

Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts

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Feminist activism has long incorporated the rhetorical strategies of public protest and confrontation. However, feminist thought has also produced forms of activism that both include and move beyond these traditional rhetorical options. This essay explores the rhetorical exigencies of contemporary feminist activism, and then examines examples of rhetorical activism that play an integral part in contemporary feminism, such as creating grassroots models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and challenging stereotypes. This activism contributes not only to our understanding of the rhetoric of contemporary feminism, but also extends the rhetorical theories of social movements and counterpublics to include alternative kinds of activist options.

KEYTERMS activism, social protest, counterpublics, social movements, third wave feminism

During the past 50 years, communication scholars have written extensively on the rhetorical meanings and functions of social protest, change, and movements. Whether implicitly or explicitly, rhetorical studies of social movements and social protest have suggested that at the center of such discourse is an exigency for change and a methodology relying on public protest. Although the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movements of

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the 1960s and 1970s, environmental movements in the 1970s and 1980s, and other such social movements provide illustrative examples of how individuals created movements and joined organizations in their efforts to combat social ills, such examples of activism, especially within feminism, seem less prevalent at the turn of the 21st century.

Although recent anthologies have started to reconceptualize the nature of social movements, much of this literature relies on the notion that activism requires organized, collective action and social protest (e.g., Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Morris & Browne, 2001; Smith & Johnson, 2002). However, contemporary feminist activists often feel that they are castigated as inadequate and ineffective by their predecessors because they do not necessarily participate in traditional forms of social activism even though they still identify as activists (e.g., see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Mankiller, 2004; Walker, 2004). These forms of feminist activism suggest that the traditional rhetorical understanding of activism and social movements includes, but also moves beyond, the existing models of the rhetoric of social protest. In this analysis, rhetorical acts of contemporary feminists are explored to conceptualize what rhetorical activism means for these feminists. Rhetorical activism, which has traditionally been defined as public protest and confrontation, might also include creating grassroots models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels. Our purpose then, is to reconceptualize how rhetorical scholars view activism within the scope of current activist, social movement, and protest rhetorical theory.

Scholars have conceptualized social protest and social movements in numerous ways, but have largely focused on traditional characteristics of social activism and public protest. For example, Morris and Browne (2001) highlight important contributions to the study of social protest, focusing on influential essays that discuss social activism as social protest or social movement. Their collection features Gregg's (1971) essay on protest rhetoric, Windt's (1972) essay on the diatribe, including protest measures such as "obscenities, strident moralism, and counter-culture lifestyles," and Haiman's (1967) essay on forms and activities in social movements, such as vigils, sit-ins, pickets, mass rallies, and obstruction of traffic. Other scholars have defined social protest and social movement through the study of confrontation, radicalism, revolution, or spectacle (Cathcart, 1978; Gray, 2001; Scott & Smith, 1969). In fact, Cathcart describes confrontation as the defining characteristic of a social movement in order to achieve the consummation of the movement. Gray contends that the performance of spectacle is an important aspect of struggle, appropriation, and social activism. Although Smith and Windes (1975) describe innovational movements as anti-conflict, they also indicate that social change within an institution or system of thought is a central goal. New social movements (NSMs) also are oriented around social protest, as Giugni (2002) explains, "demonstrative actions (street demonstrations, rallies, protest marches, sit-ins, and the like) are the

forms of action NSMs (and movements *tout court*) most often adopt to address their demands to political authorities” (p. 24).

