

**Discourses Among Academic and Third Wave Feminists: Reiterating the Essence of “The personal is the Political” in Third Wave Feminism**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper tends to reiterate the awareness-arousing characteristics of the third-wave feminism: heterogeneity, transnationalism, individual testimony, cultural hybridity, coalitional identity and collective empowerment by responding to the article, “Feminism’s Third Wave: What Do Young Women Want?” published by Wendy Kamner, who criticizes that for the purpose of voicing the indignation at being unfairly oppressed in class, gender and race, how third-wave feminists improperly take miserable testimony as the therapeutic route against the unfair treatment from the patriarchal power. By declaiming third wavers’ presenting their personal oppressed histories as an inadequate process to limit public issues into personal ones, Kamner points out it is risk-taking in finitely constructing the politics of third-wave feminism by expressing private testimonies. However, one of the representative feminists in third-wave movement, Babara Findlen, has mentioned, “Individual women’s experiences of sexism have always been an important basis for political awareness and action. This collection gives voice to young feminists’ personal experiences because they have often been, and continue to be, our point of entry into feminism” (15). Individuals’ voices not only play significant roles to construct the foundation of feminist theory but can be collected as the approaches to feminism relating to both personal and public phronesis. For responding to Kamner’s undervaluing the fixed position of an individual in third-wave feminism, this paper tends to discuss how third wavers embrace the characteristic of coalition with multiple identities by sharing their personal life records in the light of the conception, “the personal is political.”*

**KEYWORDS:** cultural hybridity, heterogeneity, third-wave feminism, collective empowerment, personal is political, transnationalis

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## INTRODUCTION

The slogan, “the personal is political,” deriving from the period of second-wave feminism, was coined in 1968 by Carol Hanisch, who was at that time a civil rights worker and a feminist activist. This conception emphasizes the direct connection between the personal and the political. That is to say that for catching on political issues concerning female predicaments, the first step is to comprehend the individual life of women. Due to the bond relationship between male jurisdiction over women in public region, and male predomination over females in families, Hanisch indicates it is

erroneous to assume that there is no correlation between the individual and public spheres (Theresa 163). In any country, women's personal experiences which not only stand for the collective ones but the foundation of the politics in women movement, can be traced back to the root of social structure. Although the slogan, "the personal is political" is the production in second-wave feminism, it helps propel the momentum of third-wave feminism as well, and "continues to inspire women's movements all around the world" (164). Calling for the attention to transnationalism, third-wave feminism is not taken as the monolithic movement belonging to the white middle-class females in the western world, but as the grassroots movement collecting diverse local life records for constructing the footstones of the theory. Owing to the characteristics of diversity and multiplicity, third-wave feminists encourage followers coming from various cultural, economic, political and ethnic backgrounds to testify their personal stories and to share their life experiences, less academic and less theoretical to be comprehended by the masses

As what Rebecca Walker claims in her introduction to *To Be Real*, "I prefer personal testimonies because they build empathy and compassion, are infinitely more accessible than more academic tracts, and because I believe that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory that neither vilifies or deifies, but that accepts and respects difference" (37). Hence, the process of disseminating personal experiences composed of the characteristics of authenticity simultaneously stands for establishing the basic structure of third-wave feminism. To apparently expound, personal historical records can be considered as the elements of ideology, because reading the personal experiences could be the guidance to arouse readers' consciousness concerning feminism, especially for the innocent and naïve women oppressed by the patriarchal frame. In other words, in third-wave feminism, story-telling is a productive way to exemplify instances of how women survive in a tough position and to awake the women who still insensibly live under oppression or the women who tend to struggle for gender equality.

