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# Third Wave Feminism: A Response to dominant theorisations

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The text that follows is a response to a Third Wave Feminism symposium held at Swansea University, Jan 26th, 2007.

<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/english/gender/conferences/ridingworkshop1.htm>. The text is combination of interviews and analysis and attempts to give a different picture of dynamic feminist voices in the UK and Europe today.

## Third Wave Feminism: A Response to dominant theorisations

After attending an academic symposium at Swansea University on the 26th January, 2007 entitled *Riding the Third Wave: Recognising Difference*, I felt it necessary to offer a response to the discussions, definitions and theorisations of third wave feminism offered that day. Seemingly the only person in the room to define themselves as a 'third wave feminist,' I was frustrated by the overwhelming tones of negativity presented by the feminist academics there. It appeared that these scholars could only recognise what are, in my opinion, the very worst manifestations of post-feminist strategies (not surprisingly) granted visibility and intelligibility in popular culture. There was no effort at this symposium to uncover the multiple instances of grassroots feminist activism taking place nationally which, by necessity at present, operate independently of the mainstream media. What frustrated me the most was the insidious marginalisation, if not silencing of, activist voices and experiences within academic theorisations of 'the third wave.' This has serious implications for the writing of a feminist history of a present which is immobilising itself by refusing to look further than the television screen for evidence of engaged feminist activity in the world today.

To summarise the main points that frustrated me at the *Riding the Third wave* symposium:

Third wave feminism was portrayed as confused and lacking in political focus, emerging from a culture of apathetic, media enslaved individualistic young women wishing to cut themselves off from the past. Speakers theorised the current invocation of the third wave as supplanting previous movements, not a continuation of them. They were uncomfortable towards accepting the strategies of third wave 'effectively cloaking reclamations of identities such as 'girl/grrrl', such as those used within the youth feminist Riot Grrrl movement, as the very worst instances of immaturity. This wave's use of confessional writing in zines, offering testimonies of personal experience (much like the second wave), were seen as symptomatic of the self-indulgent stance presented by young women in contemporary Britain. There were glaring omissions from these theorisations, including from where these confessional writings were coming from: the examples offered that day were of black women and queer women mainly. There was a lack of sensitivity to the massive problem of articulating subjectivities for marginalised groups in society. As feminists (of either wave or no wave) we should not take it for granted that all women have access to a political voice, even if white women in academia (speaking largely through a master's discourse) offer convincing performances of articulation. We need to recognise the confessional writing of the third wave as part of a continuous strategy of women connecting and politicising other women through the mode of personal experience. The personal still can be the political.

Third Wave Feminism was described as being exclusively the realm of young women. This was done with little exploration of the different conditions in which young women today live their lives that make the positing of a different generational experience necessary in order to establish the concrete historical problems they may be facing. By annexing feminism to young women also alienates large amounts of women from ever participating in third wave activity. There seems to be a problem of collapsing generation — the actual age of women — and the particular historical conditions faced by a generation that can constitute a whole range of ages and other identity-like variables. While the former in my mind is less relevant, the latter greatly needs exploration in order to establish the specificity of a third wave feminist praxis.

There was also little critique of how late capitalism places demands and pressures on young women and men's subjectivities in popular culture. The picture presented that day was as if our lives were being lived in isolation from the very powerful patriarchal, capitalist socio-economic structures that exist and negatively impact upon the majority of people's lives today. This seemed to translate into a curious blaming of young women for the lack of vigorous feminist critique in popular culture. The whole symposium, in my opinion, severely lacked an ability to recognise and engage with the political language of third wave feminism which may not operate under traditionally recognisable codes of what politics looks like.

There were positive points to that day mainly emerging from a generalised concern for keeping alive and querying feminist histories. However the overwhelming tone of the day resided in negativity, and offered little avenues for seeing out of stalemate of what was defined as the state of feminist cultures today.

So to return to my initial feelings: I needed to respond to the gaping discrepancy between what is being represented in academia and what I feel is being lived outside of that arena. I want to provide counter narratives to challenge these dominant theorisations. I want to address the confusion, establish specificity and offer concrete examples of the multiplicity of third wave feminisms that exist today, politically active, engaged and offering alternatives to the dominant patriarchal, capitalist culture. I want to provide useful spaces of dialogue for both academics and activists (or indeed people who occupy both of these positions, or somewhere else/ inbetween) to tap into and generate productive debate that may result in political hope for feminists wishing to engage with revolutionary praxis in the 21st century.

