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### I Promise I Won't Say 'Herstory': New Conversations Among Feminists

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# *I PROMISE I WON'T SAY "HERSTORY": NEW CONVERSATIONS AMONG FEMINISTS*

by Jannelle Ruswick & Alycia Sellie

Jessica Valenti, *FULL FRONTAL FEMINISM: A YOUNG WOMAN'S GUIDE TO WHY FEMINISM MATTERS*. Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2007. 271p. pap., \$15.95, ISBN 978-1580052016.

Deborah Siegel, *SISTERHOOD, INTERRUPTED: FROM RADICAL WOMEN TO GRRLS GONE WILD*. New York: Plgrave Macmillan, 2007. 224p. bibl. index. pap., \$14.95, ISBN 978-1403982049.

Anita Harris, ed., *NEXT WAVE CULTURES: FEMINISM, SUBCULTURES, ACTIVISM*. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2008. 283p. bibl. index. pap., \$34.95, ISBN 978-0415957106.

[We] decided to write a paper in conversation with each other.  
— Chilla Burlbeck & Anita Harris, *Next Wave Cultures*, p.221

In the introduction to “Feminism, Youth Politics and Generational Change,” their chapter in *Next Wave Cultures*, Chilla Burlbeck and Anita Harris discuss their individual interpretations of “data sets” about young women, using their own geographic, cultural, and theoretical frameworks. Discovering their collaborative manner of writing was delightful for us as we began our process of reading and reflecting for *Feminist Collections*. Although we aren't sure how Harris and Burlbeck communicated, our correspondence was dictated by geography. Separated by hundreds of miles, we corresponded by email and discussed these works in real time via instant messaging. As reviewers, we share many commonalities. We are both academic librarians. We're twenty-seven years old. We are from the Midwest. Perhaps most importantly, we identify as feminists.

In spite of our similarities, we hope that our conversation will present varied reactions to the works that we have both read. We also hope that as young feminists, we can present a perspective that is sometimes missing in discussions about the generational

debates that are presented in the works reviewed here. What follows is excerpted from our conversations.

*Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters* sells itself as a primer on feminism, discussing topics deemed pertinent to Generation Y. The book has two objectives: to get young women to embrace feminism as a hip movement vital to their wellbeing and to provide a refresher course for out-of-the-closet feminists.

**Alycia:** I enjoyed reading *Full Frontal Feminism* on the train. It was easy to put down and pick up again, and I flew through it. Overall, the tone of the work felt like an informal conversation with a cool older sister who was trying to convince you why it's important to be a feminist.

**Jannelle:** *Full Frontal Feminism* was a pleasant read, but I had difficulty determining the audience. At first I thought the book was for college-aged women, because in Chapter 2, Valenti argues that it is “O.K.” to have consensual inebriated sex as long as the reader is aware of the myriad of issues sur-

rounding girls who have “gone wild.” However, in an interview on Alternet.org, Valenti stated, “It was a book I wish I had when I was in high school.”<sup>1</sup> The book seems to have been written for urban, sarcastic, and witty female adolescents — women who are teen-aged Valenti clones. The consequence of such a limited audience is that women who do not fit this demographic are likely to be turned off by the sex and beer talk. I say this as a woman who grew up in the Midwest; the frequent mentions of getting drunk and having sex would have scared me as a teen. I wonder if reading this in high school would have turned me off from my emerging feminism.

**Alycia:** I think I would have been intrigued but intimidated to read *Full Frontal Feminism* as a teenager. Valenti puts a lot of personal beliefs into the book, and this could be a turn-off for some, as much as it may make it voyeuristically interesting for others. I think this book was written as an expression of Valenti's personal experiences as a feminist rather than of the totality of women's experiences of

feminism. While I read, I kept questioning whether Valenti was making space for others, where I fit into her conception of feminism, and whether young women would be able to relate to this presented perspective. I'm not sure I have many conclusions, but I think Valenti realizes that feminism can be intimidating to the audience she is writing for (closeted feminists), and so she is using herself as an example of a healthy, happy feminist.