Exigencies for such social activism as defined by protest and movement literature have largely focused on the need for social change or progress (Atton, 2002; Lucas, 1980; Stewart, 1980). According to Stewart, the primary function of social movements is to bring about change or to resist social norms and pressures. More recent essays similarly argue in favor of this perspective. For example, Darsey (1991) argues “social progress, often expressed as an appeal to justice as it is in the current case, is the self-professed but elusive goal of all social movements” (p. 315). Social change is the primary focus for social activism and social movements because of the need to address problems within a society or organization. Gregg (1971) explains that “one of the major aspects of protest rhetoric is its concern for the ego” (p. 87). That is, one’s ego is ignored or oppressed, generating need for change and social activism. Stewart (1999) further elaborates that this ego-function of protest rhetoric can be self-directed or other-directed, depending on the individuals involved in different kinds of causes. For example, Campbell (1973, 1999) illustrates a type of self-directed rhetoric in the consciousness raising groups of the women’s liberation movement in which women had to persuade themselves of their own self-esteem through sharing their experiences.

Other related literature links activism to the public sphere and the idea of counterpublics. These studies also focus on political participation, social change, and the “contestatory function of subaltern counterpublics in stratified societies” (Fraser, 1992). Felski (1989) defines counterpublics as oppositional ideologies. Asen’s (2000) study of counterpublics illustrates that “participants in the public sphere still engage in potentially emancipatory affirmative practice with the hope that power may be reconfigured” in their search for answers to exclusion, oppression, and marginalization (p. 424). In much of the extant literature regarding counterpublics, public activities and opposition to states and governments are central for social change (Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Dow & Tonn, 1993; Pezzullo, 2003). Even in the broadest understanding of publics and counterpublics, an element of conflict and protest lingers (Warner, 2002). Deem (2002) contends that “what makes a particular formation a counterpublic is the violation/transformation of norms of stranger sociability through indecorous practice” (p. 451). Counterpublic theory suggests that social change, protest, and movements, and especially for marginalized voices and discourses, are central to its project.

However, the exigencies of contemporary feminism have created a demand for different kinds of activism that may include and/or differ from the traditional rhetorical options of protest, confrontation, militancy, conflict, counterpublics, and social movements. Yet the extant literature on activism has focused predominantly on these latter kinds of activism. This essay draws from the work of a wide range of contemporary feminists who use

non-traditional forms of feminist activism. Some of these individuals have been characterized as “second wave” feminists, whereas others call themselves part of the “third wave” of feminism. This “wave” terminology is often used to denote generational differences. However, this analysis does not address these waves as necessarily distinct entities (see Lotz, 2003, for further discussion on second and third wave activism). In order to theorize alternative avenues for activism, a diverse body of work on third wave feminism was examined, including Baumgardner and Richards’ (2000) book, *Manifesta*, and a number of edited volumes, including Walker’s (1995b) *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Findlen’s (1995) *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, Dicker and Piepmeier’s (2003) *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, Hernández and Rehman’s (2002) *Colonize This: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*, Bail’s (1996) *DIY Feminism*, and Labaton and Martin’s (2004) *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*. The essay begins with a discussion of the exigencies that have created a need for different kinds of activism, followed by an examination of the rhetorical exigencies behind the types of activism that contemporary feminists use. Finally, some of the rhetorical options for activism such as using strategic humor, creating grassroots models of leadership, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and shirking traditional stereotypes and labels are used to illustrate divergence from traditional understandings of rhetoric and social movements.

EXIGENCIES: CHANGING CULTURAL CONDITIONS

Many second and third wave feminists have chosen a kind of activism that operates in the private sphere or in less public arenas in comparison to the activist measures described in extant literature on social activism (e.g., Morris & Browne, 2001). Furthermore, the accomplishments of previous social movements have created a society in which discrimination, sexism, and even homophobia is not as overt as it once was. Covert forms of discrimination are subtle and seemingly innocuous (Lee, 2004). The rights that second wave feminists fought for have become routine for many contemporary feminists:

Many of us today—women and men, feminists and nonfeminists—are less politically energized than previous generations, perhaps in part because third wavers have benefited from the results of second wave activism, almost without realizing it. Third wave feminists may be less active because, for their generation, “the presence of feminism . . . is taken for granted.” (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, p. 11)

The massive number of issues, theories, speakers, and organizations available today also mean that individuals often have many choices for activist outlets. For instance, the number of campus organizations, events, and courses

offered may leave students overwhelmed with choices, and little time to participate in all of the events that might be of interest. Furthermore, traditional activist organizations tend to rely on appeals and activities that may not be effective for contemporary students and feminists (Labaton & Martin, 2004; Boonin, 2003).