In order to do this I knew a solely personal response would not be adequate. So, I devised a questionnaire that asked what I thought were interesting and necessary questions in relation to the topic of third wave feminism. Questions both addressed and ignored at the symposium. I wanted to retain the focus on history developed in the symposium because I believe it is through the active recovery and construction of history that feminism, and indeed all people's liberation movements, can realise a better present and future. I also compiled a questionnaire because it was clear to me that much research needed to be done and voices other than the academic one needed to be heard in relation to the question of third wave feminism. Nevertheless it has to be conceded that many of the respondents were either within academia, or had had some kind of contact with further education in their lifetime, so were comfortable to some extent with the theories and ideas I was asking them about.

This was partly because of the places I went to ask for questionnaire respondents. In order to get a research sample I contacted email networks I was part of; the large, trans-global European nextgeneration list and the more locally based feminist e-list in Cardiff where I live, Mind the Gap. I also contacted friends who I know through participating in feminist activist networks. When contacting potential interviewees I was asking for people who identified as third wave feminists. In response I often got people who didn't define themselves as third wave but were interested in the

topic.

I would like to strongly emphasise that by no means do I believe these answers to be representative of the third wave feminist positions, they are just the beginning of an engagement with the voices of women (no men completed the questionnaire) who may, or may not, define themselves as part of a third wave of feminist activism.

In the end I received thirteen questionnaires back, all of which had very different, thought provoking responses. All but one respondent lived outside of the UK. My questions deliberately engaged with personal experiences and were geared to provoke imaginative and creative responses. I was keen to uncover strategies too, so the questions were motivated by a desire for (collective) action. The questions were split into sections focussing on third wave definitions, history in general and activism:

1. Do you identify with the label '3rd Wave Feminist'? What does that category mean to you?
2. Do you see any political use in embracing such a label? Would another label be more useful
  - for this generation?
  - for you personally
3. By invoking the metaphor of the third wave, do you understand it as a
  - continuum with previous periods of intensified feminist activism?
  - Severing the ties with the past
  - Something completely different
4. If you reject the 3rd wave as an idea, do you also reject the idea of 2nd and 1st waves of feminist histories?
5. What relationship do you see queer activism as having to third wave feminism?
6. If I was to say that the following three things seem to be central to third wave feminist praxis (the merging of practise and theory) would you agree?
  1. The politics of self-organisation. Organising with others in an autonomous way
  2. Empowerment
  3. Voice & the personal still is the political
7. How do you feel about popular culture's representation of post feminism\*\*\* and women in the media? How much relevance do they hold for?
  - You personally
  - the rest of culture
8. How conscious are you of feminist histories?
9. Do you think it is important to remember and share these stories?
10. Are they a large enough part of the public consciousness?
11. What strategies can be deployed in order to make them so?
12. Can you describe the type of activism you are/ have been involved in?
13. If you are involved in a group, or have been in the past, can you describe what sort of organising methods do you use?
14. What do you find works best?
15. Describe your ideal world
16. Is there anything left you want to say?

In the pages that follow, I will try to do justice to the responses I received, while offering analyses of the statements along the way. Because I am keen to let the opinions speak for themselves, I will be quoting heavily from the responses I got back.

### Third Wave: Definitions

One of the biggest problems articulated in the symposium in Swansea was the lack of definition and confusion over what third wave feminism is. Some survey respondents echoed the symposium's sentiments: 'I feel third wave feminism in Britain is slowly arising but in a very confused and under confident manner. Its full of contradictions and lack of focus' (Rosie). While Sarah offers a slightly different perspective: 'I don't think it's peaked in terms of activity or results yet. It's a work in progress' (Sarah). Sarah's comment intimates toward one aspect of the wave theory that seems to me to be neglected: basically that part of what 'counts' as a 'Wave' is the sheer volume and build up of events and intensified feminist activity that eventually has an impact of popular consciousness and public culture (law, media, institutions, policy etc).

