



EVERYWHERE & NOWHERE

TEMPORARY FEMINISM IN THE UNITED STATES

JO REGER

Everywhere and Nowhere

Contemporary Feminism
in the United States

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To my family who taught me how you can be small but mighty, fight cancerous foes, always be ready to rescue and make beauty out of life's driftwood. I thank you for all your lessons.

Acknowledgments

ONE OF THE nice things about finishing a book is having a moment to reflect upon the incredible journey of researching, thinking, writing, and revising, revising, revising. I have had the extraordinarily good fortune to be surrounded by a community of scholars, friends and family who have supported and encouraged me during this entire decade-long project. Some have been constants in my life and others are newly discovered but each is equally treasured.

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Everywhere and Nowhere

Introduction

The Everywhere and Nowhere of U.S. Feminism in the Twenty-first Century

WHO ARE WE?

The Forum for Women is a matrimony of outspoken, ballsy girls. We're pissed. We're driven. We're going to get things done. Raise your hand if you dare. We may just enlighten you. We are the third wave of feminists who aren't afraid to stand up, step forward and get on top of that damn soapbox. We understand what it means to be ourselves. We have what it takes to raise our voices and tell it like it is. We know what we want, and by any means, we'll get it. We're tired of making sixty-four cents to their dollar. Our attitudes and opinions are anything but timid. Boys, don't worry, we're not man-eating barbarians. We like men. They're okay. However, some of us like women more. A lot more. Our message is haunting. Tongue-in-cheek. Risqué. Loud. Witty. Feminine. We're a kaleidoscope of cultures and backgrounds. Some of us fancy skirts while others opt for jeans and sweatshirts. But we all have one thing in common. We love being women. And quite frankly, we love our vaginas. Unabashedly outspoken, we are the luminous, uncompromising women of this generation. We will not allow for those women who came before us to be forgotten. We're inspired by our foremothers; for all of their contributions and achievements. Together, we will make a difference. We have what it takes. We are more than just the Forum for Women. We are a family.

That's who we are.

—Student group, Forum for Women
Woodview University, 2005

At a university in the Midwest, Jaclyn, the twenty-year-old vice president of Forum for Women (FFW), pens these words as the mission statement for her group. To Jaclyn and the other group members, becoming a feminist is a powerful

statement in their lives—one that explains the forces of injustice, prejudice and discrimination in the world around them. However, their enthusiasm for feminism can be puzzling when juxtaposed against the constant negative hype about contemporary feminism. Written in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the group's belief that feminism is relevant as a life-empowering ideology stands in strong contrast to the pervasive public discourse that feminism is dead, and no one, particularly young women, is interested anymore. This contradiction between the adoption of feminism and antifeminist declarations is not a new phenomenon. Social commentators have continually seen feminism as “nowhere,” meaning no longer relevant or present in American society. Obituaries for feminism reoccur throughout the history of the movement. For example, the movement, after activists obtained the right to vote in 1920, was declared dead by the 1950s, due to media reports of happy homemakers who had no interest in feminism.¹ A contemporary obit is the 1998 *Time* magazine's cover story, “Is Feminism Dead?” complete with pictures of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and TV character Ally McBeal in which the author claimed, “If feminism of the '60s and '70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.”² This quote illustrates that in addition to death notices, ridicule is also an aspect of the media's relationship with the women's movement. Take, for instance, the history of the Riot Grrrl uprising in the Northwest in the early 1990s. The emergence of a young, punk-infused feminism quickly became the focus of “dismissive, sexist and condescending” media coverage.³ This coverage was so dismaying to women prominent in Riot Grrrl organizations that they declared a media blackout. While it effectively shut down the ridicule of feminism, it also ended any cultural discussion of the continued vitality of feminism.

Contemporary obits continue this combination of silencing and ridicule by stating that the nationally visible, organized and institutionally focused (alive) feminism of the 1960s and 1970s is gone and in its place is a (dead) apolitical feminism concerned with dress, appearance, and individualized empowerment.⁴ Titles such as “Where to Pass the Torch?” (*New York Times*, 2009) and “The End of the Women's Movement” (*The American Prospect*, 2009) continue to surface in the media.⁵ But why these repeated declarations of the end of feminism? Feminist scholars argue that these notices are not so much an appraisal of the movement but instead a strategy aimed at silencing it.⁶ Myra Marx Ferree argues that movements that seek to change societal values, ideas and norms often face “soft repression,” which she defines as the “means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas.”⁷ Regardless of their intent, these obits serve to make young feminists who continue to identify and work in the movement invisible to the mainstream public.

