Imagining Women's Lives:

Feminism, Temporality, and the Metaphor of Waves

> The Pueblo people and the indigenous people of the Americas see time as round, not as a long linear string. If time is round, if time is an ocean, then something that happened 500 years ago may be quite immediate and real, whereas something inconsequential that happened an hour ago could be far away. Think of time as an ocean always moving . . . .
>
> Leslie Marmon Silko, Interview

> Now begins to rise in me the familiar rhythm; words that have lain dormant now lift, now toss their crests, and fall and rise, and fall again. . . .
> I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

In spring 2013 the majority of the one hundred students in my undergraduate course on diversity in American culture responded to my question "What is feminism?" with positive and accurate definitions such as "feminism is the belief that women and men are of equal value and that they deserve equal rights and opportunities in society." Most of the students were vaguely conservative; they were diverse in terms of race, nationality, gender, and academic fields; only a handful were majoring in the humanities; and yet, for the first time in my thirty years of teaching, the term "feminist" elicited almost no resistance or hostility. This surprising situation appears to represent a sea change from the typical experience that Toril Moi pinpointed in her 2006 essay, "'I Am Not a Feminist, But . . .': How Feminism Became the F-Word." Like many feminist faculty, Moi observed that since the mid-1990s, "most of my students no longer make feminism their central political and personal project" (1735). She explained the resistance to feminism by arguing that "[t]he poststructuralist paradigm is now exhausted" and that because most of the "fundamental assumptions of feminist theory in its various current guises (queer theory, postcolonial feminist theory, transnational feminist theory, psychoanalytic feminist theory, and so on) are still informed by some version of poststructuralism . . . much feminist

work today produces only tediously predictable lines of argument" (1735). She called on feminists as well as other poststructuralists "to rethink their most fundamental assumptions about language and meaning, the relation between language and power, language and human community, the body and the soul (or whatever we want to call the inner life)" (1735).

Moi continued by describing the success of loud-mouthed 1990s conservatives like Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh in popularizing an image of feminists as "feminazis" (Limbaugh's term) who are filled with hate and who want "women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (Robertson, qtd. in Moi 1736). Bashing feminists thrived as a popular sport across the political spectrum until recently, when the advent of books and films reframed women's oppression as "the central moral challenge of our time" and created fresh populist possibilities for global feminism enabled or enhanced by new technologies such as constantly growing, interactive websites, blogs, and computer games that open world-wide access to education and political organizing. A few galvanizing examples include Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's 2010 *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, subsequently made into a film starring George Clooney, and continuing to evolve through "innovative multi-platform initiatives" (http://www.halftheskymovement.org/pages/about-half-the-sky-movement); the PBS documentary mini-series and ever-expanding website, *Makers: Women Who Make America* (http://www.pbs.org/makers/home/); and the TEDxWomen phenomenon (http://tedxwomen.org/about-the-paley-center-for-media/). As Winter and Castillo have shown, troubling imperialist threads are interwoven into some of these (not-so-new) discourses, but in this essay I would like to focus on the peculiar persistence among academic feminists of the

metaphor of waves as a descriptor of women's lives and feminist movements, despite twenty years of feminist discomfort with the metaphor.

While metaphors occupy small linguistic spaces---"waves" is only one syllable---their imaginative force is expansive. Metaphors are powerfully concise narrative forms for encapsulating the temporality and meaning of life stories. Metaphors can crystalize a worldview, or they can open our imaginations to fresh ways of seeing the world. Their ideological ramifications sometimes function with coercive force, especially when they become so stale and clichéd that we no longer recognize them as metaphors. The metaphor of waves, which has entered our lexicon as a commonplace to categorize various feminisms, evokes in one gentle syllable a narrative arc of life and death: emergence, cresting, and dissolution. In short, metaphors are arguably the most compressed form of life-writing as well as the most potent.

