexuality, to be free agents of their sexual expression, and to control their reproduction. Whereas feminists in the
1960s reveled in the invention of the Pill and legalized abortions, heterosexual women today are faced with the possibility of losing the ability to have sex without the threat of unwanted pregnancy. The pressures on girls and young women to control their sexuality are different from those experienced by women of the sixties, and it is unproductive to examine today’s gender and women’s liberation struggles through the lens of conditions that existed forty years ago. After all, many people were aghast at the image of feminists throwing their bras into the trash during the 1968 Miss America Pageant and at the Gay Pride parades with their provocative messages and costumes. We can learn from and build on these tactics, since the “street theater” they relied on created lasting and politically potent imagery and symbolism.


A year after the first SlutWalk, on April 18, 2012, an event took place in Toronto where two organizers of the first Toronto SlutWalk delivered a speech entitled “SlutWalk 1 Year Later: Sluts of SlutWalk Talking about Slut Talk” (Motherhood Initiative 2012). On May 25, 2012, Toronto held its second SlutWalk, in which several hundred people marched, including many men. One man held a sign that read “Patriarchy sucks for everyone.” Many US cities held SlutWalks in 2012, including St. Louis, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, Washington, Seattle, Tallahassee, Salt Lake City, Detroit, Richmond, and Minneapolis. SlutWalks also occurred in 2012 in London, Berlin, Korea, Jerusalem, Vancouver, Hamilton (Canada), Seoul, Kolkata, Melbourne, Perth, New Zealand, and especially Brazil, where there were SlutWalks in a dozen cities in late May. In Brasília, the capital, more than 3,000 people marched, and over 1,000 gathered in São Paulo and in Recife. Hundreds marched in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Vitória, Curitiba, and other locations (Garcia 2012). According to my survey of SlutWalk Facebook pages this spring, more than twenty SlutWalks were scheduled for 2013 throughout North America as well as internationally, from Singapore to Melbourne to London and beyond. The full extent and meaning of the contributions of the SlutWalk movement to the overall struggle against gender oppression and the patriarchy may only be understood in the decades to come.
Notes

I am an activist scholar who teaches in the Gender and Women’s Studies department at Western Michigan University. I have been an activist all of my adult life, participating in a variety of social justice and environmental movements, including feminist activism. I am interested in the connections between academic and activist feminisms. My teaching and research are in the areas of sexuality, rape, and gender violence, and I have been a therapist of rape and incest survivors for many years. My activism in women’s liberation movements began in feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s. I am active in Take Back The Night, abortion rights movements, and International Women’s Day. When the SlutWalks emerged two years ago, my scholarly curiosity and my activist stirrings led me to develop this paper. I participated in the Chicago SlutWalk in the fall of 2012.

1. The concept of “rape culture” was first used in the mid-1970s by such feminist activists as the New York Radical Feminists in Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson’s book Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women (1974) and in Susan Brownmiller’s Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (1975). In addition, a documentary film entitled Rape Culture by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich was produced in 1975 through a collaboration between the DC Rape Crisis Center and Prisoners Against Rape, Inc.

2. Following the first wave of SlutWalks in 2011, another high-profile slut-shaming incident was provoked by Rush Limbaugh in late February of 2012. Limbaugh, who hosts a popular conservative national talk-radio show, called Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student and reproductive rights advocate, a slut and a prostitute after she was not allowed to testify at a House of Representatives Oversight Committee hearing on birth control coverage policy proposed in President Obama’s Affordable Care Act (Keyes 2011). In the course of this hearing, an all-male panel of religious leaders testified against religious institutions being forced to offer birth control coverage with no co-pay. In response, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi convened an unofficial hearing of the House Democratic Steering Policy Committee, which heard Fluke’s testimony on February 23, 2012. In a three-day on-air barrage against Fluke, Limbaugh stated that she “must be paid to have sex” and asked, “What does that make her? It makes her a slut. Right. It makes her a prostitute” (and, he added, “We’re the pimps”). He further said Fluke was “having so much sex, it’s amazing she can still walk ... so frequently that she can’t afford all the birth-control pills that she needs.” In the end, he recommended that in return for paying for Fluke’s birth control pills, “videos of all this sex [should] be posted online so we can see what we are getting for our money” (Keyes 2011).

3. The popular term “pornification” appears to come from Pamela Paul’s book Pornified (2005) and refers to pornography being so “seamlessly integrated into popular culture” that it is ubiquitous in mainstream media, pop music, advertising, magazines, and cyberspace (Paul 2005, 4).

References


Breaking the Gender Binary: Feminism and Transgressive Female Desire in Lucía Etxebarria’s *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* and *La Eva futura/La letra futura*

Lauren Applegate, Marquette University

**Abstract:** The popular texts of Spanish author Lucía Etxebarria have created a polemical social phenomenon in contemporary Spain for their blatant depiction of a world of violence, drugs, and experimental sex of the late-millennium youth culture of *Generación X*. These topics, along with Etxebarria’s public persona and feminist ideology, have fomented much public criticism and given rise to discussion of the current status of feminism, gender norms, and women’s authorship in Spain today. This article analyzes Etxebarria’s novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* and her collection of feminist essays *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, demonstrating that Etxebarria’s depiction of female desire and sexuality within their cultural context challenges the notion that feminism has no more to achieve and breaks the gender binary by imagining a gender-anonymous world. *Beatriz* delves into the life of the title character, a young woman whose experience with a dissolute social culture and her attempts to understand herself cause her to question stereotypical standards of womanhood and eroticism and to declare that she fits into no such preconceived notions. *Beatriz* is a literary inscription of Etxebarria’s feminist ideology as posited in *La Eva futura*, insofar as both these texts blur the line between feminism and postfeminism and engage with consumerist culture and identity. Moreover, they construe a philosophy that pushes the boundaries of normative discourse by mis-citing hegemonic notions of femininity and sexuality and creating the potential for change through such mis-repetition of hegemonic discourse. Ultimately, Etxebarria’s work strives for a transgressive, unbound, and fluid female desire that is in continuous reconstruction and defies heteronormative definition.

**Keywords:** Etxebarria (Lucía), *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, postfeminism, feminism in Spanish literature, contemporary Spanish women’s literature, sexuality, desire, gender studies, Constitutional Spain.

Copyright by Lauren Applegate

The 1998 publication of Lucía Etxebarria’s (b. 1966) novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* created uproar in the Spanish literary and cultural scene, in part for its boundary-breaking inscription of female desire. Two years later, the Spanish author further developed her ideas on gender and sexuality within the postmodern context in the collection of essays *La Eva futura/La letra futura*. With these texts, Etxebarria cemented her image as an outspoken author addressing social and popular issues who both openly engages with the consumerist aspects of the literary market and challenges, at times problematically, hegemonic images of femininity and female desire in contemporary Spain. In so doing, she created a controversy within Spanish literary and non-literary circles that led to a discussion of the value given to women authors’ work in a twenty-first century context, particularly with regard to the blatant expression of sexuality. In what follows, I evaluate Etxebarria’s interaction with postfeminist consumerist culture through a discussion of these two
works and I assess the transgressive expression of desire inscribed through the character of Beatriz. Most crucially, I argue, Beatriz embodies a liminal desire and challenges the heteronormative social structure that conflates a binary notion of gender with correlating heterosexual desires. This confrontation points to a larger transgression in the novel that demonstrates the gaps in normative discourses of gender and sexuality and that offers a new space in which a subject can cite non-normative versions of self.

Through the character of Beatriz, Etxebarria defies normative concepts of gender and sexuality, particularly as the novel’s protagonist finds her agency through the expression of transgressive forms of gender and desire. Beatriz searches for identity in an environment of angst, familial dysfunction, drugs, sex, and a need to escape her life. Nevertheless, this is not a typical coming-of-age narrative; it breaks free from formulaic conclusions about Beatriz’s sense of self, attempting instead to forge a new and precarious concept of sexual desire that refuses to conform to a social binary. As I seek to demonstrate here, the true transgression of Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes is the development and representation of a female desire that attempts to break completely free from gender and its represented problems, creating a greater space for the expression, experience, and definition of sexuality and sexual craving. Moreover, and specifically in the context of Spain’s history, these texts must be seen within the framework of the nation’s transformation from dictatorship to postmodern democracy, where gender issues have come to be increasingly relevant and visible in social and legal discourses.

Winner of the prestigious Premio Nadal the same year it was published, Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes was an instant commercial success. It is a first-person narrative told out of chronological order by the title character Beatriz, who simultaneously reflects on three different though closely connected time periods of her coming of age: the final disillusioned days she spends in Madrid with her best friend and adolescent crush Mónica, the person who involves Beatriz in a world of drugs and violence before Beatriz moves away; her college years in Edinburgh where she enters into a steady relationship with Cat (Caitlin), a waitress, and a concurrent love affair with Ralph, an older student; and her return to Madrid after a four-year absence, where she realizes that her obsession with Mónica was built on imagination instead of reality, and when she comes to accept herself for who she is. Despite the fact that, at times, Beatriz seems to be channeling Etxebarria’s didactic feminist messages, she is also a character that reflects the problems, insecurities, and injustices of a postmodern subject in a fast-paced and rapidly changing world.

In order to understand this late twentieth-century Bildungsroman and “the Lucía Etxebarria phenomenon,” as Christine Henseler calls it, it is crucial to place Etxebarria within the trajectory of women’s writing in the post-Franco era of Constitutional Spain (Henseler 2006, 94). In this time period, the Spanish literary market and the field of literary production have evolved dramatically. Thus, the 1980s in Spain saw a dramatic increase in the number of women authors and the beginnings of a “lesbian literature” with the 1978 publication of Esther Tusquets’s El mismo mar de todos los veranos (Martín Armas 2006, 16). As further evidence of the loosening of sexual repression left over from Franco’s Spain, the Tusquets Editores created the erotic collection La Sonrisa Vertical (The Vertical Smile) and the Premio Sonrisa Vertical (Vertical Smile Award) in 1977 and 1978, which, according to Silvia Bermúdez, aimed to “expand the sexual horizons of Spaniards as they entered an era of democratic governance and major sociological and economic changes” (Bermúdez 2002, 224). Such changes were no less evident in the publishing industry, which by the end of the 1980s had evolved into a capitalist marketplace driven by a “new generation of readers raised in a consumer society” (Tsuchiya 2002a, 139). Yet it is Lucía Etxebarria’s Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes that plays a crucial part in the consecration of the Spanish lesbian novel because it participated in the great proliferation of lesbian literature in the country that occurred between 1997 and 2000, when at least seven novels with lesbian protagonists were published with success (Martín Armas 2006, 26).
The time was ripe for this explosion, which was part of a growing trend of works published by young authors for young audiences that were perceived as having a new set of values and expectations (Villena and Castilla 1998; Memba 2000). Indeed, Etxebarria and other young writers of the 1990s are considered to be part of the so-called Generation X or “Generación Kronen” of Spain, a group who mixed their own form of literary aesthetic value with a clear attention to the marketing potential of their work (Bermúdez 2002, 224). Although they have been criticized for catering to a youth culture focused on immediate and ephemeral gratification, for Etxebarria the youth of this generation have found themselves in a world that ignores their interests, a world fraught with the broken promises of capitalism and the ideological failures of the left (Etxebarria 2007, 127–28). It is within this cultural context that Etxebarria publishes Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes, a novel that is fully immersed in the language and culture of Generation X, with an author who is well aware of the commercial environment in which she is publishing her work.

Through her commercialism, Lucía Etxebarria has made herself a visible and prolific “phenomenon” in contemporary Spain, one whose potential impact has inspired much dispute (Henseler 2006, 94). The criticism of her work has tended to focus on two distinct aspects, namely, the analysis of Etxebarria’s texts themselves and the critique of Etxebarria as a figure within the system of literary and cultural production. Indeed, her presence in the literary field has provoked intense reactions, both positive and negative, because of the way Etxebarria engages with systems of consumerism to the point of selling her own image, causing a debate as to her “actual” literary value (Bermúdez 2002, 224). Her antiestablishment attitude, her insistence on using references to popular culture, in particular youth culture and language, and her brazen self-promotion through a discourse of self-defined feminism have led critics such as Ignacio Echevarría to see her as a figure who has become famous as a result of an overblown, empty, and tacky display, and whose literary work is overrated (Echevarría 1998). From this point of view, her literature and that of other young writers of the Spanish Generation X “caters to a generation of socially and ethically disengaged youth who, faced with boredom and an uncertain future, seeks an experience of momentary but intense gratification, through sex, drugs, and mass culture” (Tsuchiya 2002b, 78).

