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Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism

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This essay examines the contradictions often found in third wave feminist texts that function as strategic choices that may shape, foster, and enhance an individual's sense of agency. Many third wave feminists utilize contradiction as a way to understand emergent identities, to develop new ways of thinking, and to imagine new forms of social action. Agency, then, stems from the use of contradiction as a means of self-determination and identity, of transcendence of seemingly forced or dichotomous choices, and counter-imaginings of a better future.

The summer 1997 issue of *Hypatia* explored numerous aspects, ideas, and positions of third wave feminism. In this special issue, authors explored the difficulties in defining exactly what third wave feminism is, noting that it emphasizes multiplicity, ambiguity, and difference (Alfonso and Trigilio 1997; Bailey 1997; Orr 1997; Siegel 1997). Other authors explored generational differences among feminist academicians (Detloff 1997; Golumbia 1997) and issues relating to identity politics (Ferguson 1997). Many of these scholars examined third wave feminist books such as Rebecca Walker's edited collection, *To Be Real* (1995), and Barbara Findlen's anthology, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995). Several of these early third wave feminist writers, including the books' editors, discussed how young women (and men) felt alienated by second wave feminism, lacked a sense of belonging to or understanding of feminist ideals and theories, and did not feel included in

feminist organizations and activism (Findlen 1995; Walker 1995; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Labaton and Martin 2004). Some second wave feminists were perceived as suggesting that they were dismayed by younger women's (and men's) apathy for activism and lack of desire to identify with feminist ideals (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Labaton and Martin 2004).

After the 1997 special issue of *Hypatia* was published, numerous books, anthologies, articles, and public discussions about third wave feminism emerged, such as Baumgardner and Richards's *Manifesta* (2000) and *Grassroots* (2005), Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), and Valenti's *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (2007). New volumes that document third wave thought and practice include: *The Fire This Time*, edited by Labaton and Martin (2004), *Catching a Wave*, edited by Dicker and Piepmeier (2003), and *Colonize This!*, edited by Hernández and Rehman (2002). The emergence of these books and public discussion demonstrate that third wave feminism is still relevant fifteen years after Rebecca Walker first coined this term (Walker 1992). In addition to numerous references to third wave feminism found in popular literature and activist circles, we have also noticed that these texts resonate with our students in ways that second wave feminist literature often does not. These third wave texts speak to young women (and men) who may or may not call themselves feminists and who may or may not be familiar with the important historical legacies of the first and second waves of feminism in the United States. The proliferation of third wave feminist texts and their resonance with younger audiences demonstrate that these texts still warrant investigation.

In particular, feminist scholars have observed the ubiquitous presence of contradictions in much third wave feminist literature (Bailey 1997; Orr 1997; Siegel 1997). Cathryn Bailey addresses third wave texts that emphasize contradiction, noting that "complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction can enrich our identities as individual feminists and the movement as a whole" (Bailey 1997, 26). Catherine Orr also notes that "navigating feminism's contradictions—historical, cultural, psychological—is a primary theme of third wave feminism" (Orr 1997, 31). Whereas these scholars document the presence of contradictions in third wave feminist literature (especially in Findlen 1995 and Walker 1995), we explore the use of contradiction as a strategy to foster agency in social, political, and collaborative contexts. Although contradiction is prevalent in third wave feminist literature, the use of contradiction is not monolithic, nor do all third wave feminist writers and activists use it. However, we argue that contradictions foster a sense of agency for some third wave feminist writers and their readers that enables them to understand their identities, diversity, and feminism on their own terms and to explore new possibilities and options for everyday experiences and activism.

While contradiction may be prominent in third wave feminist literature, marginalized groups, and especially women of both the first and second waves of feminism, have often utilized contradictions as a way to navigate through a world that does not necessarily accommodate their values or rhetorical practices (Campbell 1973; Anzaldúa 1987; Orr 1997). For example, feminists and women's rights advocates have developed methods of expression that may run counter to what is expected in order to subvert traditional patriarchal structures. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues that during the 1960s, women's consciousness-raising groups engaged in "oxymoronic" rhetoric as a means of addressing a particular and acute rhetorical situation (Campbell 1973). Campbell also demonstrates similar "contradictory" rhetorical options for women advocating the abolition of slavery and the right to vote in the nineteenth century (Campbell 1989). While it is clear that contradictions and oxymorons have long been feminist options, their presence is especially pronounced in third wave feminism. Dicker and Piepmeier explain that "One way that the third wave distinguishes itself from the second wave is through its *emphasis* on paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and messiness" (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 16, italics added). The practice of contradiction embodies what some third wave feminists see as a positive contribution to their own lives and social circumstances. For some third wave feminists, then, contradictions are not practices to be avoided, but rather the result of a "feminism [that] is often informed by post-modern, poststructuralist theories of identity" (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 16). In other words, contradictions are useful rhetorical tools for negotiating complex lives in a complicated world, and they are a hallmark of the third wave.