Feminist activism may operate in private settings, such as daily conversation or the internet. Such activist measures may go unnoticed, even though these individuals may be very proactive in their daily lives. Misha Schubert (1996) observes,

There is often criticism that young women are either inactive or apathetic, or, worse, that we just don't understand. I am here to tell you that we do understand and we are part of the women's movement. Our styles of activism are sometimes different . . . this invalidates some ingenious styles of activism that young women have brought to the movement to integrate their activism in their daily lives; to use every conversation, every social choice, every decision about how they interact with people and live their lives to make political statements and capitalize on some of the rights which older women have won for us. (p. 59)

As Pollitt and Baumgardner (2003) illustrate, “feminism’s style has changed—we’re hooked into pop culture, the Internet, and hip-hop” (p. 314). In other words, these feminists see themselves as activists, using alternative and unexpected measures and media to convey different ideas. In comparison to traditional forms of activism, these rhetorical options are often perceived as apathy, inactivity, or passivity. Yet, the writings of these feminist authors suggest that they care about social issues, but use different means to express themselves.

RHETORICAL OPTIONS FOR ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

Activism among contemporary feminists is often overlooked because it does not adhere to traditional definitions of activism and takes place in the everyday lives of these feminists. Bondoc (1995) explains that the problem with the term *activism* is that it is generally not self-defined, and that activists should be allowed to let their actions and words speak for themselves: “Saying ‘I’m an activist’ is like saying ‘I’m an artist’ or a writer. People don’t believe you, think it’s an arrogant statement, and have a vague, typecast view of you (an Abbie Hoffman radical, covered in ‘statement’ buttons, attending protests, waving banners)” (Bondoc, 1995, p. 174). For contemporary feminists, activism requires thinking within and beyond established avenues of protest. For example, Erin Harde explains, “if women can come to terms with their feminism on a personal level first, it will ultimately contribute to

the movement . . . my feminism . . . was expressed through personal choices, for example, my choice to play male-dominated sports” (in Harde & Harde, 2003, p. 120). One of the hallmarks of contemporary feminism is this idea of acting in one’s self-interest. This idea of individual activism in everyday life and small contributions is echoed repeatedly in contemporary feminist writing. Previous feminist generations have made clear that the boundaries between the public and private sphere must be blurred for women to have voice (e.g., see Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1992). Creating a meaningful private sphere through personal activism is as important as public activism to these feminist thinkers. Other examples of these private sphere/public rhetorical activities occur in many ways, such as grassroots leadership, strategic humor, feminist identities, stories, and resistance to stereotypes are a few of the more prominent types of activism that third wave feminists have discussed in their works.

Leadership as Activism

Many third wave feminists use leadership that is organic and a product of lived experience and expertise. Cultural conditions and exigencies have created circumstances where women choose to be role models and mentors for both men and women, or exemplary parents, employers, journalists, or teachers. As Labaton and Martin (2004) explain, this type of leadership might include cutting-edge work in the arts, education, alternative media such as zines, or the legal field. Many of these feminists who contribute to anthologies on third wave feminism participate or work for non-governmental organizations and claim to lead through their own actions (Labaton & Martin, 2004). Baumgardner and Richards (2000, 2003) have outlined a number of characteristics of third wave leadership. First, they note that leadership stems from women’s real lives and recognizes expertise as a product of experience. Someone who works in a particular arena is acknowledged as qualified to speak about the sorts of activism that would be most beneficial in that arena regardless of their academic credentials, salary, or professional rank. Second, they explain that leaders can act from wherever they are and not only “within the movement” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2003, p. 165). In other words, there is no distinction for many modern feminists between feminist leadership and real life. Rather, many contemporary feminists may have nothing to do with feminist organizations but still consider themselves valuable to feminism. This form of leadership diverges from much of the work on traditional social movements in that there may be no visionary leader, but there are feminists who lead by example. As Campbell (1973) suggests, women in the 1960s and 1970s formed consciousness raising groups that were leaderless. The idea of leadership for many third wave feminists functions in a similar fashion, except that all individuals who call themselves feminists become leaders, moving from leaderless activism to an activism where everyone can play a role in leadership.

