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Weaving a Tapestry, Compassionately: Toward an Understanding of Young Women's Feminisms

Ruth Lewis and Susan Marine

The article challenges representations of so-called third-wave feminist politics that have over-simplified the complex, multifaceted nature of young women's feminism, and that, by relying upon written accounts, have overlooked the empirical realities of "everyday" feminisms. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the "new femininities"—that is, how young women negotiate the contemporary gender order—as well as to the published work of relatively high-profile third-wave feminists, there are surprisingly few empirical examinations of young feminists' politics, views, and activism despite an exciting and heartening resurgence of feminist activity in the United States and United Kingdom—the two countries in which this study is located. To better incorporate analysis of such activity into feminist theorizing, the article argues for a threefold approach to understanding young women's contemporary feminisms: theoretically informed empirical examinations of young women's politics; a more compassionate approach that understands the political, social, and cultural contexts in which feminist politics and sensibilities are (re)produced and enacted; and a consideration of feminism as a tapestry, with its history reflexively woven into its present.

Keywords: activism / everyday politics / feminism / feminist politics / feminist theory / third-wave feminism

Introduction

After the oft-cited period of abeyance in feminist activity (Bagguley 2002; Taylor 1989), we are in the midst of a reemergence of interest in and discussion about feminism.¹ There are numerous, powerful demonstrations of this resurgence:

Julia Gillard's 2012 challenge to misogyny in Australian politics; the public outcry in India following the highly publicised rape and murder of a young woman student in December 2012; debates about veiling practices in the context of Islamophobia; the global Slutwalk movement; and numerous blogs and online discussions, as well as feminist campaigns.² In addition, the early years of this century saw an explosion of publications in the academic and popular press claiming that feminism is alive and kicking, albeit in varied, contested forms (see, for example, Daniels 2012; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Findlen 2001; Hernandez and Rehman 2002; Redfern and Aune 2010; Valenti 2007). This has led to claims that a third (and even a fourth) feminist "wave" has developed. In attempting to portray the history and chronology of feminism, generational divides have emerged (Faludi 2010; Findlen 2001; Henry 2004; Hogeland 2001; Siegel 2007; Walker 1995) whereby feminisms of different time periods are portrayed as discrete waves, and contemporary young women are criticized for their purported disengagement or distraction. This article advocates a more complex, compassionate, and empirically-derived analysis of contemporary feminisms. It argues for a threefold approach to understanding young women's contemporary feminisms: theoretically informed empirical examinations of young women's politics;³ a more compassionate approach that understands the political, social, and cultural contexts in which feminist politics and sensibilities are (re)produced and enacted; and a consideration of feminism as a tapestry, with its history reflexively woven into its present.

Our experiences as activists and academics have prompted our interest in these debates and our sense that now, more than ever, is the time to develop a nuanced approach to understanding contemporary versions of feminism. A word about those experiences and our positionality as researchers of this topic: we have been involved in research, teaching, and student support in universities in the United States and United Kingdom over the last three decades, where we have regularly observed and worked with women students as they make sense of the gendered nature of their lives and engage with feminism. Alongside those roles, like many other feminist academics we have also been involved in feminist campaigns (about women's and LGBT rights, sexuality, safety, and space), working with and helping to run women's organizations (around, for example, sexual assault and domestic violence), and establishing, supporting, and working within national and local feminist networks and events (such as for International Women's Day, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Take Back/Reclaim the Night Marches, and the movement to end LGBT intimate partner violence). Thus, we have been involved in feminist politics as academics and activists, debating and furthering feminist politics both within feminism and with nonfeminist entities (for example, university administrations and local councils). We see ourselves as coming to feminist consciousness after the second wave during the 1970s, but we are strongly influenced by it and subsequent feminist thought. We set out

our histories not to make some claim to the authenticity of our argument, but rather because our observations and points of contention in this argument stem as much from our analysis of the academic debates as from our engagement in feminist politics outside academia. And we observe some developments in the enactment of contemporary feminism by activist groups that do not seem to be well-represented in academic discussions. Since feminist theories have traditionally been developed from analysis of the lived realities of the gendered world—that is, from empirical observations—we are eager to see more academic analysis of the observations we make in this article. Our focus is on how we theorize about and make sense of contemporary feminism as enacted by young women, and how such analysis contributes to feminist theory.

Theorizing New Femininities

Recent academic analysis has tried to describe and theorize the contemporary, neoliberal gender order and young women's place in it. Two particular interrelated aspects of young women's lives have risen to the forefront in this analysis, which we discuss in this section: sexual agency and tensions around the negotiation of neoliberal values. As we point out below, although these debates are useful for highlighting the new gender order as experienced by young Western women, they are of more limited value for our purposes, as they focus on young *women* rather than young *feminists*.