These kinds of criticisms became even more pronounced when, shortly after winning the Premio Nadal for Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes, Etxebarria posed for mostly nude photographs for the magazine Dunia, indicating that for many the real issue at stake was not the literary quality per se of Beatriz or Etxebarria’s other works, but rather the public behavior of Etxebarria herself in relation to popular culture, literature, and consumerism. As various literary critics, including Silvia Bermúdez and Christine Henseler, have pointed out, Etxebarria blatantly exposes the fact that the system of literary production is indeed enmeshed in a market of consumption, and that the author is part and parcel of the commercial exchange of literature. Etxebarria has “turned herself into an advertisement” for her own works, a move that in Henseler’s opinion is “the ultimate avant-garde expression” that manages “to subvert a system that disregards as too popular a large part of the literature written by female authors” (Henseler 2004, 699–700). Along similar lines, Bermúdez argues that Etxebarria uses a feminist paradigm to unveil the manner in which the processes of legitimization and delegitimization occur in the production of cultural capital, particularly for women authors. In so doing, Etxebarria “speak[s] to the importance of self-articulation and self-determination” as a woman author in the creation of prestige and symbolic power (Bermúdez 2002, 233).

For her part, Akiko Tsuchiya recognizes the gender inequalities in the field of literary production and the “double dilemma” that women authors face in the struggle to “gain visibility in predominantly male-controlled media of communication,” a visibility that, when achieved, causes “the commodification of their works into the usual gender-biased stereotypes and commonplaces” (Tsuchiya 2002a, 239–
Nevertheless, Tsuchiya finds Etxebarria’s particular way of addressing this dilemma to be grossly problematic. She criticizes Etxebarria for her combination of popular culture with feminism in her fictional works. Tsuchiya argues that by working from within the system of popular discourse rather than against it, Etxebarria negates her own feminist message through a cooptation of her values, and thereby reifies instead of transforming the “institutions and structures of thought that have traditionally oppressed women and other marginalized or non-normative subjects” (Tsuchiya 2002a, 250). On the one hand, Tsuchiya acknowledges that Etxebarria’s fictional works do address feminist issues “and attempt to deconstruct socially normative conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, thus opening the possibility of alternative constructions of identity” (Tsuchiya 2002b, 79). Yet, for Tsuchiya, Etxebarria’s open engagement with the mass market and her use of gender and peripheral sexualities as selling points for her works act not as a subversion of the norm, as Henseler suggests, but rather as a “reaffirmation of those very structures, categories and ideologies that she claims to question” (Tsuchiya 2002b, 80).

This debate reflects the ambiguity of Etxebarria’s brand of feminism. For example, she begins _La Eva futura_ by trying to package her feminist critique in such a way as to appeal to an audience living in a postfeminist cultural context, that is, by initiating the discussion with the disclaimer that it is not necessary to hate men, be lesbian, or give up using makeup or wearing a bra to be a feminist (Etxebarria 2007, 21). This kind of argument feeds into the negative stereotypes of feminists that circulate in postfeminist discourse, even though Etxebarria’s intent appears to be to want to counter them, because it includes an implicit agreement that feminism can be threateningly “a-feminine.” Such a backhanded argument in favor of feminism partially undermines Etxebarria’s own claims that different sexualities, behaviors, body types, and preferences should be allowed to exist free of judgment. Nevertheless, her work does counter precisely these kinds of stereotypes by focusing on a main goal of challenging gender prejudice and discrimination. As she states, “Ser feminista … [s]e trata de reclamar el poder de las mujeres y el derecho de cada una de nosotras a utilizar ese poder según nuestros propios términos” (To be feminist … means to demand the power of women and the right of each one of us to utilize that power according to our own terms) (Etxebarria 2007, 21). In other words, the overarching project of Etxebarria’s texts is the direct feminist aim of critiquing social injustices and teaching a general public about gender and sexuality inequalities, despite her at times contradictory arguments that reach out to those whom she is trying to convince that feminism is good.

These conflicting aspects of Etxebarria’s work, including the combination of her category of feminism with popular culture and her periodic appeal to problematic stereotypes, lie precisely in her engagement with a postfeminist context. There is no doubt that Etxebarria’s use of the market is blatant, and, as she herself affirms, the topics of her novels and other texts are very often commodified into selling points (Etxebarria 2002). The key is the way that this use allows her to work from within the paradigm of postmodern normative discourse and a supposedly postfeminist cultural environment, by appropriating many of the tools of this discourse and this environment in order to challenge them. This move is a mark of her particular feminist stance, which sits at a crossroads between feminism and postfeminism. Etxebarria’s novels, as well as her non-fictional and cyberspace work, “offer a unique glimpse into the trappings of twenty-first century female identity” and challenge the Spanish “notion of reality” by means of “the incorporation of contemporary cultural references, feminist and gender issues, and a keen sense of what it means to be living in the twenty-first century” (Everly 2010, 134).

Etxebarria’s feminist ideology, as presented in _La Eva futura/La letra futura_, includes a resounding criticism of still-existing sexism, injustices, and inequalities that she sees in Spanish society and Western
society more generally. She addresses a broad range of settings, from private and public spaces to popular culture and the media to the field of literary production. Her text denounces the postfeminist claims that society has reached the utopia of feminist dreams by making the argument that the current, “postfeminist” era is far from being perfect for women. The term “postfeminism” is in and of itself an imperfect one, fraught with complications. As Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon argue, postfeminism “exists both as a journalistic buzzword and as a theoretical stance, as well as a more generalised late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ‘atmosphere’ and ‘aura’ ... that emerges in the intersections and hybridisation of mainstream media, consumer culture, neoliberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 5). On one level, such a postfeminist atmosphere reflects a notion of the “pastness” of feminism, the “post” in this case denoting the idea that feminism is no longer necessary, that it has fulfilled its purpose and now is not only passé but woefully misguided (Genz and Brabon 2009, 3). Etxebarria questions this idea of feminism’s death, bemoaning the fact that young feminists today are told that they do not exist and that feminism is outmoded, and yet, as she states in La Eva futura, “la mayoría de las mujeres que no se autodefinen como feministas ... han integrado en su ideario todas las reivindicaciones del movimiento feminista, aun sin saberlo” (the majority of women that do not define themselves as feminist ... have integrated in their ideas the vindications of the feminist movement, even without knowing it) (Etxebarria 2007, 65–66).

Within this kind of postfeminist paradigm there is a reconceptualization of the New Woman, who becomes a figure with a supposedly liberated sexuality, seen as free from both the restraints of prefeminist society and the allegedly puritanical demands of second-wave feminists, who are in turn perceived as non-feminine and sexually frigid. In this context, there is what Angela McRobbie calls a “faux-feminism” that has been appropriated by Western neoliberal discourse from popular culture to governmental and juridical spheres and that simultaneously vilifies feminism as a movement while appropriating as tools certain feminist ideals, such as those of empowerment, choice, and sexual freedom (McRobbie 2009, 1). Choice and freedom are then redefined and attached to the capacity to purchase, reflecting the importance of the consumer market (Genz and Brabon 2009, 8). Postfeminism in this definition offers, as posited by Diane Negra, “the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique,” allowing the modern-day woman to break free from the “shrill” feminism of the 1970s (Negra 2009, 2).

On another level, however, the term postfeminism refers to what Genz and Brabon call a feminist “genealogy” (2009, 3), wherein the “post” indicates a continuation and transformation of feminism through an “interrogative stance” that leads to “a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women’s movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 11). From this perspective, postfeminism is not a “faux-feminism” but rather marks a site of unique cultural and critical hybridity in the way it incorporates popular media and consumer culture into a feminist approach. This facet of postfeminism signals therefore a positive evolution of feminism, marking its potential to adapt and grow with the times.

Postfeminism is not an issue of “either/or” but rather of “both/and,” meaning that while it describes a society of hybridized consumerism, in which feminism is simultaneously shunned and appropriated, it is also an ideological stance that works out of this position of oppositionality to ask new questions. It is at the intersection of these two conceptualizations that Etxebarria’s work can be placed; even as it rejects the notion of the “pastness” of feminism and criticizes hegemonic conceptualizations of femininity and female sexuality and desire, it also fully embodies this hybridization of feminism and popular culture. Etxebarria’s
self-identification fluidly floats between postfeminism, third-wave feminism, and what she calls power feminism, by which she means a feminism that calls for opening a debate about the need to change the “obsolete” conceptualizations of masculine and feminine (Etxebarria 2007, 23). The breakdown of these falsely constructed gender roles, in Etxebarria’s mind, is necessary in order to fully achieve freedom, equality, and understanding in a just society (Etxebarria 2007, 16).

For Etxebarria, the new woman, “la Eva futura” (the future Eve), is represented by “la mujer fuerte…. Un modelo envuelto en el lenguaje de la heterosexualidad, pero que al mismo tiempo atrae conscientemente una mirada lesbiana, una transformación premeditada del juguete masculino en camarada femenina” (the strong woman…. A model enveloped by heterosexual language who at the same time consciously attracts a lesbian gaze, a premeditated transformation of the male toy into female comrade) (Etxebarria 2007, 154). In other words, the woman of the future is in a place of ambiguity regarding her desire and desirability, creating a more fluid relation between the genders and within desires. Moreover, it is in Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes that Lucía Etxebarria takes an interrogative stance towards the normative system of gender and desire through the exploration of dissident female sexualities in the context of late twentieth-century Spain. She interweaves various elements of globalized culture, yet the narrative goes beyond the mere inclusion of cultural references and becomes a postfeminist text in the way that it questions normative gender identities and suggests a viable new option for female desire.

The protagonist Beatriz is a prototype of Etxebarria’s “strong woman,” and her coming of age is a process of development in the direction of this figure. Even more significant is that sex and desire act as catalysts for this process. Beatriz’s experience of sex allows her to explore her identity and to recognize that her desire does not fit social norms. She realizes that she is “una tía muy rara” (a really strange girl) (Etxebarria 1998, 220), that “yo no era una chica con todas las letras, sino una chica falsa…. Y si yo no era una chica, si era algo así como una especie de alienígena infiltrado que no era él ni era ella, ¿por qué tenía entonces que enamorarme de un hombre y casarme y tener hijos si a mí no me apetecía? ¿Por qué no iba a enamorarme de quien a mí me diera la gana?” (I was not a girl with all of the letters, but rather a false girl…. And if I wasn’t a girl, if I was something like an infiltrated alien species that was neither he nor she, why then should I have to fall in love with a man and get married and have kids if it didn’t appeal to me? Why wouldn’t I fall in love with whomever I felt like?) (Etxebarria 1998, 144; italics in original). The boundaries of love and desire are hence broadened and expanded, challenging gendered expectations for both the desirer and her object of desire.

The inscription of female desire through Beatriz is subversive to the system of binary and compulsory heterosexuality, and furthermore it undermines the concept of a fixed homosexual or lesbian identity. This in turn is a challenge to gender normativity, in that desire and gender are directly linked in normative discourse, in which feminine and masculine are differentiated as supposedly natural, necessary, and mutually exclusive opposites that are linked by heterosexual desire (Butler 1999, 30; Sedgwick 1990, 31–32). Nevertheless, in what becomes a challenge to sexuality discourse and the connection between sexuality and gender identity, Beatriz does not come to accept a specifically lesbian sense of self, but rather an open sense of self; she attempts to exist in ambiguity, expressing a desire for people as individuals rather than as gendered beings. Indeed, the critical tendency to label Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes as a lesbian novel because of Beatriz’s attraction to Mónica and Cat (see Urioste 2000, Martín Armas 2006, Vitorino Ceia 2006, and Martín 2001, among others) in effect limits the transgressive potential of the work and denies the very strong implications of Beatriz’s love triangle and experience of desire throughout the text. Indeed, one of the most daring aspects of this narrative is that it demands that the reader consider female desire completely outside of a binary paradigm, whether heterosexual or lesbian.
To be clear, *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* does not privilege lesbian desire over any other kind of sexual preference. The novel’s forwardness in describing Beatriz’s sensual pleasure in her lovers’ embraces, including her attraction to women, is not simply a matter of negating heteronormative hierarchies, nor is it an attempt to reify female desire to the exclusion or derision of male desire. In her article “‘Erotic Fiction by Women for Women’: The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality,” Esther Sonnet maintains that in reading erotic fiction that focuses specifically on female desire criticism must escape the “heterocentric” viewpoint of a binary pleasure principle. According to Sonnet, we must consider that “positionings for pleasure within written erotica may invoke a multiplicity of mobile and transient subjectivities which cannot be subsumed by the uni-dimensional power structure of gender-defined heterosexuality” (Sonnet 1999, 183; italics in original). A multiplicity of this kind is precisely what is embodied in the character of Beatriz. Her desire cannot be defined as specifically lesbian vis-à-vis a heterosexual paradigm of normative discourse because her desire functions precisely as a rejection of the power structure of normative discourse, and, within that discourse, of the “ghettoization” of so-called “deviant” sexualities. Her desire specifically defies a lesbian label, a label of active, or a label of passive, reaching beyond these structurally limiting markers and pushing the boundaries of normativity.