In this article, we argue that the contradictions found in some third wave feminist practices, activist measures, and essays are strategic choices that may shape, foster, and enhance third wave feminists' sense of agency. To advance this argument, we examine both anthologies and texts from the 1990s (Findlen 1995; Walker 1995; Bail 1996; Heywood and Drake 1997) and more recent publications, such as Baumgardner and Richards's *Manifesta* (2000), Dicker and Piepmeier's *Catching a Wave* (2003), and Hernández and Rehman's *Colonize This!* (2002). We begin by defining agency and contradiction. We then provide examples of contradictions in third wave feminist literature that illustrate agency through self-determination, transcendence, and "counter-imaginings" (Ott and Aoki 2001). Various third wave feminists have utilized contradiction that may foster, enhance, and empower their sense of agency, as well as their audience's sense of agency. The way in which contradiction, often viewed as a faulty argument, fosters agency invites a reevaluation of women's and other marginalized groups' rhetorical practices. Rather than condemning the rhetorical practice of contradiction, instead it might be viewed as a strategic and agential orientation that enables marginalized perspectives to find voice.

AGENCY AS FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEXTUALIZING CONTRADICTION

In this essay, we utilize the three-pronged definition of agency developed by Emirbayer and Mische, whose extensive essay on agency builds on the philosophical frameworks of historical and contemporary thinkers. They explain that their goal

is to begin to reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963)

This definition of human agency includes routines, habits, future thoughts, and how actors negotiate the past and their vision for the future to shape their choices within present circumstances.

Numerous scholars have recently attempted to theorize agency and its connection to language and rhetorical choice (Fraiberg 1992; Triage 2000; Francis 2002; Webster 2002; Alliance of Rhetoric Societies 2003; Anderson 2004; Greene 2004; Turnbull 2004; Campbell 2005). Many of these studies provide a cursory understanding of the term *agency* as enactment, choice, will, or some other single concept that attempts to embody agency (for example, see Alliance of Rhetoric Societies 2003). However, other theorists see agency as a much more nuanced concept. For example, Mary Triage (2000) argues that agency is comprised of extra-discursive acts, but it is language that motivates people to act. Similarly, Gerard Hauser explains that “Agency also raises questions of voice, power, and rights which place at the center of this era’s major social, political, economic, and cultural issues” (Hauser 2004, 183). Although the importance of studying agency is clear, its “chameleon-like quality” makes this a difficult task (Hauser 2004, 186). Nick Turnbull links agency to language when he contends that “the rhetorical turn supports an increased capacity of agency in the use of language to construct identity and to relate to others. Agency is a fundamental property of rhetoric” (Turnbull 2004, 207). Campbell observes that “agency is communal, social, cooperative, and participatory and, simultaneously, constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture” (Campbell 2005, 3). These views of agency mean that, as Campbell argues, agency is ambiguous and constantly in flux as agents negotiate social circumstances. We use contradiction as an exemplar of how its usages allow for possibilities of self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginings that embody and foster a sense of agency.

CONTRADICTIONS IN THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

The term “contradiction” derives from *contra*, meaning “against,” and *dicere*, meaning “to say.” In its most simplified definition, then, contradiction is to say something against or to oppose (Goldman 2000). Contradiction, as an internally inconsistent or oppositional position, has long been considered a rhetorical strategy or theoretical position to avoid. For example, in the 2004 presidential election, democratic candidate John Kerry’s opponents and the media called him a “flip-flopper” for failing to maintain a consistent position on particular policy issues (Schneider 2004). This label was used not only to insult Kerry; it encapsulates the general cultural disposition toward contradiction. Indeed, contradictions are often frustrating to an audience conditioned and trained to look for and appreciate predictability. As Michel Foucault observes,

The history of ideas usually credits the discourse that it analyses with coherence. If it happens to notice an irregularity in the use of words, several incompatible propositions, a set of meanings that do not adjust to one another, concepts that cannot be systematized together, then it regards it as its duty to find, at a deeper level, a principle of cohesion that organizes the discourse and restores to it its hidden unity. This law of coherence is a heuristic rule, a procedural obligation, almost a moral constraint of research . . . to overcome these contradictions, and to find the point from which they will be able to be mastered. (Foucault 1972, 149)

Foucault calls this practice the “law of coherence,” which is designed to expose and eliminate contradictions.