Sarah point also brings up another aspect that we need to consider when looking at feminist activism today. By stressing the importance of it being a work in process, it marks a shift in our understanding of cultural processes that do not have to be recognisable or immediate impact. Rosie also comments hopefully about the amount of feminist activism today: 'The network of women out there via women's groups and websites is far greater than I'd ever imagined' 'all women have been very open and supportive in my exploration of feminism and I wish more people realised it was there to experience it' (Rosie).

Sarah also draws on this support: 'What I get from feminist/riot grrrl networks is support, rather than activism to be honest' (Sarah). This again may not be a recognisable form of politics, but by creating supportive networks feminist activism today is creating a space where the politics of the relationships can be worked through differently to relations saturated by power relations of patriarchal capitalist societies that place relationships in competition and opposition.

Some respondents were less hopeful, seeing the turn to a third wave of feminist activity as symptomatic of inactivity, disunity and academic posturing: 'I actually find the 3rd Wave feminist movement quite depressing because it isn't a movement - it just seems to be women who are interested in studying feminism as an academic discipline, not activism or trying to make social changes' (Linda). Third Wave Feminism's interconnection with academia definitely seems to be a potential point of conflict:

3rd Wave does seem very connected with academia and I would generally expect someone using the term to describe themselves to be university educated. I do wonder if this creates a sense of division with feminist and women's activists from less educationally privileged backgrounds and those who have little interest in academic theory and find the terminology alienating (Mair).

Mair offers an important observation about the potential conflict that could exist between (university educated) third wavers and those who are alienated by the ideological positions that seem to characterise third wave feminism. Red Chidgey summarises these positions:

When thinking about the ideology of the third wave, it's important to recognise the canon of North American texts which are setting the terms of the debate. These include: *To Be Real*; *Manifesta*; *Third Wave Agenda* and so on. We do not have anything comparable coming out of the UK. Within these books much has been made about multiple alliances, placing gender within broader social struggles, and the fluidity of identity, demands, and definitions of feminism. As an ideology, you could say that third wave feminism is tempered with post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques, emerging both from criticisms made within second wave feminism and also shaped by the linguistic turn in academia

which has seen a 'destabilisation' of the universal category 'women'.

Red's summary contextualises the third wave's emergence from North American culture. This is certainly true of the subcultural forms of feminism that have existed from the early 1990s such as riot grrrl that took its inspiration from 'do it yourself' forms of cultural and political organising (more on that later). This obviously brings a problem that in attempting to have an inclusive third wave movement we are in danger, yet again, of imposing western conception of feminism into a global context, thus replicating the colonialist tendencies of other feminist movements, ie we state the agenda and you must follow what we say are the demands for our revolution. However, the conceptual openness that Red describes posited in these texts (multiple alliances, placing gender among broader political struggles) as well as (hopefully) benefiting from the insights of post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques does seem like a workable framework to move forward with an engaged feminist praxis at this historical moment. These conceptualisations seem to be aware of the problems that afflicted previous feminist generations that tended to universalise and homogenise women's experience, and see feminism today as moving beyond single issue politics. As Mair comments: 'I would also expect a 3rd Wave feminist to be somebody who looks at the way different kinds of oppression intersect, rather than arguing that one form of oppression trumps them all.'

However, this kind of feminism position remains in conflict with women who still see the main point of feminist activism as overcoming oppression on the basis on biological sex, as Linda, who situates herself as 'a good old fashioned lesbian feminist,' explains: 'my feminism is about fighting discrimination based on biological gender.' This does seem to bring up a potential point of genuine conflict between people who position themselves within the terms of the third wave debate and those working within a more traditional feminist framework. As Laura points out:

I recently helped to organise the Feminist Fightback conference and was surprised to find that the positions and arguments that have been defined as the 'sex wars' in second wave feminism appeared to be as firmly entrenched, as strongly held, as polarised and as unresolved as they were 30 years ago. While I recognise that queer theory, post-structuralism, post-colonial theory etc have had an important impact on feminist theory over the last 25 years, I would question how much these have transformed our ways of arguing and organising as activists and campaigners.