Some work points to the (sexual) commodification of the empowered, agentic young women in the twenty-first century. For example, Angela McRobbie (2009) reveals how, under the “new sexual contract,” young women are engaged by commerce and government to enact their citizenship through consumption rather than political engagement. She argues that popular cultural depictions of empowered young women reflect “feminism taken account of,” whereby some elements of (liberal) feminism are embraced at the same time as feminism is dismissed as no longer relevant. Christina Scharff (2012) demonstrates that entwined with this “production of individualist narratives and self-responsible neoliberal subjects” is the construction of the “oppressed other woman”—specifically, the “oppressed Muslim woman” (45). From a more journalistic position, Ariel Levy (2006) and Natasha Walter (2010) demonstrate the sexual commodification of women in contemporary society and reveal the new depths of the sexual objectification of young women. Today's young woman is routinely bombarded with nearly relentless soft-porn images throughout the culture, whether in television, print ads, music videos and video games, or through witnessing ubiquitous, so-called reality television. This is combined with the persistent normalization of such imagery that conveys the message that if young women are not “cool with” pornography, they are in some way “suspect” in their femininity and, crucially, their attractiveness to men.⁴ At the same time, the shifting of sexual norms has resulted in adolescence becoming a time of deeply

risky sexual experimentation and subsequent potential exploitation, especially for girls and young women (Feijoo 2004; Papadopoulos 2010).

While such work has been valuable in highlighting the changing face of patriarchy and particularly its intersection with capitalism, it tells us little about how young women are dealing with these challenges. Indeed, young women are sometimes rendered rather passive in these accounts, as we hear little about how they negotiate these contemporary developments. For example, McRobbie's (2009) valuable analysis of popular cultural depictions of empowered young women does not, and indeed does not intend to, encompass how young women themselves engage with and negotiate, challenge, resist, or subvert these depictions. Still less does her account reveal how young *feminists* understand, challenge, or resist the new sexual contract to which they are subjected.

Other work has attempted to address this question of how young women respond to contemporary forms of patriarchy in a neoliberal context. Writers like Pamela Aronson (2003), Shelley Budgeon (2001, 2011), Anita Harris (2008a, 2008b, 2010), Heather Jacques and Lorraine Radtke (2012), and Deborah Stevenson, Christine Everingham, and Penelope Robinson (2011) examine how young women engage with, adapt to, and enact the new forms of femininity offered by a neoliberal culture that prioritizes individual responsibility, personal autonomy, and notions of empowerment through consumption, and that disavows ongoing structural inequalities and oppression. They point to the fundamental tensions between feminist and neoliberal approaches that women inevitably find hard to reconcile. How can young women reconcile being agents of their own lives while also being at constant risk of sexual harassment and violence by men? How can they square being agentic actors making free choices with their experiences of the social forces (patriarchy, capitalism, racism, heteronormativity, for example) that limit those choices? This question plays out not only in theoretical discussions but also in empirical examinations of young women's attempts to make sense of their experiences. Joanne Baker's (2008) analysis reveals how these tensions are expressed in young women's lives, whereby "the experience of male violence was subjected to strongly individualised interpretations. . . . there was a strong tendency for young women to demonstrate personal responsibility and resilience in order to distance themselves from notions of weakness or the dreaded 'victim' status" (58–59). Similarly, Emma Rich's (2005) analysis of young sportswomen's accounts reveals that they "were very much aware of having to tread an extremely fine line between not being victims, exercising their agency and choice and remaining 'feminine'" (505). Jacques and Radtke (2012) found that young women expressed awareness of the negotiations involved in having careers and being mothers, but rather than "situating these negotiations in the context of debates about gender equality and politics" (455), they relied upon "neoliberal discourses of choice and individualism" (443).

While this work addresses young *women's* responses to enduring oppression, it tells us little about how young *feminist* women are dealing with these

challenges. How do those young women who identify as feminists use their feminist frameworks to understand, challenge, or resist the new sexual contract and the “raunch culture” to which they are subjected? How do young feminists distance themselves from and challenge the sexual objectification they experience? How do they use their feminist understanding to make sense of and subvert their depiction as empowered, agentic individuals free of the shackles of structural oppressions wrought by the intersections of patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism? To help us answer these questions, we can turn to a couple of different bodies of work that, we maintain, are essential to grounding our understanding in young feminists’ lived experience: the published work of young feminists, and empirical examinations of young feminists’ activities and views.

First, the published work of self-defined young feminists, many of whom advocate third-wave feminism, helps us understand how young feminists reflect, embrace, or resist the contemporary gender order. These discussions tend to rely largely upon theoretical, autobiographical, or “thought piece” material rather than empirical examinations of young feminists. Several anthologies and first-person biographies of third-wave activist experiences have emerged from these articulations of feminism, whose authors are diverse in their social locations, perspectives, and trajectories to feminism (Baumgardner & Richards 2010; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Findlen 2001; Hernandez and Rehman 2002; Heywood and Drake 1997; Walker 1995). In response to the perceived essentialism of some earlier feminist work, third-wave contributions problematize the subject *woman* so that it is layered with other identities (such as ethnicity, social class, or sexuality, as well as political affiliations).⁵ For contributors to these anthologies and biographical accounts, the category *woman* is intertwined with their other salient identity-based and political categories—Black and Latina women, lesbians, fat activists, queer and transgender feminists, and disabled feminists—signaling the implausibility, if not impossibility, of narrowing the making of feminist identity down to one singular path or point of view (Gillis, Howie, and Munford 2007). Explicitly or implicitly, some draw on work about intersectionality that seeks to extend analysis of oppression beyond single dimensions of power, and instead insists on considering individual identity as a product of multiple forms of oppression that operate through, for example, race, dis/ability, sexuality, and class (Collins 1989; Crenshaw 1991). Our aim in this article is not to critique this significant body of work, but simply to note that these autobiographical and “thought piece” accounts are a valuable source of information about how young feminists challenge, subvert, and resist the new gender order as it intersects with other structures of power and oppression.

