

Astrid Henry. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*. Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 2004.

ISBN: 0253344549.

Anthea Taylor

In *Not My Mother's Sister*, Astrid Henry critiques the excessive use of generational tropes and familial metaphors in American "third-wave" texts. Henry's stated aim is to analyse how the mother-daughter trope has become *the* central means of figuring relationships between second-wave and third-wave feminists in the US (2). In so doing, *Not My Mother's Sister* fills a significant critical gap within feminist textual studies, specifically in relation to the rhetoric of 'popular' feminist writing. Her study consists of close analyses of a number of US texts defined as products of third-wave feminism and which exemplify the "overmaternalization of feminism" (146). She trenchantly observes that such works repeatedly view feminism as a symbolic Mother necessitating repudiation to permit the individuation of her wayward daughter. The feminist publications she analyses, both 'popular' and academic (although most can be categorised as the former), are clustered in the 1990s, the point at which she argues the third-wave becomes most culturally visible. An Australian audience may be tempted to read the highly visible media debates over the meaning (and 'ownership') of feminism in the 1990s, precipitated by the publication of Helen Garner's *The First Stone*, through Henry's observations on the third-wave. However, the term's application and currency in Australia has been comparatively limited, either in 'mainstream' or academic contexts. Nonetheless, her unpacking of generational tropes and maternal metaphors provides important insight into how relationships between different cohorts of feminists are being figured.

The book begins with an attempt to historicise the feminist 'waves'

phenomenon. In ‘Daughterhood is Powerful: The Emergence of Feminisms’ Third Wave’ she searches for the origins of the third-wave, a critical gesture that historians of the second-wave have shown to be fraught, particularly given that such stories seek to impose an unsustainable coherence and linearity to feminist history. In Henry’s reading, the women of the third-wave seek to rehabilitate feminism (36), a gesture that requires the invocation of a particular feminist past. The next chapter – ‘Finding Ourselves in the Past’ – offers a potted history of the US second-wave, identifying within it problems that would be exaggerated by third-wave daughters seeking to distinguish themselves from this earlier generation. Henry explores the relationship between the first- and second-waves, tracking how the latter came to identify the former as “their history and their political foundation” (58). In taking up the wave metaphor, second-wave feminists sought to identify with their nineteenth or early twentieth century predecessors while simultaneously positioning themselves as “the vanguard” (58), a process that continues in writing of the so-called third-wave. The remainder of the book, comprised of detailed rhetorical analysis, addresses the way third-wave authors discursively construct the differences between feminists predominantly through the generational prism.

In Henry’s analysis, the key points on which this third-wave seeks to distance itself from the second-wave as (M)Other are in attitudes to (hetero)sexuality, queer feminist identities and racial difference; chapters are devoted to each of these issues and how they have provided the basis for a differentiation between these two generations of feminism. Although there are myriad similarities between the so-called “third-wave” texts she analyses, binding them is a rejection of (a particular type of) academic feminism; the third-wave seeks to establish itself as practical as opposed to theoretical – itself a highly questionable demarcation given its apparent preoccupation with, and intervention into, the field of cultural politics. This separation is more remarkable given the continuities and points of convergence between the work of feminist theorists informed by poststructuralist, postmodern and postcolonial critical discourses (produced by theorists such as Judith Butler, Liz Grosz and Ien Ang) and these ‘popular’ works: the instability of identity, a consciousness of the exclusionary gestures of a totalising hegemonic feminism, an emphasis on the contingencies of meaning, and an acknowledgement that cultural politics represents a key site in the struggle over power.

In each of the following chapters, she tracks the discursive ‘matricide’ (10) undertaken by authors of the third-wave. Through detailed textual analysis, Henry comprehensively demonstrates how all these forms of third-wave writing – pro (hetero)sex, queer and black American – tend to

invoke an impossibly monolithic second-wave that must be disavowed to enable the legitimization of their own contrastingly multifaceted feminist identities and practices. In "Taking Feminism to Bed: The Third Wave Does the Sex Wars," Henry identifies the approach to sexuality as one of the central distinctions between second- and third-waves. Writers of the third-wave considered in this chapter, such as celebrity feminists Rene Denfeld, Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf and the lesser-known Merri Lisa Johnson, invariably conceptualise its predecessor as anti-sex and puritanical. In contrast, feminism's most recent manifestation professes to embrace (hetero)sexuality and thus is credited not with alienating contemporary young women but attracting them. In terms of their sexual practices, these young women are avowedly heterosexual and unashamedly hedonistic; they emphasise in particular the pleasures of penetrative sex, pleasures they suggest the misguided politics of second-wave feminism led women to surrender. Henry demonstrates that such writers construct a straw second-wave against which to define their form of feminism as superior and more sophisticated and liberated, a move reliant upon a problematic teleological notion of feminism's development.

