Week Ten:
Fourth Wave Feminist Cultural Critiques

Monday, October 29

Wednesday, October 31

Friday, November 2: Discussion Groups

**Readings for this Week**

Available on WyoCourse as:


You may consult related sources online in open access format by consulting the “Additional Resources” section of this document.

**Context and Relevance**

Fourth wave feminism is the contemporary global movement for gender equality that began to flourish following the establishment and globally widespread use of information and communication technologies toward the first decade of the twenty-first century. Facilitated by the creation of global feminist communities unbounded by geography and enabled by social media, fourth wave feminism builds on the third wave’s prioritization of diversity and inclusivity, the second wave’s focus on equal socio-sexual rights, and the first wave’s focus on equal legal rights. The fourth wave is inclusive of a spectrum of gender identities, sexualities, body types, and denounces gender-based violence through widespread social media and other online fora.

All social movements require cross-generational work to accomplish widespread social and political change. As we have learned throughout our readings and discussions over the last nine weeks, feminism takes unique forms in different historical, cultural, and social contexts.
Differences between the waves may at times appear irreconcilable, yet it is important to remember that at their core all four waves support gender equality and oppose discrimination, sexual violence, and other harms that disproportionately impact women. For example, some fourth wave feminists accuse some third wave feminists of failing to include queer communities and sex positivity in their activism and work. Some third wave feminists likewise accuse fourth wave feminists of engaging in superficial forms of activism by arguing that political movements cannot be led on social media. These inter-generational criticisms are by no means new, as some third wave feminists accused second wave feminists of being too narrowly focused on middle-class white women’s concerns. Some second wave feminists likewise dismissed third wave feminists as being too focused on sexuality to enact any real socio-political change. Some first wave feminists, who fought to obtain the right for women to vote made similar criticisms of second wave feminists who advocated for birth control and an end to the sexual double standard.

We organized our reading this semester around the four waves of feminism in order to provide historical context for the issues discussed in each of the assigned readings. This week we read an article by historian Nancy Hewitt in which she argues that the wave metaphor may not accurately reflect the nuances of feminist social movements. “Our best strategy then, to deal with past, present, and future iterations of feminism” she writes on page 659, “may be to recast the concepts of waves itself in order to recognize the multiple and conflicting elements that comprise particular periods of activism.” Whether envisioned as radio waves transmitting at different lengths and frequencies, as Hewitt suggests, or as tidal waves of social transformation, Hewitt argues that the wave metaphor is too easily distilled, particularly by mass media, in ways that erase the rich and complex history of feminist social movements. On page 668, she argues that thinking about the four waves using a radio waves metaphor is much more productive because “Radio waves not only help us think about how competing versions of feminism coexist in the same time period, but they also continue to resonate even in moments of seeming quiescence.”

Miriam Abelson’s article we read this week also reflects on the various ways that feminism is understood by individuals, communities, and dominant cultures. She does so through analysis of her contemporary research with trans-masculine people, noting that all of the participants in her research defined feminism in their own ways rather than subscribing to a narrow, proscriptive definition of it. Abelson, like many fourth wave authors, engages with queer theory as well as feminist theory in her work. Queer theory resembles feminist theory in its exploration of gender as a social construction but also critically engages with sexualities as social constructions of their own, often in a much more sophisticated way than feminist theories have historically been able to do as a result of ideological splits between feminists. Queer theorists were the first to articulate the notion of heteronormativity, a belief system that regards sex and gender as identical, gender as binary (male/female), and men and women as opposites “naturally” drawn to sexually desire one another.

Psychologists Heidi Levitt and Maria Ippolitto studied how gender variant people learn to communicate their gender in a dominant cultural context that exposes them to significant challenges in finding and maintaining work, social support, and relationships with intimate partners and family members. The authors argue on page 59 that gender variant individuals, like members of other minority groups, “often display bicultural competence [because they]
learn to communicate with those in the dominant culture (in the case of transgender people the [cisgender] population) yet to navigate the social and institutional structures of a minority culture as well (e.g. queer communities).” This reality, Levitt and Ippolitto note on page 61, gives gender variant people a “deep understanding of the systemic ways that genders are oppressed and privileged.”

**Reading Questions**

1. Now that you are well-versed in feminist theories and perspectives, try to advance your critical reading and thinking skills by envisioning dialogues between different authors. Even when the arguments presented in each text seem similar, remember that publishing in a peer-reviewed journal or other venue requires making a unique contribution to knowledge. What would the authors of the texts we read this week say to each other about their work? What would they say to the authors of other texts we have read this semester?

2. What are the arguments for and against abandoning the waves metaphor traditionally used to tell the story of feminist social movements throughout history? What is gained, and what is lost, by recounting the history of feminism in another way?