Objections to the wave metaphor have been manifold, ranging from off-handed jokes to serious theoretical arguments. I have heard countless graduate students and faculty struggle to fit themselves into "a wave" and to pigeon-hole other women, usually older women, into an (out-moded) wave. In 2006 feminists gathered from universities across Canada in a conference wittily entitled (in homage to a Stevie Smith poem), "Not Drowning But Waving," in which the speakers variously addressed such questions as: "Do our conventional designations of first wave, second wave, third wave work? Can a 'generation' describe a particular kind of feminism?" In 2011 the organizers published a collection of essays that evolved from the conference, *Not Drowning But Waving: Women, Feminism, and the Liberal Arts*. Phil Okeke-Iherjiriki and Julie Rak noted that their individual "feminist experiences grew out of an responded to very different local conditions, yet neither of us sees herself reflected in, or aligned with, what we have come to think of as The Waves" (286). Okeke-Iherjiriki notes that "the historical spaces and times

constructed by the movement and its waves [are] improperly fitted to wide into the historical pluralities of African cultures" (293), which echoes Kimberly Springer's 2002 argument that "the term *third wave* . . . excludes women of color" (1059) and "drowns out" black feminism (1061). Although Rebecca Walker, the daughter of Alice Walker, is usually credited with inventing or popularizing the term "third wave feminism,"i Springer protests against the notion of time that the "wave" metaphor imposes on black women's self-writing. She insists: "The recuperation of the self in a racist and sexist society is a political enterprise and a Black feminist one that deprioritizes generational differences in the interest of historical, activist continuity" (1060-61). Julie Rak wryly critiques "waves as a concept" because her life story is "of being in the in-between wavelet, or of not being in a wavelet at all" (298). Tongue-in-check, she coins a new category, "the 2.5 wave."

I would like to begin by presenting an effective, pro-feminist use of the wave metaphor on the stage of world politics.

On November 28, 2012, the United Nations News Center issued a press release stating:

> Countries have a responsibility to implement national policies to end violence against women . . . . Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. In some countries, up to 7 in 10 women will be beaten, raped, abused or mutilated in their lifetimes.
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> The UN General Assembly designated 25 November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in a 1999 resolution . . . [that] harks to the 25 November 1960 assassination of the three Mirabal sisters, who were political activists in the Dominican Republic . . . . During the commemoration, the Executive Director of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and

> the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Michelle Bachelet, underlined that implementing national policies will require concrete action plans from policymakers and should also involve women in all aspects of society.
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> "We need to enforce and implement new and improved national laws and action plans that provide for safe houses, free hotline services and free legal and medical aid to survivors," she said. "We need to guarantee the right to sexual and reproductive health. We need education programmes that teach human rights, equality and mutual respect. We need increasing numbers of women in politics, law enforcement, and peacekeeping forces. We need equal economic opportunities and decent jobs for women and young female graduates."

On Friday, March 15, 2013, after months of tough, contentious negotiations, 131 countries approved a United Nations "blueprint to combat violence against women and girls" (Lederer A4). Michelle Bachelet announced, to loud applause, "We did it!"

Not everyone applauded, of course. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had "lashed out at the anticipated document for advocating sexual freedoms for women and the right to abortion 'under the guise of sexual and reproductive rights'" (Lederer A4). But they did not succeed in controlling the head of Egypt's delegation, Mervat Tallawy, who announced that Egypt would join the U.N. consensus. Tallawy, who is also the president of the National Council for Women-Egypt, described the Brotherhood as "a global wave of conservatism, of repression against women, and this [blueprint] is a message that if we can get together, hold power together, we can be a strong wave against this conservatism." She continued: "I believe in women's cause. I don't take money from the government. I work voluntarily. If they want to kick me out, they can. But I will not change my belief in women" (Lederer A4).

Before I comment on Tallawy's clever use of the metaphor of waves, I'd like to acknowledge the significance of the past century for women's rights. A hundred years ago, in 1914, the United States government did not acknowledge the right of women to vote, nor did most other countries around the world. European conflicts over empires and resources were on the verge of plunging the world into a ghastly war, and there was no major international meeting ground at which nations could gather to attempt to work out their differences. Nor was there any place on earth where a group of women as diversely accomplished and professionally successful as those we routinely expect at academic conferences today could have gathered because there were no universities that admitted a wide range of women as students, much less hired them as faculty. The March 15, 2013 United Nations blueprint against gendered violence is historic on multiple fronts. Women not only voted; women led the process of creating a transnational legal framework through which to combat violence against women and girls. One of the key women was Michelle Bachelet, who as a young woman in Pinochet's Chile was imprisoned, tortured, and forced into exile along with her mother, while her father died under torture. Despite the aftermath of terror and trauma, she managed to become a pediatrician and an epidemiologist while also studying military strategy. After Chile returned to democracy, Bachelet was appointed Minister of Health in 2000 and Minister of Defense in 2002. In 2006 she was elected Chile's first female President. In March 2013, after the UN vote, she returned to Chile to run for a second term, and in December she won the election in the greatest landslide in 80 years (Henao).

