

Liberal Irony, Rhetoric, and Feminist Thought: A Unifying Third Wave Feminist Theory

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The meanings of a feminist movement and feminism have changed significantly over the past hundred years. From the women's suffrage movement, to the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, to the 1980s label "feminazi," feminist theories and movements have emphasized many different issues for a variety of reasons. In part, it is these differences that make identification with feminist principles and practices so difficult. As part of the new generation of feminists, we are often left wondering if we are good enough as feminists, if we do enough as activists, and what it is that we really stand for. Many of us have grown up with the benefits and the victories of the feminists in the second wave and feel a responsibility to continue to seek the end of oppression. However, our experiences as feminists and young women often leave us feeling angry, hopeless, and confused as to where we are supposed to go, how we are supposed to get there, and what battles we are supposed to wage as part of a feminist movement. Resolving these tensions and questions will allow us to better understand and articulate what it is that we want and need in a feminist theory. Recent and ongoing division within and among feminist movements and theories, lack of consensus, in-group fighting, and a focus on singular women's theories and issues have created problems and a lack of solidarity that is counter-productive to feminism as a whole.

"Third wave feminism" is a term used to describe feminists who were born in the 1960s and 1970s. Although not universally recognized as a discrete wave of feminism, the third wave is increasingly distinguishing itself in both popular culture and academic writing.¹ We believe that third wave feminism is an emerging movement that currently lacks an overarching or coherent philosophy of praxis. While this type of unifying philosophy is not necessarily required by a movement, we believe that the presence of such a theory, in the instance of third wave feminism, would be highly

beneficial since it could provide direction and explain the motives of young feminists who are still in the process of developing and defining their feminist beliefs and actions. Often the philosophy of a movement is not apparent until the movement is well established or has accomplished its goals. Third wave feminists, however, are in a unique position to simultaneously create and embrace a coherent philosophy while developing their feminist ideas and practices. In this essay, we argue that Richard Rorty's notion of liberal irony, as interpreted by third wave feminist experience, is a coherent philosophy of thought and action that will center the emerging feminist movement and allow it to prosper.

For us, a rhetorical theory constructed from Rorty's liberal irony and pragmatism, together with various third wave feminist theories, provides the sort of solution that addresses many of our concerns about the direction of feminist theory. Rorty's philosophy of liberal ironism is compelling but has received scant attention from feminist or rhetorical theorists. A few feminist philosophers have examined a pragmatist feminism, but have largely focused on the early pragmatists, ignoring Rorty's liberal ironism entirely or discussing it only in the larger context of pragmatism (Aboulaflia 1993; Hart 1993; Leffers 1993; Pappas 1993; Rooney 1993; Shuler and Tate 2001; Seigfried 1996; Sullivan 2001; Upin 1993). Donna Haraway (1990), although not dealing directly with irony from a pragmatist perspective, notes that language politics are strongly associated with feminist struggles. She argues that feminists can utilize ironic methods to negotiate identities that "seem contradictory, partial, and strategic" (197). An ironic perspective recognizes the exclusion inherent in naming and allows contradictory fusions of identity to emerge. In this way, irony blurs the boundaries of language. For her, "irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play" (190). She values irony as a rhetorical strategy and a political method, and advocates its use as a socialist feminist tool.

Other scholars have written about and criticized more extensively the relationship between Rorty's theories of neopragmatism, liberal irony, and feminism, but we believe that their criticisms can be answered within the context and our interpretation of Rorty's works (Bickford 1993; Fraser 1989, 1991, 1995; Kaufman-Osborn 1993). Both Rorty (1991a, 1993) and Duran (1993) address how feminism and pragmatism might intersect. Others have examined Rorty's contributions to the study of rhetoric, but these

articles and books do not seem to have had much influence on establishing liberal irony as an overarching rhetorical theory (Horne 1989, 2001; Mailloux 1998; Smith 1989). Two notable, recent exceptions are Hariman's (2002) and McDaniel's (2002) discussion of irony in rhetorical theory. Hariman contends that allegory is a suitable replacement and improvement on irony's faults. His two major criticisms of Rorty's irony are that irony represents a single, dominating form of rationality and that ironists are interested only in private redescriptions, rather than public change. McDaniel problematizes Hariman's interpretation of Rorty by observing that Hariman creates a false dichotomy and forced choice between allegory and irony, when in fact both may be useful and that irony provides sharper analysis than does allegory. In essence, Hariman concludes that allegory creates a unifying principle that joins "together many discourses, images, ideas, and identities into obviously provisional hierarchies that are known to be scaffolding for building more egalitarian, caring, creative communities" (289). However, McDaniel argues that irony is better suited for this task than allegory because of its emphasis on "critical consciousness, political activity, self-governance, and the skills through which subjects can participate in civic deliberation on matters of mutual concern" (323–4). We agree with McDaniel that irony is well suited for the liberal ironist feminist rhetorical theory that we will articulate here, and believe that Hariman's criticisms can be answered within Rorty's work, leading to both the unifying principle and critical consciousness that Hariman and McDaniel envision.