This suggests that there has not been the cross over of theory into the activist world, and this does seem to present a generational divide between younger feminists active now and feminists who retain, for example, a virulently anti-porn position and who are hostile to queer ideas about gender translating sometimes into transphobia. The conflict between the generations is arguably a conflict of theory, and in particular queered ideas about identities, boundaries, positions and genders. It may also a clash of generations, however, as Cindrea suggested, 'third wave is a mix of generations which will hopefully learn from each other.'

In theoretical idealism, Third wave feminism is a queer feminism, which is a (gender) inclusive feminism; IvanaP comments: 'as far as i'm concerned, [third wave] means that feminist of the third wave are people that are fighting for the 'all together' world, not only women's spaces or men spaces (and animal spaces of course).' Nazmia Jamal echoes this point:

when I became involved with Ladyfest London I began to wonder about what kind of feminist I might actually be. Inclusiveness, equality, skill sharing, community and making things better are all things that are vitally important to me and I see these as being specifically third wave ideals as I am not, I suppose this seems a bit simplistic but anyway, a separatist.

IvanaP articulated her perception of the relationship of feminism to queer theory: 'for me, third wave feminism is based on queer theory. meaning, only queer theory can involve all identities that all of us have! viva la difference!' The thrust of the third wave is through queering spaces, identities and

culture so that we can move out of a single issue politics (that is unable to see connections between different types of oppressions and liberations) into a more inclusive form of politics that has the potential encompass all forms of life that exist on the planet (also signalling the exit from anthropocentric thought). This is the result of queer's conceptual capacity to accommodate complexity, and allow for multiplicity and difference. So that within a queered third wave feminist position, the type of argument presented by Linda is not excluded but is one position among many as there is no need to reduce arguments or ideas within right/ wrong binary schemas.

To accept this idea is of course to accept a certain amount of theory into your life that may seem irrelevant or horribly abstract. However I am of the strong belief that theories are now as they have ever been, tools to be utilised within a broader political field rather than toys to be played with self-indulgently within the cosy annals of academia. Historically feminism has always invented and used theories and concepts.

### The political language of Third Wave Feminism

The integration of queer within a third wave feminist praxis signals a difference in strategy to previous waves of feminist activity that were more concerned about gaining basic civil rights, equality within the work place and education, setting up public institutions and challenging sexist power structures. Julia Downes summarises:

The third wave to me doesn't really seek similar strategies, it's more of a queered feminism it doesn't seek legitimisation from a legal structure or institution but emphasises how people can change/challenge/disrupt/question their own immediate situations and cultures themselves.

This difference in strategy means that it may not be obvious or visible in the same way that other manifestations of feminist activism are and have been in the past, eg lobbying or protesting. Consequently, this may lead to many dynamic forms of feminism activism being ignored since they do not fall within the parameters of recognisable activism. In my opinion this is exactly what happened in the symposium in Swansea that seemed to suggest if there wasn't effective feminist critique circulating in the capitalist, patriarchal popular media (the one place you'll probably never get it until society completely changes) then feminism today didn't exist at all.

It is important therefore that we recognise these new forms of feminist activism on their own terms and not impose a pre-existing definition of what constitutes effective activism/ politics. Third Wave feminism

can be an engagement with cultural politics, that 'other' feminists might not see as political at all. But I think it challenges what politics looks like in a changing cultural context as a response to people's own situations/ interests/ desires/ pleasures/ motivations... (Julia, Italics mine)

This outlines different forms of cultural activism that dominate the activity of the third wave. The primacy of redefinition and creativity in these practices can make it elusive since they challenge the very terms upon which we understand political activity. It is, perhaps, an individualised form of politics since it is responsive to transforming personal/ political contexts, but this by no means prevents collective action. Nazmia Jamal sees third wave feminist practices as forms that allows my cultural activism to be seen as valid in a way that perhaps second wave feminism wouldn't.

Cultural activism is an essential part of third wave feminist activity. One of the most visible manifestations (although still very underground) of third wave feminist activity in the USA, UK and Europe has been the creation of temporary, feminist cultural spaces such as Ladyfests. These events, that usually run from anywhere between 2 to 5 days, are self-organised by local feminist communities and create a space where women's achievements in music and the arts can be celebrated. They also tend to have workshops that highlight the importance of skill sharing and feminists often travel far out

of their immediate locations to attend these events.