Mervat Tallawy is another pivotal figure in this recent advance. Born in 1937, Tallawy has been a politician and diplomat in Egypt and at the U.N. for the past half century (since 1963), during which time she has witnessed many political and ideological regimes come and go in

Egypt and in the larger world, so when she said that we are currently facing "a global wave of conservatism, of repression against women," she was speaking authoritatively from a depth of experience. The revolution taking place in Egypt suggests that she was prescient in anticipating a backlash against the Muslim Brotherhood. By describing the Muslim Brotherhood as part of a "wave," she used the metaphor cannily to undercut the Brotherhood's rhetorical claims to rootedness, its self-portrayal as the essence and bulwark of Islam. And when she stated: "if we can get together, hold power together, we can be a strong wave against this conservatism," her image of push-back worked efficaciously to galvanize pro-women alliances.

Tallawy's savvy deployment of the wave metaphor stands in contrast to the prevalent way in which the metaphor is used by many feminist activists today when they describe feminism as a series of successive waves: first, second, third, and fourth. I've heard many colleagues and students struggle to figure out which wave they fit into, and their positioning is usually predicated on a reductive portrayal of previous so-called waves. Each wave builds, crests, and vanishes, and the next wave rushes in exuberantly, as if unaware that the metaphor foretells its transience, too. Imagining feminisms as a succession of waves foregrounds an image of feminisms pounding against each other. The larger world is occluded.

One of the most influential instances is Jennifer Baumgardner and and Amy Richards's 2000 book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, which was published in a 10th Anniversary Edition in 2010. The authors declare that "Third Wave" feminists like "girlie culture," which they define as "a phenomenon of female self-empowerment that emerged in the 1990s with movies like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, activist groups like Riot Grrrl and books like Elizabeth Wurtzel's Bitch." The main problem, the Manifesto asserts, is that "Second Wave

feminists, and especially Second Wave politicians and journalists, are largely against their advocation." The Manifesto continues:

> So an intergenerational struggle has sprung forth between mothers and daughters. On the one side are Second Wavers who lashed out against their sexually limiting roles as wives and mothers in exchange for equal pay and egalitarian partnerships. And on the other are Third Wavers who, perhaps dismissive of the battles fought and often won by their mothers, aspire to be Madonna, the woman who rose to fame as the ultimate virgin whore. Third Wavers . . . want to continue the fight for equal rights, but not to the detriment of their sexuality. They want to be both subject and object, when it comes to their sexual roles, their political power and their place in American culture. (http://www.alternet.org/story/9986/a_manifesto_for_third_wave_feminism)

Rather than point out how trivializing and historically inaccurate this Manifesto is, I would like to emphasize that this example, which I've drawn from popular culture, is just one of a proliferating series of definitions of "waves" of feminism. Many feminist scholars have articulated more substantive distinctions between various forms of feminism than this "Manifesto" does. In a representative example, Michelle Sidler asserts in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's important 1997 anthology, *Third Wave Agenda*: "Second Wave feminism helped bring about professional self-sufficiency for women, and their work paved the way for new feminisms, such as that being constructed by young women of the post-baby boom generation. But postmodernism and the new global economy have brought on concerns about the homogeneity of the so-called bourgeois white feminism of the second wave" (27). In short, whether we take examples from academic culture or from popular culture, the structure of the

analysis remains the same. A self-defined Wave C dismisses what it defines as Wave B in broad, simplistic strokes, while proclaiming itself more diverse, more sophisticated, and less complicit with oppressive forces than its predecessors. Heywood and Drake argue that "what third wave feminists seek and find in the writing of [earlier black and "third-world" feminists] is languages and images that account for multiplicity and difference, that negotiate contradiction in affirmative ways, and that give voice to a politics of hybridity and coalition" (9). Unfortunately, the linear temporality evoked by the "wave" metaphor undermines their goals; difference, plurality, and simultaneity are submerged, while the metaphor offers new life to an old Oedipus. The Queen is dead, long live the Queen.