Humor as Activism

Excitement and humor is also a part of third wave feminist activism. Humor becomes an outlet for addressing oppression and discrimination. For example, one feminist makes prank phone calls to pornography studios and massage parlors as part of her activist agenda and explains that this “gives an example of subversive action that even the laziest activist types can take. I also want to show that it’s okay to laugh at certain injustices instead of feeling constantly offended and disempowered by them” (Wong, 2003, p. 303). This element of humor leads some to erroneously discount contemporary activism as unimportant because it does not meet some predetermined definition of activism. Temple (2004) explains that “the options [for activism] are expanding. Some might see this as the juncture at which the movement loses cohesion, but I see it as a hopeful, creative moment. This diversity of tactics . . . makes the system stronger, more stable, more resistant to blight” (p. 149). Miranda (2004) argues that “we can create a political movement that uses entertainment to ‘edutain’ We can bust down the borders, expose the truth, and create a new vision for liberation all at the same time” (p. 180).

Activism, for many contemporary feminists, stems from personal exigency. Contemporary feminists may have any number of reasons for participating in activism, for themselves, for others, because activism is fun, because they care, or because they seek to develop a particular identity. None of these justifications is any more laudable than the other, and working for the greater good is no more important than working to improve the lives of particular individuals. As Johnson (1989) observes, resistance may not work because it is often co-opted by dominant social forces. She contends that rather than simply seek a better future, feminists should desire a better present, that feminists should begin doing now what they want or hope to do in the future. In many ways, contemporary feminists embody this idea. They actively create a present that they find fulfilling rather than strategizing political change in the future. The strategic use of humor creates a space for third wave feminists to enjoy their lives and feminism in the present rather than focusing on the omnipresent issues that confront modern feminists. The focus of such rhetorical options is less about resistance, and more about enjoying the here and now. In contrast to the nature of social protest and movements, which is centered around the idea of resistance, these third wave feminists employ rhetorical activism through enjoyment of their lives in the present, rather than, or in addition to, the use of resistance.

Building Feminist Self-Identity as Activism

One of the hallmarks of contemporary feminism is its emphasis on paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and messiness (Renegar & Sowards, 2003). The very idea of a unified self has been questioned, which allows for a multiplicity

of identities to flourish in a single individual. This also means that women and men define feminism for themselves, as well as engage in behavior that may contradict other identities. Many young women have been hesitant to label themselves as feminists because of the general lack of understanding about contemporary feminism. Instead, the negative stereotypes of feminists that surfaced as a result of feminist backlash like “femi-nazi” are pervasive. Findlen (1995) explains that “Feminists are still often assumed to be strident, man-hating, unattractive—and lesbian” (p. xv). Similarly, Martin explains that “My perception was that it [feminism] was a place for a certain kind of professionalized older activist whom I couldn’t relate to” (quoted in Labaton & Martin, 2004, p. xxii). These negative connotations have discouraged younger women and men from making feminism part of their identity.