When describing her sexual relationship with her girlfriend Cat, Beatriz uses a combination of language that expresses an ebb and flow of activity, conjuring images of both receiving and advancing:

Deslizándose en mi búsqueda, chocaba en lo oscuro, de pronto, y yo sentía su piel en contacto con la mía. Brotaban chispas eléctricas. Ella susurraba arrastrando las palabras con su voz anaranjada y me contaba las cosas que iba a hacer conmigo.... Y entonces sentía como entraba en mí, un ataque luminoso que alumbraba las sábanas.... Era como si yo tuviera una microcámara en las yemas de mis dedos, que me permitiera ver su interior. Avanzaba, la atravesaba.... Yo estaba en ella, y ella en mí. (Etxebarria 1998, 51–52)

Sliding around in search of me, she crashed in the dark, suddenly, and I felt her skin in contact with mine. Electric sparks burst. She murmured crawling words with her orange voice and told me the things that she was going to do with me.... And then I felt how she entered me, a luminous attack that lit up the sheets.... It was as if I had a micro camera on the tips of my fingers that allowed me to see her inside. I advanced, I entered her.... I was in her, and she in me.

In her experience of sex and pleasure with her female lover, Beatriz here is both the object and the subject of their interaction. She waits for her lover’s touch, listens as Cat expresses her desire, allows herself to be “attacked,” and yet also enters into her lover, examines her minutely with her fingertips, and traverses the barriers of her body, desires her actively. It is an electric experience, an electric desire. In other words, the kind of female desire inscribed in the novel through Beatriz takes on many layers of meaning and is not a simple reversal of the dichotomy of masculine and feminine, activity and passivity. It is instead an erasure of the hierarchy of power that is given to one desiring party over another within such a paradigm, which achieves its aim by attributing active and passive characteristics to Beatriz’s desire to the point that they are simultaneous and inseparable.

Female desire in *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* is therefore expressed as an expansion of limits that creates an alternative conceptualization of desire, challenging the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual as well as active/passive forms of passion. Beatriz’s lust at times takes the form of a “ritmo salvaje” (savage rhythm) (Etxebarria 1998, 216) and at others she offers no resistance, telling herself to “Go with the flow” (204; italics and English in original). Sexual craving gives her the potential for agency in the way that she embodies it and makes it her own. When describing her relationship with Ralph, she asserts authority
over both her desire and the sexual act itself. She says, “Académicamente hablando, debería escribir que
cuando hacía el amor con Ralph era él el que me poseía, el que me tomaba. Sin embargo era yo quien lo
hacía, era yo quien le acogía en mi interior, porque él entraba en mi” (Academically speaking, I should write
that when I made love with Ralph it was he that possessed me, the one who took me. But it was I that did
it, I was the one who took him in my interior, because he entered me) (Etxebarria 1998, 214–15). In this
way Beatriz subverts the traditional hierarchical image of coitus, which attributes social characteristics of
masculine activity and female passivity to sexualized body parts. Beatriz takes hold of her own sexuality
and agency even in a heterosexual coupling, thereby rejecting notions of female desire as inherently passive
and breaking with the notion of an immutable and essentially feminine way of desiring. In so doing, she
gains a new awareness of her self and body: “El sexo me ofrecía una clara conciencia de mí misma, desde
la distancia, como si fuera otra” (Sex offered me a clear awareness of myself, from a distance, as if I were
someone else) (Etxebarria 1998, 221).

Ironically, however, in coming into her body by means of a multiple-partner sexuality that is neither
solely lesbian nor heterosexual, Beatriz finds herself and her sexual physicality precisely at the point where
her identity becomes socially ambiguous, unrecognizable within the terms of normative discourse. This
ambiguity casts a shadow of doubt over the viability of her identity, since the struggle to find agency that
develops in such an ambiguous way can threaten the very existence and livability of a subject’s life (Butler
2004, 3). As Beatriz herself admits, her desire does not fit within any recognizable classification of sexuality
or gender. She states that from the moment she began to have two lovers, “mi corazón se convirtió en algo
borroso, indefinible, indescifrable. Porque si me hubieran preguntado en ese momento si yo era lesbiana o
si era heterosexual, e incluso si era bisexual, que parecía la respuesta más convincente, no hubiera sabido
qué responder” (my heart turned into something blurry, undefined, indecipherable. Because if they had
asked me in that moment if I were lesbian or heterosexual, and even if I were bisexual, which seemed
the most convincing answer, I wouldn’t have known how to respond) (Etxebarria 1998, 221). Later she
questions the binary classification of these two sexual worlds, asking, “¿Sólo hay dos? ¿Y dónde se supone
entonces que resido yo?” (Are there only two? And where is it supposed that I reside?) (Etxebarria 1998,
221). Such a challenge that Beatriz makes to a binary notion of sexuality and gender performativity is a form
of what J. Jack Halberstam calls “gaga feminism,” meaning a feminism that “grapples with what cannot
yet be pronounced and what still takes the form of gibberish, as we wait for new social forms to give our
gaga babbling meaning” (Halberstam 2012, xxv). Halberstam asks: “what if sexual orientation could also
be read as less fixed, less determined, more negotiated and fluid?” (9). In the character of Beatriz we can
see an answer to this question; she refuses to be defined by the parameters of sexuality labels, hinting with
her rhetorical question that sexuality and desire should be more open-ended. In this way, female desire as
inscribed in the character of Beatriz becomes much more than an appropriation of both active and passive
characteristics; it is expressed as fluid, moving beyond the dichotomies that are presumed in normative
social structures and language.

Certainly, at the end of the novel Beatriz finally wants to commit to a lasting relationship with Cat, who
is painted as a positive complement to Beatriz; nonetheless, it is not because Cat is a woman that Beatriz
wants to be with her. To put it plainly, the establishment of a fixed lesbian identity does not mark Beatriz’s
coming of age, as though her experiences have been leading her to some kind of coming out. Her attraction
to Cat has never been because Beatriz was specifically looking for a lesbian partner, but rather because of
Cat’s personal qualities. As a lesbian couple, they are not painted as a euphoric or idyllic pair that should
supplant a heterosexual couple in some idealized gender utopia. They are connected by a mutual desire,
by a “chemical” connection that is the fundamental driving force in the novel. Nevertheless, Beatriz adores Cat, “No por su belleza ni por su sentido del humor, sino, básicamente, porque sabía que ella era una buena persona, quizá la primera persona auténticamente plena de bondad que había conocido en la vida” (Not for her beauty or her sense of humor, but, basically, because I knew that she was a good person, maybe the first person authentically filled with goodness that I had met in life) (Etxebarria 1998, 179–80).

Indeed, Beatriz constantly reminds the reader that she does not have set sexual preferences one way or the other, that though she had never “gone to bed” with a man before dating Cat, this was due to a lack of opportunity rather than a profound conviction against it (Etxebarria 1998, 47). She sees Cat’s resolve to only ever sleep with lesbians who had never been with a man and who were never attracted to men as absurd and unnecessarily drastic (Etxebarria 1998, 46). Beatriz’s decision to go to the lesbian bar where she met Cat was based on the desire to be free from the aggressive advances of unknown men rather than on specifically looking for a lesbian lover. She makes it very clear: “No iba buscando una chica, no fui allí porque me sintiera lesbiana. Sólo buscaba una cerveza y un poco de música” (I didn’t go looking for a girl, I didn’t go there because I felt lesbian. I was only looking for a beer and a little bit of music) (Etxebarria 1998, 25). After being the victim of three attempted rapes in the last fateful week that she spends with Mónica in Madrid, Beatriz realizes that her mother’s warnings that a woman should not go alone to a bar are true, even in the purportedly postfeminist culture where women are supposed to be treated with equal respect, because men have not changed much since her mother’s youth (Etxebarria 1998, 25). In other words, Beatriz realizes that gender and power are still constructed as an unequal hierarchy wherein women are seen as potential targets of men’s aggression. She decides to go to a bar without men, not because she is against being with men, but in order to avoid the social trouble that being a single woman in a public space has always caused her (Etxebarria 1998, 25).

Even Beatriz’z obsessions with her adolescent crush and best friend Mónica are not because Mónica is female but because of what she represents to Beatriz, namely, an ally in a lonely world who seems to understand her. Beatriz assures the reader that she has always been attracted to Mónica because she is vivacious, different, charismatic, and interesting. Underscoring the point that the gender of her object of desire is irrelevant, she declares that her desire for Mónica “no se reducía a un término tan simple como que a mí me gustaran o no las mujeres. Me gustaba ella. Ella, sólo ella, reconocible en medio de este monstruoso criptograma cuántico que es el universo. Y si hubiera sido un hombre, me habría gustado también” (it could not be reduced to terms as simple as that I liked or didn’t like women. I liked her. Her, only her, recognizable in this monstrous quantum cryptogram that is the universe. And if she had been a man I would have liked her too) (Etxebarria 1998, 190–91).

For Beatriz, then, the gender, sex, and physical form of the object of desire are irrelevant; the body of the desired one is simply a medium, a way for Beatriz to connect or unite with the Other and to experience the physical fulfillment of her desire. As Beatriz declares, “La mujer que amó a Ralph era la misma que amó a Cat y sé que será difícil comprender, para quien no lo haya vivido, que amó del mismo modo al uno que a la otra. Que no hubo grandes diferencias en lo que hacíamos. Que la fisiología no determinó nunca la mecánica amorosa. Que yo nací persona, y amé a personas” (The woman who loved Ralph was the same as the one who loved Cat and I know that it will be difficult to understand, for someone who hasn’t lived it, that she loved the one and the other in the same way. That there were no great differences in what we did. That physiology never determined the mechanics of love. That I was born a person, and I loved people) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Indeed, Beatriz’s desire for multiple sexual partners adds another dimension to the representation of female desire in the novel. It defies the normative expectation of monogamy, as does
the fact that Beatriz feels no self-recrimination for it. Her need to keep it a secret is more for fear of others’ judgments than because of any qualms of her own. She gets something from both of her partners; with Cat, Beatriz experiences desire as an experience of melting, which turns her into “átomos minúsculos” (miniscule atoms), whereas with Ralph her desire is a process of synchronization, control, and rhythm that gives her the awareness at the macro level of “la maravilla de mi propio cuerpo tenso” (the marvel of my own tense body) (Etxebarria 1998, 215–16). Her experiences with both lovers give her a never before enjoyed sense of happiness, a way to close the gap in the search for wholeness, even as it places her outside the realm of social normativity and signification.