3. What does Abelson’s analysis of trans-masculine people’s perspectives on feminism reveal about gender as a social construction? What does her analysis reflect with respect to fourth wave feminism’s inclusivity of the spectrum of gender identities?

4. Levitt and Ippolitto argue that gender variant individuals have a more nuanced understanding of the various forms of gender oppression and privilege than cisgender persons because they have embodied multiple gender identities. What conclusions can we take away from their findings in light of what we have learned this semester?

**Additional Resources**

1. MeToo unites women all over the world against sexual assault through its Twitter campaign: https://twitter.com/search?q=%23METOO

2. The Everyday Sexism Project provides an online forum for women all over the world to share their experiences with sexism and protest against it: https://everydaysexism.com/

3. Global Hollaback combats sexual harassment in public space through online and in-person organizing: https://www.ihollaback.org/about/

4. Nancy Hewitt’s professional website: https://history.rutgers.edu/faculty-directory/faculty-emeriti/162-hewitt-nancy

5. Miriam Abelson’s professional website: https://www.pdx.edu/ws/miriam-abelson
Fourth wave feminist cultural critiques

Week Ten

- Contemporary global movement for gender equality
- First decade of 21st century
- Flourished with globally widespread use of information and communication technology
- Global feminist communities unbounded by geography
- Enabled by social media
Building on previous waves

- Continued prioritization of third wave diversity and inclusivity
- Remains focused on second wave goals of equal socio-sexual rights
- Still supportive of first wave movements for equal legal rights
- New focus on:
  - Inclusivity of gender identities, sexualities, body types
  - Denouncing gender-based violence through online fora

Social movements require cross-generational work

- Feminism takes unique forms in different historical and socio-cultural contexts
- Differences between the waves may appear irreconcilable
- Yet all have core belief in gender equality and oppose violence and discrimination against women
Cross-generational debates between fourth and third wave feminists

- Some fourth wave feminists accuse some third wave feminists of:
  - failing to include queer communities
  - being sex negative

- Some third wave feminists accuse some fourth wave feminists of:
  - superficial activism
  - using social media is not a political action

Intergenerational debates are not new

- Some third wave feminists accused second wave feminists of:
  - Being too narrowly focused on middle-class white women’s concerns

- Some second wave feminists dismissed some third wave feminists as:
  - being too focused on sexuality to enact any real socio-political change

- Some first wave feminists:
  - Made similar critiques of second wave feminist struggles for reproductive rights, birth control, and an end to the sexual double standard
Hewitt’s critique: the wave metaphor inadequately captures the nuances of feminist activism

- Historian Nancy Hewitt argues that the wave metaphor may be too reductive and simplistic
- “Our best strategy then, to deal with past, present, and future iterations of feminism, may be to recast the concepts of waves itself in order to recognize multiple and conflicting elements that comprise particular period of activism” (p. 659).
- Radio waves of different lengths and frequencies?
- Tidal waves of social transformation?

Radio vs. tidal waves?

- Waves too easily distilled and over-simplified by mass media
- Important because media is the central way that audiences learn about social movements
- “Radio waves not only help us think about how competing versions of feminism coexist in the same time period, but they also continue to resonate even in moments of seeming quiescence” (p. 668)

- Reflects on the various ways feminism is understood by individuals, communities, and dominant cultures
- Analysis of contemporary research with trans-masculine people
- Notes that all participants in her research defined feminism in their own ways
- Rather than subscribing to a narrow, proscriptive definition of it

Engagement with queer theory

- Abelson follows many fourth wave feminist authors in engaging with both queer theory and feminist theory
- Queer theory also engages with gender as a social construction
- But also critically engages with sexualities as social constructions of their own
Queer theory and heteronormativity

- Feminist ideological splits regarding sexuality make queer theory more nuanced
  - “Sex wars” of the 1980s/90s
  - Heteronormativity of the feminist movement

- Queer theorists first articulated heteronormativity, a belief system that:
  - Regards sex and gender as identical
  - Gender as binary (male/female)
  - Men and women as opposites who are “naturally” drawn to sexually desire one another

Levitt and Ippolito, *Being Transgender* (2014)

- Studied how gender variant people learn to communicate their gender
- Important to consider in a dominant cultural context that exposes them to significant challenges in finding and maintaining
  - Work
  - Social support
  - Relationships with intimate partners and family
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What does Abelson’s analysis of trans-masculine people’s perspectives on feminism reveal about gender as a social construction? What does her analysis reflect with respect to fourth wave feminism’s inclusivity of the spectrum of gender identities?

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Additional resources

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- Nancy Hewitt’s professional website: https://history.rutgers.edu/faculty-directory/faculty-emeriti/162-hewitt-nancy
- Miriam Abelson’s professional website: https://www.pdx.edu/ws/miriam-abelson
- Heidi Levitt’s professional website: https://www.umb.edu/academics/cla/faculty/heidi_levitt