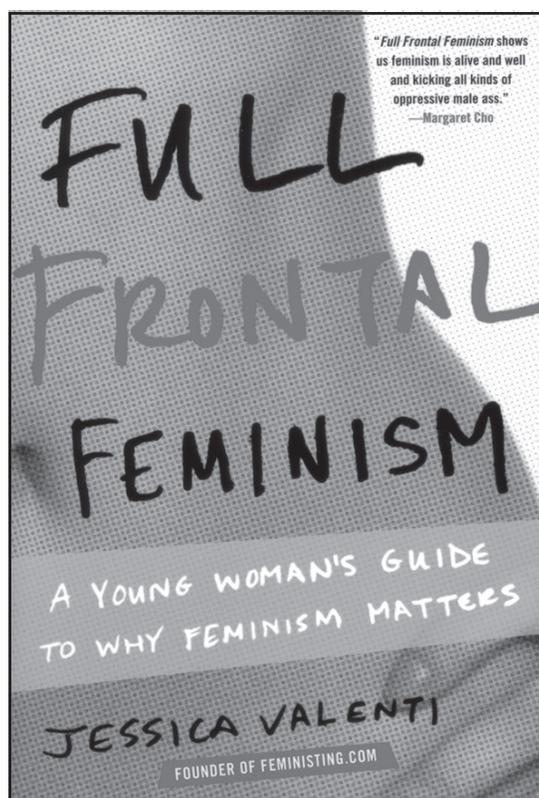
**Jannelle:** To give Valenti credit, she repeatedly emphasizes that most of the things she says in her book are her personal feelings, and that the reader needs to determine her own opinions on the subject. I wish Valenti (or the publishers) would have marketed the book differently; perhaps as a memoir of a young feminist instead of as a "Feminism 101" guide.

**Alycia:** I couldn't agree more about the framing of the work. *Full Frontal Feminism* is a great representation of what Valenti is experiencing as a feminist writer today, but the book does not present a comprehensive history of feminism by any means. She leans to the left, and so the book does too; for instance, she lists "Don't have sex with Republicans" (p.30) as a personal rule in Chapter 2, "Feminists Do It Better (and Other Sex Tips)." Although other topics are highlighted (reproductive rights, relationships, politics, and pop culture are a few), I think Valenti frames all issues within the scope of identity politics.

**Jannelle:** I found her writing lacking in analysis. If one of the goals of the book is to educate young women about "why feminism matters" (subtitle), I'd expect to see a more thorough examination of issues. For example, in a paragraph about statutory rape charges in Nebraska that were avoided by the couple getting married in Kansas,

she says, "Clearly, this case is fucked up in a thousand ways" (p. 29). I know the ways in which the example is "fucked up," but will a young woman new to feminism? The "Um, no" and "Just saying" conclusions got tiring and felt like excuses to avoid explanation.

**Alycia:** These phrases, plus the swearing in some areas and the fake swearing in others ("friggin"), as well as the lack of depth, were problems for me personally as a reader, but I also recognized immediately that I



was not the intended audience for the book. The writing was definitely reminiscent of a mainstream magazine or news article and lacking in thorough research. I was also aware that Valenti co-founded and writes for the popular feminist blog Feministing.com. Thus, I think that on some level I approached this book as if I were reading a series of blog entries, so I wasn't surprised by the tone of the writing or its randomness.

**Jannelle:** I didn't intend to approach it as if I were reading a blog, but in the end I felt the book was more of a "Best of Feministing" anthology than a full book. What worries me about the lack of depth is that when Valenti does provide analysis, the research is shoddy. For example, she quotes the famous Joycelyn Elders statement about masturbation being a topic for sex education. When I checked the notes for the chapter, I discovered that she used the website Rotten.com as her source. This particular quote may be accurate despite the unreliable source, but it left me worried that Valenti wasn't exercising due diligence in her research. A teen may not care to do further research, but I think authors have an obligation to provide verifiable information from reliable sources.

**Alycia:** The tone of Valenti's writing is most successful in the last chapter of the book ("Get to It"), where readers are invited to get involved by listing feminist goals that are simple to accomplish. Her examples are brash, and laden with her own personality, and yet still do-it-yourself: "Don't diet. Fuck them and their bullshit beauty standards. Eating can be a powerful act when the world wants you to disappear" (p.244). I like the participatory aspects of the book that invite ladies in, and the fact that the end of the work doesn't leave a hole that merely makes us ask *Where do we go next?* without offering any suggestions. Valenti is great at making readers realize that feminism is what they will make of it.

Following this, I was left wondering whether *Full Frontal Feminism* will be effective at convincing young people that identifying as feminists is important. In this book, Valenti is the cool, swearing older sister trying to convince

you why you need to join the club and pay attention. But will it work?

