

ROUND TABLE: "ARE WE POST-FEMINIST YET?"



DEFINING THE TERMS: POSTFEMINISM AS AN IDEOLOGY OF COOL

Over the past few years, I have observed that my students seem to be finding progressively less common cause with conventional academic feminisms. Increasing numbers of graduate students and undergraduates (both female and male) argue that feminism is 'over,' that its legacy of struggle and achievement offers no alliances that they need and many that they do not want. This does not necessarily surprise me, since I have seen a number of theoretical approaches (deconstruction, for example) gain and lose popularity since I began my graduate work in 1987. And to be sure, evidence for the success of the women's movement is everywhere.

But I did not grow up with feminism and I am not inclined to take its achievements for granted. For me, feminism provides more than a mere critical method for analyzing literature. Politics, law, health care, education, and numerous other sites of gender inequity invite our collective attention and action. So why have "consciousness-raising" and "feminist activism" become unfashionable terms? Worse, how have they come to connote "victim feminism,"¹ an odious and misleading phrase.

To make sense of post-feminism, I have to turn to my own experience of pre-feminism. In 1977 I was a high school junior in Centerville, Ohio. I was seventeen, and my intellectual horizons were narrow—they "ran the gamut of A to B" (as Dorothy Parker famously said of Katherine Hepburn's emotional range as a stage actress). My generation opposed the legacies of Nixon, the Vietnam War, and our parents. I belonged to what was left of the Hippies and to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. I loved rock and roll—but selectively. There was not much middle ground: the Stones were cool; the Beatles were not. And so on. It was in this intellectual context that I first learned—from my peers, the source for everything that I then considered worth knowing—about the Equal Rights Amendment. What I heard (and to my eternal embarrassment, I subsequently repeated) was that the ERA was bad news. Equal Rights for women meant only that we would be forced to use unisex toilets and serve on the front lines in whatever war the U.S. got involved in next: two horrifying prospects for a teenager in 1977.

Reflecting back, I find it hard to believe that I allied myself with this absurd version of antifeminist politics, that I had not yet recognized that women and men were experiencing systematically differential treatment. I, after all, was supremely confident of my skills in the arenas where I competed with my

male peers: in foosball (table soccer), in radio broadcasting, and in various forms of delinquency. It took me much longer than I like to admit to realize that I was subject to variables beyond my control. And it was not until graduate school that I actually read the (by then long-rejected) Equal Rights Amendment. (That none of my college classes required me to read this document speaks volumes about sexism as institutionalized practice). It reads simply: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex."² No shared toilets, no references to the draft. I find it incomprehensible that our legal code still lacks such an amendment. But in the seventies, when feminism could have provided a productive expression for the kind of reckless energy I was expending on petty crime, I simply considered myself too cool for feminism.

"Coolness" is one of those intangibles that invite impressionistic and anecdotal reflection, but which ultimately is a fairly straightforward concept. Cool is about confidence—being at ease, doing what you enjoy (though not inordinately), maintaining a seemingly effortless equilibrium in an unstable world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (though itself not a particularly cool resource) does a pretty good job of defining cool. In the *OED*, cool is a comfort level: a state being neither too cold nor too hot; a pace: "restrained or relaxed"; and a style of behavior: "not heated by passion or emotion; unexcited, dispassionate; deliberate, not hasty; undisturbed, calm." Cool is also an attitude: "assured and unabashed in demeanor, where the circumstances would call for diffidence and hesitation; calmly and deliberately audacious or impudent in making a proposal or demand; said of persons and their actions." When hurried, coolness whispers "relax." When overheated, coolness says, "chill." Under pressure, coolness responds, "hey—I can handle this." Performing cool involves a display of rebellion with a certain elegant detachment.

A recent issue of the *Rolling Stone* (which truly once was an arbiter of coolness) explains, "Nobody can make you cool. You're cool. Or maybe you're not. And indifference in general is cool, although apathy is not... Unlike being hip, which suggests that you know what's happening, and unlike being down, which suggests you are with the in crowd, being cool is a fiercely individualistic characteristic. Going your own damn way at your own damn pace is cool."³ What the *Rolling Stone* definition misses is that the politics of cool, while masquerading as self-sufficiency, is inescapably relational. We form communities around the behaviors, identities, and products we consider cool. In youth culture, cool begins as a reaction against an emergent generation's earliest domestic models and attachments. However, if to act independent from parents and authorities is cool, to be truly independent (at any age) is virtually impossible. As one generation attempts to distinguish itself from its predecessors and to produce its own identity, the performance of cool offers in its alternative models and values protective cover for the often humiliating, essentially trial-and-error process of growing up. And as critics such as Naomi Klein and Malcolm Gladwell have pointed out, we are at all ages interpellated into subcultures of cool that we recognize and express by wearing certain logos, listening to particular kinds of music, and

congregating in certain zip codes.⁴ Cool achieves a particularly hegemonic grasp on the adolescent imagination, but few are completely immune to its appeal.