However, Foucault and others have argued that contradictions are a way to move thinking in new directions. For example, Mao Tse-Tung observes that “Contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its development” (Mao 1965, 4). Mao defines contradiction as difference, the identity of opposites, and the possibility for antagonisms and struggles. Similarly, Leslie Baxter contends that contradiction might be defined as the “dilemma of identity construction” between the “I” and the “we” in a relationship, and other tensions such as “integration-separation, certainty-uncertainty, and expression-non-expression” (Baxter 2004, 115). Foucault argues that contradictions function to develop and elaborate ideas, reorganize discourses and ways of thinking, and to interrogate critically discursive formations (Foucault 1972). Gloria Anzaldúa employs the term “mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” (Anzaldúa 1987, 78), to describe how contradictions embody ambiguity, divergent thinking, and “movement away from set patterns and

goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes" (79).

In this sense, contradiction becomes a rubric for moving in new directions for thinking, theorizing, acting, and negotiating tensions in constructing identity. Contradiction is not just a statement of opposition, but rather functions as a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency. Contradictions found in third wave feminism are often designed to challenge traditional notions of identity and to create ambiguities, divergences, incompatibilities, and different ways of thinking. In other words, contradiction is a deliberate strategy that includes interplays of oppositions. These performative and participatory contradictions create possibilities for self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginings that foster and rely on a sense of agency.

RECONTEXTUALIZING DEFINITIONS AND IDENTITIES: CONTRADICTIONS AND SELF-DETERMINATION

One of the prominent features of third wave feminist rhetoric is the absence of a coherent definition of third wave feminism (Alfonso and Trigilio 1997; Bailey 1997; Orr 1997; Siegel 1997; Renegar and Sowards 2003; Sowards and Renegar 2004, 2006). This definitional ambiguity allows individuals to challenge old notions, sample competing interpretations, create new meanings, and revel in a multiplicity of identities. Third wave feminism is confronted with the challenge of including women and men who share feminist ideals, but who have been unwilling to call themselves feminists because they do not feel that they meet some stringent definition of a feminist or are averse to the perceived "radicalism" of feminism. In part, this reluctance stems from media characterizations of feminists as "feminazis" (a term popularized by conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh) or as left-wing radicals. Walker explains, "We shy from or modify the [feminist] label in an attempt to begin to articulate our differences. . . . For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that does not allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories" (Walker 1995, xxxiii). Other third wave feminists challenge the pervasive stereotypes of feminists. For example, Alisa Valdés, in her essay, "Ruminations of a Feminist Aerobics Instructor," demonstrates how she confronts perceptions of feminism: "Just saying my title is enough to make most people laugh: feminist aerobics instructor. Huh? It's like being a fascist poet. People think you just can't" (Valdés 1995, 12). Although many contemporary feminists do not believe a feminist aerobics instructor is a paradoxical position, for those who understand feminism only from the information provided by the popular

press, such a characterization is a contradiction. These writers employ seemingly contradictory labels to disrupt these popular (mis)understandings of feminism.

Contradictions in connotative meanings are also important rhetorical choices. For example, identity labels that have been previously considered derogatory have been redefined in contradictory and conflicting ways. Some third wave feminist-oriented magazines take negatively connotative identity labels and problematize them by using them as terms of empowerment, such as the magazine *Bitch*. The creators and editors of this magazine use *bitch* to represent the feminist who is outspoken and assertive. The use of *bitch* is a term of empowerment, which appeals to readers who struggle in a society that labels a strong woman a bitch. Similarly, the magazine *Bust* complicates the colloquialism for women's breasts. The subtitle of the publication, "For women with something to get off their chests," both pokes fun at and embraces the term *bust*. Using old words in new ways allows for complexities and contradictions in definition or understanding to emerge, and these contradictions, then, can be used to call the connotations of words into question or reveal hidden assumptions (Daly and Caputi 1987).