Ladyfests have dominated the forms of feminist gatherings in the UK since the first one happened here in Glasgow, 2001 (the first one happened in Olympia, USA in 2000). They are a strong example of the type of do it yourself cultural activism that predominates the third wave. It is not that all manifestations of third wave activism predictably fall within the Ladyfest model, but this tendency to create inclusive, ie queered, autonomous feminist cultural spaces that bypass the need to be legitimised, validated or accepted by patriarchal power structures and institutions is part of one of many strategies of the third wave: the creation of culture on the terms that we want to live it. There is no waiting around for the revolution to happen; it is about dealing with the cultural spaces that are immediately around you and taking them back, one by one.

As Julia said it is a form of activism in response to people's own situations/ interests/ desires/ pleasures/ motivations. There is no negotiation with institutions that will neither understand nor accept your demands, just taking action to create the feminist culture you wish to exist for the present and continuing for the future. The general dismissal of such aspects of feminist activism in its third wave is a symptom of the failure to recognise the political language of third wave feminism which necessarily redefines the basis of politics itself. The tendency to view diy feminist cultural activism as quirky and un-threatening (Julia) by academics and non-academics alike is part of this general misperception.

Of course there are other reasons why third wave feminism may seem invisible without the necessary codes to read its existence. This can be seen as synonymous with transformations of activist practices and changes in the world at large. As Tracey summarises: In the past activism may have been commonly regarded as physical and local protest; these days activism can take many shapes. Thus whilst there are advantages in modern technology enabling a global dialogue and exchange, there is also a fragmentation of protest into diverse mediums. This may have been perceived as consequent in a watering down of feminist protest and some activity not being recognised as such. This point, as well as the fact that anti-capitalism, vegan activism and feminism and queer issues have all become more interconnected (Hannah) in the third wave, should encourage us to consider the third wave as a new form of dynamic, intersecting feminist praxis.

Despite this transformation of the nature of feminist and wider activist practices in our current epoch, some respondents still felt there was the need to establish specificity of third wave feminist political demands if it is to have any impact outside of a grassroots, subcultural form of politics. As Red Chidgey states: We need a feminism which outlines its political position (as inclusive yet as fighting for something) so a third wave politics does not disintegrate into an ineffective free for all. This would also be a way forward, Red argues, into greater forms of public political visibility, thus challenging the absence of a feminist voice in the mainstream media:

If we had a clear presence of UK Third wave then we could also give the media something to hang on and could be a tangible presence to the post-feminist charge. However, it is absolutely crucial that we don't make the same mistake which I see the London 3rd Wave group as doing, of shying away from giving their feminism some content. Their definition of feminism was so diffuse it could be anything anybody felt it was. Room for debate was privileged over and beyond any sense of shared political critique. This obviously comes out of the criticism of second wave for being too prescriptive, reformist or narrow, but to be able to rejuvenate feminist discussion we must first seek to put down some description of what we are fighting against (i.e. sexual violence, capitalist imperialism, binary gender models and so on). (Red).

One thing third wave feminists activists need to do then is to establish the specificity of its position, this would challenge the critique circulating in academia that the third wave is confused and without political focus. As it stands however, there isn't the framework (in the UK at least) for establishing an

uncompromised third wave position that would serve as a banner under which feminists could mobilise. Red suggests setting up a national foundation that would serve as a resource for activists and academics to share information and concerns. This is certainly one future direction that would aid the spreading of the feminist message wider than the isolated poles of subcultural, grassroots activism and academic research, both of which are equally invisible to mainstream audiences of popular culture. Thus there needs to be a meeting in the middle, a sharing of information and co-operation that affirms all of our concerns. This meeting needs to be played out in the active field of culture making (as our subcultural practises promise as possible) in order to reach as wide an audience as possible.

### Critiques of the third wave metaphor

In the questionnaire I was interested to pursue the usefulness of invoking the third wave as a category since this was something widely discussed at the symposium. Does dividing the narrative of feminist history into waves reduce complex historical events? Does it erase or negate feminist activism that falls between the waves? Does it signal a desire to be cut off from the past? What is feminism's relationship to her stories?