In this essay, we develop the basis for a coherent, unifying, ironic feminist rhetorical theory that demonstrates the importance of language and rhetoric, eliminating pain and humiliation from our language, demanding solidarity among all sorts of humans, highlighting social hope and optimism, and providing a theory that tolerates, mediates, respects, and encourages differences. In the first part of the essay, we examine some of the tensions in contemporary feminist movements through a discussion of the advent of third wave feminism. In the second part, we develop Rorty's theory of liberal irony from a rhetorical perspective. Finally, we examine how feminists, feminist movements, and rhetorical theory benefit from liberal irony as a rhetorical theory.

Contemporary American feminism in transition

The feminist movement in the United States at the beginning of the new millennium is poised on the brink of change. Many of the activists of the second wave are retiring from public life and third wave feminists are still a young group without a solid foundation. Young women and men often do not refer to themselves as feminists even though they often share a feminist ideology. Many find the feminism of the second wave stale and ideologically rigid (Sorasio 1997) and have not yet realized that a third wave alternative exists. Third wave feminists explain that twenty-something men and women often believe that feminism is irrelevant because the biggest battles for women's rights have already been won by our predecessors, and other issues, such as the equal rights amendment, are no longer compelling (Stansell 2001). "Unlike the women who took part in the First and Second waves of feminism, young women today feel as if they live their feminist lives without clear political struggles" (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 20–21). Shugart (2001) argues that third wave feminism calls for individualism and confrontation in order to combat oppression. Perhaps it is the schism between the second and third waves of feminism, and seeming lack of direction, that explains why although gender, sexuality, and family issues play a prominent role in current cultural and political spheres, feminism has seen a decline in its energy and scale in recent years (Shiach 2001). Shugart characterizes third wave feminism as merely a subculture of the Generation X phenomenon rather than as a major contributor to feminist theory. However, third wave feminism may prove to be more than a subculture and provide the sort of experience sharing and coalition building that is needed for a new generation of feminists.

In the 1980s and 1990s feminism became a paradox. It was a movement powerful enough to incite backlash, but women continued to face major setbacks during this time (Sorasio 1997). For instance, women's studies programs have become standard at colleges and universities, but the popular use of gender neutral language is attacked as "political correctness." The media characterized activists campaigning for women's rights as "feminazis" (Heywood and Drake 1997) and effectively created a culture where women did not want to call themselves "the 'f' word," although they often voiced feminist sentiments (Sorasio 1997). Shugart observes that paradoxically, the former "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." has become "*I am a feminist, but . . .*" (2001, 131; italics in original), which may indicate that individuals are becoming more comfortable with the term.

In addition to these unsavory labels from the media and popular culture, feminism has also suffered from internal strife. The feminist movement has become highly fractured and contentious in recent years. Stansell explains that “American feminism, still vigorous in its latest run of thirty years, is also old enough to produce its own vexed family dynamics” (2001, 23). It is not unusual for women to spend more time debating with other women about their various feminist views than working toward some common feminist goal. There are bitter arguments between conservative and progressive feminists, second and third wave feminists, equity and gender feminists, and radical and liberal feminists. Christina Hoff Sommers, who has made a career out of opposing other feminist thinkers, puts it simply: “We do not have a shared vision” (in Sorisio 1997, 35).

Various feminist groups often become focused on individual issues rather than attempting to create a cohesive feminist theory. Reproductive rights, sexual harassment, equal pay, political representation, environmental problems, motherhood, gender construction, pornography, and sexuality have each been extolled as the paramount issue that feminists should be concerned with over and against all other issues. This single-issue focus necessarily alienates and divides feminists who may share a common ideology but disagree over its implementation in particular instances. For example, Kennedy explains “for too long, women of color and young women have felt excluded from feminism. For too long, the feminist movement has not genuinely allied itself with other struggles—against poverty, police brutality, environmental racism and unfair working conditions.” She goes on to explain that “inclusion cannot be superficial if feminism is really to become a multi-issue movement” (in Richards 2001, 2).

As the feminist movement extends itself into the new millennium, it must find a way to unify its various warring factions, come to terms with its historical context, and create solidarity among feminist thinkers if there is to be any hope of social change. Scholars who are accustomed to theoretical work and aware of the transformative power of theory often assume the task of theory creation. However, academic feminists are “characterized as out of touch, confining ourselves to a realm of theory with no tangible significance in either the political or the personal sphere” (Sorisio 1997, 135). Unfortunately, this characterization ignores the vital role that theory building and philosophy play in creating identification among groups. Academic feminists, with an awareness of the issues that splinter the feminist movement, are in a unique position to herald new ways of thinking and talking about feminism that transcend old dichotomies and may re-ener-

gize the feminist movement. Heywood and Drake believe that feminists must begin to radically re-vision their movement in new ways and seek to understand and situate themselves within the current historical context. They explain, “because our lives have been shaped by struggles between various feminisms as well as by cultural backlash against feminism and activism, we argue that contradiction—or what looks like contradiction, if one doesn’t shift one’s point of view—marks the desires and strategies of third wave feminists” (1997, 2).