Anti-orthodox language choices also demonstrate how some third wave feminists resist normative standards for consistency and clarity in the development of their identities. For example, Nomy Lamm uses her own language rather than the "college essay format" with "fifty-cent words" to articulate her experience with contradiction as a feminist rhetorical practice:

If there's one thing that feminism has taught me, it's that the revolution is gonna be on my terms. The revolution will be incited through my voice, my words, not the words of the universe of male intellect that already exists. And I know that a hell of a lot of what I say is totally contradictory. My contradictions can coexist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I'm not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear, analytical pattern that I know they're supposed to. I think it's important to recognize that all this stuff does contribute to the revolution, for real. The fact that I write like this cuz it's the way I want to write makes this world that much safer for me. (Lamm 1995, 85)

This example illustrates how some third wave feminists use contradiction consciously and purposefully as a way to counter dominant ideologies and demands for consistency.

Not only do these third wave feminist writers employ language choices in polyvocal ways, they also challenge, resist, and employ multiple identities. These third wave feminists hail from an assortment of classes, ethnicities, experiences, sexual orientations, professions, and political alliances. For example,

Barbara Findlen, in the introduction to *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, writes that:

women in this book call themselves, among other things, articulate, white, middle-class college kid; wild and unruly; single mother; Asian bisexual; punk; politically astute, active woman; middle-class black woman; young mother; slacker; member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation; well-adjusted; student; teacher; writer; an individual; a young lady; a person with a visible disability; androgynous; lapsed Jew; child of professional feminists; lesbian daughter; activist; zine writer; a Libra; and an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother. These identities all coexist (*to varying degrees of comfort*) with feminism. (Findlen 1995, xiv, emphasis added)

The editors of these collections have made a deliberate effort to include diverse voices, while recognizing there remains some discomfort in seemingly contradictory identities (Howry and Wood 2001; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003). However, these third wave feminists do not necessarily believe that they have addressed the lack of diversity of feminist thinking. Rather, they recognize that diversity remains a heated and contested issue. Cristina Tzintzún complicates our understanding of diversity when she notes, “I am the colonizer and the colonized, the exploiter and the exploited. I am confused yet sure. I am a contradiction” (Tzintzún 2002, 28).

These third wave feminists are comfortable with their seeming contradictions, which in turn encourage readers to discover and experiment with the various dimensions of themselves. In essence, these texts function to create an alternative space where writers and readers can engage in self-determination and self-definition through the disruption of traditional definitions, stereotypes, and identities. As illustrated by their refusal to adopt expected labels and their use of polyvocal terms, these authors’ choices demonstrate an agential orientation that embodies self-determination. Instead of outright rejection of patriarchal ideas and language, these writers simultaneously resist and engage in these rhetorical strategies. This practice of employing contradiction works much like metaphor; “it takes elements of meaning apart in order to bring them back together again in new, unexpected combinations” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 989). Although the idea of self-determination implies that agency resides within the individual, the way in which these third wave feminists employ such contradictions in public forums, such as third wave feminist anthologies or non-profit women’s organizations, suggests that agency is both “cooperative and communal” (Campbell 2005, 6). That is, the use of contradiction in self-determination becomes reiterative, or “Agency emerges out of performances or actions that, when repeated, fix meaning through sedimentation. Agency

equally emerges in performances that repeat with a difference, altering meaning” (Campbell 2005, 7). The idea of self-determination or self-empowerment stems from the way in which these writers socially negotiate what it means to engage in self-determination. They may define for themselves who they are, but those definitions come from socially constituted support networks that enable an agential orientation toward self-determination.

The use of contradictions also reflects an understanding of agency that is the result of reflection, habitual practices, and conscious choices about the future that employ the iterative, projective, and evaluative functions of agency. Some third wave feminist writers challenge definitions and stereotypes to explore the ontological and epistemological iterations and trappings of mainstream society. Such practices reflect an emphasis on self-determination, that women can negotiate social constraints to make the best choices for that particular moment, recognizing the contingencies of their historical contexts and material worlds as limitations, but looking for ways to subvert those limitations if possible. In other words, they seek to identify possibilities for resistance, while living in a world that seeks to constrain resistance. Slavoj Žižek explains the basis for the evolution or radicalization of identity: “the act proper is the only one which restructures the very symbolic coordinates of the agent’s situation: it is an intervention in the course of which the agent’s identity itself is radically changed” (Žižek 2001, 85). Žižek suggests, as do Emirbayer and Mische (1998), that agency as a projective and evaluative process demands rhetorical intervention to reshape our rhetorical situations. The third wave feminists discussed here purposefully employ contradictions as a way to intervene and disrupt normative thinking, identities, and systemic practices to foster a sense of communal agency through self-determination.