Second, it is surprising that amid scholarship about youth activism, there are so few empirical examinations of young feminists’ resistance to the contemporary gender order.⁶ Perhaps in reaction to claims of young people’s apathy—a

claim that is challenged by recent activism, such as the Occupy movement, student protests, and the Arab Spring—scholarship and biographical pieces about young activists are emerging. For example, Rowan Rheingans and Robert Hollands (2013) challenge dominant claims that contemporary youth politics are driven by neoliberal values. Mary Trigg’s (2010) edited collection and Jessica Taft (2011) reveal the diverse activism of young women, some of which are rooted in feminist politics. Scholarship about young, self-identified feminists’ activism in feminist issues is more sparse, with some important exceptions: Annemarie Vaccaro’s (2009) participant observation of a US university feminist society, Finn Mackay’s (2011) examination of the London Feminist Network, and Sarah Maddison’s (2004) case studies of young women in the contemporary Australian women’s movement. Their empirical examinations chart young women’s developing feminist politics. Vaccaro examines the evolution of young women’s feminist politics—ranging from the personal and individualistic to the collective and politicized—as they experience institutional barriers. Mackay’s study, while based on a small sample, reveals that despite claims that young people are disengaged from politics, some young women are motivated to join a feminist network because of a growing awareness of the barriers they and other women face. Maddison’s analysis of young women’s feminist activism shows its importance in processes of collective-identity development that help to “maintain a political space for feminist activism in this country and discursively create and maintain the entity we refer to as ‘the women’s movement’” (249). All three studies reveal the range of young feminists’ activities and strategies for resisting and challenging: “stickering”; mock fashion parades to expose global corporations’ use of slave labor; Reclaim/Take Back the Night rallies; volunteering at local women’s shelters; securing safe rides to ensure women’s safety after leaving late-night campus social events. Additional empirical examinations of young feminists’ activism would develop our understanding and analysis of how contemporary feminism is enacted in various circumstances and locations.

Empirical examinations would help us to avoid slippage between young women and young feminist women. Deborah Siegel (2007) notes that “when ‘young women’ and ‘feminism’ appear together in a sentence these days, it’s increasingly in reference to ‘Girls Gone Wild’ types who fight valiantly for their right to bare their breasts on camera and flash their thongs” (10). A failure to distinguish between the actions and attitudes of young *women* and of young *feminists* thus enables a glib and erroneous characterization that denies the complexities, nuances, and diversity among young women’s responses to the contemporary gender order; it enables the development of caricatures of generations (Purvis 2004), and does not help us build an analysis of contemporary feminism as enacted by young women, in all its diversity. Below, we set out a proposed alternative approach for researching, understanding, and theorizing contemporary feminism.

Constructive Feminist Engagement

In this section, we advocate a form of constructive feminist engagement that aims to develop and advance our understanding of contemporary feminisms. It is comprised of three key features, which we set out below: theoretically informed empirical analysis of young women's politics; a more compassionate approach that understands and empathizes with the different political, social, and cultural contexts in which feminist politics and sensibilities are (re)produced and enacted; and a consideration of feminism as a tapestry, with its history reflexively woven into its present.

Theoretically Informed Empirical Analysis

As described above, the emergence of publications both online and off by self-proclaimed feminists has informed our understanding of and theorizing about the varieties of contemporary feminisms. However, reliance upon these sources to the exclusion of others reveals only part of the landscape of feminism; indeed, measuring feminism by the statements and acts of those deemed "stars" by academics, publishers, social-media environments, and the press is an approach at odds with some forms of feminism that emphasize the collective rather than the individual, the group rather than the spokeswoman. (See Jo Freeman [1972] for an early warning against the "star system.") Moreover, we note that media-anointed stars tend to be white, formally educated, and relatively affluent. While we celebrate the sudden increased interest from the media in the voices of young feminists, we are concerned that what might emerge is a reliance upon "spokeswomen" or high-profile feminists as representatives of feminism today at the expense of "everyday" feminism enacted by ordinary young women around the United States and United Kingdom.

Instead, we advocate empirical examinations of how young feminists are responding to the contemporary gender order; we see these as comprising a vital component of building gender theory, and understanding the use and application of that theory. We would benefit from understanding contemporary feminism through the lived realities of young women's perspectives. Feminism is produced by those who write about it, but also by those who do it—activists, as well as writers. Politics exist not only or primarily in the academic realm or engagements among public intellectuals, but also in everyday practices, discussions, negotiations, and decisions; "everyday practices define participation in political projects where participants attempt to build the future in the present" (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 487). According to Stacey Young (1997), feminist "discursive politics," which change discourses, norms, and practices, occur at the level of daily life: "movement participants discursively create the movement itself from the bottom up . . . [and] come to embody this discourse in a process of continually making and remaking 'the women's movement' in word, text and action" (qtd. in Maddison 2004, 237). This focus on "everyday

practices” has a particular resonance for feminism; as a social movement and as a theory, its roots are in women’s daily lives and experiences of oppression. It is from these experiences that theories, as well as actions, have been built: for example, women coming together discovered their shared experiences of violence and abuse; consciousness-raising helped them understand these experiences as an integral part of patriarchal structures; theorists and activists used the theoretical frameworks that emerged to guide their critique of male power, whether embodied in individual men, state practices, or dominant discourses.⁷