**Jannelle:** I think that if a teen loves her swearing older sister, then yes. However, I do not believe that is the subset of teens that needs convincing that feminism is cool. As an academic librarian, I would recommend this book to my students with some hesitation. I think there are better-written and better-researched books available for young budding feminists to read. Valenti has said she didn't want a woman's symbol on the cover because, "let's face it, no young woman is going to pick up a book with the woman's symbol with a fist on it."<sup>2</sup> It is ironic that *Sisterhood Interrupted* has two women's symbols on the cover, yet it achieves Valenti's goals more successfully than *Full Frontal Feminism* does.

In *Sisterhood Interrupted*, Deborah Siegel describes the conflicts and conversations that have challenged and divided feminists from the 1960s to today. Her book has two sections: the first, labeled "Mothers," tells stories of women battling sexism and patriarchy in the Second Wave; the second, "Daughters," talks about the generations after the Second Wave and the women who struggle to convince their peers that there are continuing reasons why feminism is important and that there is still a need to fight for equality.

**Alycia:** I really enjoyed *Sisterhood Interrupted*. I was amazed by the radicalism of Second Wave feminist history and by how much I learned from this book. Siegel has said that she "read scads of manifestos, memos, letters, memoirs, magazine issues, archives, news reports, bestselling books, anthologies and pretty much every written source I could get hold of to examine what those women most invested in defining feminism in the public eye have argued and argued about across the decades."<sup>3</sup>

I had the opportunity to hear Deborah Siegel talk at the "Women, Action and the Media" conference in Boston last year, where she led a panel of feminist writers who all shared tips about publishing. Siegel stressed that it is possible to be an academic and to publish well-researched books that can reach a general audience. I think this framework is at the heart of *Sisterhood Interrupted*.

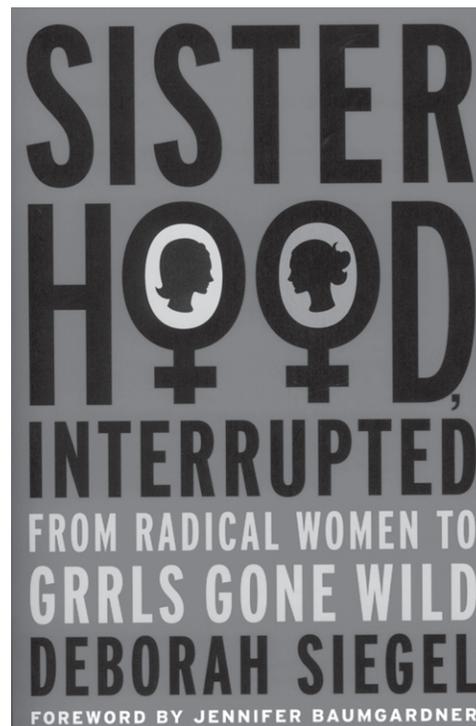
**Jannelle:** I also enjoyed *Sisterhood Interrupted*. I have a women's studies background, but this book contained information I did not have, specifically the history of the formation of groups such as NOW. While the book may be advanced reading for a teen, the writing is totally accessible to college-aged students and older. In an interview on Alternet.com, Siegel said, "I wrote the book I wanted my younger cousin, my mother, and my great aunt to read: a road map to the feminist past for a younger generation and a guidebook to the present for women who have been calling for change for years."<sup>4</sup> I appreciate that she was aware of her audience and wrote accordingly. I also think this book fills a gap in feminist literature. I haven't seen such an accessible book discussing feminist infighting before.

**Alycia:** Siegel explains how a controversial topic will divide, shift, and alter feminist circles. There are a few chapters that focus on specific feminists (Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and Katie Roiphe, among others), but I never felt that there were sets of rivalrous individuals or groups whose conflicts lasted throughout the whole book or the whole historical period; the characters fluctuated and evolved with the changes of the eras. Siegel writes about the root causes and beliefs that led to the formations of separate groups, all of whom were all working as

feminists. Despite being a book essentially about feminist infighting, it was surprising how inspired I felt by reading this history, and how connected I felt to many of the differing struggles. I also appreciate that Siegel includes discussions (although limited) of race, class, and orientation.

The only criticism that I have is that I think there could have been more written about the fringes of Third Wave feminism in the "Daughters" section — more about the riot grrrrl, GLBT, and trans issues that I see at the core of the Third Wave. I felt that the first section did deal with more radical groups within the Second Wave, but such coverage decreased as the book progressed chronologically. I thought that the depiction of the Third Wave was more mainstream than I know it to be, but then again, that could reflect my own experience.