All kinds of people identifying themselves as feminists resist the hegemonic stereotypes imposed by uninformed society. For example, Bondoc (1995) declares “sometimes, I thought I’d have a T-shirt printed with these words on it: ‘Hi. I’m Anna. I’m Asian-American, heterosexual, middle class, pro-choice, feminist. Slot me where you will’” (p. 169). In fact, “younger feminist activists have a keen sense of the interconnectedness of issues based on identities” and how these identities both enable and suppress activist options (Labaton & Martin, 2004, p. xxxvii). Feminism, then, is an identity category that allows other identities to come into being. By declaring themselves feminist, they are activists in the process of defying traditional stereotypes about what feminists think, do, look like, or find interesting. Furthermore, this process becomes recursive, builds multiple feminist identities, and encourages activism. Wong (2003) describes this cycle:

Recently, I have been much more comfortable calling myself a feminist when people ask me to describe the work I do. Feminism has become something to which I have given my own interpretation, and I have taken the responsibility of not letting the word feminism ‘name me.’ Instead, I believe that I can take the reins and redefine the word for myself. This is the attitude that I would like to pass on to others, I hope that they, too, will change their attitude toward the word. Feminism is a proactive, creative act that you can do in your backyard. It is anything that will change the state of women for the better or open new dialogue on the state of women. Through my Web site, I tackled many of my fears about the inaccessible and impersonal nature of feminism. What I didn’t realize until later was that, in challenging what I thought was wrong with feminism, I was actually doing feminism. (p. 307)

Understanding the process of building feminist identity as an activist endeavor expands the concept of activism to include personal transformation.

Much contemporary feminist rhetoric does not demand public presence other than creating space for self-autonomy and definition. Contemporary feminist rhetorical practices may or may not take place in a public sphere,

but more interestingly, this rhetoric is not aimed necessarily at creating a better community, society, state, nation, or world. These practices may reflect certain aspects of counterpublics, including features that Warner (2002) outlined, such as a “conflictual relation with the dominant public” of feminist discourse (p. 423). In many ways, contemporary feminists are responding to what they perceive as hegemonic feminist thought and theories of the second wave (Sandoval, 2000). Warner (2002) explains “A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” (pp. 423–424). He continues by noting that such rhetorical practices focus on a particular kind of audience: “ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person that would participate in this kind of talk, or to be present in this kind of scene” (Warner, 2002, p. 424). In this sense, some feminists may speak from a position lacking political power. Contemporary feminist discourse presents a different kind of counterpublic, one that is not primarily focused on social change, other than what is generated for the self through expression and affirmation. A counterpublic might be redefined to include this amorphous body of rhetoric that is not public oriented but still functions as a counterpublic in that these rhetorical practices are not normative expressions or acts.

This kind of activist rhetoric suggests that there is a consciousness that is differential in nature and does not rely on the traditional tactics of social protest. Sandoval (2000) explains that oppositional rhetoric largely has focused on revolution, supremacism, separatism, or equal rights. *Differential consciousness* is the practice of “functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 43). This consciousness “depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilized in order to enlist and secure influence; the differential is thus performative” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 57). Third wave feminist rhetoric demonstrates an activist commitment to what Sandoval called grace, flexibility, and strength in their self-confidence and autonomy. Contemporary feminist consciousness requires a sense of one’s own agency, which, in turn, creates the ability for women and men to perform activism and create identity on their own terms. Although Sandoval (2000) clearly identifies differential consciousness as an element of oppositional consciousness, contemporary feminist rhetoric indicates that perhaps differential consciousness might occur with or without the oppositional consciousness. Their rhetorical practices reflect a sense of failed resistance. That is, resistance and the fight for social change is not entirely their purpose, if at all.