A further reason for focusing on empirical examinations to complement existing scholarship and published narratives of feminism lies in the varied engagement with the written word. Despite the revolution in social media that many feminists have enthusiastically embraced as a new vehicle for networking and challenging, many feminists are passive users, reading and following rather than posting and creating online,⁸ but their feminism sustains and develops as part of group activity that may be local and small-scale rather than gaining a high-profile, individual published voice; that is, feminism is produced in both textual form—in libraries, newsprint, and the proliferation of new social media—and also in face-to-face interactions, discussions, and actions. We maintain that to overlook this everyday form of feminism is to disregard an important element of the contemporary enactment of feminist politics.

Work grounded in theoretically informed empirical analysis seeks to understand feminist practices and politics from the perspective of feminist actors, cognizant of the socioeconomic and political contexts in which they exist. In this effort, we may benefit from borrowing a page from earlier pioneers who distilled and advanced theories of feminist-identity development drawn from systematically analyzed quantitative data from feminist-identified women (see, for example, Downing and Roush 1985; Fischer et al. 2000; Hansen 2002; Moradi, Subich, and Phillips 2002).⁹ We propose that this body of work that has measured the prevalence and patterns of feminist identification and relied largely upon quantitative measures would be complemented by more qualitative work examining the meanings and experiences of feminist practices.

We argue that the development of feminist theory would benefit from empirical examinations of the enactment of feminism by feminist activists—that is, theory that reflects contemporary feminism both in- and outside academia. What might empirical analysis, as a supplement to theoretical analysis, tell us? Empirical examinations of young feminists’ activities can tell us about how they negotiate, resist, and subvert the contemporary gender order. How and why do they select the focus of their activities (for example, migration policies and practices that restrict women’s freedom, commercial premises and enterprises like lap-dancing clubs and Amazon, the media’s neglect of women experts in favor of men, sexual assault on campus)? Is their focus entirely on the manifestations of patriarchy, or do they recognize the intersections of oppressive forces? Do they address those manifestations that touch their lives

locally, or do they tackle, for example, poverty and educational restrictions in other countries? And what of their tactics? Do contemporary feminist activists introduce new tactics and strategies, such as online collective action in response to online abuse, to the repertoire of traditional tools of activism? Examinations of their activities and the impacts of their campaigns would help reveal the spaces for resistance, for change, and for meaningful collaboration with other feminists. They would reveal the boundaries and borders of patriarchy in an era of neoliberalism. Moreover, such examinations would tell us about how young feminists use, or do not use, feminist theory. How do activists apply feminist theory—consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly—in their practice of feminism? Do their attitudes and sensibilities reflect feminist theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1996) in the academy, or are academic developments and the enactment of feminism out of step with each other? This would improve understanding and development of the relationship between feminist theory and feminist activism, between academics and activists.

Empirical examinations can also deepen the conversation about intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991)—a topic that has been the subject of intense debate (see, for example, the summer 2013 special issue of *Signs* coedited by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall) and is a feature of much third-wave and contemporary feminism—by exploring how feminists from different subject positions enact, understand, use, and reflect on feminism in their everyday activism. We wonder whether those groups that are less well-represented in the public face of feminism and academia, such as women of color, poor, and disabled women for example, may be more vocally represented in local feminist scenes. The critique that contemporary feminisms in the United States and United Kingdom focus on issues that may be more pertinent to some white women (for example, gender wage equity, sharing childcare with one's partner, promotion rights at work) rather than issues more pertinent to Black women (discrimination in immigration policies, treatment of and services for women seeking asylum, the enduring racism in state agencies like the police, manifestations of Islamophobia), together with the erasure of Black women in feminism, is well-illustrated by the recent Twitter hashtag that calls out these fissures: #solidarityisforwhitewomen. Empirical examination of local feminist activism would help explore the lived realities of intersectionality in terms of experiences of and resistance to oppressions. A likely outcome of exploring intersectional feminist activism would be greater insight into the diversity of concerns and views among young feminists. For example, while feminist claims for women-only space have reemerged as a contentious debate, it seems that they have greater relevance for white than for some women of color whose cultural heritages include collectivist traditions. Moreover, our research with young feminists in local groups (Marine and Lewis 2014) reveals the variety of their political orientations and feminist sensibilities, which range from structural analyses of power relations, linked with ideas about capitalism and patriarchy;

to a focus on equality and sameness, more influenced by liberal philosophies; to a deconstruction of binary categories, especially in terms of debates about trans people's rights. As well as revealing the lived realities of contemporary young feminists, recognition of this diversity moves away from the depictions of entire cohorts of women suggested by "waves" or "generations" (as we discuss below).