Beatriz comes to the realization that she must accept who she is before she can be a healthy being who is part of a couple, because “el tiempo nos ofrece sólo dos opciones: o asumir lo que somos o abandonar” (time offers us only two options: either become or abandon who we are) (Etxebarria 1998, 265). This acceptance does not constitute settling into a fixed lesbian or bisexual identity; quite the opposite. Throughout the novel it is the incongruity of her “strangeness,” the fact that she is a “chica rara” (strange girl) who does not fit into any preconceived mold of femininity or sexuality, that has been causing her much angst. She has tried unsuccessfully to hide her difference, yet that difference consists not in her being a lesbian but precisely in the fact that her desire has no name. Now, at the end of the novel, she comes to accept herself as a “chica rara” and to recognize what she is looking for in the object of her desire and affection. She states, “Ahora sólo espero renacer de mis cenizas y disfrutar de ciertas brasas de pasión, … el calor conocido de los labios y la serenidad tantos días encontrada en unos ojos en los que ya no brillan ni la ansiedad ni el deseo excesivos.… La paz, a fin de cuentas. O el amor” (Now I only hope to be reborn from my ashes and enjoy certain embers of passion, … the known heat of lips and the serenity found so many days in eyes in which there no longer shines excessive anxiety or excessive desire.… Peace, after all. Or love) (Etxebarria 1998, 256). Invoking the image of the phoenix, Beatriz aims to rise from the ashes of the traumatic experiences of her past and move forward. The phoenix implies the notion of constant renewal, of the cyclical destruction of the old self and the rebirth of the new. Contextualized as it is, this image reinforces Beatriz’s conceptualization of the self as mutable and in a perpetual state of transformation. She has realized that she is looking for intimacy, peace, love, and desire, but it must be noted that this specific kind of desire is, from Beatriz’s perspective, gender-free.

Erotic desire, for Beatriz, is the medium through which she can conduct the search for a new identity outside the realm of the definitions of normative discourse. It is a longing to return to an imagined pre-gendered state, to fill the void left by being forced out of an imagined equilibrium of androgyny that existed in her mind at some point before birth. She feels split into an incomplete gender, imperfect because it is limited by social norms and regulations that do not allow for a fluid expression of self and sexuality (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Beatriz’s desire is in reality the craving for “la perfección de un estado primordial, un estado de fuerza y autonomía anterior a lo masculino o a lo femenino” (the perfection of a primordial state, a state of strength and autonomy before masculine or feminine) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Her experience of femininity is problematic because she never felt that she fit in with the other little girls at school, and always had to pretend. She declares that femininity must be redefined, and implies that the essentialist notions of the feminine as attached to a body that is presented in a certain way with certain clothes are false. The social constructions of masculine and feminine are at the root of most of the social angst and internal conflict expressed in the novel. Beatriz resists them, declaring, “No quería ser la mitad de uno” (I didn’t want to be the half of a whole), a statement that refers to both the idea of being a part of a monogamous couple and to being female in a binary construction of gender (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Indeed, the expressions of
masculinity and femininity for Beatriz are seen as existing on a sliding scale. Rather than being a question of essential characteristics, Beatriz declares that it is all a question of degree, that there are an infinite variety of “matrices de gris” (shades of gray) (Etxebarria 1998, 137). At the same time, she senses the restricting reality of normative discourse that attempts to break the world into two. She says, “Sentía una profunda nostalgia de un ideal que llevaba dentro, quizás más inexistentente que perdido, y creo que buscabla Totalidad a través del sexo, añorando dolorosamente una reunificación que sabía de partida imposible, mero deseo de fusión” (I felt a profound nostalgia for an ideal that I carried inside, perhaps more inexistent than lost, and I think I looked for Totality through sex, painfully missing a reunification that I knew from the outset was impossible, mere desire for fusion) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Her sexual desire, then, is an attempt to reconcile this division, to reach a place of infinite possibility within herself.

The body becomes the problematic site wherein this search for totality plays out. Beatriz’s body has been a site of discord and discontent, from the violence that she has received at the hands of her father to the self-inflicted pangs of hunger as she engages in a regimen of anorexia. As Jessica A. Folkart indicates, the bodies in this text are attached to a notion of internal and external exile and alienation within a cold world, represented by the metaphor of space that is alluded to in the title of the novel and the constant references to celestial bodies, satellites, and outer space (Folkart 2004, 45). Folkart uses the ideas of Elaine Scarry and her crucial work *The Body in Pain*, wherein Scarry discusses the way pain dehumanizes individuals, as well as the manner in which discourse can objectify that pain. Discourse has the potential to give a subject the ability to share painful experiences with others and hence achieve some modicum of healing. From this perspective, then, Beatriz’s narration of the metaphorical and literal pain of her past is a cathartic experience. In Folkart’s view, the act of telling creates a stable object, the narration of past memories, through which Beatriz can measure herself as a subject by means of distancing herself from those recollections. In this way, Beatriz gains an identity and “becomes a body that talks as she struggles to create cohesive intimacy, surmount spatial chasms, and adjust her perspective to comprehend the other bodies that drift within her atmosphere” (Folkart 2004, 45).

Yet the body is not only a site of pain for Beatriz, but also a place of transformation, mutability, and of course sexual desire, although the latter is intimately connected to the search for connection with other people who surround her. The body for Beatriz is a space that is at once a personal site for self-definition, the border between the self and the world, and the site that marks the confining social constructions of femininity she finds so detrimentally limiting and pointless. For this reason, she attempts to deny the transformation of her body from the flat angles of girlhood to the matured curves of adult womanhood through fasting. Her anorexia gives her a “placer del rechazo” (pleasure of rejection) because, as she herself says, “el ayuno constituía una prolongada resistencia al cambio, el único medio que yo imaginaba para mantener la dignidad que tenía de niña y qué perdería como mujer. No quería ser mujer” (fasting constituted a prolonged resistance to change, the only way that I imagined to maintain the dignity that I had as a girl and would lose as a woman. I didn’t want to be a woman) (Etxebarria 1998, 36). Her refusal to eat and her need to remain thin are a part of her struggle against a system that treats women as second class, with less dignity than a child. As Everly notes, the body in *Beatriz* is used to interrogate “a gender system that has in fact become outdated” by emphasizing the “impossibility of identity residing in the body or in its performative function” and in the way that the body’s shaky identification “questions gender as a legitimate device in sociological relationships” (Everly 2001, 174). Beatriz’s body becomes a site of this resistance, a place to enact the desire to break free from the constraints placed upon it by normative discourse.

This is done precisely through Beatriz’s attempts to mold an androgynous body for herself. While on the
one hand her body is her means to express and experience her desire for sexual fulfillment, it is also a way for her to attempt to realize her desire for a pregendered self, a self that has not been socialized in a detrimental way, through the process of changing her physical form. In point of fact, for Beatriz the androgynous body is “la visión más erótica” (the most erotic vision) that she has ever seen, a statement that underscores yet again the overarching message of the narrative as Beatriz comes of age, namely, that the ideal body and the ideal representation of desire are genderless, without socially constructed containment (Etxebarria 1998, 35). I would take Everly’s argument one step further, in that in my view it is not simply the body but rather desire acting through the body that drives this attempt to construct a pregendered or ambiguously gendered state. The body acts as a medium, a tool, for the redefinition of a desire that challenges gender norms and the consequent expectations of heteronormative sexuality.

It must be noted, however, that the objects of Beatriz’s desire are coded as masculine (Ralph) and feminine (Cat, Mónica). While Beatriz confounds her labeled gender and disconnects it from her desire, the people who are her love-sex interests (Cat, Mónica, and Ralph) still function within the system of normative expectations as to how heterosexual and homosexual masculinity and femininity are delineated. This is not some kind of oversight in the novel, but rather a device that serves to outline even more clearly that Beatriz exists within a gendered social structure, which will not accept her as non-gendered, and that demonstrates her liminality in relation to this structure. Nevertheless, the transformative and transgressive aspects of Beatriz’s attraction to and behavior with Cat and Ralph, and her cognitive recognition that she does not fit, lie in her constant refusal to perform or cite the normative expectations of her gender and its supposedly correlated desire.

In other words, Beatriz can neither fit into nor comprehend compulsory heterosexuality and its dictated connection to gender performance. The “blurriness” of her desire illustrates precisely the constructed nature of these interwoven institutions. Then again, in her refusal to adhere to culturally coded forms of femininity, and in her rejection of the heteronormative expectation that her being labeled as a female woman is supposed to entail within normative discourse (i.e., that as a “woman” she must desire “men”), she illustrates that such a connection is neither natural nor all-encompassing. Gender and desire turn out to be disconnected from each other in Beatriz’s performance, as is any notion of a specific box into which that desire can fit.8 Whereas Beatriz’s love interests and the world around her do remain within a heteronormative framework, Beatriz’s refusal to define herself as heterosexual, homosexual, or even bisexual attempts, not to replace gender and sexuality with some utopian universal ideal, but rather to negotiate a less fixed version of gendered, heteronormative society through what I call a mis-citation of normative expectations of her desire. Beatriz’s understanding of her gender performance and the fluid manner in which her desire both fits and does not fit within this performance produce precisely this kind of marginal and ambiguous expression that is a new, unnamed form.

This reconceptualization of a female desire that defies normative conceptualizations of sexuality, whether hetero- or homosexual, marks the way in which Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes inscribes a female desire that is inherently a mis-citation of gender and sexual norms. Recalling the idea that the gender and sexuality of a person are created through the constant citation or “regulated process of repetition” in the “performance” of gender and heteronormative desire (Butler 1999, 185), the inscription of female desire in Beatriz can be seen as a mis-citation of these norms because of the way that it refuses or neglects to conform to their standard forms. Although it creates significant angst in the protagonist, this mis-citation acts as a moment of critical agency within and against the bounds of normative discourse that, by the end of the narrative, gives Beatriz a sense of purpose and a feeling of ownership of the act of refusing to adhere to normative
conceptualizations of female desire and femininity. What is most interesting is that mis-citation within Beatriz is also iterated and reiterated constantly. In effect, as Beatriz repeatedly expresses a desire that has no name and that, like her heart, is “algo borroso, indefinible, indescifrable” (something blurry, indefinable, indecipherable), she effectively performs an identity that is a mis-citation in itself (Etxebarria 1998, 221). The difficulty lies in the fact that Beatriz exists within the boundaries of normative discourse, but her desire acts in resistance to those limits, creating a new space through the agency of desiring. Beatriz’s desire pushes the margins not only of normative concepts of desire but also non-normative ones, creating the potential for an ambiguous concept of female desire that defies concrete classification.

Hence Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes is a text that interrogates normative conceptualizations of female desire and critiques the ideas of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles in general in the context of a society that is postfeminist in the negative sense, a society blind to the inequalities that exist in the established gender binary. It is not just that Beatriz is sometimes active and sometimes passive in her desire, or rather, it is not only that she is both active and passive, but instead that the expression of desire in Beatriz as a female desiring subject is not presented in terms of a duality but rather in terms of a flowing affect that knows neither gender nor boundaries. Desire is not to be limited to a gender, nor to a specific box of femininity, masculinity, or even androgyny. It is presented as a highly distinctive experience of sensuality and longing, and is inevitably blended with self-identity and the development of an adult individuality. The transgressive characteristic of Etxebarria’s inscription of desire through the character of Beatriz resides in the fact that the “package” no longer matters, the desire is not defined in terms of the desired object’s gender, which in normative terms is what determines the sexuality and therefore the gendered identity of the desiring subject.

By refusing to accept a single sexuality, the character of Beatriz breaks new ground in the literary conceptualization of female desire. As Vanessa Vitorino Ceia argues, Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes, along with the rest of Etxebarria’s work, rejects binary gender categories not because they do not exist but rather because they do not represent the individuality of any person (Vitorino Ceia 2006, 9). Such conceptualizations of sexuality, gender, and desire are supported by Etxebarria’s La Eva futura/La letra futura. Etxebarria’s feminist essays, her presentation of sex and desire in Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes, and her unmasking of the inner workings of cultural production through a conscious use of the elements of popular culture and consumerism, make her a key author for understanding the discourses of sexuality circulating at the end of the twentieth century. Beatriz strives for gender anonymity, which she sees as “la última transgresión” (the ultimate transgression) (Etxebarria 1998, 214). The conceptualization of gender and desire as fluid categories, as presented in Etxebarria’s work, creates a goal of desire that is free to choose its object regardless of gender. In this way, Beatriz rejects the negative version of the postfeminist female subject who is co-opted into accepting an unequal sexual contract. Instead, the character of Beatriz points in the direction of the other side of this kind of postfeminism by inscribing a female desire that transgresses the boundaries of that contract. In the end, it is the goal of an open and unbounded desire that constitutes the true ultimate transgression of Lucía Etxebarria’s writings.

Notes

1. Etxebarria’s first novel, Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas, published in 1996 and later made into a motion picture, established her interest in the question of femininity and explored different “models” of women—housewife, busi-
ness executive, free-spirited party girl—all within an end-of-the-century ambience of ambivalence, despair, and apathy. In Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes this sensibility is further developed, and Beatriz becomes a character that breaks the mold, unable to adhere to any of the types of femininity and sexuality offered to her in society, as discussed below.