Many of the respondents were wary of fully embracing the label of third wave feminism since it might over-simplify the trajectories of feminist histories:

I don't think there can really ever be a continuum of feminist/women's movements because that kind of flattens it out and often ignores all the differences in the WLM (second wave, whatever one calls it) and all the things that happened in the 1980s (Anna).

Julia makes a similar point:

I don't find '3rd wave' a particularly useful concept: the idea of using waves and dividing a historically enduring transgressive and progressive agenda of struggling for various equalities up into neat waves or phases.

The use of the wave metaphor or concept to describe historical processes was perceived as an unsatisfactory way of approaching or thinking about feminist history. Some respondents, like Linda, rejected the idea of wave theory all together: "I don't think there are distinct phases in feminism." Some of the respondents explored the difficulties that arise in invoking the wave metaphor:

I think the main problem with the metaphor is that while it is intended to suggest a continuum, it can imply a division because interpretation depends on how one is reading. I've spoken to some older second-wave identified feminists who find it a bit alienating because they think it suggests their wave is "over" and has been replaced with something new, something that seems to be occupied by very much younger women with different priorities. If this is the case, where does the 3rd Wave leave them? (Mair)

Clearly no one has ultimate control over how we read the third wave metaphor. Perhaps what is best is if we establish the importance of preserving feminist historical memory as a central and continuous part of all feminist activity. It is this question that Red sees as central to feminist action now, the problem of "what constitutes feminist memory and how is it passed on." This conjoining of memory, action and transmission sees the importance of keeping alive feminist historical memories, while posing important questions about how we receive feminist memory and how can we make that memory conscious and present. This is the integral responsibility of feminist actors in the world today: we cannot reject our past (at our peril) and we need to put energy into the continuous production of our past and present histories.

It is for this reason I asked people the questions about what strategies can be deployed to make our histories more present and how they can have an effective impact on the wider public consciousness. Laura suggested that it wasn't enough to produce a wider knowledge of women's history which runs the risk, in a capitalist consumer society, of turning these histories merely into pleasurable or interesting commodities. Instead we need to find a way to make the process of history writing more participatory:

I think that history has a more important part to play in present day struggles than simply as stories for 'other people' to consume. Ideally I would like to find a way of enabling women today to be involved in writing the history of their struggle- both now and in the past (Laura).

The reclamation of people's histories that empower people to realise that history is something they can create and experience, is an area that we can work on. Here there are important lessons to be gained from previous feminist movements, from continuing work of women's history archives and other revolutionary people's history archives. The important thing is for these histories to retain their voice and be understood on their own terms. In other words, not be accommodated into a previous framework of history that subsumes that difference or carelessly sells it as thrilling commodity. The relationship to history is a crucial point of connection for inter-generational dialogue between feminists active in the movement then and now. Rosie described how her Mum and friends had set up a reminiscent women's groups, encouraging different generations to have faith in one another: 'I had to use my study as an excuse to learn about older women's experiences of feminism' our generation should encourage the past generations to speak up and visa versa.

This is a great idea that we should embrace as it would provide a crucial space of learning and preserving the past, whilst also creating a social space where different generations of feminists could meet up and help each other realise a stronger movement.

In asking the question about feminist history it was clear that this related to both histories within the feminist movement and the wider culture as a whole. It was felt by some of the respondents that the younger feminists today are not as conscious of the feminist histories that have gone before them. Anna comments: 'There are a lot of young women who identify as feminists who don't know shit about what came before Judith Butler. I think that's the product of women being written out of history.' While Linda states; I think it is vital for young women to realise very recent feminist history - ie that the sex discrimination and abortion acts were enacted relatively recently and that the rights they take for granted haven't even existed for all of my lifetime.

Even among feminists then, there is the feeling that we do not know enough about histories. In writing these histories Anna commented on the importance of producing feminist histories that are not over-simplified and are true to the conflicts and tensions that have existed historically in the feminist movements.

'We have to write our own histories or things get forgotten. And we have to write them as full of tensions or we perpetuate false stories. We also have to carry on the hope and fun and joy because that's what makes a community that can struggle together.'