In addition, our own research shows that although social media is an important source of information for many young feminists, and while they are active in meetings, campaigns, and on Facebook, many do not actively contribute to blogs, discussion boards, or other online feminist communities, preferring to observe Twitter debates, blog discussions, and other messaging. This suggests that the public, online face of feminism, and particularly the media selection of "stars" to speak on behalf of the movement, may not reflect the diversity and extent of local activity that is happening. Moreover, expanding empirical research with young feminists would help explain why they do or do not participate in online activity, thereby helping us to better understand the limits of engagement and what, if anything, could support young feminists to engage in a range of work on the internet as well as "in the streets."¹⁰

Empirical examinations of young feminists, their activities, strategies, and targets, as well as their attitudes, sensibilities, and political frameworks, will help inform debates, analysis, and developments in feminist theory so that theory development that aims to explain the gendered nature of our world and to imagine better alternatives is grounded in lived experiences. A traditional strength of feminist theory, and particularly feminist theory produced by women of color (see, for example, Collins 1989), has been that it is grounded in empirical realities and lived experiences; a distinctive feature of feminist theory has been its aim to help women develop a feminist consciousness to better analyze and challenge the nature of their circumstances. Arguably, in seeking recognition in the academy and proving ourselves as feminist theorists, we have ruptured the link with our distinctive roots in emancipatory politics. Rose Corrigan (2013) also notes "how few of the stories I heard as a service provider had made their way into the academic discussions about feminism, feminist movements and feminist organizations" and calls for "greater attention to feminist practice as a primary source for generating and critiquing feminist theory" (489). This link among lived realities, empirical examinations, and theory development directed at progressive social change is feminism's strength, which we lose at our peril.

Feminist Compassion

The second pillar of our proposed constructive feminist engagement is a more compassionate approach to the debates about different manifestations of feminism over the ages. We are struck by the frustration, disappointment, and anger that have sometimes accompanied critique of so-called third-wave feminist politics. Reflecting on the NOW organization, Susan Faludi (2010) describes the intensity of this debate, which she argues amounts to "feminism's ritual

matricide” (29). Diane Elam’s (1997) portrayal of feminism as a “gift” invokes the idea that young feminists should express gratitude to those who bestow it on them. And Beverley Skeggs’s (1995) frustration at the “sense of entitlement” among women’s studies students is palpable:

The combination of citizenship, client, and consumerist rights rhetoric with popular feminism has generated an entitlement discourse which gives an individualistic, competitive slant to earlier feminist demands for entitlement to decent education and employment. Students are able to interpret their experiences through access to these entitlement discourses. . . . Some of the students who enter Women’s Studies courses already know what they want, how it should be provided, and know the sort of feminist who should provide it. They also want us to be nice and look good. (478)

We sense in the intensity of this criticism a failure to acknowledge the challenges that young women face today. We are surrounded by examples of the worst excesses of sexism in advanced neoliberal Western cultures: a commercial sex industry that has burst out of the boundaries in which it was once contained; a culture where “jokes” about rape and abuse of women are routine (for example, the “Uni Lad” website [see Wiseman 2012]); the “othering” of some women of color and their portrayal as subordinated victims; a fashion industry that bombards young women with products and images to which they must aspire; an economic decline that means that the advances in women’s financial independence are at serious risk (Fawcett Society 2012); and a political and cultural environment in which sexual abuse by high-profile men, such as Julian Assange and Roman Polanski, is overlooked in an appeal to human rights or cultural contributions (Phipps 2014). Many of these features of contemporary society are directed at younger women, a valuable potential consumer group. Indeed, these manifestations of sexism are layered with neoliberal values of individualism, personal responsibility, agency, and freedom, together with proclamations that in the West “we’re all equal now,” that “feminism is dead,” and in its irrelevance is thus something to be avoided by right-thinking young women. Having the sociological imagination, critical awareness, political consciousness, and personal bravery to recognize and resist these powerful influences is no mean feat. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 275) argues that “women strategise within a set of concrete constraints,” a process that she characterises as “patriarchal bargains.” For young women, these new forms of sexism, or patriarchy, comprise “concrete constraints,” and their responses to them can be seen as “patriarchal bargains.” In this context, a compassionate, empathetic approach would recognize the “everyday resistance” we see and hear in young women’s experiences, and would respect the energy it takes for these women to develop, sustain, and proclaim a feminist identity.

This compassionate approach comprised of empathy, kindness, and recognition of commonalities is evident in some existing scholarship; for example,

Baker (2008) poignantly describes the accounts of young women who, without a gender framework to understand their worlds, conceptualize their experiences of oppression by the men in their lives through the lenses of “choice” and “personal resilience.” For others who adopt this more empathetic approach, which resists judging young feminists within the frame of an earlier era and a different political context, this means recognizing young women’s activities, such as web-based communications and subcultural and craft activities, as contemporary enactments of their feminist values and politics (Harris 2008b, 2010) and seeing that “it is an exciting time to be a young feminist” (Orr 1997, 42). In the same vein, Deborah Withers (2012, 81) aims to produce “a compassionate historiography” of the women’s movement. This more empathetic approach does not foreclose critique of the work under review, but encourages constructive engagement rather than simply judging it, and finding it wanting, against a standard developed in different political and social contexts.