While the declaration of the death of feminism is not new, there is a new twist. A number of older feminists are stepping forward to label contemporary feminism as apolitical and ineffectual. For example, longtime feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin addressed young feminists at the 2002 Veteran Feminists of America conference by saying:

We were action-oriented in a public, political context. We had to challenge laws, change patterns, alter behavior. Being able to bare your midriff . . . is fine as an expression, but it doesn't mean things are going to change.⁸

Phyllis Chesler, another longtime feminist, starts out her essay, "The Failure of Feminism," with the line "Is feminism really dead? Well, yes and no."⁹ Pogrebin and Chesler are not antifeminists; instead they are two of many older activists who see young feminists as too concerned with the popular culture. They charge contemporary feminists with being too involved in sexual empowerment ("being able to bare your midriff") and feminist consumption (such as buying into Nike's slogan of "Just Do It"),¹⁰ and not engaged enough in legislative or policy change efforts. Aligned with the notion that contemporary feminism is nowhere (i.e., dead) is the idea that feminism is also "everywhere."

"Everywhere" in this context is the idea that as social movements continue over long periods of time, their ideas and goals are pervasive, becoming a part of everyday cultural beliefs and norms.¹¹ Just as contemporary feminists exist in a time when they are told feminism is nowhere, they also live in a time where feminism is everywhere. For example, I examine a college town on the East Coast where a feminist student group exists on paper but languishes in terms of activity. Lots of self-identified feminists in the community know of the group but seldom engage directly with women's rights issues. Instead their attention turns to issues of racism, homophobia and transgender rights. Yet when you question them about these issues, they view feminism as the root of their activism. Here feminism maintains its relevance but is submerged into other movements, issues and groups. Feminism, in this context, is a set of ideas and identities diffused into the culture and structure of society, and informs, sometimes unconsciously, the actions of these college students. In this community, as feminist authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards are often quoted, "Feminism is like fluoride, it is simply in the water."¹² Or as Ednie Kaeh Garrison describes it, feminism is in the airwaves around us.¹³ Important in both of the metaphors and in this college town is the idea of feminism as present and active, yet undetected—everywhere and nowhere.

In this book, I examine the vitality and continuity of the U.S. women's movement and explore the idea of a "nowhere-everywhere" feminism through an investigation of community-level activism. I explore how feminism is created in

three different feminist social movement communities as a way of understanding how the movement continues to challenge the status quo and mainstream society on issues related to women's rights. These three feminist communities, in the Midwest, East Coast and the Northwest, vary in some aspects but also have similarities. The communities differ in the relevance of established feminist organizations and the relationship to other feminist generations. In terms of similarities, activists in all three communities continue to embrace feminist identities, adopt mainly culturally focused tactics and strategies, and struggle with issues of racism, inclusion and gender fluidity. All contain multiple layers of the movement from the presence of national groups to the creation of local organizations and grassroots networks—although in different formulations.

These differences and similarities I argue are the result of a political generation shaped by the cultural and political environment in a community context. A political generation is a group of people who share a similar political awakening brought about by societal changes. Political opportunity theorists posit that movements emerge and respond to favorable (or unfavorable) openings in the social environment.¹⁴ As such, community environments can be hostile to activists' goals or facilitate them. For example, open or accepting political fields may include sympathetic elected leaders, the existence of related groups and organizations, or a community tradition of progressive politics. Hostile, or closed, political fields may contain political leaders or organizations antagonistic to activists' agendas. These openings or opportunities can also be cultural in nature.¹⁵ For example, Kimberly Dugan in her study of a local antigay ballot proposal illustrates how gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists lost a cultural battle against conservative Christian forces when Christian groups drew on the cultural opportunities (e.g., images of gay and lesbians wanting "special rights") available to them to create a more "believable" public image that helped uphold the ballot proposal.¹⁶ Holly McCammon and her colleagues also found that the cultural context of a movement, in their case women's right to serve on juries, shaped the discourse of their struggles. They call this "a discursive opportunity structure," which shapes how movement actors put forth arguments.¹⁷ This example illustrates how community environments can be hostile toward, neutral about or accepting politically and culturally of movements, which in turn shapes the way in which a political generation of activists does activism.¹⁸ Applying these concepts of generations and opportunity structures allows me to see the diversity of feminist communities as opposed to painting all contemporary feminism in broad strokes.