Sharing Stories as Activism

Contemporary feminist activism also often occurs in the form of sharing perspectives and experiences. The mosaic of experiences that comprise feminism makes it clear that there is no single feminist identity or form of activism. The editors of *Catching a Wave* explain that the book “offers essays that use

personal experience as a bridge to larger political and theoretical explorations of the third wave, these essays function as the very tools we need to effect change” (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, p. 13). Similarly, the editors of *Colonize This!* indicate that “for us, this book is activism, a way to continue the conversation among young women of color found in earlier books” (Rehman & Hernández, 2002, p. xxi). The experiences of others often ignite greater self reflection. For example, López (2002) explains that

My contact with this new feminism brought me back into closer contact with my own ethnicity, my own self. Reenergized by my new vision of the world, I began seeking women of color who were interested in discussing literature and this new consciousness we were feeling. Through these women of all shapes and sizes, I was inspired to start writing stories of my own. (p. 129)

In addition to functioning as an identity building process, writing also is self-expressive and cathartic. As one writer explains, “Words became my expression, my voice, my activism, joy, rage and release” (DiMarco, 1995, p. 58). Similarly, Harad (2003) elucidates the fundamental connection between writing and activism:

Feminism is as much a change of heart and vision as it is any particular political affiliation. It is a waking up, a coming into consciousness. In order to gain a feminist consciousness, women (and girls) must admit to connections between their individual lives, the lives of other women, and larger political and social structures. But more than that, they must *feel*, at least once, the truth of these connections: *That’s me. I know what that feels like. Yes. That’s how it works.* For that, we need stories. (p. 84, italics in original)

This process of sharing is a form of feminist activism because it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a story telling process that others can learn from if they so choose.

Often the circumstances of young women make writing and sharing experiences one of the most easily accessible forms of activism. Findlen (1995) explains that,

This country hasn’t heard enough from young feminists. We’re here, and we have a lot to say about our ideas and hopes and struggles and our place within feminism. We haven’t had many opportunities to tell our stories, but more of us are finding our voices and the tools to make them heard. (p. xvi)

She lists the many avenues for feminist expression including books, music, magazines, zines, newspapers, videos, letters to editors, conferences,

and the internet (Findlen, 1995). Wong (2003), who used a web site as her activist forum, explains how “the process of developing the site helped me test and renegotiate what I loathed about ‘feminist’ notions and activist politics. This site helped me change what I thought about feminism and activism by redefining those ideas for myself and for other people” (p. 294). This writing process reflects a self-oriented activism that is more about self-affirmation, catharsis, and expression than generating social change. Social change and awareness of women’s experience may result from such books and essays but is not the central goal for sharing one’s thoughts.

Sharing stories as a rhetorical practice is characterized by self-autonomy and a general lack of concern for their failure to meet externally dictated activist expectations. These feminists write from a place of confidence and self-awareness of their own power. Shugart (2001) observes a sense of ebullience in the process of self-revelation that is characteristic of third wave feminist rhetoric. Like the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s where women built self-esteem by sharing difficult experiences of exclusion or oppression (Campbell, 1973), contemporary feminists often share stories as an act of personal catharsis and self-expression, and perhaps, secondarily, for the purpose of creating social awareness of problems women face or building solidarity. Miranda (2004) argues that revolutionaries “do not have to water down our radical ideology or action, just rethink and reinvent our strategies for resistance” (p. 180).

This self-focus is not narcissistic, but rather a recognition of the complexities of contemporary activism. Rhetorical activism reconceptualized in this way draws rhetorical scholars away from traditional models of social activism, based on protest, social movement theory, and collective action. In comparison to Campbell’s (1973) characterizations of consciousness raising in the early 1970s, contemporary feminists seek to reaffirm their own identities but do not necessarily have the sense of self doubt and negative self-concepts that Campbell described as part of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Contemporary feminists are also no longer divided in the same divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, or race, even though they may experience the world in dramatically different ways. The function of their rhetoric is really neither self- nor other-directed (Gregg, 1971; Stewart, 1999). Rather, their rhetorical practices indicate a strong sense of self and ego, but they are not necessarily acting as a way to free themselves or escape severe oppression. Neither are contemporary feminists other-directed, that is, they do not necessarily seek to help anyone other than themselves in their rhetorical activism. However, the effect of their rhetoric might be to do both; that is, they affirm their sense of self and also provide stories that their readers can relate to because the stories speak to multiple experiences. The motive for writing, then, is neither self- nor other-directed, but the rhetorical function is both self- and other-directed.