A lot of respondents focussed on the role formal education within schools plays in creating a sense of our collective historical pasts. Education is an important avenue through which we can transform our relationship to history, school being a crucial space where our relationship to culture is moulded early on. Sarah said we need more women's history - not just war history or the royal family - that perpetuates the militarism and the class structure. This point was echoed by Hannah:

History, by and large, still means 'HIS story' to most people I think. Personally in school etc. I was never really taught anything about women's history or maybe we had one lesson on the Suffragettes which was specifically the 'women's history hour' or whatever marginalised. And then next week the return to kings and battles and all that shit.

Nazmia stated strongly that we needed a 'new national curriculum.' It is clear from these responses that it was felt there needs to be an in-depth transformation of the information taught to young people in schools.

Tracey suggested strategies that operated in a number of levels to get feminist histories into the public consciousness: 'Female headed media publications; utilising International Women's Day; curriculum within schools; socialisation process.'

Mair develops upon this point:

We need more of a feminist media which is available to everyone. We need more education about feminism in schools from an early age rather than having it relegated so much to universities. We need grassroots feminist groups and/or networks in every large town and city.

Mair's observation about the relegation of feminist histories to universities takes us to academia and its relationship to, and the production of, feminist histories. While at the symposium in Swansea, I was conscious of how the concern surrounding the preservation and sharing of feminist histories continued to produce an idea of feminist history that excluded grassroots and activist histories. This has the affect of producing a kind of majority feminist history, thus confusing our relationship to the past and effecting our relationship to the present. As Red comments:

Feminist activism, especially by women and men of the Women's Liberation Movement, is still missing from our records and our textbooks. There is a greater intellectual legacy of feminism available to us than an activist one- which therefore delimits the third wave. We are simply not aware of our feminist pasts.

Red offers sobering insight into how our history has been passed on to us through in this third wave, perhaps explaining why our third wave is so theory laden. This process of misrepresenting the second wave is illustrated by Hannah's perception that the third wave feminism to be 'much less academic and more grassroots based than, say, 2nd wave feminism.' So while we may have contact with the great amount of literature and theory produced in the 1960s and 1970s, we still do not have an accurate picture of grassroots feminist activism throughout history. As Red says this delimits our perspective of the present, and means we are still not fully aware of our feminist pasts. There is much work to be done among feminists to recover these stories, produce archives and counter the uneven emphasis on the intellectual legacy of feminism, and fuse this knowledge and action together in an active and responsible present.

### Third Wave/ Post Wave/ Media Haze

The final area I wanted to explore in this essay is the relationship to the media and post-feminism. While it is clear that Third Wave feminism is not a term that has critical currency in the media; that old demon post-feminism seems to hold sway. Within academic theorisations of the third wave, the terms often get collapsed producing confusion where post ends and third wave begins. It is for this reason I asked people what they thought about the representations of supposedly empowered women that circulate within the media from the 1990s until today. In the questionnaire I defined post feminist in popular culture as the post 90s, post Bridget Jones, Spice Girls and Ally Mcbeal 'version' of 'empowered' female subjectivity.

Most of the respondents were united by a rejection of the post-feminist representations of women that exist in the media.

What has Sex & The City really done for women? Ladettes? Burlesque revival? Domestic goddesses? Actually all very unhelpful. Where are the strong, political, organised women apart from Beth Ditto

in the main stream media? (Nazmia)

I hate the media! women are often portrayed badly feminist or not! post feminism is awful! hate sex and the city and all that I find it utterly degrading and so many people easily buy into it! get rid of them all (Rosie).

While other respondents were ambivalent to post-feminism and its uses, talking of the Spice Girls Hannah commented, "any feminist icons who make women feel better about themselves and their abilities are culturally significant, really." Buffy the Vampire also came out quite positive, with Louise saying that she is the "closest I can get to a post-feminist empowered hero." Largely however, these media manifestations of feminism were largely to be treated with suspicion and rejection by the respondents of the questionnaire:

In post feminist texts like Bridget Jones, Ally McBeal, Sex in the City, we are constantly shown predominantly white, middle-class wealthy women whose lives have been benefited by liberal feminism but who feel ambivalent about those benefits. So they are made by and for the dominant group in western society and, as such, are pretty self-indulgent. I mean, we don't have many dramas about Mexican women being raped and shot by American police as they cross the border do we? (Mair)

Anna also develops this point:

If we are looking for feminist activism on our tv sets or complaining when it isn't there we are wasting our time. That's not to say studying representations is a waste of time. Media literacy is definitely important.