In recent years graduate students and young faculty who see themselves as radical have told me that women are not oppressed and that feminism is "hegemonic." I would like to believe them. How tempting it is to turn away from the perennial issues that feminism addresses—the wide world in which, for instance, "up to 7 in 10 women will be beaten, raped, abused or mutilated in their lifetimes" and the U.S. front in which women still only make 77 cents for every dollar that men make. It is hard, as aging women, to withstand our world's deep, rushing currents of matricidal contempt. Submission in the face of our imminent demise has a certain allure. Why not break like a wave?

Unlike the metaphor of political movement, which underscores human agency through collective motion, the metaphor of waves exempts us from social responsibility because waves do not possess agency. Their fates are inevitable. They are phenomena produced by winds, tides, currents, and weather systems. In other words, they are symptoms or signs of powers that are much larger than themselves. Waves are ephemera, not elemental forces. In this sense, waves are feminine. Waves, we could say, are like emotions, which are eternally feminine

ephemera, unlike rationality, which is an eternally masculine domain. For rationality we have metaphors like *tower*, *anchor*, *fortress*, *lighthouse*. And abstractions, like *hegemonic world order*. Maybe we can work the wave metaphor this way: While men rule the world, feminists wave.

To be sure, emotions, like feminisms, are said to come and go in waves. Tenderness laps gently; rage deafens, thunders, and crashes; desire knocks us flat and dissolves the very fibers of our being with its drumming, drumming, drumming. And grief, when it washes over us full force, is a tsunami, devastating and obliterating.

I see an underlying logic here: if women are creatures of emotion, women's movements are like waves, while men's movements are, like, solid. Institutions. Revolutions. Governments. Empires. Capitalism. Communism. Democracy. Enduring achievements that unfold over centuries. Millenia even.

I will confess, in case you hadn't noticed, that I love words like I love the ocean; I love waves of words and words about waves. I once heard a novelist describe metaphors as the erotic zone of language, and I agree with her. But I believe that the metaphor of waves, when applied to generations of feminisms, obscures the richness and complexity of both our individual life stories and our collective histories. It detracts from central feminist insights, strategies, and alliances. As a political movement, one of feminism's foundational tasks is to challenge the patriarchal, racist, and homophobic logic of gender---the cultural spaces in which gender is imagined and institutionalized. Feminism enables us to stake a claim holistically to our reason as well as to our emotions. With evidence and emotion in hand, we can imagine ourselves rising up, empowered as well as stricken by the force of emotions and the discipline of evidence-based knowledge, and in these moments of rising we define ourselves not by what we feel or think but

by what we choose to do, the choices we make in response to the options that life presents. Our legacy does not reside in the temporality of waves but in the deep time of creation. Our legacy is not our history; it is not the fact of our having lived and died; it is the music that we create from the beauty and the nightmare of our historical, individual, and collective lives.

Now that I have outlined a few of the reasons why I believe that using the metaphor of waves to describe feminism is inapt and self-defeating, I would like, in closing, to reclaim the metaphor for its *existential* aptness, its efficacy as a *memento mori*, a reminder that how we view death foretells how we view life. One of art's chief functions is elegiac, which is to say that art gives expression to grief, mourning, and despair in ways that are crucial to human survival. Elegiac art infuses life with meaning by detailing its pain and joy and lamenting its transience. Our power as individual agents of change, destruction, and creation is indeed transient and ephemeral; we individually, as embodied subjects, do emerge, crest, and fade away as rhythmically as waves rise and dissolve in the ocean. When we invoke the metaphor of waves, we, consciously or unconsciously, are calling attention to time and mortality, to the relation between the present and the past. In the relations that we claim, and in the relations that we repudiate, we imagine our own future, our own fate. Will we collectively vanish without a trace, like waves sinking in the sand, or will we endure, like water returning to the ocean from whence it came? In the ocean's womb, time does not drum a linear march (1, 2, 3, 4; first, second, third, fourth). Rather it churns, and in its churning the dead are re-formed as the vital nutrients from which the next generation is born.

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[i] Groeneveld, for example, observes: "In a 1992 issue of *Ms*. Magazine, Rebecca Walker introduce the term *third wave* into feminist discourse by announcing 'I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave'" (271).