By focusing on the community level, I offer a corrective to perceptions of the U.S. women's movement solely based on observations of a nationally organized feminist presence. A community analysis captures how feminism has always

existed on multiple levels, from the national chapters to the grassroots networks, within feminist communities. This complexity is captured by Steven Buechler's concept of "social movement community" and Raka Ray's concept of "fields of action." Buechler argues that movements have always contained a variety of organizational forms and networks, and in social movement communities, activists are loosely connected through formal and informal organizations and networks. They share in a set of beliefs, ideas and goals for social change, and interact with and respond to other actors such as the state, political parties and social movement organizations.¹⁹ Ray conceptualizes communities in a similar way, seeing them as places where activists function within a political field, which is defined as "a socially constructed environment [in] which organizations and activists constantly respond."²⁰

It is the community complexity of social movements that allow movements to continue even when declared in decline on a national level. In their article "Whatever Happened to the Women's Movement?" Verta Taylor and Suzanne Staggenborg argue that:

The women's movement survives to the extent that it has developed feminist "fields" in a variety of arenas, devised tactical repertoires that have challenged numerous authorities and cultural and political codes, and permeated other social movements and public consciousness.²¹

Taylor and Staggenborg point to the everywhere nature of feminist communities as important in the movement's continuity over time. By "permeating other social movements and public consciousness" in a variety of arenas, feminist communities are shifting contexts of interaction and response that contain multiple movement forms and tactics. By moving the analysis of the women's movement from a national organizational perspective, an examination of feminist communities offers a structural and cultural "slice" of multiple layers of activism from the national groups, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW), to the local organizations (such as Forum for Women) to the informally organized network of feminists. To understand where this sense of nowhere originates from, I examine the wave metaphor and how it shapes our understanding of U.S. feminism.

Rejecting the Wave Metaphor

One challenge in studying the continuity of U.S. feminism is the terminology used. The metaphor of ocean waves is central in most investigations of a feminist movement, evidenced by the common usage of it in articles and books.²²

U.S. feminism is often presented in a series of waves, with the first taking place in the 1800s, the second rising in the 1960s and 1970s and a third cresting in the mid 1990s. There have also been numerous efforts to identify a “fourth” wave, with one woman I interviewed asking me if I thought we were in the “fifth wave” yet.²³ The idea of a wave fits with how social movement scholars argue that social change efforts come in cycles.²⁴ However, the wave metaphor in the women’s movement is troubling to many. In 2010, the journal *Feminist Formations* dedicated almost sixty pages of essays by feminist historians critiquing the wave metaphor.²⁵ While it makes for a neat historical package when telling the history of the movement, the wave metaphor has been charged with leaving out the efforts of women of color, lesbian, poor and working-class women, “washing away” much of feminist history.²⁶ Too often, scholars charge, the history of the movement’s rise and fall becomes one of white, middle-class women who were visible nationally.²⁷ Other scholars point out that women who come to feminism between waves are left with no defining terminology for themselves.²⁸ To that end, as someone who came into feminism in the Reagan era 1980s, I have been known to call myself a feminist “tweener,” between the waves with no neat label. In addition, identifying by waves does not resonate with all feminists. As noted by Suzanne Beechey in her study of young women who work in feminist organizations, many had not heard of or did not identify with the idea of third wave; instead they chose to identify as simply “feminists.”²⁹ In addition, social movement scholars are increasingly critiquing the idea that movements only exist when they focus on state-centered political change.³⁰ Overall, when the metaphor focuses on waves of state-centered national mobilization and these waves are not evident, the movement is perceived as being in decline or nowhere.