An ideology of coolness resonates deeply with the varieties of postfeminism currently in circulation. I am focusing here on the “girl power” varieties of postfeminism—also known as the third or fourth wave, not the reactionary strains critiqued so ably by Tania Modleski.⁵ These perspectives, representing what I want to categorize as post-feminism informed by a politics of cool—“cool postfeminism,” for short—surface in alternative fiction,⁶ in installation and performance art (by, for example, The Critical Art Ensemble, and the Guerrilla Girls), and in music (in bands such as Bikini Kill and Tribe 8).⁷ As the recurring term “girls” (or “grrrls”) suggests, “cool postfeminism” appeals most strongly to the young.

Cool postfeminism celebrates female transgression, independence, and power. It categorically rejects the orthodoxies and identity politics of academic feminism. Cris Mazza, novelist and editor of two anthologies entitled *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* and *Chick-Lit 2: No Vics*, describes her work as “irreverent, sassy, in-your-face adventures of women characters with no hint of dealing with the oppression and liability of ‘growing up female in America.’”⁸ That Mazza scornfully attributes the ubiquitous phrase “growing up female in America” to Erica Jong—along with Jane Gallop, the most ridiculed feminists in postfeminist polemic—is telling. Both Jong and Gallop have long cultivated oppositional stances in feminism and in the academy, which would seem to define them as always already cool. But *mutatis mutandi*, one woman’s rebellion is another’s retrenchment.

At its best, cool postfeminism substitutes a celebration of female agency and sexuality for oppression as a point of contact among women. Chris Mazza maintains, “we’re complicated organisms... we’re more than oppressed victims. We can start things instead of just react. We have so many things to say that have nothing to do with ‘I wasn’t allowed to have a paper route’ or ‘my boss touched my butt’ or ‘my man left me when I no longer looked 21.’”⁹ This is not to say that such indignities did and do not occur, just that they cannot serve as the basis for a postfeminist alliance. Complaining is not cool.

Still, amnesia offers a poor alternative. Eurydice, novelist and staff writer for *Spin* magazine, explains, “what’s new about our feminist agenda is that there’s no agenda. We don’t hate pornography, we don’t place value judgments on butch vs. lipstick lesbians, we unequivocally encourage radical bisexuals, dominatrixes, slaves, and celibates to be themselves and join our ranks. We don’t apologize and we don’t much remember.”¹⁰ Lily James, creator of the (now defunct) *Postfeminist Playground* web zine, similarly asserts: “postfeminism is a lack of interest in chanting the old slogans, waving the old banners, crabbing over the old injustices. Young women today want to exploit and enjoy our freedom, not pout about what freedoms we don’t or didn’t have. If you want to see postfeminism, look at the movie *Charlie’s Angels*: chicks kicking ass in lipstick and short skirts, who think of bras as a

cool way to make your boobs look good, not as the shackles of patriarchy. Postfeminists want to move on from feminism—that's the simplest way I can define it. We're tired of being told if we wear makeup and have fun we're betraying our gender and pandering to men."¹¹ Like Eurydice, who asserts that "we don't much remember," James argues that a postfeminist future can be founded on the erasure of a patriarchal past. As an agenda, this strategy is naïve at best. But this is not a feminist theory. It is an ideology of cool.

The consequences of forgetting the past can be seen in the afterlife of James's web zine. By the time I researched this essay in the spring of 2002, I found that the *Postfeminist Playground* website, <http://www.pfplayground.com>, had been taken over by a massive porn site, www.bangx.com. James explains that *Postfeminist Playground* was "a web zine, gloriously illustrated and masterfully edited and we ran it hard for a number of years. Then we got interested in other things—two of us got married and pregnant, myself included, and it was just a lot of work to keep doing... So we shut it down."¹² Shortly after, a porn site bought the rights to the domain name, by then linked to university Women's Studies sites. At present (October 2002), www.pfplayground.com stands vacant, no doubt a relief to an indignant James ("now there are links all over the net to this fucking porn site that people think is ours—oh it is a pain in the ass")¹³ and to uninformed web surfers. The battles we think are safe to "don't much remember" will be fought again in ways that we will not soon forget. Still, while much postfeminist polemic seeks to overlook its history, much of the movement's fiction takes the past as a starting point. Gabrielle Burton's superb novel *Heartbreak Hotel* and Eileen A. Joy's startling "Lot's Wife"¹⁴ provide instructive examples. James's *Postfeminist Playground* makes it all the more important that, as Leigh Shoemaker urges, "third wave feminism must be constantly vigilant, aware that it has been intimately shaped by backlash media and popular culture, and able to recognize the contradictions that fuel its desire for change and differentiation."¹⁵