Challenging Stereotypes and Labels as Activism

Another central idea behind this version of activism is that individuals can be activists in the process of simply going about their lives. One of the important ways that feminists inculcate everyday activism is by resisting gender stereotypes or refusing to adopt gender normativity:

Feminism is today the basis of resistance to the dominant paradigm. Feminism is now the method by which we are able to analyze that dominant culture and reject what are accepted universally as truths simply because those truths have been indoctrinated in us since we were born. (Suskin, 2003, p. 270)

Further, for many feminists, activism means “women talking back to stereotypes and taking back a history that has been denied to us” (Rehman & Hernández, 2002, p. xxvii). Davis (1995) explains that feminists often “recognize that anytime we challenge the ‘old school’, we run the risk of treading dangerous turf. That is why those of us who strike out in search of change are so often subjected to harsh criticisms” (p. 284). Feminist activism, then, can be the conscious resistance of these mainstream norms; a deliberate failing to meet the preconceived notions of patriarchal society.

Modern feminist activism also takes more personal forms through personal expression. For example, slogans on t-shirts can be a powerful and overlooked form of self-expression. English (1996), a young feminist and member of a punk band, explains “There is a feminist tradition of women with ‘chest graffiti’. Idealistically and naively, they went to war with their slogans emblazoned on their chests using humor and satire to promote a devastatingly serious cause. I admired the hell out of that” (p. 60). *Ms. Magazine* exemplified this theme on the Spring 2003 cover where Ashley Judd, Camryn Manheim, Whoopi Goldberg, and Margaret Cho are featured wearing shirts that proclaim “This is What a Feminist Looks Like”. This seemingly simple act challenges others to reconsider the preconceived notions they might have about whom feminists are and what they look like.

Similarly, modern feminists consider the process of becoming comfortable with their bodies, especially bodies that do not mirror the social ideal of activist. Lamm (1995) explains, “Where’s the revolution? My body is fucking beautiful, and every time I look in the mirror and acknowledge that, I am contributing to the revolution” (p. 90). The act of resisting the media representations of beauty as thinness is a powerful form of individual activism, yet feminists need new tactics for resistant readings of media messages (Durham, 1999). Women who fall outside the narrow constraints of those standards are made to feel ugly and personally responsible for that ugliness. Lamm (1995) indicates that the answer is not to ignore the body and focus on inner beauty. “And I don’t want to be told, ‘Yes, you’re fat, but you’re beautiful

on the inside.’ That’s just another way of telling me that I’m ugly, that there’s no way I’m beautiful on the outside” (p. 90). Similarly, Chernik (1995) argues that healthy women will continue to be considered physically flawed as long as society is controlled by patriarchal forces. In her battle to overcome an eating disorder, Chernik had to recognize the inherent beauty in her body and the strength that a healthy body could possess. However, this recognition should not be considered a case of personal healing. Rather, it is an example of feminist activism. She explains, “Gaining weight and getting my head out of the toilet bowl was the most political act I have ever committed” (Chernik, 1995, p. 81).

Contemporary feminists not only challenge dominant stereotypes through personal representation, but also the language that they use to describe themselves and others. This includes consciously using gender inclusive language (Bennett, 1996) and avoiding describing the world in terms of limiting polarities (Walker, 1995a). For modern feminists, activism need not necessarily be a public or group activity. Powerful forms of activism can be individual and private. This individual activism may or may not inspire public protest, in contrast to what traditional studies of social movements suggest. Regardless, it stimulates personal empowerment and feminist consciousness, which is at the very heart of activism for these feminists. In the introduction to her collection of third wave feminist essays, Walker (1995a) contends that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory. These rhetorical practices reflect a recognition that authentic and organic change occurs only in the self. Gearhart (1995) observes that probably the most important contribution humans can make is to clean up our own acts. Gearhart (1979) has also argued that humans can only change themselves, and that for too long, rhetoric has been the study of persuasion, conquest, and conversion of others to the rhetor’s ideals. Contemporary feminist rhetoric demonstrates awareness that conversion through forceful persuasion, for example, protest, confrontation, or movement, may not generate the kind of social change they desire:

Feminists are paying close attention to the ways in which power is manifested differently now than it was thirty years ago and are developing appropriate new frameworks for social justice work. [They] demonstrate a keen understanding of the multiple occupations necessary to envision and create a feminist world. (Labaton & Martin, p. 280)

These rhetorical practices of contemporary feminists are similar to the process that Anzaldúa (1990) called “*haciendo caras*.” She explained that,

Among Chicanas/*méxicanas*, *haciendo caras*, “making faces,” means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face—frowning, grimacing, looking sad, glum or disapproving. For me, *haciendo caras* has

the added connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says, “Don’t walk all over me,” the one that says, “Get out of my face.” (p. xv)

These faces function in juxtaposition to what Anzaldúa calls *máscaras* that hide our identities and sense of self: “After years of wearing masks we may become just series of roles, the constellated self limping along with its broken limbs” (p. xv). This practice of negotiating, coping, and dealing with the world is a rhetorical activist expression that renegotiates traditional understandings of activism, protest, and even social movement. That is, feminist activism can be defined by the idea of negotiating one’s own identity and one’s own world, yet may not involve public protest, confrontation, or resistance as traditional rhetorical theory suggests.

CONCLUSION: REDEFINING ACTIVISM THROUGH PERSONAL EXIGENCE

Contemporary feminist activism provides a rich ground for redefining social movement and protest projects that have traditionally dominated rhetorical studies. This type of activism embodies a wide range of rhetorical practices that are powerful, personal, and self-created. Because these activities are defined by the individual activist, they are also not prescriptive. That is, contemporary feminists avoid dictating activism or judging other feminists for their perceived lack of feminist activism. This principle creates space for multiple individual and social identities, providing contemporary feminists with flexibility and malleable tactics for navigating the social systems in which they live. Furthermore, such activism occurs in the course of everyday life. As Shun-hing (2002) explains, this everyday activism is important because it is “the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds,” creating a sense of agency and critical consciousness (p. 710).

Ultimately, third wave rhetorical options for activism respond to cultural conditions in the 21st century that demand personal responsibility. Although many third wave feminists desire to create a better world for themselves and for others, they also recognize the need to be able to live in and enjoy the present. As Felski (1989) observes, third wave feminists might embody counterpublic oppositionality that differs from traditional concepts of social protest and movement in that they:

seek to define themselves *against* the homogenizing and universalizing logic of the global megaculture of modern mass communication as a debased pseudopublic sphere, and to voice needs and articulate oppositional values which the ‘culture industry’ fails to address. These new sites

of oppositionality are multiple and heterogeneous and do not converge to form a single revolutionary movement. (p. 166)

These sites of oppositionality, such as building feminist identities and models for leadership, using humor, and resisting stereotypes, diversify third wave feminism to such an extent, it does not look like traditional understandings of social movements or social protest, yet embodies a sense of personal responsibility and activism that many third wave feminists find compelling and fulfilling.

These rhetorical practices are common in many other aspects of activism, ranging from environmentalism and animal rights to civil rights movements. Many of these groups and individual activists have also experienced blame for not doing enough. At some point, individuals must come to terms with what “enough” is and recognize the need for self-created rather than other-imposed standards. Contemporary feminists are comfortable with their rhetorical choices to further feminism on an everyday level, which could certainly extend into other arenas where activists struggle to find a location and satisfaction for what they do and say. The need for authentic, individual responses to cultural conditions is by no means limited to contemporary feminism. Rather, in an increasingly fragmented and contentious world, activism must necessarily reflect the complexity and needs of the individuals who choose to participate in it.

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