When the contradictions of the past are viewed from a different perspective, a dialectic arises to connect the members of the various feminist factions (Stansell 2001). This dialectic is a conversation between groups who share the same fundamental assumptions, but who maintain different strategies and vocabularies to describe their current condition. Most people believe that there is no overarching philosophical position that unites feminists because individuals have different goals and methods for enacting their own brand of feminism as a result of their individual experience and vision of the future. This, however, does not discount the need for a unifying theoretical position; rather it demands a philosophical position that achieves solidarity among feminists by allowing individual differences to exist. “Even as different strains of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other, they are all part of our third wave lives, our thinking, and our praxes: we are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of such a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name altogether” (Heywood and Drake 1997, 3). A theory that incorporates the dialectics that exist between feminists and feminisms into an ongoing conversation has the potential to unleash a great deal of transformative power.

Contemporary American feminism stands at a crossroads as the next generation of feminist thinkers comes of age and is taking the reins from their second wave predecessors. The current transition between the second and third waves of feminism presents a unique time for feminist theorists to focus their attention on the creation of a unifying theory that incorporates the lived experience of the new feminist generation and seeks to transcend the contradictions of the past. Baumgardner and Richards point to the need for a unifying theory when they note, “What young feminist-minded people often lack is a coherent declaration that can connect the lives of individual women to the larger history of our movement” (2000, 18). Individual women and men who are seeking to create and clarify their feminist beliefs and develop useful and fulfilling feminist practices are in

need of an overarching philosophy of thought and action that will unite them with other individuals engaged in similar quests. The feminist backlash of the last few centuries has demonstrated the need for solidarity and support, yet the unifying mechanisms of second wave feminism are not wholly satisfactory for the newest feminist wave. Third wave feminists require a coherent philosophy, one that connects their struggles and experiences with the past and their feminist predecessors but also provides a mechanism for constructing a reality that is free from oppression and humiliation.

We need not only a unifying theory but a vocabulary to describe new ways of feminist thinking. Heywood and Drake's supposition that "perhaps we [feminists] need a different name altogether" (1997, 3) points to the inadequacy of the contemporary American vocabulary to describe the new breed of feminist thought. Richard Rorty discusses the need for changing and revising language to better suit our needs as an important step in transcending the limitations of the prevailing social order in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). He provides a rubric for creating a philosophical position that could provide the feminist movement with a sense of solidarity by understanding the process of social change and the importance of alternative modes of thinking and talking as a challenge to the existing social schema. This functions as a unifying theory by linking the ideas and needs of third wave feminist thought with the waves of feminist thinking that came before it, as well as providing avenues for new ways of thinking, speaking, and doing feminism.

Contingency

Rorty explains that humans create truth through language that functions as a mechanism that they use to explore and understand themselves and the world around them. He argues "the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not" (1989, 5). Truth is therefore contingent since it has the capacity to change when humans, their descriptions, or the words they use change over time in order to better suit their needs. Descriptions of the world can be true or false, but the world itself makes no truth claim. The world simply exists, and it is only these *descriptions* of it that may be evaluated under a rubric of truth and falsity (Rorty 1989). The manner in which humans describe their world is the basis for a vocabulary. This vocabulary

is used not only for description but also for generating new thought and in the process, self-creation and discovery.

People create what Rorty calls final vocabularies, a set of words and sentences that we use to justify action and beliefs. In this sense, we use vocabularies to share meaning about how we think about the world around us, but due to the limitations of language we never actually generate a description that fully represents reality. Since our descriptions and final vocabularies are not reflective of reality, we must then come to terms with the contingencies of our languages. Sometimes, however, our final vocabularies cause harm or reflect our limited perspectives. Vocabularies and languages are not static since they are a product of their times, culture, and need. It has even been suggested that changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort who have never existed before (Rorty 1989). Indeed, if language can shape human existence so dramatically, it stands to reason that conscious changes in our language, the creation of new vocabularies, may create dramatic social change. The language of modern society is often a result of patriarchal tradition and provides an inadequate vocabulary for feminists to express themselves. Use of patriarchal language erodes women's sense of themselves. Daly explains, "We need only think of such words as *feminine*, *unfeminine*, *womanly*, *unwomanly*, to recognize how certain words, particularly those that are supposed to name us, not only fail to express who we are but also destroy our identity" (1978, 331, italics in original).

When our present vocabularies prove inadequate for describing the world, a new vocabulary is necessary. These language changes take hold and become part of the common vernacular as any number of things are described in new ways until there is a pattern of linguistic behavior that will tempt the rising generations to adopt it. In turn, we are encouraged to look for and create appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior that fit within the new vocabulary, such as new social institutions or scientific instruments (Rorty 1989). This new vocabulary will include not only new words but also the "creative misuses of language—familiar words used in ways which initially sound crazy" (1991a, 233). The creation of a new vocabulary is the result of a conscious questioning of the existing order. "It suggests that we might want to stop doing those [futile] things and do something else" (Rorty 1989, 9). Using entrenched language and traditional rhetorical methods and ideas insure the continuation of the existing social order, while devising new and possibly more interesting questions could result in the rhetorical construction of a new social order.

