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Introduction

This book arose out of two preoccupations: first, my interest in and desire to address the apparent emergence of the fourth wave of feminism, and secondly, my fascination with how this is manifest, increasingly in contemporary popular culture. The announcement of the arrival of a new wave of feminism raises multiple questions. Not least, what is it about the fourth wave that's new? How does it differ from the waves that came before? And what are the conditions of its arrival? Addressing these questions requires looking back as well as looking forward, particularly in order to establish how, or indeed if, the fourth wave has risen from the ashes of postfeminism, and assessing where fourth-wave feminism overlaps and intersects with notions of postfeminism(s) and previously established 'waves.'

The idea that feminism is encountering renewed levels of interest is not particularly contentious. However, this renewed interest is perhaps not in itself a straightforward cause for celebration. As Alison Phipps remarks in her 2014 book, *The Politics of the Body*, 'feminism, which is currently enjoying a resurgence [...] has perhaps never operated in a more difficult political and cultural milieu' (Phipps 2014, p. 3). Indeed, if various high profile—and highly publicized—media spats are to be taken at face value, despite its apparent popularity, feminism has seldom been embroiled in more in-fighting or internal turmoil. The very public denouncement of the music megastar and now fourth-wave feminist icon, Beyoncé, as a 'terrorist' by established feminist theorist and critic, bell hooks, for example, can be seen as characterizing this supposed

generational and theoretical divide between feminists and feminist ‘waves.’ Undoubtedly such tensions between feminists and differing schools of feminist thought do exist and are brought into sharp focus by the critical lens of mainstream media, and yet whether there is anything particularly ‘new,’ or even particularly problematic, in feminists disagreeing with one another is questionable. Furthermore, whether such disagreements or conflicting perspectives can be neatly aligned with whole generations of feminists or designated to singular perceptions of ‘waves,’ is also worthy of scrutiny.

As I highlight in the first chapter of this text—and throughout—when exploring the usefulness or viability or the analogy of a wave to describe the feminist movement, or more accurately movements, feminism(s) have always been characterized by a degree of internal disagreement and critique. This lack of unity within feminist movements is not a new phenomenon. The notion of a consolidated and coherent feminist past where women were united under universal aims, is at best romanticized, and at worst, a tool used to undermine contemporary feminism or to silence women who speak out against a majority view and imply that they are damaging the movement. Although undoubtedly there have been times when many women were in agreement over the need to pursue specific political goals, there have also always been dissenting voices amongst them. The campaign for suffrage, for example, despite ostensibly striking a universal tone intended to benefit *all* women, was in fact marked by a complex and conflicted relationship with intersections of race and class, raising issues still prevalent in current feminist debates. Indeed, the 2015 movie, *Suffragette*, was widely criticized for a promotional photo-shoot that thoughtlessly ignored these important intersections, featuring its four leading white actresses, Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep, Anne-Marie Duff, and Romola Garai, in t-shirts declaring, ‘I’d rather be a rebel than a slave,’ a quote attributed to Emmeline Pankhurst. Such a slogan, then and now, not only conflates racism with sexism, seemingly suggesting parity between the two forms of discrimination, but also belies the struggle of those women forced to confront both. As such, not only is the notion of feminism as having a unified past questionable, such a pretension to a singular view of feminism is also arguably undesirable, burying as much as it reveals. Nonetheless, with regard to the arrival of the fourth wave, despite the multiple issues and valid criticisms leveled at the film, the fact that Hollywood chose to turn its gaze to the history of women’s suffrage at all speaks to the resurgence

of interest in feminism in popular culture, albeit a surface interest in a so-called feminism ‘lite.’

Just as the renewed interest in feminism should not simplistically be heralded as a mark of feminist’s success then, this lack of unity should also not necessarily be regarded as negative. Instead, the diversity within feminist ideologies, and amongst feminists themselves, can be seen as a cause for celebration. Engagement with criticism from both outside and within the feminist ‘movement’ ensures that feminism remains a dynamic and responsive ideology that attempts to resist essentialism and universalizing, in order to adapt to women’s ever-changing experiences and a continually shifting political landscape. Thus, disagreements between feminists and apparent inconsistencies between feminism(s) can be seen as offering the opportunity to expand feminist debates, rather than rendering feminism incoherent or irrelevant.

And yet in addressing the announced arrival of the fourth wave I don’t wish to dismiss its newness all together. Rather, in looking back to where this current wave of feminism intersects with its predecessor(s) it is hoped that the unhelpful notion of a linear progress from one wave to another can be challenged in favor of acknowledging the more complex and cyclical nature of feminism’s histories. To such a degree, a central aim of this book is to examine the resurgence of feminism in popular culture in its complexity, illuminating the nuances in these discussions that are often flattened out or oversimplified in media reporting.