THEORY AND PRACTICE: CONTRADICTION AND TRANSCENDENCE

For many third wave feminists, contradictions are also embodied by activist paradoxes and a wide variety of compelling theories, which are often contradictory or inconsistent with one another. For instance, oppression is rarely a clear-cut issue, and explanations of its source, as well as avenues for ending or alleviating it, are often at odds with one another. Rather, many third wave feminists tend to see oppression as temporary and contextualized. For instance, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake write, “We know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something that I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something that you participate in” (Heywood and Drake 1997, 3).

For some third wave feminists, contradictory and ambiguous theories are appealing because they explain the intricacies of an issue on multiple levels. This is the practice of what Foucault calls inadequation, where contradictions

seem to exist on multiple levels, such as between theory and practice (Foucault 1972). For example, a number of theorists have suggested that pornography is inherently oppressive, constitutes violence, and has no redeeming value (for example, MacKinnon 1993). Other theorists argue that pornography can be used as a tool to enable women to become more comfortable with their sexuality; women who choose to participate in pornography may do so as a result of their own choice rather than through coercion and oppression (for example, Bright 2003). Some third wave feminists, then, utilize a consciousness of multiplicity that allows for contradiction to flourish (Lotz 2003). Amanda Lotz explains that this kind of consciousness enables a third wave feminist “to be a self-determined site of feminism, variously positioning oneself on issues (for or against the criminalization of pornography), tactics (arguing women are the same as men or women are different from men), and identities (today I foreground my race, tomorrow I foreground my sexuality)” (Lotz 2003, 6). These practices that are often labeled as contradictions exist simultaneously and may function without tension or willingness to resolve them.

Some third wave feminists do not feel that they are united with other feminists by shared political and social positions but rather by the feeling that there may be no single, correct position on any number of issues. For example, the debate over the legal age of sexual consent has feminist advocates on opposing sides. Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner explains “on the one hand, there’s the feminist argument for protecting young people from pedophiles, and on the other, the equally feminist counter-argument that mature teens should have the freedom to accept sexual responsibility, as well as access to all of the information necessary to help make their decisions” (Rowe-Finkbeiner 2003, 71). Although some theories may seem inherently contradictory, third wave feminist writers also see these contradictions as the logical result of equally compelling, albeit competing, arguments.

Furthermore, contradictory ideas enable agency where choices about particular issues must often be decided in light of the circumstances that accompany a given situation. Although those who seek to define people by their stand on certain issues are often frustrated with those third wave feminists who refuse to take a concrete position, many third wave feminists see contradiction as a means of creating flexibility and transcending dichotomous or forced positions. Mocha Jean Herrup explains this idea when she says that to “accept the ambiguities’ has become my personal mantra. I repeat these words not to invoke their action, but to cast their spell and release the magic that comes from engagement with uncertainty” (Herrup 1995, 240). When the artificial boundaries of consistency are revealed, contradictions emerge as powerful tools for creating new choices.

These examples of third wave feminist responses to theoretical concerns avoid emphasis on consistency or particular ideological parameters. Rather, strategies of contradiction recognize contingency as a positive and dynamic state that allows individuals to make decisions designed to respond to particular

situations and cultural contexts. As Emirbayer and Mische explain, “actors playfully insert themselves into a variety of possible trajectories and spin out alternative means-ends sequences, thereby expanding their flexible response to a given field of action” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 989–990), representing the projective and evaluative aspects of agency. One of the elements of contingency is the absence of a “right” answer, as Richard Rorty suggests in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: “This playfulness is the product of their shared ability to appreciate the power of redescribing, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important—an appreciation which becomes possible only when one’s aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than The One Right Description” (Rorty 1989, 39–40). Many third wave feminists recognize that there are numerous alternative decisions and descriptions that can work for each person, depending on how that person negotiates and evaluates the present context.