Likewise, in the preceding chapter, "Neither My Mother Nor My Lover: Generational Relations in Queer Feminism," Henry suggests that young queer feminists commonly define themselves against a homogenised "frumpy and unsexy" (and, again, anti-phallic) generation of second-wave feminists (124). Feminism here is seen as a "repressive and intrusive force" (123), impeding the sexual liberty of her self-aware daughters: "Viewing feminism as orthodoxy, oppressor, and stern patroller of behaviour would appear to be a generational thing, not just a straight thing" (123). Henry observes that, by figuring feminism as a puritanical Mother, these writers are commonly trapped in a maternity/sexuality opposition with a lengthy history which is predicated on an "ideologically suspect view of motherhood" (183). For these third-wave queer writers, the lesbian Mother to be rejected is the purportedly asexual lesbian feminist of the second-wave (126); moreover, Henry suggests, young women reject this 'mother' in favour of a politically loaded alliance with queer men and/or men in general. This embrace of the phallus (a term she uses interchangeably with the actual penis) is seen as a way of demonstrating that young lesbians are "not like 'mama'" (137). Her assertion that queer feminism is defined against second-wave feminism through its wholesale endorsement of a pro-phallic sexuality – what she calls the "celebration of penetration" (137) – serves to homogenise queer feminism (and feminists) in a way reminiscent of those writers she most heavily critiques (Wolf, Denfeld, Roiphe), who reduce a diverse second-wave feminism to a wooden caricature. This

chapter, drawing mostly on queer-theory texts, is less convincing regarding a third-wave queer feminism that predominantly manifests in non-academic forms.

In “To Be, Or Not To Be, Real: Black Feminists and the Emerging Third Wave,” the focus shifts to how young black women of the third-wave (Rebecca Walker, Joan Morgan and Shani Jamila) persistently argue that their version of feminism is inclusive of contradictions, tensions, ambiguities and multiplicities in a way that their (literal and symbolic) feminist ‘mothers’ were not. For these writers, rather than being a heterogenous movement, the ‘Mother feminism’ against which they rebel is regulating, puritanical and, most problematically, white. The texts Henry examines consistently invoke the phrases “to be real” or “keeping it real,” the meanings of which themselves inevitably shift. Although this invocation of an authentic/inauthentic feminism binary is unsustainable, it is nonetheless a central rhetorical strategy used in writing by young black feminists. Henry contends that “within the variety of ‘reals’ being used in this writing, a representation of the feminism(s) of the past emerges, one that is clearly not real enough” (159). Like other third-wave writers, therefore, they seek to differentiate their own brand of feminism from a homogenous second-wave. In this chapter, texts rejecting the simplistic certainties of generational logic are also interrogated, and their presence thus complicates the notion of a unified third-wave that marks other points of *Not My Mother’s Sister*.

In the book’s characteristic self-reflexivity, Henry is conscious that even her own critique of the “matrophor” (the use of maternal metaphors in feminist writing) remains trapped in the logic she seeks to disavow (11). With some reservation, in the “Introduction” she confesses to an identification with the third-wave writers she explicitly sets out to critique (15). However, she does not argue that the third-wave is to be valued hierarchically over the second; unlike her generational peers, she seeks to emphasise both the points of continuity and the divergences between these two ‘waves.’ She also astutely criticises the third-wave’s rampant “ideology of individualism” and emphasis on individual choice (44), and its homogenisation of a diverse second-wave. That said, whether the generation of (for?) whom she speaks (itself being quickly superseded by the next) should embrace the characterisation “third-wave” is not sufficiently tackled. For Henry, the signifier “third-wave” adequately describes a new theory, politics and practice being embraced by young women; that is, the third-wave is an empirical phenomenon not simply a textual practice. That said, she is critical of figuring feminism in maternal terms and emphasises the material ramifications of the deployment of generational discourses: “While feminism’s familial language is, in fact, figurative, the metaphors we use to de-

scribe feminism have real effects in the world and in the ways that feminists develop intergenerational relationships and participate in intergenerational dialogue” (182). Henry underscores the exclusions and the political consequences of the persistent mobilisation of mother-daughter tropes within a broadly conceived feminist discourse. Like previous commentators in this area, she argues that positioning differences in mother-daughter terms functions to mask ‘real’ political differences between feminists and she emphasises that this figuring of internal feminist disagreements along generational lines has displaced the feminist focus from “external battles against sexism, racism and homophobia” (183). In this vein, Henry cautiously concludes that feminism needs to refocus its energies: “If feminism is indeed like a family, it would be wise of us not to forget its absent father” (183). Finally, the flaws and attractions (in terms of giving young feminists a readily marketable – if problematic – place from which to speak) inherent in generational logic are both foregrounded throughout *Not My Mother's Sister*, thus producing a critical narrative attentive to the discursive potentialities of the generational frame and its inherent limitations. In doing so, *Not My Mother's Sister* makes an important contribution to an emergent field of scholarship on the rhetorics of both ‘popular’ and academic feminisms.

University of New South Wales
antheataylor@yahoo.com.au