Nevertheless, in the article, "Feminism's Third Wave: What Do Young Women Want," Kaminer indicates the inadequate procedure of the young third wavers' giving their voice to the patriarchal world by subjectively expressing the individual miserable experience for venting personal negative emotions, and criticizes their lacking objectivity via quoting what Susan Reverby, a historian at Wellesley College, remarks in the article, "students insist on talking about their personal experiences in class and seek therapy instead of instruction from their teachers. What do 19- and 20-year-olds think about? They think about themselves"(2). In her interpretation, different from previous academic feminists, these young third wavers are amateur memoirists who write and speak only for personal purpose and have no idea about the significance of separating personal emotions from social policy. Distrusting the young feminists' intention of individual experience sharing, Kaminer further refers that the criteria to examine writers are not like the one to examine athletes— the younger the better. Younger sportsmen are possibly able to create great effects but young third wavers are not qualified to materialize the emancipation movement. Apparently, the value and contribution of the waver's testimonies are denied by Kaminer, who ignores their practice relating to connecting the personal issue with the social/political in the meantime.

Responding to Kamnier's distorted perspective on third-wave feminism, Heywood and Drake's discourses supply the explanation as follows, "we wanted good storytelling and critical analysis without jargon, live personal experience that was tied to the larger social sense" (14). Third wavers' personal narratives are connected with the society composing of local voices and "feminist activism is necessarily congruent with civic engagement" for both bridging and sustaining the public-private relationship (Theresa 164). In writings concerning third-wave discourses, such as *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, *Listen Up! Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* or *Bitchfest*, numerous women deliver their own stories with injured feelings resulting from the patriarchal society. These books resemble the territories where women plow and weed altogether for inspiring one another by composing and sharing various individual stories. We can say that experiences sharing is the most straightforward path for us to get familiar with what third-wave feminists are engaged in and how they are suffered in their growing process. Striving for justice and equality, Katie Roiphe, a 24-year-old graduate student, discloses her wounded experience about gender discrimination. Why did she disregard any possible negative judgment and bravely unfold the truth? The purpose is nothing but resonating with younger women for gathering more empowerment and pursuing equality by writing—a process of experience sharing, self-expression and mental therapy. Once the experiences of sexism are presented, similar or even sympathetic responses must string along. Barbara Findlen, another representative third-wave feminist, proclaims that she has been a feminist since girlhood. Recalling those misfortune experiences, Findlen had defined herself as a feminist at the suffered moment—being haunted by patriarchal oppression. Possessing difficult positions and predicament is usually accompanied with the process to arouses an individual's consciousness, and the individual's situation with inequality directly reacts the interrelationship between the persona and the political, as Tocach proposes,

When we talk about personal and political, we mean the process in which people discuss how they shall live. It is a conscious process that has form and content that develops historically. Because it is about how people live it is being and acting "social" and "personal." Because we are human, the three levels of activity and consciousness, that is, the personal, social, and societal, are present at all times in each of us. Whether we are aware of this interconnection is another matter, the matter of consciousness-raising. (225)

For helping more oppressed women and respecting their diverse cultural heritages at the same time, third-wave feminism, different from the academic one, stresses the necessity to cross the boundary of gender, race, and class by leaving tolerant space for women to make voices. As a grass-root movement, third-wave feminism does not arise "from a mass-based social movement" and "may be even less class-conscious than much second wave feminism has been" (Alfonso 10). Accordingly, it is possible that the contributors of third-wave feminism include academic, nonacademic, colored, Western, and Third World members who might be artists, activists, academics and even ordinary citizens. With regard to the characteristic of inclusiveness, Kaminer controverts by providing the following statements,

A SELF-CONSCIOUSLY diverse group, they write about eating disorders, discrimination against fat people and the disabled, rape, incest, homophobia

and other forms of sexism and racism. They are preoccupied with oppression. Are they oppressed? Do they collaborate in the oppression of others? . . .Oppression is an affliction that anyone can claim. (3)