The function of these contradictions allows for choices that transcend the commonly accepted, usually dichotomous, options. Society is awash in artificial dichotomies, but contradiction challenges the either/or nature of forced choices and allows for complex combinations of options and new alternatives to emerge. The third wave feminists discussed here have become comfortable revealing assumptions, examining implications, considering different perspectives, and asking new questions—all of which problematize the idea that simple decisions are readily at hand. Mary Daly (1992) has argued that women should seek to create a transcendent third option that spans the differences between forced choices and illuminates the artificial and constructed nature of these dichotomies: “Patriarchy constructs false dichotomies that force women into either/or decisions where neither option is attractive. Daly’s method of overcoming these pseudo-forced choices is to devise a third option that transcends the foreground limitations embedded within false dichotomies” (Renegar 2000, 131). The third wave embodies Daly’s ideas by being comfortable with complexity and deliberately eschewing efforts at simplification. Some third wave feminists are at ease with the complicated and complex, and are willing to deal with the difficulty of choosing among many options or creating new alternatives rather than allowing someone else to limit their sense of agency by attempting to create simple either/or decisions.

PRESENTATION AND RE-PRESENTATION: AGENCY AND COUNTER-IMAGINATIONS

Contradictions also emerge when individuals actively participate in how they present and represent themselves. Such activities might include choice of dress, the television shows and movies they watch, and the books and magazines they read. Some third wave feminists seek to avoid an established, univocal, or homogeneous image (Garrison 2000). As Anzaldúa suggests, the

issue of presentation is a question of identity and contradiction, that is, of being torn between social expectations and one's sense of self (Anzaldúa 1987). Indeed, these third wave feminists discuss how they have chosen some combination of traditional gender stereotypes and nontraditional representations of identity. "Contradiction and multiplicity of identities plays itself out especially in third wavers' love/hate relationship with the media and pop culture" (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 16). For example, some third wave feminists rely consciously on clothing as a vehicle for expression that exemplifies contradiction in gender expectations. Lisbeth Gorr describes her role as "Elle McFeast" on an Australian sports program: "for beneath the frocks, Elle wore her Docs. Yes, the ol' Doc Martens boots—good for kicking down doors and traversing any terrain, and they look particularly funky with red lipstick" (Gorr 1996, 27). Gorr's description of the clothes she wore for her sports commentaries demonstrates the anti-orthodoxy that many third wave feminists choose to embody. Jennifer Reid Maxcy Myhre purposefully employs an ambiguous gender by shaving her head, and then relishes the moments when she is a mystery to those seeking static gender categories: "I am glad they are uncomfortable; it suits my purposes" (Myhre 1995, 135).

Other third wave feminists attempt to employ feminine and masculine stereotypes or images at the same time; wearing both traditional and nontraditional clothing together illustrates the desire to be simultaneously what society expects and does not expect. Again, Gorr participates in traditional feminine dress by wearing a ball gown and red lipstick for her news report but, at the same time, resists that stereotypical, feminine image by wearing combat boots. Her image is further complicated by her femininity in the male-dominated world of sports-casting. Similarly, Jeannine DeLombard sees representation as the heart of third wave feminism. She describes "femmenism," what she calls the intersection of third wave feminism and lesbianism, as "the riptide that drags nature and nurture, essentialism and constructivism, and all other binary oppositions out to sea. Femmenism is nothing if not contradictory. Femmenism is looking like a straight woman and living like a dyke" (DeLombard 1995, 21).

Choices in entertainment, including movies, television, popular music, and magazines, also reflect an ability to accept, resist, and problematize the consumption of mass-mediated images. The relatively new genre of female action heroes, such as Veronica Mars, Halle Berry as a secret agent working with James Bond, the new *Charlie's Angels*, and the popular television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, represent women who are both sexualized and empowered (Byers 2003; Payne-Milliken and Renegar 2006). Some third wave feminists discuss how they consume these images because they are empowered by such female portrayals, but at the same time they often recognize the problems inherent in representing strong women in highly sexualized ways. "Chick" flicks and romantic comedies present a similar dilemma because they are often per-

ceived as vapid or hyper-feminine. Baumgardner and Richards urge feminist audiences to embrace the entertainment media that they enjoy: “The Girlie zine *Bust*’s exhortation to embrace the chick label in the name of girl culture is one response to women’s scapegoating. (‘Yeah, goddamn it! *Bridget Jones* is a chick book! *Hole* is a chick band!’ as [*Bust*] co-editor Debbie Stoller says.)” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 95, italics in original). Thus, some third wave feminists are able to complicate their consumption of popular culture through their recognition of the empowering and objectifying principles they encounter because they are able to see past initial feminist or social objections to such popular culture artifacts and appreciate the value or entertainment in both kinds of images.