As we begin to ask different questions and begin seeing things in new ways, we can create a new vocabulary that allows for different modes of expression than the current language allows. Understanding the contingent and changing nature of language allows for these alternative ways of thinking and talking to present themselves as viable solutions to the problems created by a stale or outdated vocabulary. Not surprisingly, the implications of new vocabularies are extensive. Additionally, our ability to create ourselves is then limited by the language available to us. As this language begins to change, our options of self-creation and expression are altered as well.

The right to self-definition has traditionally been denied to women. In fact, many feminists describe their project as an ontological quest. They believe that equality will continue to be an elusive goal until all people are allowed to define themselves rather than adhering to socially created expectations and constraints. Recognizing that these expectations and constraints are contingent and a result of the current vocabulary reveals the limitations created by language and opens a space for change. Rorty suggests that to accept someone else's description of oneself is to perform a previously created script that prohibits the possibility of autonomy and self-definition (1989, 1991a). Yet, there are countless individuals who have not been party to the creation of themselves but rather are forced to conform to existing social or gender roles without questioning their origin or validity. They abide by the moral consciousness of their community without realizing that this consciousness is an historically conditioned response to a certain time and place and must be continually revisited, interrogated, and revised. This process of interrogation often demonstrates the inadequacies of our current vocabulary to describe some feeling or problem and that, in turn, allows for new vocabularies to emerge. Our ability to define ourselves depends on our ability to create a vocabulary that allows for authentic self-expression and self-definition, but this is certainly not an easy task. "Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do" (Rorty 1989, 65).

Not only do individuals benefit from the creation of new vocabularies, but society does as well. For example, our current vocabulary includes distinctions, false dichotomies, and forced choices that do not serve useful functions. Rorty explains that freedom is the recognition of contingency (1989, 46). In other words, when a community comes to understand that its current order was created and is maintained by the current vocabulary, it

should also come to realize that change is possible with the adoption of a new vocabulary. In recognizing the contingency of language, the possibility of a new future becomes apparent. Furthermore, this recognition empowers individuals with the ability to rhetorically create the future that they wish to inhabit. Rorty further contends that these very ideas are useful for creating a linguistically based philosophy that can bring about emancipation for oppressed peoples (1991a, 1993).

The recognition of the contingent nature of language and the potential transformative power of new languages highlights the rhetorical nature of the process of social change. Therefore, feminists must start with the question of language and seek to create a new vocabulary that spans the differences and diversity of individual experiences in order to increase intellectual, political, and social freedom for women and men. The quest for a unifying theory must consequently take the importance of language use, vocabulary building, and the rhetorical construction of reality into account and suggest avenues by which feminists can participate in the transformation of the existing social order.

Liberal irony

Rorty (1989) suggests that the pursuit of ironism, as a principle that continually questions final vocabularies, beliefs, and values, is useful to expand our sense of vocabularies and understanding our contingent character. Rorty proposes that ironists continually doubt their final vocabularies in recognition of others' final vocabularies, know that their present vocabularies cannot eliminate these doubts about their final vocabularies, and realize that their vocabularies and the vocabularies of others do not fully represent reality. According to Rorty (1989), and following the work of Judith Shklar (1984), a liberal is someone who thinks that cruelty is the absolute worst thing that humans do. Thus, "liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (1989, xv).

Fraser (1989) and Hariman (2002) contend that, ultimately, Rorty believes there is only one legitimate vocabulary in which people may describe themselves and everyone else. However, Rorty's positions on redescription, pluralism, and ironism seem to indicate otherwise (1979, 1989,

1991b, 1999). Although a final vocabulary does imply the single perspective of a single individual, the process of irony, as we understand it, would mean that individuals must strike a critical pose and strive to incorporate and understand new perspectives as part of their belief system. This process might engage what Rorty calls conversation. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he writes, "If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice" (1979, 171). Specifically, Rorty sees conversation replacing confrontation in an effort to abandon our historical tendencies toward the mirror of nature. Elsewhere, Rorty argues that "it does not matter if everybody's final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies as well as into one's own" (1989, 92–93). He continues by noting, "What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs" (1989, 93, italics in original). The very process of irony, then, addresses the problematic single, legitimate final vocabulary that Fraser and Hariman identify. Ironists use the only vocabulary available to them at the time, but continually doubt that vocabulary and recognize that it potentially can cause humiliation.

Another shortcoming of Rorty's position, according to Fraser (1989, 1991), Bickford (1993), and Hariman (2002), is that irony cannot be used for public redescription or doubt about final vocabularies, that it belongs only in the private sphere. Kaufman-Osborn (1993) further argues that a Rortian pragmatism may deny women's experiences. Fraser (1989) believes that the distinction between a public and private redescription is artificial at best, and at worst, means that the feminist mantra "the personal is political" is meaningless. To deny redescription in public perhaps means an erasure of our personal experiences and many successes as feminists to date. Rorty (1999) responds that identity politics (and he includes some feminist positions) can be damaging and separatist. What is needed, then, is a pluralistic, ironist position that leaves us with a utopia quite similar to the one that feminists might promulgate. Ultimately, Fraser seems to concur with this idea (1989, 1995). She argues in favor of a struggle over cultural meanings and recognition of competing solidarities and social divisions, a feminism that would be a "nonindividualist, nonelitist, nonmasculinist utopian vision" that mixes just the right amount of pessimism with social hope (1989, 108). Private redescription functions as the precursory activity to

more public change. As Gearhart (1979) observes, change is something that only the individual can enact. Activists cannot force individuals to change unless the right conditions are present. Creating these conditions is the focus of private irony and critical self-reflection.