Outside academia, writers have made similar observations that to simply judge young women’s feminism as lacking is to disregard the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it is developed and enacted. Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune (2010) and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2010) on their respective sides of the Atlantic point to the tendencies within feminism to dismiss young women’s feminism as “not worthy” and the resulting frustration among young feminists whose contributions to campaigns and politics come to be overlooked, while in her foreword to Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin’s *The Fire This Time* (2004), Rebecca Walker argues that “we want to flex the muscle of young women’s might, to make it visible not just to the media and the progressive left, but also to the older feminist activists whose lives have so profoundly shaped our own” (xvi).

An approach characterized by compassion breaks from the unfortunate tendency in some feminist debate to blame young women for reflecting the neoliberalism that imbues every aspect of their lives, and for failing to be more like older feminists who, incidentally, come from the generation responsible for implementing the worst excesses of the neoliberalism faced by young women. The intensity of some of these criticisms does not reflect the sisterhood or solidarity to which many feminists, younger and older, aspire. We advocate an approach that engages critically with ideas and analysis in both public debate and inter-personal engagements, but that resists the convention of building up one’s own argument by putting down one’s perceived nemesis. A more compassionate, empathetic approach seeks to identify and explore commonalities, as well as differences, and draws on the “affective turn” in feminist theory.¹¹

However, we should be cautious of subduing feminism’s healthy openness to critique and conflict from within the feminist community, which has been so productive for both theory development and activism. Indeed, Maud Perrier (2012) warns of the risks of seeing emotions like kindness, care, and empathy as tools for social justice. In her insightful reflections on the value of these affects

for ongoing feminist debates about ethics, she points out that they have the potential to reproduce inequalities when used to justify individual responses to structural injustices, when they are commodified as skills in the marketplace, and when they are incorporated into political discourses about “compassionate conservatives.” According to Carolyn Pedwell (2011, qtd. in Perrier), empathy can be seen as the new technology of governmentality. Similarly, Clare Hemmings (2011) cautions that empathy is problematic when it is seen to stem from women’s natural capacities rather than their adaptation to shouldering primary responsibility for family responsibilities; when it is used to flatten differences among women rather than to work to overcome them; and when it assumes reciprocity that may be absent for historical and political reasons, such as genocide or ethnic cleansing.

Instead, some writers argue that uglier feelings may prove to be transformative in feminist politics. Hemmings examines the potential of “horror” to reveal the limits of Western feminist subjectivity and empathy, while Perrier (2012) argues (as does Sianne Ngai [2005]) that conflict may offer more transformative potential for feminist politics: “Ngai suggests we might develop coalitions built on the conflicted terrain of relations amongst women, including its ugly feelings” (11). Rather than conceiving of conflicts between feminists as problematic and destructive, their approach encourages us to recognize the productive potential therein. We suggest that it is useful to distinguish between *destructive* and *productive* conflict. Like most social movements, feminism has a history of conflict, dispute, and argumentation. While much of that has been healthy and productive, leading to new insights and theoretical developments (one thinks of the critiques by feminists of color; for example, bell hooks [1981] of the inherent whiteness of the subject woman in some early feminist thought, as well as the critiques of heteronormativity in feminism (for example, Rich 1994), there have also been casualties. Most feminist scholars and activists can recount experiences of disputes that destroyed connections rather than producing alliances; that lowered morale rather than fueling motivation; or that dissolved campaign groups rather than replenishing the ranks of feminists.

To guard against this destructive potential, we cautiously call for more compassion in our feminism. Eschewing the tendency to attribute intergenerational feminist difference to mother/daughter dysfunction and instead recognizing the essential interdependence of feminists, we make progress by adopting an “ethics of care” (Collins 1989; Noddings 1986) toward one another. Caring provides a mode of interrelating that enables both carer and cared-for to flourish, and serves as a natural backdrop for collective activist energies. Virginia Held (2006, 53) affirms that a “caring relationship requires mutuality in the interdependencies of personal, political, economic, and global contexts.” While mindful that compassion can be seen as a feminine trait or expectation and used to silence anger or “ugly feelings,” we draw on the history of feminist research methodologies that advocate a compassionate or empathetic approach to participants

in the research process (Fonow and Cook 1991; Maynard and Purvis 1994; Oakley 1981). A highly judgmental approach by some feminists toward other feminists, as research participants or peers in feminist politics, is at odds with this important tradition. Therefore, notwithstanding the valuable critiques of compassion as the basis of a feminist ethics, we argue that without this compassion, the attempt at a shared understanding, without recognizing convergence and respecting the reasons for and meaning of divergence, we risk not only misunderstanding young women's enactment of feminism in their everyday lives, but also risk a significant rift in feminism, maybe even its demise.¹² Instead, we propose a kind of collective compassion, imagining ourselves, as Sara Ahmed (2010a) invokes, participants in an avowedly "willful politics," which by definition "needs to be a collective politics. The collective here is not assumed as a ground. Rather, willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence. You need to be supported when you are not going the way things are flowing. . . . we need support when we live our lives in ways that are experienced by others as stubborn or obstinate" (5).