**Jannelle:** I finished *Sisterhood Interrupted* feeling a stronger connection to the women who came before me. I liked that Siegel showed how the



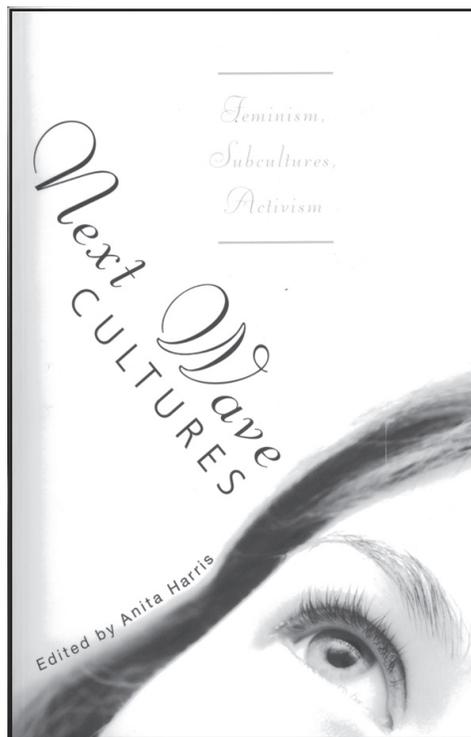
slogan “The personal is the political” continues to have meaning for women of all ages, races, and classes. Not only did the book make me feel more connected to older women; it made me feel connected to women my age who are living a different experience than I am. I think Siegel was successful in portraying the beginning of the Third Wave as a “swirl of intense, ironic, and often painful contradictions around issues of progress, promotion, and power” (p.139). However, I’d agree that she largely ignored the fringe (which I would argue is the core of the forward movement of the Third Wave), but I don’t think describing the fringe was her objective. I also don’t think she would have been able to address it within this book to our satisfaction if she had tried. I feel like this book exists to break down walls among all women, not to define who those women are. I am really glad I read *Sisterhood Interrupted* before I read *Next Wave Cultures*.

**N***ext Wave Cultures* picks up where *Sisterhood Interrupted* ends by detailing current attitudes, activities, identities, and goals of women living within subcultures of the Third Wave movement. Edited by Anita Harris, *Next Wave Cultures* is divided into three sections: “Infiltrating Masculine Domains,” “Creating Spaces,” and “New Activisms.”

**Jannelle:** *Next Wave Cultures* was written with an academic audience in mind, and as a result it can be a bit drier than the works of Siegel and Valenti. The book has a good mix of empirical studies and personal stories. I liked both styles, and I thought the book balanced the two well. Highlights include “Rescuing a Theory of Adolescent Excess,” in which authors Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine inter-

view teenage women about their attitudes and beliefs about sex, and “The Empowered Fe-Fe’s.” The Fe-Fes are a group of differently abled, low-income teenage women of color in Chicago who have been empowered to create films about their lives.

**Alycia:** The pieces in *Next Wave Cultures* are a fusion of Women’s Studies and Subculture Studies — a field I hadn’t heard of before reading this book. In her introduction, Harris explains that there has been a void in the area of Subculture Studies, wherein gender was not specifically or intentionally addressed. This book is



attempting to fill that void, and many of the studies spoke to the emerging crossover in the fields.

The research compiled in *Next Wave Cultures* covers topics that neither of the other books would have had the opportunity to cover: topics outside of mainstream feminist history, such as female surfers, Gangstressism, girls with disabilities, and culture jamming.

My favorite was “Connecting the Dots: Riot Grrrls, Ladyfests and the International Grrrl Zine Network,” by Kristen Schilt and Elke Zobl, which presented a side of Third Wave feminism that I had felt was missing from the other two works (the more punk, riot grrrl, do-it-yourself side).

Finally, another topic stressed in Harris’s introduction was the idea — or the fear — that today’s younger women are less politically engaged as a group than young women were in the past. Harris addresses the shared worry among older generations about the future of feminism, based on the perceived lethargy of younger generations. I found that this worry over the lack of engagement, and the desire to shape new feminisms to come, was what united the three works we read; these issues were explored in a variety of ways in *Next Wave Cultures* as well as in *Sisterhood Interrupted* and *Full Frontal Feminism*.

**Jannelle:** I think that is the overarching theme of the three books: exploring the myth that young women are not engaged. *Next Wave Cultures* was able to debunk the myth both anecdotally and empirically. Of all the books, *Next Wave Cultures* was the most successful at highlighting the “others” that the first two books largely ignored.