A liberal ironic perspective seems to have much in common with feminist demands for the reordering and transformation of systems, institutions, beliefs, and language. Further, liberal irony could unite feminists across a wide range of perspectives. Differences in feminisms might be bridged through an ironist perspective, or at least legitimized and acknowledged as different perspectives. For instance, third wave feminists propose that we should recognize the different perspectives and contributions of African American, Latina, Arab American, American Indian, Asian American, and so-called third world feminists. In addition to such recognition, feminists would be in a position to critically examine their own final vocabularies of feminisms and endeavor to move beyond the limitations that those vocabularies create. This does not mean that feminists would have to discredit their own struggles, experiences, and perspectives; rather they would have to attempt to expand their sense of struggle and perspective by incorporating the experiences of others into their vocabularies. This, in turn, would create a new vocabulary that must then be scrutinized and altered in the ongoing effort to allow for even greater freedom.

Solidarity and difference

Liberal irony, with its focus on bridging and respecting difference, also incorporates important elements of solidarity that resonate with third wave feminist ideals. In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty argues “our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture which prides itself on *not* being monolithic—on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighboring cultures” (1991b, 14; italics in original). He contends that humans are fundamentally ethnocentric and we are unable to break free from our contingencies. However, Rorty (1991b) also explains that we cannot tolerate vocabularies of racism, sexism, exclusion, oppression, and domination of marginalized voices because this kind of language contributes to human suffering and humiliation. Our only intolerance, then, should be of intolerance itself.

Rorty emphasizes solidarity as the ultimate goal of humanity. He writes, “if we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading towards a place which has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance” (1991b, 27–28). Humans must expand “we” intentions and the concept of “us” to include other people whenever possible. Haraway notes the self awareness inherent in this demand when she considers “who counts as ‘us’ in my own rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us,’ and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?” (1990, 197). Solidarity is strongest when we can relate to other people in ways that do not revolve around the essence of being human. Rorty argues that once a “they” is presented, the “they” is constructed into a group of humans who are not like us, or are “the wrong sort of human beings” (1989, 190). Rather, we should seek to create solidarity with others through common interests. As Rorty claims, it is an “ethnocentrism of a ‘we’ (‘we liberals’) which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*. It is the ‘we’ of the people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism” (1989, 198; italics in original). The “we” who distrusts ethnocentrism and searches for greater solidarity is also responsible for defining personhood, or what makes an individual a person who can participate in a society or conversation. Solidarity is not based on fundamental or essential characteristics of humanity, and neither is personhood according to Rorty. He describes his ideal society as a liberal one that seeks to maximize freedom. He explains, “a liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices” (1989, 60). Consequently, each member of that society is responsible for questioning the existing order and creating new vocabularies that will replace the ones that currently limit that society.

Third wave feminists are committed to Rorty’s notions of expanding conversations and “we” intentions but lack an overarching philosophical foundation to support these goals. He explains that we must view “differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation” (1989, 192). Rather, it is “the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’ ” (1989, 192) that forms the basis for

human solidarity. Just because women are oppressed and marginalized as a function of gender does not mean they achieve an automatic solidarity or sisterhood. Instead, each of us bears responsibility for bridging differences and discovering similarities within our group of feminists and women in general. Rorty argues for a pluralist perspective, what he calls “pragmatically justified tolerance” (1999, 276). He sees this process as the pursuit of solidarity and expansion of conversation, rather than a process of confrontation. Rorty’s conversation employs the same sorts of principles of Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric (1995) and Gearhart’s vision of change (1979). Ironic conversation is a dialectic engagement of ideas in which change may result from the offering of multiple perspectives. Ultimately, change results from individual agency and decision to change, rather than from force, persuasion, or domination. Rorty’s conversation pushes participants to an ethic of influence (i.e., to be better people) and focuses on the eradication of pain and suffering caused by other humans.