Instead of "wasting our time" reading media texts then, this time could be spent teaching people how to read media in order to see beyond and tap into the wider political picture that exists beyond what is framed by the TV set. Since post-feminism perpetuates a vision of feminism which is irrelevant to the lives of most women on the planet, (Mair) why do so many feminist academics continue to study it and by doing so, validate it? Isn't it time now that we all shake off the post-feminist media haze that dominated the 90s and find ways of getting an uncompromised and effective feminist agenda into the public consciousness?

Tracey commented on how she takes post-feminist representations "with a pinch of salt, and actively seek out other sources of media that are intelligent in their coverage. [ Although admittedly it is difficult to find]." She continues, "It is not until we seek out alternative media sources that the extent of post-feminism can be fully realised. If we were to go by the popular consensus feminism has disappeared along with the need for it." As it currently stands then, the only spaces where an engaged feminist critique exists is outside the dominant forms of media. Feminism remains an alternative story that has to be sought out.

Looking for a way out the doldrums of post-feminism, respondents did not reject ever using the mass media to communicate a feminist message, as they saw this as a way to reach a wider audience (a way to escape the subculture/ academic problem described earlier). Red suggested the need for "media profiling of contemporary feminists" popular media and dissemination, while Sarah similarly stated the need for "more media attention" while Hannah said "not just on International Women's Day or V Day (which actually don't receive as much media focus as they should anyway), but in day to day newspaper reports."

Although I agree that there needs to be a wide dissemination of feminist ideas, and that if the third wave is to have any enduring application it needs to move into the reality of many more people's lives. I am always wary of the mainstream media since it is so often a tool of co-option and assimilation of ideas that challenge capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and so on. This could be tempered by making alliances and cooperating with women and feminists in media industries/ academia/ and all those who specialise in cultural visibility (Julia). I think third wave feminists still need to be very careful as to how we present the message if using this strategy. I believe that the only way to escape co-option is by creating autonomous feminist media, magazines and publishers, much like in the 1970s with Spare Rib, the feminist magazine that ran until the 1990s, and Virago and the Women's Press, women's publishing groups that are still publishing books today. These feminist media and publishing agencies were attuned to the need for self-organisation that is still, in my mind, the only way to have lasting impact on culture and society.

### Conclusions

This paper is a contribution to the work in progress that is third wave feminism. It has sought to create dialogue and give voice the various perspectives of feminists in the UK and Europe today in the hope to infuse third wave feminism with political hope and establish the specificities of its political language that has so far in my view, been largely misunderstood. This paper calls for a shift in perspective and strategy on behalf of both academics and subcultural activists to meet in the middle, reach a wider audience and draw upon our collective knowledges: through this we may challenge the pervasive absence of a visible and engaged feminist critique within the popular consciousness. For academics studying feminism and popular culture, this paper demands the realisation that popular culture is not an innocent, even playing field; its representations are not created with the benefit and good health of women in mind. Popular culture is intimately bound up with capitalism and the perpetuation of an exploitative, abusive, sexist, racist, homophobic culture.

There is now such a multiplicity of feminist positions in the world - this is strength, not a weakness, there can be unity in diversity. However, as Julia comments:

We have to be suspicious if any of those become hegemonic (understand how this happens - any connection to capitalism/ institutions/ religion etc) and start silencing/ marginalising/ ridiculing other feminisms.

This is arguably what happened with the post-feminist turn of feminist theory and the 1990s until now and it was felt at the symposium I attended in Swansea. So instead of perpetuating a feminist position that excludes and ridicules other valid expressions of feminism, pressing work needs to be done to understand how this has happened to stop the replication of patriarchal structures posturing under the name of 'feminism.' We need reclamation of feminism's liberatory potential and contribute productively to its occurrence within the present. The creation of genuine dialogue, exchanging ideas, admitting mistakes, learning, being creative and supporting each other and transforming the world around will be the result of this process. With history as our guide, nothing can stop us.