2. All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

3. Importantly, the labeling of Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes as purely lesbian literature is too simple a classification, even if the novel did prompt an increase in the publication of such literature in Spain, because Beatriz confounds both homosexual and heterosexual definitions of gender and sexuality, as this article discusses.

4. As Etxebarria states, “Si esta juventud no parece mostrar excesivo interés por el mundo que les rodea, puede que sea porque el mundo que les rodea en nada les tiene en cuenta.... Esta generación se ha encontrado con un mundo en el que las antiguas ideologías de izquierdas, tras el fracaso de los regímenes comunistas, se han revelado ineficaces, mientras que el capitalismo ha dejado de significar la promesa de un desarrollo potencial” (If this youth does not seem to demonstrate excessive interest in the world around them, it could be because the world around them pays them no attention.... This generation has found itself in a world in which the old leftist ideologies, following the failure of the communist regimes, have revealed themselves to be ineffectual, while capitalism has ceased to signify the promise of a potential development) (Etxebarria 2007, 127–28).

5. As Judith Butler argues, “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (Butler 1999, 30). For her part, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick illustrates how our notions of homo- and heterosexuality are necessarily based on a binary notion of gender, which is blind to any forms of gender or sexuality that do not fit this binary (Sedgwick 1990, 31).

6. Butler describes the social experience of an ambiguous subject, stating, “As a result the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the ‘I’ becomes to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable” (Butler 2004, 3).

7. Halberstam develops the theory of “gaga feminism” inspired by the gender-queer performances of the extremely famous and popular American music artist of the early twenty-first century known as Lady Gaga. Halberstam states that “gaga feminism” is not a mere close reading of Lady Gaga’s gender-bending public displays but rather “uses the meteoric rise to fame of Lady Gaga to hint at emerging formulations of a gender politics of a new generation. This feminism is invested in innovative deployments of femininity and finds them to be well represented by pop performances characterized by their excess, their ecstatic embrace of loss of control, and a maverick sense of bodily identity” (Halberstam 2012, xiii).

8. This disconnection illustrates precisely the kind of malleability of gender that Judith Butler argues must be traced in the field of gender studies. In Undoing Gender Butler declares, “it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories [is] put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable” (Butler 2004, 216).

References

Bermúdez, Silvia. 2002. “Let’s Talk about Sex? From Almudena Grandes to Lucía Etxebarria, the Volatile Values of the


Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory
Susan Archer Mann, University of New Orleans

Abstract: This article first traces the history of unhappy marriages of disparate theoretical perspectives in US feminism. In recent decades, US third-wave authors have arranged their own unhappy marriage in that their major publications reflect an attempt to wed poststructuralism with intersectionality theory. Although the standpoint epistemology of intersectionality theory shares some common ground with the epistemology of poststructuralism, their epistemological assumptions conflict on a number of important dimensions. This contested terrain has generated serious debates within the third wave and between second- and third-wave feminists. The form, content, and political implications of their “unhappy marriage” are the subject of this article.

Keywords: third-wave feminism, feminist theory, feminist epistemology

Copyright by Susan Archer Mann

Introduction

US feminism has a long history of living through unhappy marriages. In the nineteenth century the doctrine of coverture governed marriage laws across most of the United States. Under this doctrine, once a man and women married they were considered one before the law. This “one” was the husband who controlled the property and income of the household and had the right to chastise his wife and children. The famous “Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments,” established in 1848 at the first women’s rights conference in the United States, directly attacked this doctrine. It enumerated various ways in which men established “tyranny” over women, including “taking from her all right to property, even to the wages she earns” and “making her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead” (Stanton [1848] 2005, 72).

Mirroring the doctrine of coverture, in the late twentieth century the term “unhappy marriage” virtually became a cliché for feminist theorists’ attempts to wed contradictory or disparate perspectives where one approach came to dominate the other. In the early 1980s, Heidi Hartmann referred to the “unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism” to criticize how Marxism (like the husband) dominated feminism (the wife) because class trumped gender in Marxist feminists’ understanding of women’s oppression (Hartmann 1981). In the early 1990s, Cheshire Calhoun discussed the “unhappy marriage of feminist theory and lesbian theory” in her critique of how patriarchy was given greater salience than heterosexism in second-wave radical feminism ([1994] 2003). These feminist critiques were leveled against hierarchicalizing oppressions or treating one form of oppression as more important than another. Both Hartmann and Calhoun urged feminists to clearly distinguish between different forms of oppression and not to treat one form as simply derivative of the other.

Controversies over hierarchicalizing forms of oppression are rare today, given the powerful impact of feminisms that focus on differences between women and the multiplicity of oppressions they experience. Key voices in the rise of this feminist scholarship of difference were those of US women of color who highlighted the “simultaneous” and “multiple” nature of oppressions as the “most significant contribution” of their
approach (Smith 1983, xxxii). Rudimentary forms of intersectional analysis existed during the first wave. However, it was not until the second wave that this approach came to be known by a number of specific names, such as the women-of-color perspective (Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 1983); intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989); and US Third World feminism (Sandoval [1991] 2003). Despite its long history, intersectional analysis—whether viewed as a theory, a method, a metaphor, and/or a politics—only began to gain hegemony in US feminist thought in the 1980s, following the publication of such signal works as the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement” (1977) and This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa ([1981] 1983). Interestingly, it was second-wave women of color who first used the term “third wave” to distinguish their intersectional approach—although this particular moniker was seldom used (Springer 2002, 1063).

Other theoretical perspectives that became more prominent within US feminism in the 1980s and 1990s—postmodernist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial feminisms—also focused attention on polyvocality or the multiple voices generated by diverse vantage points on social reality (Grant 1993; Fuss 1989; Mohanty 1984). Like intersectionality theorists, they too ushered in calls to deconstruct essentialist conceptions of “woman” and to decenter feminisms that spoke only to the interests of women of privileged classes, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and/or global locations. All of these polyvocal feminisms rested on epistemologies that fundamentally challenged and shook the foundations of modern scientific thought. As a result, the former trend toward seeking universal “truths” and theoretical convergence gave way to the recognition of multiple “truths” and theoretical pluralism (Cheal 1991, 153). This momentous change is stated quite simply in the title of Sandra Harding’s influential book on feminist epistemologies, Is Science Multicultural? (1998).

A number of observers have referred to this focus on difference, deconstruction, and decentering as a “paradigm shift” in feminist thought because of its radical break with earlier feminisms (Barrett and Phillips 1992; Hekman 2004; Mann 2012). In their aptly titled book, Destabilizing Theory, Michèle Barrett and Ann Phillips write:

> The founding principles of contemporary western feminism have been dramatically challenged with previous shared assumptions and unquestioned orthodoxies relegated almost to history. These changes have been of the order of a “paradigm shift,” in which assumptions rather than conclusions are radically overturned. (1992, 2)

**Grounding the Paradigm Shift Socially**

> Toward a history of the vanishing present.
> — Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

The social grounding of this paradigm shift has both global and national dimensions. The rise of the scholarship of difference has been linked to new social movements that fostered the collapse of the Euro-American West’s hold on its colonial empires in the post–World War II era and sharpened conflicts *within* European and American societies. In the United States these conflicts spawned the anti–Vietnam war movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the lesbian and gay rights movement, and the Black, Red, and Brown power movements of African-Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos/as (Lemert 2004). Such attempts to decenter both the West globally and dominant groups within Western nations were important triggers for this paradigm shift.

Yet, in a more profound sense, the shift to a focus on difference, deconstruction, and decentering reflects the seismic changes in social conditions wrought by postmodernity (Mann 2012). Globalization and
digitalization have been signal features of this new world order. Not only has globalization unsettled and blurred national boundaries, but it has decentered the First World’s industrial working class. In the face of the offshoring and outsourcing that accompanied increased US corporate investments abroad, the United States deindustrialized. Between 1965 and 1985 alone, the manufacturing share of US total employment was cut in half and real male wages experienced their sharpest reduction ever in a two-decade period when US gross domestic product was advancing (Thurow 1996, 223–24). In turn, US women entered the labor force in record numbers to buttress their household incomes. The rise in low-paying service jobs provided employment not only for US women, but also for large numbers of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. In the 1990s, over a million immigrants were entering the United States each year, with women making up an increasing percentage of this foreign labor (Macionis 2011). That feminists have been focusing more attention on race, ethnicity, and global location reflects the changing demographics of the US labor force, the feminization of migration, and the increasingly global nature of the division of labor (Mann and Huffman 2005).³

Marked advances in globalization were made possible by the growth of the new digital, microchip, and satellite technologies that annihilated previous barriers of time and space. These new technologies dramatically quicken the distribution of ideas, which flash by with a speed that makes them difficult to unpack. Moreover, their ability to create simulations and virtual realities blurs the lines between artifice and reality (Baudrillard 1983). In such a swirling sea of signs and symbols, it is no wonder that in many contemporary theories discourse appears to have inordinate power or that a major theoretical device used to decode such messages—deconstruction—has become a buzzword in social thought (Agger 1998, 125).

Although such technological developments have been ingenious, science and technology in general have been subjected to intense critical scrutiny by social theorists in recent decades. Their rational means, which earlier theorists claimed would promote social progress, created major risks that plague our planet today, such as environmental pollution and nuclear arms. As the irrationality of rationality became more visible, increasing skepticism was directed toward the rules governing scientific inquiry and what is deemed as credible knowledge. Feminist Jane Flax called this the “end of innocence” in terms of viewing science as the key to truth and social well-being (Flax 1992). Indeed, the deconstruction of science by new feminist epistemologies revealed the hidden fingerprints of power underlying scientific inquiries and engendered a radical uncertainty in regard to what constitutes “truth” and whose “truth” is privileged.

The latter topic is the primary subject of this article. The unhappy marriage examined here took place after this paradigm shift in feminist thought and was arranged by US feminist authors who published under the banner of the third wave. I call it the “unhappy marriage of poststructuralism and intersectionality theory” because these two perspectives, which inspired their writings, have conflicting epistemologies that make the marriage untenable.

Who Is the “Third Wave”?

I am the third wave...
— Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave” (my emphasis)

In the 1990s, the US women’s movement witnessed a resurgence of feminist activism and scholarship among a new generation of feminists so large and unexpected that some referred to it as a “genderquake” (Wolf 1994, 25). Although debates have ensued as to whether this resurgence of feminism constitutes a “new” wave (Berger 2006) or whether this oceanography of feminist waves is even useful (Mann 2012, xvii–xviii), the third wave has become the banner under which many women identify their new brand of feminism.⁴
Clearly, demarcating exactly who constitutes the third wave is not without difficulty. Its constituents have been referred to in myriad ways that often focus more on their age or generation than on their contributions to feminist theory or activism. Many of the early writings of self-identified third wavers used specific dates of birth, for example between 1963 and 1974 (Heywood and Drake 1997), while other writers used collective designations such as “Generation X,” the “twenty-somethings,” or the “Jane Generation” (Kamen 1991; Johnson 2002). Mother-daughter tropes also were used to describe these feminists’ relationship to their second-wave predecessors, often resulting in themes of generational conflict and rebellion (Quinn 1997; Henry 2004). However, as these young women aged and new recruits joined the third wave, birth dates and generational criteria became less useful for distinguishing this new wave of feminism. Some observers even warn that generational accounts of feminism provide a tool for dividing the feminist movement (Berger 2006) and/or fostering an antifeminist backlash (Gillis and Munford 2004, 177–78).

Other writers have suggested using the notion of a “political generation” to designate the third wave. The key to political generations is that they reflect the life experiences and concerns of a particular historical moment—the moment when a person becomes politicized; thus, a political generation could include more than one chronological generation (Whittier 1995, 15). No doubt there is much to learn from historically grounding the discourse of third-wave feminism in the turbulent, uncertain social conditions of postmodernity, especially given the stark differences between the political and economic conditions faced by both the second and the third wave when they entered their respective adulthoods (Sidler 1997; Heywood and Drake 2004; Mann and Huffman 2005).