Feminisms today seem to be in need of such an injection of solidarity. Controversy and dissent between and about various feminists groups have created a situation that denies third wave feminists both voice and participation. For instance, young feminists were not part of the second wave of feminism. Indeed, we had not even been born when Betty Friedan’s pivotal book *The Feminine Mystique* was published (1963). Consequently, knowledge of prior feminist thought and activism is the product of classroom lectures, reading, and discussion. Young feminists’ understanding of the second wave is thereby limited by cultural and historical memory and not based on personal experience, a condition that creates a significant cultural divide. The rhetorical representations of third wave feminism tend to cast it as apathetic, non-activist, contradiction riddled, and unappreciative and/or unaware of prior women’s movements. However, these representations of the third wave do not resonate with our experiences. This schism in representation has created a situation that inhibits participation and silences emerging voices from upcoming generations of feminist thinkers. For example, we are apprehensive about approaching prominent feminists because we fear that we will be criticized for our positions because they deviate from second wave standards or because we are not doing enough to advance feminist goals through traditional channels of activism. Like many young women, we feel disconnected from our feminist predecessors. Their work does not fully resonate with our experience; we have few opportunities to interact socially or meet informally; and we are often intimidated by their rank and standing in the community. Although young

feminists desperately need mentors, we are often too apprehensive to reach out to established feminists, and absent some sort of institutional affiliation, they are generally unaware of our existence. Furthermore, we have read the heated exchanges between feminist scholars over feminist ideas and the virulent reaction to feminist scholarship and activism with a sense of fear. Being feminist means that we are committed to exposing oppression and participating in the process of critical engagement, but we are unsure as to what extent we must also expose ourselves to attack. This sense of alienation and fear has created a situation where third wave feminists feel discouraged, limited in their feminist participation, and voiceless.

A unifying philosophy can help third wave feminists create a rhetorical bridge to reach out to others and allow us to articulate the motives and actions of third wave feminism. It is incumbent on us to help create a theory, with an ironic appreciation for the task, that may help bridge these disagreements and differences and that may produce a useful feminist dialectic across generations and experiences. Rorty's liberal irony gives us a better starting point for understanding where we want to go as feminists, scholars, and activists.

Liberal irony and third wave feminist praxis

Rorty's focus on contingency, liberal irony, and solidarity creates a rhetorical philosophy that can serve as an overarching framework for third wave feminists. Third wave feminists emphasize diversity (Hernández and Rehman 2002) and encourage social change and activism (Baumgardner and Richards 2000), yet lack a theoretical or ethical justificatory system for pursuing those goals. Actively expanding "we" intentions, questioning and re-visioning what activism means, focusing on social hope and optimism, and redefining contradiction are some examples of how third wave feminists might use liberal irony as a rhetorical theory of praxis.

Women and men of the third wave are interested in creating a movement that incorporates the views of various feminisms and allows for a wide range of experience and expression. Heywood and Drake explain the importance of an inclusive perspective:

Although we also owe an enormous debt to the critique of sexism and the struggles for gender equity that were white feminism's strongest provinces, it was U.S. third world feminism that modeled a language and a politics of hybridity that can account for our lives at the century's turn. These are lives marked by the realities of multicultural exchange, fusion, and conflict, lives that combine blackness, whiteness, brownness, gayness, bisexuality, straightness. These are lives that combine male-identification and female-identification, middle class status and staggering debt, lives that are hopeful and stressed and depressed, empowered and exhausted and scared. (1997,13)

The rich diversity that characterizes American life at the turn of this century demands a new mode of feminist thinking. However, this focus on diversity of perspectives is often easy to say and difficult to enact. Rorty's "we" intentions demonstrate that understanding diversity means the active pursuit and attempts to listen, understand, empathize, and discuss different perspectives and experiences of the world. Solidarity and "we" intentions are about reaching out to those who are different from us, despite the difficulty of doing so.

Another of the most important components of Rorty's theoretical perspective is social hope. He has an optimistic hope for the future and the potential for humans to create new and better worlds that imbues individuals with an overwhelming sense of hopefulness. This optimistic hope is also an important component of third wave feminisms. Hope means to us that there is a possibility that, as Rorty (1991a) puts it, all people will have access to full-fledged personhood. Perhaps Rorty would consider ironic third wave feminists as "prophetic feminists" because we have a hope that we can engage in "the production of a better set of social constructs than the ones presently available, and thus as the creation of a new and better sort of human being" (250). And although we would like to be optimistic that third wave feminists can participate in the creation of these social constructs, we also recognize that we may fail in this endeavor because of the difficulties involved in the process. Reconstituting vocabularies is a life-long endeavor for each of us; it is not an automatic process, but rather involves extensive critical self-reflection in order to understand our shortcomings and how we can improve as feminists and as people in general.

Furthermore, Rorty provides feminists with a mechanism for social change that is available to all humans. The process of critically evaluating the current vocabulary and revising it to better describe our social system and rhetorically create a new system is not something reserved for the intellectually elite or politically powerful. Rather, it is a process in which all

people, regardless of education, cultural background, or social status, can engage whenever and wherever they are able. The new vocabularies that each individual creates are not going to be the same, but as we begin to engage in dialectal conversations about their differences, the process of critical evaluation continues. The recursive nature of Rorty's mechanism for social change assures us that feminists, like all liberal ironists, will continue to question their assumptions and create a new unifying theory in the spirit of liberal ironism, solidarity, and social hope. This is and will be a difficult task, and even though we are hopeful that we can engage in full-fledged liberal irony, we also recognize that it will be a tough and arduous journey.