How can current feminists respond effectively to postfeminism? The title of one of the first "third wave" anthologies, *Listen up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*,¹⁶ offers the most productive strategy. Intergenerational feminism can continue to flourish only if we listen and respond to the voices that challenge the traditional ways of doing feminism. Postfeminists have a valid point when they argue that conventional feminist analyses often represent power as a hegemonic force which inevitably co-opts expressions of agency. An uncritical valorization of "high theory" and identity politics in academic feminism invites similar reevaluation. As feminist critics and activists, we must learn to make our voices intelligible outside the academy. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake wisely observe that "Our hybrid engagement with culture and/as politics sometimes looks problematic to second-wave activists... But, as third-wave activists, we contest a politics of purity that would separate political activism from cultural production."¹⁷

Ultimately, then, postfeminism can be seen both as a divisive generational struggle and as a vital and creative movement. Refusing to identify themselves

as gendered subjects has become, for postfeminists, a political (if not feminist) act. Moreover, some women reject feminism because they do not see their interests, identities, and energies reflected in its conflicts and agendas. For example, some of my students assure me that they reject conventional feminism because they don't recognize themselves as "subjects of gender" in any meaningful way. As children, they were encouraged to play war games and team sports as well as house. As girls, they were encouraged to excel in math and computer science. They argue that exploring conventional notions of gender is tantamount to accepting them. While I find this line of reasoning unconvincing, I appreciate the desire of a new generation of women to seek a space for developing female affiliations outside established frameworks and institutions. As Deborah Seigel maintains, "[w]e must recognize that there can be no single representative subject of feminism, while, at the same time, we must continue to speak in a collective voice that articulates political demands on behalf of a group called 'women.'"¹⁸

Finally, in demographic terms, we second-wave feminists can recognize that we are now the establishment, and therefore are positionally "uncool." For many of us longtime rebels, this may come as a shock. But I find my solace and my marching orders in the words of bell hooks: "[t]o speak about that location from which work emerges, I choose familiar politicized language, old codes, words like 'struggle, marginality, resistance.' I choose these words, knowing that they are no longer popular or 'cool'—I hold onto them and the political legacies they evoke and affirm, even as I work to change what they say, to give them renewed and different meaning."¹⁹

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¹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

² In *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*. Ed. Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 371.

³ <http://www.rollingstone.com/features/cool/default.asp>. *Rolling Stone* 866 (April 12, 2001).

⁴ I am indebted to Louis Althusser for the term "interpellation." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). See also Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000); Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000).

⁵ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3. See also *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist Doing Feminism*, eds. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁶ Mazza's anthologies include (with co-editor Jeffrey DeShell) *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (Normal, IL: FC2, 1995), and (with coeditors Jeffrey DeShell and Elisabeth Sheffield) *Chick-Lit 2: No Chick Vics* (Normal, IL: FC2, 1996). See also, Cris Mazza, "Editing Postfeminist Fiction: Finding the Chic in Lit," *Symploke* 8 (2000): 101-112.

⁷ Postfeminist Forum. <http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr3/forum/forum.htm>.

⁸ "Editing Postfeminist Fiction," p. 109. The author quoted here is "Erica Jong, 2nd generation feminist." Endnote, p. 112.

⁹ "Editing Postfeminist Fiction," p. 109.

¹⁰ <http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr3/forum/fem.htm>.

¹¹ Review of Lily James, *High Drama in Fabulous Toledo* by Valerie MacEwan. <http://www.popmatters.com/books/reviews/h/high-drama-in-fabulous-toledo.html>.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Gabrielle Burton, *Heartbreak Hotel* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999); Eileen A. Joy, "Lot's Wife," *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, pp. 196-205.

¹⁵ Leigh Showmaker, "Part Animal, Part Machine: Self-Definition, Rollins Style," in Heywood and Drake, pp. 103-21, at p. 120.

¹⁶ *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, ed. Barbara Findlen (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, "We Learn America Like A Script: Activism in the Third Wave; or Enough Phantoms of Nothing," pp. 40-54, in *Third Wave Agenda*. p 52.

¹⁸ Deborah Siegel, "Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a 'Postfeminist' Moment," in Heywood and Drake, pp. 55-82, at pp.61-2.

¹⁹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 152-53.