As a scholar investigating feminism in the late 1990s and twenty-first century, avoiding the reification of the wave metaphor is not easy. It does not work to talk about “today’s feminism” (too temporally oriented) or “young” or younger feminists (too age oriented).³¹ To avoid reifying “waves,” I adopt the terms “contemporary feminism” (which still has some temporal connotations), referring to a feminist generation that emerges in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and “second-wave generation” to describe feminists coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s.³² These feminist generations are the result of experience, ideologies and identities forged by the time they are living in and not by rates of mobilization or a type of activism evident in the overall movement. While not all activist generations are defined by age, in the case of contemporary feminism, I find this to be largely true of the participants in the communities studied. While some argue “third wavers” are under the age of thirty, others argue that any age range leaves out activists and stereotypes feminists by age.³³ While I

agree that age ranges are problematic in characterizing contemporary feminism, age turns out to be an important factor in the communities studied.³⁴ The average age of the community respondents was 22½ years old in the college communities of the East and Midwest, with the Northwest having a slightly older population, the average being 26½ years old.³⁵ I speculate that this is because in earlier generations of feminism, particularly in the 1960s, women of all ages discovered it in a similar time span, often spurred by specific events. For current generations, feminism has been integrated into the U.S. landscape since the 1800s, leaving mostly a younger generation to come to a feminist identity for the first time.

Using the term “generation” allows me to situate different groups of feminists active in the movement without conceptualizing U.S. feminist activism as ending with one wave and beginning with another. By using the term “contemporary feminist,” I draw upon ways in which interviewees conceptualize different generations of feminism as coexisting, yet having distinct differences. With this terminology, the movement becomes one of overlapping generations instead of waves framed by temporal events. This follows the thinking of Lelia Rupp and Verta Taylor who argue “that waves do not rise and crash independently of each other” and neither do these generations of feminists.³⁶ To show this interconnection, I employ social movement concepts to illustrate how the second-wave feminist generation influences contemporary feminism. Although feminist historians argue that the movement’s history is problematic because of its reliance on waves as a central framework, I draw on various aspects of this history to illustrate the continuity and dynamics of the movement.³⁷

Theory, History and Contemporary Feminism

Overall, the movement has had periods of growth and accomplishment as well as times of backlash and low mobilization. Working within these times are generations of activists who come to see the movement in a particular way based upon their own contexts. Throughout its history, feminist issues and corresponding tactics and strategies have ranged from institutionally focused to those of personal empowerment and cultural change. Along with changing issues and tactics came variation in feminist identities and ideologies, creating a movement with a variety of structures from formalized local and national organizations to more amorphous groups and networks. Throughout it all feminists have continued to struggle with creating a diverse and inclusive movement. Overall, the history of U.S. feminism foreshadows the topics to come in this book, in particular ideas about continuity, movement structure, feminist

generations and identities, tactics and issues, and inclusion. I begin by describing how the U.S. women's movement has theoretically expanded conceptions of social movement continuity.

Movement Continuity and Organizational Diversity

How and when movements emerge, peak and decline are questions concerning social movement scholars. Often theories of movement continuity are based on activity within formal social movement organizations.³⁸ However, feminist scholars such as Taylor and Staggenborg, interested in revising and expanding conceptions of continuity, draw on the women's movement to propose a different view.³⁹ They argue that continuity emerges from movements with multiple organizational forms, not solely limited to visible, national formal organizations, and is maintained in fields where movement actors respond to and interact with the social context. These movement communities contain a variety of tactics, strategies and goals that continue to resonate with new generations of activists.

The history of the first-wave generation is one of national and local organizations with a long agenda of movement goals that narrow over time, changing as activists responded to shifts in the social and political environment. While the early years of the movement were primarily structured around formal organizations, activists also worked on issues through networks of women's church groups, clubs, missionary societies, the College Women's Alumnae Association and a coalition of working women.⁴⁰ Within these organizational structures, feminists entered the movement in different generations, sparked by new tactics, ideologies and a changing political and social environment.

The movement emerged during a time of social upheaval in the nineteenth century: a time of geographic expansion, industrial development, social reform and a growing debate on individuals' rights.⁴¹ As women became increasingly more visible politically, they attempted to work within the abolition movement and other social organizations of the 1830s. Outraged at their treatment of being shut out by their fellow abolitionists, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton held a convention for women's rights on July 14, 1848.⁴² At the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, both women and men drafted a Declaration of Sentiments and twelve resolutions demanding women's rights to determine their own lives, particularly in areas such as the law, marriage, employment and the church. What followed was a period of mobilization that led to the eventual development of multiple organizations and networks focused on women's rights with a goal of passing suffrage. In 1869, there was a split in the movement over tactical and ideological questions. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, longtime friends and well-known leaders, formed the National Woman Suffrage Association