Further, Kaminer comments on the third wavers' exaggeration in disclosing their personal injured occurrences and remarks that "in recent years, feminism has manufactured excuses for women, exaggerating the extent of discrimination, sexual harassment or the risk of sexual violence" (3). In the development of third-wave feminism, Kaminer ignores its necessity of constructing the approach for women to make personal voices to resist oppression. Obviously, she complicates the pure motivation of the young wavers. Referring to Kaminer's disapproving third waver's personal oppressed testimonies, apparently, she examines third-wave feminism in the aspect of "victim feminism" that "allows white bourgeois women to inaccurately absorb other's experiences into their own, to force them into a rhetoric of 'sisterhood' or a category of 'woman' that may not adequately describe different women's experiences" (Soriso 142). In *Fire with Fire*, Naomi Wolf indicates there are two approaches to feminism: "victim feminism" and "power feminism." "Victim feminism" is not helpful to contemporary feminism due to its concentrating on women's anonymity and powerlessness with victim identity; "power feminism" is empowering with tolerance of difference, "hating sexism without hating men," and valuing individuals "voices and identities for public recognition" (148-50). Corresponding to the definition of "power feminism," third-wave feminism holds hybridity of voices and encourages women to speak up for obtaining empowerment and to negotiate the personal with the political. On the contrary, traditional academic feminists' clinging to "a theory of common oppression" consists with the so-called "victim feminism" that ignores "the individual achievement and public recognition" (143).

Encompassing the assertion of transnationalism, third-wave feminism displays the voices of Third World women within and out of the western country and attempts to subvert the structure of binary oppositions. In the past, the disadvantaged were hardly in possession of space and positions due to essentialism of academic feminism that mantled the voices of the women on the edge. Criticizing the limitation of second-wave feminism, Sturgeon claims, "I contend that this comprehension of feminist consciousness is hegemonically unified, framed, and buttressed with the result that the expression of a unique form of U.S. third world feminism, active over the last thirty years, has become invisible outside of its all-knowing logic" (175). Definitely, the conception of "the personal is political" has emerged since the period of second-wave feminism, but the part of "the personal" has less relationship with the identity of Third World women because of the constraints caused by hierarchy and inequality in western countries. In such west-centered structure, the definition of "the personal" becomes limited to white middle-class women. In this way, "the political" reacted by "the personal" has less involvement with transnationalism.

While analyzing the social condition concerning oppression events, "the white women doing the comparing did not say that they were treated as black women were treated (which they could not say because they often dealt with black women as subordinates or employees), and they did not seem to consider gender divisions among black people relevant in their comparison" (Zack 4). To white women, identifying themselves as if

they were black women is difficult with regard to the fact that dissimilar culture heritages bring people different encounters. Hierarchy of gender, class and race indeed exist all over the world and it is urgent to initiate the boundary-crossing political issue reacted by personal experiences with transnational conception to break the boundary between the White and non-White. As to third-wave feminism, its context is not restricted to U.S. but pluralistically spreads in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and so on. In the article, "Transnational Feminisms in A New Global Matrix," Sampaio explains how "the personal struggle" of the marginalized women is transnationally transformed into "political consciousness and subjectivity" in feminism:

In particular, the work of US feminists of color has opened critical spaces where African American/Black, Asian American, Chicana/Latina and American Indian/Native American women can connect around issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination, domestic violence, health related concerns, class stratification and a host of other issues reflecting their daily struggles. These critical spaces enabled the development of women's political consciousness rooted in particular communities, asserted an "oppositional" political subjectivity that challenged discourses marginalizing women and racial minorities and developed a theory of "difference" as the simultaneous existence of contradictory and complementary positions (197).

On account of the existence of hierarchy emerging from the discrepancy of politics, economics and culture, such discrepancy and difference should be tolerated so inclusiveness is required in the third wave that makes Third world women listened. Thus, the subjects of so-called "the personal" extends to every corners in the world. Subsequently, the range of "the political" will not be restricted to be white-centered but become worldwide. The events happening in women's daily life, including domestic relationship, cultural disadvantage, racism, sexism, and discrimination, directly reflect what should be concentrated on for arousing political consciousness.

Applying boundary-breaking theory in postfeminism, third waver broaden the cultural and geographical space for more life storytellers to seek for recognition of identity and status. For feminists engaged in "poststructural theory, the study of subjectivity is far more than a simple celebration of the personal and "certain institutions (and discourses) contribute to the construction of identity marks the process as a public activity that serves both political and public functions" (Isenberg 454). U.S. feminists of color contribute to the mission of connecting in transnational feminism which "represents a desire to transgress the political borders dividing women who have been marginalized by hierarchies of domination without erasing the specificity of their experiences and the syncretism of race, class and gender in their daily lives" (197).