Similarly, women’s representation in media might be interpreted as either oppression or as women’s freedom of expression. Veronica Webb, a successful fashion model, explains “I personally don’t feel objectified, because I control the way my looks are used, not the other way around. There is a lot more self-expression [in modeling] than people realize” (Walker and Webb 1995, 210). She continues by noting that “models *choose* what they want to do” (210–11, italics in original). The representation of women can be viewed as simultaneously empowering and objectifying women, as Baumgardner and Richards illustrate:

Objectification is no longer our biggest problem. Historically, women’s bodies in ads have always been conflated with the product, something that feminists worked hard to identify and critique . . . there are positive examples of women’s “subjectification.” These women aren’t objects, because they hold the power. The obvious “subjectifier” is Madonna, but there is also hip-hop diva Missy Elliott, soccer pinup Brandi Chastain, and TV star Roseanne. All have parlayed their sexual selves into power in feminist ways. These women aren’t exploited. They are whole women—both confident *and* conscious. (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 102–03, italics in original)

Some third wave feminists and their comfort with contradiction offer the possibility of exploring the simultaneous acceptance and resistance to images, media representation, and the empowerment and the objectification that may ensue. In some ways, it is the ability of these feminists to consume and accept popular culture that allows them also to reflect critically on multiple meanings of popular culture. For example, maintaining a critical posture toward media representations is much easier when there is a familiarity with those images and texts. Someone who both enjoys and critiques popular culture is in a unique position to have a richer understanding of the phenomenon, to produce a deeper analysis of its cultural assumptions, and to explain why it appeals to mass

audiences. The tendency of many third wave feminists to be simultaneously both popular culture consumers and critics illustrates how these feminists are able to engage in practical-evaluative agency through determining which alternatives will work in which temporal contexts.

Some third wave feminists also encourage those who wish to live in a better world to begin enacting the changes that they want to see, using the evaluative and projective functions of agency. Michael Salvador argues, through his study of rhetorical inventions that served to regulate cultural contradictions, that groups must challenge essential cultural values and norms in order to create social change (Salvador 1994). Similarly, Ott and Aoki explain that choices that are the result of the dominant, white, masculinist, heterosexist imagination limit human agency by requiring adaptation to these constructed situations. They advocate the use of counter-imaginings to reveal hidden power dynamics in dominant discourses and imaginings and to propose new futures for radical possibility (Ott and Aoki 2001). This idea of counter-imaginings, or projective agency, can “provide communicative bases for the formulation of new strategies for collective action as well as for the development of new social policies, normative ideals, or ways of organizing institutions” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 990). Many third wave feminists embody projective agency, using contradictions as a framework for counter-imaginings and agential orientation.

Agency, then, develops through combinations of incongruous ideas that are the result of these counter-imaginings. Emirbayer and Mische similarly note that “as actors encounter problematic situations requiring the exercise of imagination and judgment, they gain a reflective distance from received patterns that may (in some contexts) allow for greater imagination, choice, and conscious purpose” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 973). In other words, agency begets more agency. Third wave feminists who deploy contradictions as counter-imaginings and strategic tools to foster choice and disrupt the status quo are consequently in a position to increasingly exercise agential orientations to a greater degree.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have identified numerous examples of contradiction found in third wave feminist texts. These contradictions function to enhance agency by creating space for self-determination, transcending expected behavior and adherence to ideas, and exploring alternatives through counter-imaginings and creativity. The rhetorical practice of contradiction in these third wave feminist texts demonstrates a different way of thinking about third wave feminism, illustrating its complexity, despite accusations of simplicity and apathy. For instance the examples of contradiction cited in this essay provide a more com-

plex understanding of how many third wave feminists negotiate issues of diversity, identity, theory, and activism in relationship to the legacies of first and second wave feminism, even if these previous waves are not always acknowledged or understood. For many third wave feminists, the political and ethical climates are also more complex and dynamic, given the proliferation of feminist thought, in addition to social changes. As Emirbayer and Mische explain, “actors who are located in more complex relational settings must correspondingly learn to take a wider variety of factors into account, to reflect upon alternative paths of action, and to communicate, to negotiate, and to compromise with people of diverse populations and perspectives” which then “support more autonomous personal and occupational identities (and, by extension, more imaginative and reflective engagements with the contexts of action)” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1007). Contradiction is one example of how many third wave feminists shape their agential orientation to develop new ways of thinking and new forms of social action.