In contrast to the ways of designating the third wave I have outlined above, this article focuses on the theoretical assumptions employed by US feminist authors who identify as belonging to the third wave. While it is doubtful that all US feminists who mobilize under this banner share a uniform perspective, their major publications share a number of theoretical and epistemological assumptions that reflect an attempt to merge the two feminist frameworks by which they were heavily influenced: poststructuralist feminism and intersectionality theory. This view of US third-wave theory was first described by Deborah Siegel in “Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism’s Third Wave,” where she discussed how these earlier perspectives “shaped the form and content of third wave expressions” (1997a, 46). My analysis examines these theoretical links more closely to highlight their epistemological assumptions and to expose the contradictions entailed in merging the two feminist frameworks. It must be emphasized that calling the approach of third-wave authors a synthetic derivation does not mean it lacks originality. Rather, it is the complex ways in which they interweave these earlier feminisms that make their third-wave agenda novel.

It may seem ironic to focus on third-wave authors’ theoretical perspective when their writings have been described as without theory. One review of Rebecca Walker’s signal work, To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995), portrayed her anthology as “not a book of feminist theory,” but rather “a very personal book filled with anecdotes about individuals’ own struggles” (Haslanger quoted in Siegel 1997a, 67). A harsher critic referred to the contributors to Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation (1995) as “amateur memoirists” who confuse “feeling bad” with oppression and who “believe their lives are intrinsically interesting to strangers” (Kaminer quoted in Siegel 1997a, 67). Katha Pollitt’s article, acerbically titled “The Solipsisters,” labeled third-wave publications as “self-absorbed writings” that naively assume “personal testimony, impressions and feelings are all you need to make a political argument” (quoted in Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 19–20). Even avid supporters of the third wave, such as the editors of Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 20th Century, state that “it is time to move beyond personal accounts to political and collective action” and urge their peers to use personal experiences “as a bridge to larger political and theoretical explorations” (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 13).
No doubt, the preferred genre of third-wave authors—personal narratives—is a difficult form of writing from which to unravel theoretical assumptions, precisely because these narratives are so individual and subjective. Nevertheless, “claims that the third wave is a theory-free movement ... are epistemologically naïve, historically inaccurate, and, ultimately, misinformed” (Siegel 1997a, 49). There are common threads running through these narratives that weave together the underlying theoretical fabric of third-wave feminism. Siegel refers to these threads as “common tropes, images, motifs, narrative patterns and general issues of concern” (1997a, 51). By whatever name, they reveal the theoretical ground shared by the agents of this wave. Though “third-wave feminism” remains a contested concept, I concur with a recent analyst that despite conflicts over definitional issues and inconsistencies in its usage, the phrase “third wave” is meaningful insofar as several dimensions are repeatedly associated with it and these cohere to the extent that it is feasible to regard them as a distinct form of feminism. (Budgeon 2011, 4)

Yet, because these repeated assumptions are less obvious, we have to read between the lines, so to speak, to discover this less explicit or “embodied theory” (Bordo 1993, 184–85).

This study, then, follows in the footsteps of authors such as Deborah Siegel (1997a, 2007), Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (2003), Astrid Henry (2004), and Shelley Budgeon (2011), who analyzed major publications of feminists who identify as belonging to the third wave.5 This textual analysis should not be read as a metonymic view of the US third wave in which only one part of its practices—major published works by its authors—is taken to represent all of its visions and voices. Rather, the narrow parameters of this study entail certain limitations. First, using major published works privileges those voices and silences other diverse sites of theorizing such as zines, blogs, art, or music by which third wavers have made their voices heard. Second, published works are often written by college-educated women, thereby introducing a class bias, given that only about thirty percent of adult US women 25 years and older have a four-year college degree (Macionis 2011). Third, although the implications of various theoretical assumptions for political praxis will be addressed, this is not a study of US third-wave activism—a massive task beyond the scope of this article. Fourth, focusing on the United States ignores new directions in third-wave thought undertaken by feminists in other countries. For example, less visible in US third-wave publications are the materialist approaches embraced by some European feminists (Van der Tuin 2011) or the transnational approaches used by various contributors to international anthologies such as Defending Our Dreams: Global Feminist Voices for a New Generation (Wilson, Sengupta and Evans 2005) and Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration (Gillis, Howe and Munford [2004] 2007). Indeed, given time, it is likely that we will speak of different third-wave feminisms, just as we speak of different feminisms within both the first and second waves. However, this study is limited by focusing only on the theoretical assumptions most characteristic of US third-wave publications to date.

In defense of this limited textual analysis, it is important to acknowledge that much feminist critical analysis in the past (whether of authors in the first, second or third waves) has addressed major published works as signaling (if not representing) important insights into the theoretical and epistemological foundations of different feminist frameworks. In turn, many authors of the works examined below have become major spokespersons for the US third wave at international, national, and local conferences and workshops, as well as in the mass media, which—rightly or wrongly—gives their voices privilege and currency.
Tracing a Lineage to Intersectionality Theory

I stand on the shoulders of women like Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and Luisah Teish....
— Veronica Chambers, “Betrayal Feminism”

In recent years, closer scrutiny of “intersectionality” has revealed both its complexity and its misuse (McCall 2005; Hancock 2007; Choo and Ferree 2010; Nash 2010; Alexander-Floyd 2012). Without entering into this dense debate, suffice it to say that I use intersectionality both as an “idea” and as an “ideograph” (Alexander-Floyd 2012, 3). In this article, I primarily refer to intersectionality as a specific theory or idea that focuses on and explicates the simultaneous and intersecting or co-determinative forces of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism in the lives of women. In turn, I discuss the political implications of this specific theory and, therefore, address intersectionality in the ideographic sense of a broader project focused on social justice theorizing and action (Alexander-Floyd 2012, 4–5). As will become more apparent below, I share Nikol Alexander-Floyd’s view that women of color often “disappear” when the epistemological assumptions underlying intersectionality are ignored, thus reversing the original intent of those who pioneered intersectional analysis (Alexander-Floyd 2012, 17–18).

Many third-wave authors, regardless of their own racial or ethnic backgrounds, trace their lineage to the US second-wave women of color who forged intersectionality theory. For example, in Third Wave Agenda (1997), editors Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake state, “It was US Third World Feminism that modeled a language and a politics of hybridity that can account for our lives at the century’s turn” (1997, 13). Daisy Hernández, Bushra Rehman, and Cherrie Moraga, the editors of Colonize This! Young Women of Color in Today’s Feminism (2002), describe their anthology as “continuing the conversations” first initiated by second-wave intersectionality theorists (2002, xxi). In Feminist Fatale (1991), Paula Kamen acknowledges that the “authors with the most undeniable influence on my generation ... are women of color” (Kamen 1991, 17). One of the more poignant testimonies to this influence appears in Veronica Chambers’s “Betrayal Feminism” (1995), which critiques other forms of second-wave feminism while lauding the work of intersectionality theorists:

When I bought Barbara Smith’s Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, I carried it like a prayer book. It was in this book that I first read Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, June Jordan and Luisah Teish. When I read Michelle Cliff’s “If I Could Write This Fire, I Would Write This Fire,” the title alone reverberated in my head like a drumbeat. (Chambers 1995, 24)

Chronicler of the third wave Astrid Henry argues that intersectionality theorists’ central insight into the simultaneous, interlocking nature of multiple oppressions has been “the second wave’s most influential and vital lesson” for the third wave (2004, 32).

Common Epistemological Ground

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century a paradigm shift has been under way in epistemology, a movement away from an absolutist, subject-centered conception of truth to a conception of truth as situated, perspectival and discursive.

Because there is not one feminism but many feminisms, feminists do not always agree on epistemological positioning. To date, the major feminist epistemologies have been divided into three camps that hold distinct positions on who can be knowledge producers and how knowledge is produced. These three epistemological
camps—empiricist, standpoint, and postmodern—have been discussed at length by various scholars (Harding 1993 and 2005; Hekman 2004; Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser 2004). I argue that many US third-wave authors wed approaches with analytically distinct epistemologies, given that poststructuralism embraces a postmodern epistemology while intersectionality theory employs a standpoint epistemology. Below I focus on the common ground shared by these epistemologies to better understand third-wave authors’ attempts to merge them.

First, the epistemologies of intersectionality theory and poststructuralism both embrace a strong social-constructionist view of knowledge. This means they highlight the relationship between knowledge and power, as well as how people construct knowledge from different social locations, such as their race, gender, class, and global location. Because all vantage points are socially situated and perspectival, both of these epistemologies embrace polyvocality or the inclusion of many voices or vantage points in their construction of social reality.

Second, common ground is visible in the joint call of these epistemologies for the excavation and retrieval of subjugated knowledges as critical acts that undermine dominant discourses. These are the knowledges of subordinate groups that have been buried, ignored, silenced, or deemed less credible by dominant groups. Poststructuralist Michel Foucault referred to them as “naïve knowledges,” not because they are naïve in themselves but rather because they are treated as such by dominant groups (Foucault 1984, 81–82).

Evidence of third-wave authors’ commitment to polyvocality and the retrieval of subjugated knowledges can be found in most major third-wave publications. For example, the editors of third-wave anthologies are careful to include authors of subjugated and diverse races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities (although their diversity by social class is less apparent). Anthologies such as To Be Real (1995), Listen Up (1995), and Colonize This! (2002) exemplify this approach to voicing difference. More recently, contributors to “Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert” (2010) went even further to examine the difficulties or “sticking points” of polyvocal, intersectional analyses and political praxis (Nash 2010). They point, for example, to how organizations committed to these politics sometimes “implode” because of the difficulties of working across differences within the group (Van Devin and Kubala 2010). They also suggest ways of addressing these difficulties that enable both diversity and dissent.

A third feature shared by standpoint and postmodern epistemologies is the recognition that there is no such thing as value neutrality in social research and analysis. This is well stated in third-wave feminist Julie Bettie’s award-winning book Women without Class: Girls, Race and Identity (2003). Bettie discusses how her generation grew up amid the “crises of ethnographic authority” that posed a challenge to the ideal of an impartial science (Bettie 2003, 17). Her ethnography recognizes that researchers do not offer a “view from nowhere” or what other critical analysts call the “God trick”—pretending to be a detached, neutral observer who sees from everywhere and nowhere (Bettie 2003, 22).

A fourth terrain of common ground is that these epistemologies recognize the reflexive nature of knowledge. People both construct knowledge/discourses and are constructed by them—what Sandra Harding referred to as a “co-constructionist view of knowledge” (Harding 1998, 4). Hence, authors must acknowledge how their social locations influence their knowledge claims and be accountable for how their knowledge claims may influence other people. On the one hand, third-wave writers’ preference for personal narratives reflects their commitment to such authorial accountability and transparency. Personal narratives are one of the more transparent ways of acknowledging authorial presence and one’s role in the construction of knowledge. On the other hand, rather than speaking for other women, third wavers resist using the foundational claims of the second-wave feminist “we” (Siegel 1997b, 57). This critical stance
stems from the deconstructionist techniques of postmodernism and poststructuralism, as well as from the critiques by intersectionality theorists of the second-wave “sisterhood” that too often spoke for “all women” and ignored difference. Consider the words of third-wave feminist Jee Yeun Lee:

> These days, whenever someone says the word “women” to me, my mind goes blank. What “women”? What is this “women” thing you’re talking about? Does that mean me? Does that mean my mother, my roommates, the white woman next door ... half of the world’s population? (quoted in Siegel 1997a, 57–58)

A fifth epistemological feature shared by poststructuralism and intersectionality theory and embraced by third-wave authors is the call for a broader description of the activity that customarily qualifies as theoretical, pointing to multiple sites of theory production both inside and outside of the academy. For example, second-wave intersectionality theorists elevated the value of socially lived knowledge or the knowledge garnered from everyday life. In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins refers to this knowledge as “wisdom” as contrasted to formal education (Collins 1990, 208). In *Tapestries of Life: Women’s Work, Women’s Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Life* (1989), Bettina Aptheker points to the importance of socially lived knowledge and what she calls the “dailiness” of women’s lives. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde makes the case that poetry is a “distillation of experience” that can serve as an emancipatory project for women (Lorde 1984, 37). Similarly, in “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian argues that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic”:

> Our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. (Christian 1988, 52)

This defense of multiple sites, forms and foundations of theorizing also can be found in third-wave writings. In “Producing Sex, Theory, and Culture: Gay/Straight Remappings in Contemporary Feminism” (1990), Katie King speaks of how the academy often privileges certain types of theory production and leaves others unacknowledged or deemed lesser.