This book also addresses the phenomena of postfeminism(s) in all its many guises, adding to existing discussions in the vein of Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, for example, who, in the afterword of their book, *Postfeminism Cultural Texts and Theories*, express their hope that their work ‘will lead others to cultivate the still relatively uncharted postfeminist terrain’ (Genz and Brabon 2009, p. 179). However, now increasingly discussed, postfeminism has become well charted, if often shifting, terrain for feminist theorists, informing a rich body of feminist analysis. As Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have argued in the introduction to their edited collection of essays, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, the term ‘postfeminism’ is now used so frequently in feminist discussions that ‘[i]ts taken-for-granted status belies very real disputes and contestations over its meanings’ (Gill and Scharff (2013), p. 3). Gill and Scharff suggest that the term ‘postfeminism’ is broadly used to signify four differing understandings of the concept. As a shift within feminism defined as an

‘epistemological break’ linked to postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism (Brooks 1997; Gill and Scharff 2013) or a suggestion that feminism is a thing of the past, as Tasker and Negra have observed, ‘whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, p. 1; Gill and Scharff 2013, p. 3). This is also linked to the notion of postfeminism as a backlash against feminism, which, as Angela McRobbie asserts, paradoxically both asserts feminisms’ success in claiming that the battle for equality has been won, whilst simultaneously undermining feminist gains in suggesting that feminism has gone too far (McRobbie 2004, 2009). Perhaps most crucially as pertaining to the complexities and novelty of the fourth wave, however, is Gill’s notion of postfeminism as a sensibility. This is the understanding of postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon, allowing for ‘the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them’ (Gill 2007), that I believe best characterizes the fourth wave.

Questions of whether the emergence of a ‘new’ wave of feminism has rendered postfeminism(s) as now defunct, either as a critical term or phenomena, have begun to be asked. As with many feminist debates there is little to no consensus on this issue. Whilst Hanna Retallack, Jessica Ringrose, and Emilie Lawrence (2016) have suggested postfeminism may now be redundant in the wake of the fourth wave of feminism, and in particular the rise of social media based feminist activism, Gill advocates for the continued relevance of the concept. She argues convincingly that many of the current manifestations of feminism—and particularly those granted column space in mainstream media publications—are in fact ‘perfectly in keeping with postfeminism’ (Gill 2016, p. 618). Similarly, it is my feeling that the term still offers valuable scope for analyzing the presence of feminism within popular culture, not least because of the complexities inherent in reading manifestations of postfeminism(s) and the space the term affords for feminism to be simultaneously celebrated and undone. Crucially, postfeminism is not a static term—or indeed phenomena—and as such, the arrival of fourth-wave feminism may signal the transformation of postfeminism(s) and the need for continued interrogation, rather than its demise. Thus, as we sit on the crest of a ‘new’ wave, unraveling the slippage between understandings or presentations of postfeminism(s) seems to me to be a pressing task, both in assessing what, for feminism, has been before and what is perhaps yet to come.

The work that follows covers some, but by no means all, of the key areas where postfeminism and the emergence of the fourth wave overlap. Through examples such as the phenomenon of celebrity feminism; the apparent ‘generation wars’ between women such as Miley Cyrus and Sinead O’Connor or bell hooks and Beyoncé; the controversial feminist activist group, Femen; or the importance of online activities in contemporary feminist activism, I explore the role that postfeminism plays in shaping this apparently new wave of feminism. Although I center the fourth wave within all of these discussions, it is not my intention to attempt to offer a static and necessarily limiting or rigid definition of the boundaries containing or encapsulating fourth-wave feminism. Furthermore, the idea that there is anything inherently ‘new’ in this latest inception of feminism is continually problematized. Indeed whether associated with a surge in online activism and the utilization of new technology, or coupled with an evolving understanding of intersectional feminism, much that has been promoted as defining the fourth wave has in fact been previously linked with prior waves. This is not to negate the importance of the new, or renewed, commitment to feminist activity or the celebration of feminist identities that have culminated in the swell of activity increasingly being defined as the fourth wave, or to dismiss fourth-wave feminism as the poor relative of feminisms’ rich past. Rather my intention with this work is to highlight the importance of disrupting linear narratives of feminist waves and troubling the propensity to present feminism through the lens of generational and familial conflict, instead suggesting the opportunities afforded by a feminism that embraces intersectional and intergenerational activism and theory, as we welcome the arrival of the fourth wave.

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