Liberal irony also provides a mechanism for redefining the nature of activism by recognizing that the current definitions of activism constitute a final vocabulary that limits the possibilities for alternative types of social activism. Traditional notions of social activism include protesting in the streets or on college campuses, national speaking tours, public engagements, and other confrontational strategies. A liberal ironist feminist perspective would certainly include these elements, but would also recognize that discussing feminist issues in the classroom or with friends is also an important form of social activism. Under Rorty's rubric, activism is inherently individual and individual actions can have a profound impact in the creation of social change. Under Rorty's theory, feminists can begin to notice the ways in which our feminist thinking pervades our lives rather than being limited to isolated incidents of protest or consciousness raising. We see that every day, in a myriad of ways, we exhibit feminist thinking, educate others by example, and engage in important consciousness-raising activities such as teaching, talking about, or drawing attention to feminist ideas. Rorty's theory demonstrates the ways in which we can interrogate traditional notions of activism and then redefine them rhetorically to give them greater meaning to a new generation. Liberal ironism gives feminists a way of updating their practice without losing a sense of the tradition of which they are a part. Much like Foss and Griffin's *invitational rhetoric* (1995), liberal ironists would offer, rather than force, their perspective to those with whom they converse. Likewise, liberal ironists would listen and respect perspectives different from their own. Conversation is not the simplistic act of dialogue or gossip, but rather the critical engagement in which participants employ self-reflexivity, an ongoing critique of the assumptions revealed by language, active listening and respect, and self-autonomous choice for change. Change comes from within a participant of the

conversation, the basis of Rorty's private redescription through irony. Public redescription cannot occur without private irony.

Liberal ironic praxis is also evident in the third wave feminisms' comfort with contradiction. The changing nature of our society and the multiplicity of feminist perspectives often mean that third wave feminists are engaged in a rhetoric of contradiction. For example, we find it increasingly difficult to take a unified stance or find common ground on many so-called women's issues, such as pornography, prostitution, and abortion, because we find many of the seemingly oppositional positions on each of these issues are equally appealing on different levels. Furthermore, the labels, definitions, philosophies, and theories that we ascribe to are often difficult to enact in practice. Sometimes we find that we can believe in philosophies and theories but also recognize that we may not always be able to practice what we believe (Bailey 1997). This is the nature of contradiction. Liberal irony seeks to expose the assumptions embedded within the idea of contradiction and then transcend those limitations by redefining the term. The very idea of contradiction as a negative feature is called into question by a liberal ironic, critical posture since comfort with the contradiction is one of the things that unite feminists in the third wave. A feminist praxis with an overarching philosophy of liberal ironism can help feminists to resolve issues with the vocabularies we use, creating new words that allow us a voice; resolve or maintain our contradictions and inconsistencies without feeling guilty; and recognize that we are never quite done revising the way we think and speak.

Rhetoric, liberal ironism, and feminism

Liberal ironism is, at its core, a rhetorical theory. Using our field's many understandings of rhetoric, we can recognize, as Rorty does, that our vocabularies and rhetorical practices have potentially damaging effects. A rhetorical perspective emphasizes these important aspects of Rortian pragmatism: the contingencies of language, refinement and revolution of vocabularies, recognition that language creates truths, and inclusion of difference to expand our conversations and "we" intentions. Language causes us to believe (Rorty 1989). Baumgarner and Richards indicate "the lack of a Third Wave feminist terminology keeps us from building a potent movement" (2000, 48), which suggests that a limited vocabulary will nec-

essarily limit the options for self-expression. Liberal irony provides the framework for creating new vocabularies, developing new ways of thinking, bridging individual differences, and expanding options for autonomy.

Rorty makes two important rhetorical contributions: first, he claims that there are no truths beyond rhetoric; and second, traditional argumentation does not encourage people to cross or bridge their own language (Mailloux 1998). With Rorty's liberal irony as a rhetorical philosophy, we achieve a greater understanding of the impact of language and words; that rhetoric can cause hurt, pain, and humiliation; and that as liberal ironists we must consistently seek to avoid this. The humiliation that women experience due to the current prevailing vocabularies is just one exemplar of the effects of language. Furthermore, liberal ironism employs a human-centered perspective. It is a rhetorical theory for both men and women that does not emphasize essentialist characteristics of people, but rather emphasizes that all people have different experiences and perspectives. We should strive to embrace, understand, and incorporate those differences into our ever-evolving vocabularies. Understanding liberal irony from this perspective addresses Hariman's concerns of private redescrptions and the seemingly monolithic foundation of irony (2002). As McDaniel (2002) observes, irony is a choice of principle and encourages critical consciousness that creates a rhetoric of resistance that can be useful for feminist projects.