Some analysts of third-wave texts argue that “the majority of third-wave feminists have been quick to define themselves as primarily non-academic” (Gillis and Munford 2004, 168). In particular, third-wave authors critique the abstract, abstruse language of academia as failing to meet the needs of women “outside the ivied gates” and as draining ideas of their relevance to the real world of politics and action (Wolf 1994, 125). For example, third-wave authors Veronica Chambers and Joan Morgan highlight distinctions between the socially lived knowledge they drew from their everyday lives and the academic knowledge they acquired in women’s studies classes (Chambers 1995; Morgan 1999). In her third-wave hip-hop classic *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999), Morgan, like Chambers, expresses her gratitude to the university curriculum that exposed her to the works of women of color. However, she wants a feminism that speaks to young Black women, the way that hip hop does: “If feminism is to have any relevance in the lives of the majority of black women ... it has to rescue itself from the ivory towers of academia” (Morgan 1999, 76). Because her critique is leveled at both white feminist theorists and feminist theorists of color, one observer writes:

> Morgan seems to suggest that academia is like a bleaching agent, inevitably whitening those who choose it as a career path. Whiteness and intellectualism both have the same effect, a feminism that is out of touch with young black women. (Henry 2004, 155)
A similar critique of academic feminism can be found in the third-wave anthology edited by Jessica Yee, *Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism* (2011). A number of contributors to this book (including Yee) are indigenous women who experienced racism and classism within the university system and felt that abstract theory, even the “hot language of intersectionality,” did not “change their walk”—it neither reduced the racism they experienced nor translated well into social-justice activism (Yee 2011, 12). They found that their academic experiences entailed various colonialist features, which enhanced their feelings of being other and lesser and fractured their own understandings of the world in ways that silenced their native cultures (Yee 2011, 16–17; Williams and Konsumo in Yee 2011, 28–29; Cruz in Yee 2011, 54–55). Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak labeled this latter form of violence “epistemic violence” in her various efforts to decolonize feminist thought produced, in Chandra Mohanty’s words, “under Western eyes” (Spivak 1987; Mohanty 1984). Spivak and other postcolonial theorists have done much to explain the very processes that Yee and her contributors simply describe. And, while describing difference certainly allows feminists to bear witness to the operations of power, “it does not analyze the mechanisms by which these systems of exclusion are replicated and re-created” (Nash 2010, 2). The latter is the role of theory.

It is ironic that Yee found intersectionality to be too academic to be politically useful when intersectionality theorists have been among the most vocal US feminists in criticizing how academic theories and scientific discourses have been used against women of color. A number of these theorists chafed at how the elitist and exclusionary language of various feminist theories performed powerful gatekeeping functions that excluded women of color (Collins 1998; Di Stefano 1990). However, unlike Morgan and Yee, they did not call for feminism to rescue itself from the ivory tower. Rather, they called for a broadening of what is meant by theory and the recognition of how both socially lived knowledge and academic theory feed and revitalize each other. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses both the importance of theory and how “Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought” (Collins 1990, 33). Similarly, in “Theory as a Liberatory Practice” (1994), bell hooks criticizes those who “trash” theory and who praise “speaking from the gut” rather than in the abstract as promoting a “false dichotomy between theory and political practice” (hooks 1994, 65). She highlights how theories entail important ideas, thoughts and visions. In her words, “Making theory is the challenge before us. For in its production lies the hope of our liberation....” (1994, 75). Ironically, it is not intersectionality theorists but rather scholars who use the most abstract and abstruse prose—postmodernists and poststructuralists—who are most wary of theory, as I will discuss next.

**Tracing a Lineage to Poststructuralism and Its Stepchild Queer Theory**

Do not commit a master narrative....

— Brian McHale, “Postmodernism, or the Anxiety of Master Narratives”

Postmodernists and poststructuralists are wary of metanarratives and generalizing theories, because they view these discourses as moves for power or dominance rather than as attempts at greater clarity. Foucault, for example, discussed how different ways of specifying knowledge and truth can restrict or enable writing, speaking, thinking, and acting. He offered a politically laden view of theory, science, and truth where “truth” becomes multiple and suspect.

Under the assumptions of a postmodern epistemology there is no single truth but many different truths situated in different discourses, none of which have any greater claim to epistemic privilege or “truth” (Hekman 2004, 229). Foucault’s work further points to how theories—even emancipatory theories—are often blind to their dominating tendencies (Ramazanoglu 1993).
It appears that some third-wave writers found these ideas particularly fertile grounds for analyzing feminism itself. Claims that feminism (especially second-wave feminism) is a disciplinary and regulatory discourse that restricts individual freedom and sits authoritatively in judgment over women’s ideas and practices can be found in a number of third-wave publications (Henry 2004, 39). Barbara Findlen, editor of *Listen Up*, describes how her peers think that “if something is appealing, fun or popular, it can’t be feminist” (1995, xiv). Some third wavers embrace Girlies who reclaimed the word “girl” to address what they saw as the antifeminine, anti-joy features of the second wave. For them wearing pink, using nail polish, and celebrating pretty power makes feminism playful and fun. “A lot of what Girlie radiates is the luxury of self-expression that *most second wavers didn’t feel they could or should indulge in...*” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 161; my emphasis). The refrain that second-wave feminists are their “serious sisters” is echoed by other third-wave writers (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 161).

A far more damning description of second-wave feminism is voiced by Rebecca Walker in *To Be Real*:

A year before I started this book, my life was like a feminist ghetto. Every decision I made, person I spent time with, word I uttered had to measure up to an image I had in my mind of what was morally and politically right according to my vision of female empowerment. Everything had a gendered explanation, and what didn’t fit into my concept of feminist was “bad, patriarchal, and problematic.” (Walker 1995, xxix)

In the “Afterword” to *To Be Real*, second-wave theorist Angela Davis describes with amazement (and some skepticism) how most contributors to this anthology felt feminism had “incarcerated their individuality—their desires, aims, and sexual practices” and characterizes this disciplinary feminism as an “imaginary feminist status quo” (Davis in Walker 1995, 281).

The imagery of incarceration evokes Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon prison. In this model prison, a few guards (located out of view of the prisoners in a high circular tower) could gaze down upon the inmates and their activities. Whether or not guards were present, the effect was to “induce in the prisoners a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assured the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1979, 201). The result of this internalized, prescriptive panoptical gaze was to make the prisoners their own jailers (Foucault 1979, 155). For Foucault, this technique of power was prevalent in modern societies where people internalized powerful, prescriptive discourses about what is “normal” or “abnormal,” “sane” or “insane,” “healthy” or “pathological”; thus, self-policing becomes a major means of control.

In “Unpacking the Mother/Daughter Baggage, Reassessing Second- and Third-Wave Tensions” (2002), Cathryn Bailey uses Foucaultian imagery to discuss how feminism can be experienced as a repressive form of power and authority:

Many younger women see themselves as struggling against becoming the kind of feminist subjects they thought that they were supposed to become. As such, they may be offering a kind of resistance that is not immediately directed at actual feminists, but rather to an internalized version of a feminist governor—a “panoptical feminist connoisseur.” (Bailey 2002, 150)

Another of Foucault’s modern techniques of power—the confessional—is employed by Gina Dent in her article “Missionary Position” (1995). Here, she likens feminism’s ostensible political correctness to how missionaries told people of other cultures that the “missionary position” was the only proper way to have sex. Although she never mentions Foucault, his imprint is clear in her discussion of feminism as both austere and disciplinary. Dent argues that, once we demand a particular form of feminist practice, confession becomes “not only a dynamic within feminism, but a means of policing its borders” (Dent 1995, 71).
Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake offer a different analysis of why second-wave feminism’s “master narrative” of patriarchal oppression has become “useful only in some contexts” (2004, 18). They discuss how globalization and deindustrialization resulted in not only downward mobility for most Americans but also income parity for most men and women of their generation. For this reason, they maintain that women of Generation X “have more in common with men of their own age group than they do with women of previous generations” (2004, 16). Because their generation also was “raised on a multicultural diet” (2004, 16), they argue that third wavers are more likely to branch out into other movements for social justice that reflect their commitment to intersectional differences, a claim echoed by other third-wave authors (Labaton and Martin 2004, xxxi; McCanty in Reger 2005, 201; Dicker 2008, 126–27). Feminism as a political movement thus becomes “less visible” but “more widely dispersed” (Heywood and Drake 2004: 20). This localized and scattered view of feminist activism, coupled with such dismissals of systemic patriarchal oppression, raises important issues about how political praxis and power are conceived.

Different Conceptions of Power and Political Praxis

Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere.
— Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?”

If we delve deeper into third-wave epistemological assumptions, we detect other conflicts and contradictions between the standpoint epistemology of intersectionality theory and the postmodern epistemology of poststructuralism. While these issues have been hotly debated by second-wave feminists, they seem to have fallen on deaf ears in the third wave. Take, for example, the debates published in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society in 1997 and later reprinted in Harding (2004). Here Patricia Hill Collins highlights how an intersectional standpoint epistemology focuses on vantage points as group phenomena:

First, the notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences.... I stress this difference between the individual and the group as units of analysis because using these two constructs as if they were interchangeable clouds understanding of a host of topics.... (Collins 2004, 247–49; original emphasis)

In contrast, a postmodern epistemology deconstructs all group categories as essentialist. For example, Judith Grant argues that “groups are not cut out of whole cloth”; they have “no single voice or vision of reality” but rather are made up of people with heterogeneous experiences (Grant 1993, 94). This argument has critical implications for many feminist frameworks, including intersectionality theory. Even though intersectionality theorists called into question the essentialist category of “women” as ignoring differences between women by race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, a similar critique could be leveled against their own group concepts, such as Collins’s “Black feminist thought” or Gloria Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza consciousness” (Collins 1990; Anzaldúa 1987).

Poststructuralist-inspired queer theorist Steven Seidman speaks directly to these issues when he discusses how even “the assertion of a black, middle-class, American, lesbian identity silences differences in this social category that relate to religion, regional location ... to feminism, age or education” (Seidman 2000, 441). Here differences are infinite and each individual is potentially unique. In contrast, for Collins, the notion of standpoint refers to groups who have shared histories because of their shared location in relations of unequal power and privilege. They are neither groups based simply on identities chosen by individuals nor groups analytically created by demographers, bureaucrats or scholars. For her, to call for
the deconstruction of all group categories in the name of critiquing essentialism is simply to move to a “language game of politics” (Collins 2004, 248 and 252–53).

Intersectionality theorists also make clearer distinctions between oppression and difference. For them, not all differences are axes of structural social oppression. For example, both intersectionality theorists and poststructuralists speak of “marginalized” peoples. Yet the former anchor this concept in hierarchically structured, group-based inequalities, while poststructuralists often are referring to people whose behaviors lie outside of or transgress social norms. This latter conception of “margins” includes a much broader swath of people where the normative structure rather than structural relations of oppression is determinate. Indeed, not all countercultural lifestyles and politics reflect the historical, institutionalized oppressions highlighted by intersectionality theorists; even groups such as the Michigan militia or the Ku Klux Klan are marginalized groups in terms of transgressing norms. This is why Collins argues that, when scholars took the postmodern turn, “conceptions of power shifted—talk of tops and bottoms, long associated with hierarchy, were recast as flattened geographies of centers and margins” that “rob the term of oppression of its critical and oppositional importance” (Collins 1998, 129 and 136). Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests that such “flattening” of intersectionality results from the absence of a structural and political critique (quoted in Berger and Guidroz 2009, 70).

Following in the footsteps of their theoretical father Foucault, poststructuralists and queer theorists also deconstruct identity categories, arguing that they are restrictive fictions that should be jettisoned as a basis for politics or, at the very least, opened up for critical interrogation (Butler 1990; Seidman 2000). A number of third-wave authors adopt their view of identities as restrictive (Senna in Walker 1995, 20; Heywood and Drake 1997; McCanty in Reger 2005):

We fear that identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad.... (Walker 1995, xxxiii)

In contrast, intersectionality theorists such as the Combahee River Collective view multi-axis identity politics as the “most profound and potentially most radical politics” and they choose sides against their oppressors without hesitation ([1977] 2005, 313). For them, coalitions are the major means for building a social movement based on difference. Crenshaw’s article on identity politics makes clear her rejection of single-axis identity politics. However, she describes the “postmodern idea” of viewing identity categories as socially constructed fictions as a “vulgarized social constructionism” that reveals how power is exercised through the process of categorization but fails to understand the social and material consequences of this categorization ([1995] 2005, 539). Thus, she finds it dangerous for guiding political praxis. Rather, she argues: “At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it” ([1995] 2005, 539). Similarly, Nikol Alexander-Floyd highlights how “Women of color feminists generally support identity politics centered on complex, negotiated understandings of group interests” (2012, 11; my emphasis). Indeed, a theory and politics that views freedom as “living in the happy limbo of nonidentity” (Foucault quoted in Grant 1993, 131) would make women of color invisible.