**Alycia:** After having read these three works as a team and discussed them here, we are happy to report that we have not created another feminist infight for Deborah Siegel’s next book. Jannelle and I have largely agreed in reaction to the works presented above, and similarly struggled with or clearly defined the audience we felt would be appropriate readers for these works.

After I had finished reading these books, but before our discussions commenced, I happened to read a stunning portrayal of this moment in feminist history. I felt it really expressed where

we are right now in the crossroads of where we have been and what is to come. In the “Letter from the Editors” introduction to *Make/Shift* magazine, Issue 4, Jessica Hoffman and Daria Yudacufski present a struggle.<sup>5</sup> They discuss what it means to be publishing a magazine with the word *feminism* on the cover when women of color in the feminist blogosphere have condemned feminism as exclusively white and middle-class. They discuss the conversations they have had among themselves as media contributors on the subject, and they are very clear that not everyone on their staff is in agreement on any segment of what is happening now or what has happened. What they convey most clearly is that they are not sure what will happen next — for their magazine; for their sisters of color; for feminism.

What was most important to me in that piece was the conversation that was held inside of it. I am very pained about the strife that currently exists within the movement, and about the idea that feminism might be something that is obtainable or identifiable only for some. I am happy that they have recorded this moment so plainly in its confusion, its discord, and its hope for solidarity.

As I reviewed these works, this piece by Hoffmann and Yudacufski stuck in my mind, and I thought about how this conversation, happening after these three books were published, may frame the next wave of books to be written about feminism. I am very glad that each of the books reviewed here has been able to record a moment in time and a perception of feminism. I am certain that younger women will think about these topics in ways that will seem wholly foreign to me, but I know that what unites all of us is the conversation. I am happy to have a friend and colleague like Jannelle to talk with, and as I aim to assess my role in feminisms of the future, I am glad

that so many other women are willing to share the struggles and their histories with me.

**Jannelle:** I work with young women every day at my university. These women are aspiring mathematicians, engineers, biologists, and chemists, pursuing careers that desperately need strong women to fight for pay equity and against discrimination. Without books speaking directly to young women about feminism, we may see that the Generation Y women believe that feminism ended with the mythical bra burnings. Each of the three books we reviewed has a place in empowering Generation Y women to become Generation Y feminists. *Full Frontal Feminism*, despite its hiccups, serves as a witty personal experience with feminism to get a young woman’s feet wet. *Sisterhood Interrupted* provides pro-feminism women who may not have an academic background in women’s studies with an easy-to-read, concise history of the feminist movement and commentary on the future of feminism. Finally, *Next Wave Cultures* brings the discussion of women’s everyday activism into the scholarly realm, with studies and stories showing that young women continue to believe that the personal is political and are on the streets working for change.

Having the chance to read and review these books with Alycia reinvigorated my feminism. It’s easy to get wrapped up in day-to-day functions and lose track of current feminist actions that I can get involved in or that I can create. Anytime I read a book by a young feminist, I feel a renewed sense of empowerment and strength to challenge and change the world. The conversations I had with Alycia to write this piece will not end here. They represent just a moment in our continuing dialogue over the past several years, and they will shape our future conversations as well as our roles in feminism.

We hope more books by young women will be published that reach as broad a spectrum of women as these three do.

#### Notes

1. Laura Barcella, “Full Frontal Feminism,” an interview with Jessica Valenti, on *Alternet.org*, posted April 24, 2007; <http://www.alternet.org/story/50843/> (accessed 01/23/2009).
2. Emma Pearse, “Riot in her Head: Jessica Valenti,” in *New York Magazine*, April 29, 2007; <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/31256/> (accessed 01/23/2009).
3. Celina, “Deborah Siegel: Sisterhood Interrupted,” on *Feministing.com*, posted June 30, 2007; <http://www.feministing.com/archives/007289.html> (accessed 01/19/2009).
4. Courtney E. Martin, “Why Feminists Fight with Each Other,” on *Alternet.org*, posted June 12, 2007; <http://www.alternet.org/story/53844/> (accessed 01/23/2009).
5. Jessica Hoffmann & Daria Yudacufski, “Letter from the Editors,” in *Make/Shift* no.4 (Fall/Winter 2008/2009), p.5.

[Jannelle Ruswick is the psychology and social sciences librarian and instruction coordinator for the Illinois Institute of Technology. She is also an adjunct faculty member in the Humanities Department, where she teaches a course on autobiographies. Alycia Sellie lives in Brooklyn, where she is the public services coordinator at Pratt Institute. She likes to knit and bike, and she plans to help organize a zine fest in New York in the next year.]