A Feminist Tapestry

The telling of feminist stories is an important yet contentious activity. In considering contemporary feminisms, we are reminded of the politics of how feminist histories are set out and by whom, as well as those histories' inclusions and exclusions, emphases and attributions. "We know that history is always more complicated than the stories we tell about it" notes Hemmings (2011, 16). But to record our history, a vocabulary, form of analysis, and method of archiving must be selected, albeit with recognition of inherent limitations. Perhaps the most familiar vocabulary is the use of the "wave" metaphor; the portrayal of feminist history as occurring in a series of waves has provided a useful framework for understanding the history of feminism (see Nancy Hewitt's [2010] edited collection). However, waves of feminism suggest homogenous bodies of thought that are distinct from one another, and, within each wave, feminists acting in agreement with one another—each a droplet in the wave. The forward movement in the same direction of each wave is presumed. As many have argued, this does not reflect the rich variety and diversity of feminist thought across time and schools of thought (Dean 2009, 2012; Faludi 2010; Hogeland 2001; Schippers and Sapp 2012). Moreover, the wave metaphor can be used for socially conservative aims, as Stevenson and colleagues (2011, 139) point out in their consideration of what they refer to as "generational wedge politics." As Leandra Zarnow (2010, 295) reflects, "when we compartmentalize feminist history into artificial designations of first, second, and third wave, we taper the mosaic of feminisms. Instead we should think comparatively, analyzing how feminists both work within inherited frameworks and respond to the demands of their time."

Mindful of such critique, the third pillar of our proposed approach draws from Hemmings's (2005) warning of the tendency to portray the history of

feminist thought as “a process of imagined linear displacement [rather than] as a series of ongoing contests and relationships” (131). We wish to avoid reproducing single narratives of complex sociopolitical discourses and bodies of thought and portraying them as located in a particular time rather than as ongoing debates. Although metaphors can misrepresent, they can also be useful discursive devices, so we propose, rather than “waves” or “generations” of feminism, a mutually constituted feminism that is more like a “woven tapestry.” In this version, feminism borrows from generations past, but insists on its own values, priorities, and forms of agency. A tapestry is constituted by its history—the history of tapestry traditions, skills, techniques, materials, and the weavers who create the tapestry—so that the history is woven into the present. So also with feminism: its history is present in contemporary feminism, its precursors are woven into the very fabric of the debate, politics, and practices. We suggest that this metaphor of a tapestry encourages more awareness and reflexivity about the history of contemporary feminism so that, rather than boldly rejecting the past and asserting the new, we are reflective about the traditions from which we draw and the extent to which contemporary approaches borrow from past traditions.

If we position ourselves as contributors to a large tapestry that is developed over time, changes, and adapts as a result of the new contributors and contributions, we become more aware of the evolving nature of it. As we observe how our threads mingle with the existing threads to create new visions, we can more easily reflect on and appreciate what has come before our own contribution. Moreover, the metaphor of a tapestry allows us to focus on both the micro (the individual threads) and the macro (the pattern, picture, or vision created), thus enabling us to appreciate the individual contributions and how they have come together. Lest this analogy suggest more agreement and accord than rings true for the history of feminist politics, the tapestry metaphor also allows us to consider the conditions in which the tapestry is created; new techniques and technologies, regimes and requirements, fashions and strategies will emerge. The weavers will vary in the extent to which they wish to preserve the traditions, experiment with new approaches, create new traditions, and merge old and new. A picture emerges of individuals coming together as a group to weave the tapestry, exchanging techniques, ideas, and criticisms as they work, with intergenerational exchange at the heart of their interactions. Such ideas conjure up the contemporary rekindling of women’s traditional arts through knitting, crocheting, and sewing groups, both on- and offline. While some may be critical of the fashion to recreate the 1950s housewife ideal, others have adopted these techniques for more radical social change. For example, knicker bunting, crocheted vulvas, and knitted vaginas are the stuff of many contemporary feminist campaigns and events. (See, for example, Government Free VJJ’s campaign that sent US senators knitted vaginas with the message “If we knit you a uterus, will you stay out of ours?”¹³) Contemporary young feminists are not the first to use art, craft, parody, and performance to mock patriarchy and convey

their alternative message; there is a history of such activities based on women's traditional arts and crafts that can be woven into our tapestry. Nor are we the first to suggest a threading metaphor: Elsa Barkley Brown (1989, 926) proposed quilting to explore the "polyrhythmic, non-symmetrical, non-linear structure" of African American women's histories and ways of seeing the world; Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990, 35) suggested a postmodern feminism that "would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single colour"; and activists have commemorated those who have died of HIV/AIDS by creating a giant memorial quilt.

Conclusion

This article has argued against reliance upon oversimplified versions of complex, diverse bodies of thought that have been attributed (sometimes wrongly) to swathes of feminists and use problematic notions of "waves" and "generations." We have argued for an approach characterized by three elements: theoretically informed empirical examinations of young women's politics; a more compassionate approach that understands the different political, social, and cultural contexts in which feminist politics and sensibilities are (re)produced and enacted; and a consideration of feminism as a tapestry, with its history reflexively woven into its present. Our argument is motivated by awareness of the divisions (particularly around class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) that have already riven feminism, one of the most self-reflective bodies of thought and practice, and a concern that in the midst of a reignited interest in feminism, we do not create new divisions that are destructive for the movement. We recognize the productive force of divisions, argument, and contestations; we also recognize the potentially destructive force of some contestations. A compassionate, yet critical engagement with the commonalities, as well as the differences between women and between feminists, which acknowledges complexity and avoids caricatures, may avoid such destructive divisions. So, this article is part of an attempt to constructively engage with different interpretations of feminism, or different forms of feminist politics; it is an attempt to complicate scholarship about a form of feminism espoused by or attributed to contemporary young feminists, to challenge contemporary ideas that "we're all equal now" and that "feminism is dead," and to build bridges and continue feminist engagement in a way that will continue to make feminism relevant to the lives and experiences of all women.