Many third-wave writers also follow poststructuralists and queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) to focus on transgressive acts as outlaw performances that challenge and subvert (Heely 1996; Delombard in Walker 1995; Stoller 1999, 84). This is most visible in third-wave writings on sexuality and sexual practices. Nan Bauer-Maglin and Donna Perry, editors of “Bad Girls”/“Good Girls,” describe “sexuality
in all its guises” as the “lightning rod of their generation’s hopes and discontents,” likening it to how civil rights and the Vietnam war galvanized the generation of the 1960s (1996, xvi). In her most recent book, *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild* (2007), Siegel describes how third-wave writers celebrate their “sexual bravado” and revel in a “feminist badass” image (2007, 124 and 155–57). Queer theoretical assumptions are prevalent in the works of third-wave authors who embrace a profusion of gendered subjects as well as a lusty, “no sex toy unturned” approach to sexual practices (Stoller 1999, 84). As one analyst put it, “the term ‘queer’ has been used to mark a new formulation of politics for this new generation of feminists” (Henry 2004, 115).

Yet, the crux of queer theory is “resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner 1993, xxvi; Duggan 1992; Halberstam 2005). Precisely because the coercive effects of the normative structure can be felt even in the most innocuous social interactions, poststructuralists and queer theorists point out how “power is everywhere” and “can even come from below” (Foucault 1980, 93). For example, in *GenderQueer: Voices from beyond the Gender Binary*, Riki Wilchins describes how she felt the normative surveillance of gender transgression when she was purchasing a newspaper or sitting on a bus (Wilchins in Nestle, Howell and Wilchins 2002, 51). In short, queer scholars focus heavily on a micropolitics of resistance (such as performance politics) rather than on hierarchical, structural power relations and macrostructural change.

Along with third-wave authors who embrace queer theory’s focus on micropolitics and dismissal of identity politics, other third-wave authors explain their commitment to local action and rejection of identity politics as stemming from different reasons. In regard to cultural activism—another major site of third-wave activism—Heywood and Drake claim that creating their own media sites and networks as forms of “localized,” “radical dispersal” better resists “co-optation by global technoculture” than does identity politics (2004, 20). In contrast, for intersectionality theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, an “overemphasis” on local politics “flies in the face of actual historical successes” and “undercuts” political activism (1998, 135). She views the postmodern focus on the local as the most effective terrain of struggle as seductively deceptive. By erasing macrostructural power from their purview, activists can appear to challenge oppression, while “secretly believing such efforts are doomed” (Collins 1998, 135).

Moreover, rather than the group concepts embraced by intersectionality theorists, a strong strain of individualism characterizes many third-wave publications. As Heyward and Drake write, “Despite our knowing better, despite our knowing its emptiness, the ideology of individualism is still a major motivating force in many third wave lives” (1997, 11). Over a decade later, Shelley Budgeon describes third-wave authors as still “privileging individual experience” and even names one of her chapters in *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* “A Politics of Self” (2011, 103 and 191). This individualistic approach is visible not only in the third wave’s “penchant for personal narratives” (Springer 2002, 1060), but also in many third wavers’ “do-it-yourself” (DIY) approach to feminism. No doubt, the DIY approach can be empowering when it motivates feminists to take action to accomplish their goals. However, the notion that feminism as a political movement can be an individual’s DIY project has disturbing implications for collective action. Consider the words of Marcelle Karp, co-editor of *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (1999):

We’ve entered an era of DIY feminism—sistah, do-it-yourself—and we have all kinds of names for ourselves, lipstick lesbians, do-me feminists... No matter what the flava is, we’re still feminists. Your feminism is what you want it to be and what you make of it. (quoted in Karp and Stoller 1999, 310–11)
This view of the third wave is echoed in Astrid Henry's article “Solitary Sisterhood” when she describes third-wave texts as “replete with individual definitions of feminism” (2005, 82).

In contrast, intersectionality theorists embrace neither an individualistic nor a relativistic feminism. Over two decades ago, bell hooks criticized feminist relativism in her book Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (1984):

Currently feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The “anything goes” approach to the definition has rendered it practically meaningless. (...) such definitions usually focus on the individual’s own right to freedom and self-determination. (hooks 1984, 23)

hooks is especially critical of feminism being viewed as a “lifestyle choice” rather than as a “political commitment” (hooks 1984, 27). She argues for a feminism defined in “political terms” that stresses collective rather than individual well-being and that calls for social revolution rather than simply personal lifestyle reform (hooks 1984, 23). Additional critiques of the political inefficacy of postmodern relativism can be found in Collins’s Fighting Words (1998).

In contrast, relativism is embraced in Rebecca Walker’s anthology To Be Real (1995). In this anthology, not only can one find authors who want “to be free” to engage in vigilante violence and to eroticize the violent rape of a child with a baseball bat, but Walker views as “liberating” these authors’ “courageous reckoning” with such “anti-revolution acts” (meaning acts that most second-wave feminists would criticize) (Walker 1995, xxxviii). She writes:

If feminism is to continue to be radical and alive, it must avoid reordering the world in terms of any polarity, be it female/male, good/evil. (1995, xxxv)

The contributors to “Polyphonic Feminisms” (2010) also suggest that multiple truths can “work together to create a coherent whole” according to their concept of “polyphony,” derived from a musical term that describes the way multiple melodies can “co-exist without dominance” (Van Deven and Kubala 2010, 3). It is not clear what these authors mean by “dominance” here. While they explicitly welcome diversity and dissent, their fear of “dominance” suggests a reticence to judge other feminists’ ideas as less valid or credible and a preference for a sanguine, even if noisy, political pluralism.

Yet standpoint theorists have long argued that feminists must be able to adjudicate or judge between competing knowledge claims in order for theory to guide political practice. Dorothy Smith, for example, argues that if knowledge is to have an impact on politics, “there must exist the possibility that one account can invalidate another” (Smith 1987, 121–22). In “High Noon in Textland” (1993) and “Telling the Truth after Postmodernism” (1996), she mocks the political impotency of a postmodern relativist epistemology. Similarly, Sandra Harding claims that epistemological relativism opens up a Pandora’s box for any and every viewpoint to claim legitimacy, even those harmful to the interests of women or other oppressed groups; for her, relativism is an “anathema” to feminism (Harding 1993, 61). Indeed, the idea that feminism should avoid making any judgments as to good or evil, right or wrong, belies its role as a politics. What are politics but the methods by which people make decisions about what is right and wrong, fair and unfair, equal and unequal, and what should be done to resolve, reform, or transform these situations?

In Catching a Wave (2003), third-wave analysts Dicker and Piepmeier suggest a more nuanced approach. They consider it fine for third wavers to challenge a restrictive notion of feminism not of their own making. They also agree with opening up and broadening the notion of feminism to make it appealing to a more diverse array of women. However, in their view, the absence of any boundaries on what feminism means “empties feminism of any core set of values and politics” and results in a “feminist free-for-all”: 
If everything and everyone can fit within the third wave—it doesn’t matter what they actually think, do or believe.... This is the worst interpretation of bell hooks’ edict that “feminism is for everybody,” it implies that anybody can be a feminist, regardless of her or his actions. (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 17)

The Lived Messiness of Third-Wave Authors’ Epistemological Stance

The lived messiness characteristic of the third wave is what defines it....

— Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, Third Wave Agenda

Unlike earlier studies that often focused on generational criteria to define the third wave, this study has highlighted the theoretical and epistemological assumptions of major US third-wave publications as an alternative way of understanding third-wave discourse and its implications for political praxis. I have argued that US third-wave authors created an unhappy and untenable marriage by wedding two approaches—poststructuralism and intersectionality theory—that have distinct and contradictory epistemologies. I’ve discussed their common ground as well as their contested terrain in terms of the importance of theory; the value placed on individualism versus collectivism; their different conceptions of power and political praxis; and whether embracing relativism results in a localized, radically dispersed, and anything-goes politics. As documented in this study, other analysts of third-wave texts have identified many of these same issues before. However, none have traced them in such a detailed way to their deeper epistemological roots.

It is said that third wavers “live comfortably with paradox” (Siegel 2007, 143) and value contradictions or their “lived messiness” as a means to a more open and inclusive feminism (Heywood and Drake 1997, 8; Dicker 2008, 103). This would be fine if the messy conflicts and contradictions embodied in the epistemologies of their major publications did not lead to serious political (rather than generational) disconnects with other feminists that “have widened, rather than narrowed” over time (Siegel 2007, 161). Some third-wave authors, such as the contributors to “Polyphonic Feminisms” (2010), are more astute at recognizing the difficulties of working through these contradictions to build a movement based on difference. Yet, they still “preserve a hope for collective engagement” (Sameh 2011). However, if the individualism and relativism of this unhappy marriage’s postmodern epistemological legacy prevail, cacophony rather than polyphony will result, and we will be left with scattered forms of resistance marching to different drums.

This is a particularly serious issue today when, within the United States, the most politically organized response to the radical insecurities engendered by postmodernity have come from the right rather than from the left, in the form of the various groups that united under the rubric of the Tea Party. Their calls for small government and privatization have already dismantled many government jobs and social services that affect the lives of women and children, not to mention their warmongering, imperialist stance, and their hostility to reproductive freedom, LGBTQ issues, and immigrant rights. While the Mad Hatters in this Tea Party were able to mobilize in a collective, mass-based movement, feminists seem unable to follow suit, even though this right-wing populism is an immense threat to those in social locations marginalized by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and global location.

Choosing between a postmodern path that embraces an anything-goes feminism or developing a body of politics that enables us to act collectively appears to be one of the most important issues confronting feminists today. Whether voiced in Joan Morgan’s hip-hop language that “sistahood is critical to our mutual survival” (1999, 232) or in the playful words of the Girlie admirers, the message is the same: “Without a body of politics, the nail polish is really going to waste” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 166). Otherwise, instead of “making tidal waves together” we will end up simply “splashing in different pools” (Siegel 2007, 161).
Notes

The author wishes to thank Oxford University Press for giving her permission to draw from Chapters 1, 5, 6, 7, and the Conclusion of Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity (2012).


2. See McCall (2005), Nash (2010), Hancock (2007), Choo and Ferree (2010), and Alexander-Floyd (2012) for a discussion of various ways in which “intersectionality” has been used and misused.

3. Castles and Miller (1993) coined the term “feminization of migration” to refer to the phenomenon of women making up an increasing proportion of immigrants.

4. See, for example, the poem by Alix Olson and the article by Lisa Jervis in Berger (2006).

5. Though Budgeon is British, she addresses many writings by US feminists in Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity (2011).

6. Many contributors to this anthology are indigenous women from Canada. They are included here because First Nation women do not always recognize the same juridical nation-state boundaries that my US-focused perspective observes.

7. Ironically in the context of this discussion, Spivak is known for using and defending an abstruse style and theoretical language (Morton 2003, 5–6).

8. One wonders how third-wave activists will avoid the problem of feminist issues being treated as less important in other movements for social justice, an experience shared by their predecessors in the abolitionist movement and in the anti–Vietnam war and civil rights movements.

9. Only a few queer theorists have questioned the political efficacy of this deconstructive dismissal of identities. Notably, Judith/Jack Halberstam rejects “happily casting off” identities as a “neoliberal” notion of “uniqueness as radical style” (2005, 19).

10. For a discussion of the empowering potential of a DIY approach see Klein in Heywood and Drake (1997) and Duncan in Reger (2005).


12. Deborah Siegel views these disconnects as resulting from a “generational divide” (2007, 161). In contrast, I argue they reflect a political divide stemming from different theoretical and epistemological assumptions.

References


Di Stefano, Christine. 1990. “Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism.” In *Feminism/Post-


Yee, Jessica, ed. 2011. *Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism.* Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.