Third-wave feminism holds the characteristics of multiplicity and coalition but how does wavers transform "the personal" into "the political" by expressing personal history resulting in the emergence of the political issues? How does an individual seek for collective empowerment to rebuild the identity? Here, taking an Asian American feminist, JeeYeun Lee, as an example to specify: Lee, an Asian American feminist, recognizes herself as one of the "women of different ethnic backgrounds, with very



different issues among East Asians, South Asians, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders; women of mixed race and heritage” (71). In Lee’s interpretation, all individuals with diverse identities might have much in common. Consequently, every personal story can be integrated together and becomes the constituent of empowered community, as Lee claims, “Feminism was my avenue to politics: It politicized me; it raised my consciousness about issues of oppression, power and resistance in general. I learn a language with which I could start to explain my experiences and link them to larger societal structures of oppression and complicity” (69). Indeed, through the therapeutic progress of personal stories sharing, oppression can be relieved to heal mental traumas accompanied with multiple identities with uncertainty, and consciousness of oppression and resistance will be raised with the following of political awareness. Like JeeYeun Lee, a women possessing diverse cultural heritages, tries to search for what women of color have in common for embracing new subjectivity as a resolution, and it is through personal narratives the “dialogic process of collectively working through and making sense of personal and shared experiences that there is a possibility of creating new subjectivities” (Cahill 276). For equality pursuing, the identity of colored women are waited to be constructed and it is what the third wavers currently strive for. Therefore, the function of personal experience cannot be ignored because it is a medium to connect the personal and the political spheres, as Cahill asserts, “Similar to the feminist practice of ‘consciousness raising’ through this process, political understandings are developed through an analysis of personal experiences” (273). Rather than individualizing the problems they have been confronted with, third wave participants record and extend their experiences publicly to arouse more women’s consciousness. Here, I would like to compare third wave feminism community to a transparent box; compare personal story to a fireworm, and the light of the fireworm resembles the voice of the oppressed in the patriarchal society. In a box, the more the fireworms are, the more brilliant the light will become. Consequently, the more personal experiences are gathered, the more empowerment women can obtain. However, the opinion “coalitional identity” proposed by Lee is criticized by Wendy Kaminer, who considers it is satiric to announce one’s multiple identities emerging from the development of rifts in different backgrounds and finally makes the conclusion that “women must be a coalitional identity.” In her clarification, the young women of identity politics “routinely deconstruct themselves” and sometimes feel excluded in certain groups. She asserts that is a big challenge to collect disparate individuals with various racial, economic or religious backgrounds. (2) Although Kaminer warns that third wavers’ deconstructing themselves might result in feeling excluded, she neglects how third-wave feminists transforming “the personal” into “the political” to recollect their identity after deconstructing themselves. In “Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy,” Ray and Korteweg cooperatively call for comparative works from third wavers involved in the areas where larger political, cultural, and economic processes are played out. It “would enable us to better understand the ways in which women's collective identities and interests are constructed and the ideological and material conditions under which mobilizations actually take place” (66-67).

To dismantle the roof of patriarchal society and get rid of any possible upcoming exploitation, third-wave feminists exert themselves to create a space with equality. Personal voices are agglomerated, then are accompanied political empowerment

emerges. In the third wave's materialization of "the person is political," it lacks objectivity to criticize that feminists merely stand up for themselves and lead personal problems into public ones without careful consideration. The interactive relationship between "the personal" and "the political" lies in the mode of reflection with the features of transnationalism, hybridity, heterogeneity, anti-racism, and coalition. That is to say personal experiences reflect public phenomena instead of directly being tantamount to public problems. Indeed, third-wave feminism's broadly incorporating voices supplies live theories for many young women (women of color, women in developing countries, non/academic women, non/heterosexual women, and even transgender women) to grope for equal life positions.

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