As routines are called into question through contradiction, critical inquiries may then lead to new forms of future actions that may then form new iterations. Utilizing rhetorical strategies such as contradiction builds confidence in understanding agency because the process of making new kinds of choices becomes more familiar and comfortable. As some third wave feminists use contradiction to combine inconsistent ideas and construct new choices, they participate in the construction of their reality. Žižek observes that “in order effectively to liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality, one should first renounce the transgressive fantasmatic supplement that attaches us to it” (Žižek 2000, 149). In essence, the ability to engage in contradiction is a renunciation of conventional social norms, traditional argument structure, and consistency as desirable practices. This both requires and fosters agency through transcendence and counter-imaginings.

Some third wave feminists also use projective agency to maintain a hopeful optimism about the possibilities for the future, even as they realize the extraordinary tenacity of patriarchal thinking in American culture. The third wave has been characterized as inspiring, liberating, and activating, with an ebullience and hopefulness (Shugart 2001). Although mainstream society often attempts to convince women that they are powerless sex objects, feminist agency infuses these third wave feminists with a sense of hopefulness and resistance to these ideas. Many third wave feminists are energized by their feminist activities and choices, and reassured by the gains of the women’s movements that have come before them. In other words, these feminists recognize the communal, contingent, and historical nature of agency that Campbell describes (Campbell 2005). Thus, some third wave feminists may have an idealistic and projective hope for the future and a steadfast belief in the power of agency, even as they are pessimistic about the present and its varied

manifestations of patriarchal thinking. In acknowledgment of social circumstances, these feminists readily concede that they might not be able to change the world or that change may be a long time in coming, but they emphasize the belief that even small changes can make a dramatic difference in the construction of the future.

Agency also encourages a critical orientation to problems of the present. Rather than experience a crisis when faced with the evidence of contradiction, some third wave feminists critique or eschew traditional notions of consistency and embrace the messiness of lived experience. The polarizations and forced choices of the status quo often create situations in which it is impossible to enact authentic, self-created decisions, so the process of engaging practical-evaluative agency to find new ways of thinking about seemingly black and white choices is essential. The deliberate practice of contradiction, then, becomes a vehicle to reveal new structures of thought that expose artificially dichotomous choices. These strategies present an opportunity to enter a liminal space where innovative thinking is appreciated and valued. In the case of contradiction, years of education that demand logic, consistency, order, organization, structure, and rational arguments in the way that humans think and communicate must be suspended. This analysis of the agency that is fostered by deliberately using contradiction challenges the tradition of consistency and the negative framing of contradiction.

Finally, although many third wave feminists are comfortable with contradictions, using them is not always a simple task. Ellen Neuborne explains that “it is equally dangerous for our mothers to assume that because we are children of the movement, we are equipped to stand our ground. In many cases, we are unarmed” (Neuborne 1995, 31–32). Individuals have often been conditioned by a lifetime of learning to follow rules, seek approval, and engage in logical and rational rhetoric. Understanding that rules have power only insofar as people choose to follow them is often forgotten along the way. Maia Boswell explains that “I learned to relinquish my power, and did so again and again, having internalized the belief that I existed apart from others who ‘knew’” (Boswell 2001, 50). An understanding of how third wave feminists employ contradiction helps situate these feminists within the rich history of feminist and women’s rights activists. Contradiction also provides an important element of flexibility that is necessary for facing new and complex social circumstances. The practice of contradiction enhances, refines, and moves feminist thinking in new directions, even as it is rooted in the ideas of the past. It is this ability to use the past to engage the future while in the present that embodies agency for some third wave feminists. Furthermore, an understanding of agency as a communal effort that builds upon itself reveals new possibilities for others who feel constrained by the prescribed choices of traditional society. In this way, third wave feminism may well be a blueprint for new ways of

thinking and acting that are both contextualized and responsive to the means and desires of a particular individual and the communities in which they live.

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