Embracing a liberal ironist third wave feminist perspective can mitigate the harmful effects of our rhetorical practices, and even create some substantial benefits. The liberal ironic belief that cruelty and humiliation are the worst things that humans do to one another grounds rhetoric in a relentlessly ethical disposition. The liberal ironist assumes that cruelty is the worst thing that we do to one another, but at the same time this theory imbues us with the hope that our vocabularies and rhetoric can be used to create unity, freedom, healing, and joy. A liberal ironist feminist rhetorical theory, then, provides a mechanism that relies on rhetoric, interrogation, and language for social change. This perspective can be a unifying rhetorical philosophy that unites women across their differences because it has a transformative power. This power to transform the vocabulary, theory, and practice of third wave feminist thought allows liberal irony to function as a coherent philosophy rather than a specific rhetorical strategy. Obviously third wave feminists could engage in the praxis of redefinition or the interrogation of final vocabularies without embracing liberal ironism as a unifying theory, but this would severely limit the transformative power intrinsic

to the philosophy. Liberal irony provides third wave feminists with a set of useful practices and an underlying critical perspective that informs their feminist thought and allows for individual feminists to be united in the common goal of ending oppression and humiliation in all of its forms while embracing a diversity of experience.

Liberal irony is not a perfect philosophy nor will it solve all of the problems and tensions in third wave feminist thought and practice. A liberal ironic perspective would prohibit even the ideas of liberal ironism from becoming part of a fixed and final vocabulary not subject to revision or reinterpretation. Like all theories, liberal irony has some potential deficiencies, such as those suggested in Fraser (1989, 1991) and Hariman (2002). For instance, it relies on the use of a final vocabulary in the interrogation of a final vocabulary. If the current vocabulary structures and limits thinking, it is difficult to imagine how new ways of thinking may emerge from the language of the existing order. This theory also relies heavily on the individual. It assumes that every person has the capacity and the will to engage in interrogation and the creativity and opportunity to devise and employ new terms. Unfortunately, individuals do not always have these types of opportunities.

Liberal ironism also places a great deal of responsibility on personal perspective when determining practices of humiliation and oppression. Liberal ironism assumes that individuals have the ability to determine what is oppressive or humiliating and to avoid it. It is one thing to say that a theory should seek to end instances of oppression and humiliation, but it is important to realize there is no objective standard by which to measure these conditions. If we depend on the humiliated or oppressed to express their condition, we run the risk of compounding the problem by making them relive the experience because we assume that the humiliated or oppressed are in a position to speak out about their position. Therefore, it is important to remember that although liberal irony offers a great deal of hope and transformative power, it is not perfect and it requires that its adherents constantly engage in the practice of interrogation and revision not only of their vocabularies but also of the philosophy itself. Although there are shortcomings of liberal irony for third wave feminists, we believe that no theory is without limitations and that in this instance and at this time, the potential benefits of this philosophy are far more important than its deficiencies.

Our field of study, communication and rhetoric, has a melioristic power (Shepherd 2001). Using Rorty's liberal irony and expansion of con-

versation rather than confrontation could have a positive transformative effect for both feminists and rhetorical theorists. We must challenge ourselves to constantly revisit our vocabularies in the pursuit of a liberal community through conversation. As individuals, we can make a choice to maintain a critical perspective, but we certainly cannot force others to engage in this process with us. Ultimately, this is a lifelong and difficult process, but as feminists searching for an end to the oppression of women and of all humans, this is one of our most worthwhile endeavors. Liberal irony, for the time being, can provide third wave feminists and other groups interested in meliorating the human condition and creating social change with a unifying rhetorical philosophy of praxis.

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Notes

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1. We recognize that the idea of a distinct third wave of feminism is often a controversial idea. Bailey (1997) argues that third wave feminism is too similar to second wave feminism to be considered a unique movement, while Orr (1997) explains that the definition of "third wave" is difficult to accurately pin down in scholarly investigation. Indeed, scholars and third wave feminists alike are still in the process of determining the ways in which the third wave is similar to and different from the second wave. However, it is clear that there is an emerging group of young people who self-identify as third wave feminists. Both Walker's (1995) and Findlen's (1995) edited volumes are collections of emerging feminist voices, many of whom locate themselves in a new feminist movement. Orr explains that "the term 'third wave' has been bandied about in popular culture as a descriptor of a type of feminism, or perhaps, more specifically, of feminists of a younger generation" (1997, 29). Similarly, Shugart (2001) argues that the third wave is only a subculture of Generation X.

It is not yet clear what third wave feminism is and is not. We would argue that as an emerging movement, the third wave is still in the process of defining itself, so boundaries and definitions are inherently fuzzy and constantly shifting. There are, however, some trends emerging among young feminists and a number of recurrent themes in their feminist thought (Howry and Wood 2001). Additionally, third wave thought is increasingly being recognized, explained, and investigated in feminist literature. For instance, in 1997 *Hypatia*, a journal that centers on issues of feminist philosophy, produced a special issue on third wave feminism. Further, books like *Third Wave Agenda* (1997) and *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) begin with the assumption that a third wave does exist. Likewise, we begin with the assumption present in these books: that there is a new breed of feminism emerging in the United States among young men and women who were raised in a

culture deeply affected by the efforts of the second wave. In this essay, we have not engaged in the difficult process of attempting to explain all of the features of third wave feminist thought and how it is similar to and different from its predecessor feminisms. Nor do we argue that the third wave is a unique feminist movement unlike any movement before it. Rather, we are interested in arguing that the newly emerging feminist movement would benefit from a coherent philosophy of praxis.

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