Further questions arise: What do women coming to feminism require from "established" feminists and feminism? If they engage with feminism in different ways, using different vehicles (like social media), how can we ensure effective, meaningful communication? What do they require of feminist communities, both real and virtual, to support their developing understanding of and critical engagement with feminist thought? Bearing in mind the need for a compassionate, constructive approach, the answers to these questions may

lie in more intergenerational dialogue and empirical analysis of coalescence, as well as conflict. Collaboration among feminist scholars and activists is desperately needed to protect the advances won by women in recent years in the midst of recessionary pressures. Such collaboration might help protect women from, for example: challenges to reproductive rights in both the United States and United Kingdom; swingeing cuts in funding to the public sectors, which have been important sources of protective employment, progressive policy, and services for women; misogyny in parliamentary and congressional politics; new attacks on women's freedoms in the guise of antiterrorist discourses; the toleration of endemic violence against women. Feminists of all ages and persuasions are responding to these challenges; now is the time to collectively recognize our brave history of analyzing and resisting such erosions of our rights and move toward a more united movement that is less insistent on the purity of analysis and more pragmatically focused on progress (Lugones 1994).

Our observations also have relevance in wider sociopolitical contexts. Contrary to the frequent bemoaning of "the apathy of young people" and their purported support for neoliberal values, claims which are critiqued by Rheingans and Hollands (2013), we have seen a recent dynamic surge of activism among young people around the globe. The Arab Spring, Occupy movement, public demonstrations against violence against women and criminal justice responses in India and Kenya, marches against cuts in educational funding in the UK, and Slutwalks to challenge victim-blaming all discredit suggestions that young people are not engaged in political issues. Our call for a compassionate, empirically informed approach to exploring young women's feminist politics contributes to scholarship and dialogue that records, analyses, values, and promotes the contemporary groundswell of young feminists' political engagement around the globe.

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Notes

1. We recognize that while grassroots feminism, as well as debate about feminism in the popular press, may have dissipated during the 1980s and '90s, feminists have been active, productive, and influential in many arenas of policy and practice during this time. See, for example, Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon (2012) for an analysis of the progressive impact of feminist activity on violence against women.

2. Examples of online sites are *Feminista*, *Hollaback*, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, *Object*, *Black Girl Dangerous*, *Rookie*, *The F Word*, *Feministing*, and *Adios Barbie*.

3. Our focus in this article is on young women and their production of feminisms. While we recognize that men can, and some do, identify as feminist, it is largely women who have been the producers of feminist knowledge and action over time, so we limit our consideration to women. We also recognize the contested nature of these categories and the important considerations in feminist debates about trans issues, but these are beyond the scope of the article. Our focus is also geographically limited to the production of feminisms in English-speaking countries, particularly the United States and Great Britain, but including Canada and Australia. We recognize and value the work that goes on beyond these boundaries, but in attempting to avoid a superficial analysis of global developments, have attempted to provide a deeper examination of a geographically limited aspect of these developments.

4. Women noted similar experiences during the sexual revolution of the 1970s where a consequence of the availability of the contraceptive pill was additional pressure on women to be sexually available to men (duPlessis and Snitow 1998).

5. Of course, they were not the first to contest the category *woman*; scholarship from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler has rarely accepted the category as a fixed, uncontested entity. See Lena Gunnarsson (2011) for a discussion of this debate in terms of contemporary feminist thought.

6. However, the focus and range of presentations at the 2013 British Feminist and Women's Studies Association conference suggests that we will shortly see a burst of publications reporting on empirical studies about young women's feminism.

7. See Rebecca Dobash and Russell Dobash (1992) and Elizabeth Schneider (2000) for analyses of domestic-violence movements in the United States and United Kingdom, and Helen Jones and Kate Cook (2008) and Lesley McMillan (2007) for discussions of the European movements in response to sexual violence.

8. Our ongoing research interviews with young feminist students reveal that, although they cite the internet and social media as important sources of information for their understanding of feminism, most also reveal that they do not actively contribute to these sources, preferring only to be "observers" of Twitter debates, blogs, and so on.

9. For more recent additions to this scholarship, see Carolyn Enns and Ann Fischer (2012), and Susan Marine and Ruth Lewis (2014).

10. This reminds us of Le Tigre's call to arms to young feminists: "Get off the internet (I'll meet you in the streets)."

11. See, for example, Ahmed (2010a, 2010b) and Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead (2012). Hemmings (2012) explores the potential of reimagining feminist-standpoint epistemology to develop "affective solidarity."

12. But note the tendency to proclaim the “premature burial” of feminism (Hawkesworth 2004), and the centrality of loss in recent accounts of contemporary feminism (Dean 2012; Hemmings 2011).

13. See <http://www.governmentfreevjj.com/>.

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