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## *Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor*

Nancy A. Hewitt

IN THE FALL OF 1920, women across the United States, many for the first time, cast ballots in a presidential election. The Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified that August, provided women with a federal guarantee of enfranchisement. This event brought to a triumphant end what scholars and activists would later label the “First Wave of feminism.” On November 2, as women voted either for Republican Warren G. Harding or Democrat James M. Cox, other types of waves were in the air—markers of technological rather than political progress. Radio waves were all the rage in 1920, and November 2 of that year also marked the first commercial broadcast when Pittsburgh station KDKA announced election returns in the presidential contest over a 100-watt transmitter.<sup>1</sup> Art deco buildings and prints endlessly repeated the trope of radio signals, often imagined as a series of expanding rings radiating out from a modernist microphone. However, when women’s liberationists of the 1960s recognized their historical predecessors by defining themselves as “Second Wave feminists,” they were thinking of tides rather than towers, of maritime phenomena rather than Marconi.

While participants in the Second—and now Third—Wave chose these identifying terms, the so-called First Wave was defined only in retrospect. Those of us who joined the Second Wave were eager to discover our foremothers and to this extent we had a historical

consciousness. It was not, however, especially deep as we willingly lumped all of our predecessors, the entire sweep of US women's rights activism from the 1840s to 1920, into a single wave. Moreover, despite the fact that many of us took Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, Sojourner Truth, and other anarchist, socialist, or African American women as role models, we often accepted—and circulated—a tale of First Wave feminism framed by the seemingly more moderate Seneca-Falls-to-suffrage narrative. This narrative opened with the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention of July 1848, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton demanded women's enfranchisement, and ended with ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The story was readily available having been constructed by pioneer suffragists such as Stanton and then updated and revised by Eleanor Flexner in her 1959 study *Century of Struggle*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, most US feminists of the 1960s and 1970s embraced an image of the First Wave as one, long, powerful surge, pounding the beachhead of patriarchal politics and slowly wearing away its most egregious barrier to equality.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, however, with more than three decades of feminist scholarship at our disposal, this definition of the First Wave seems seriously flawed. Yet it is impossible to add more waves before 1960 now that the Second is lodged so securely in American imaginations and publications. In fact, the Library of Congress has now adopted First Wave, Second Wave, and Third Wave as topical categories, entrenching them further in academic and popular discourse.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, new waves are emerging with greater frequency. The Third Wave, which announced its emergence in the United States in the early 1990s, is already being challenged by a Fourth Wave, and the pattern seems set to replicate itself every decade or so.<sup>4</sup> Our best strategy then, to deal with past, present, and future iterations of feminism may be to recast the concept of waves itself in order to recognize the multiple and conflicting elements that comprise particular periods of activism.

Radio waves provide a useful model.<sup>5</sup> Radio frequencies are based on the size of the wave that carries the signal. Early operators used amateur "ham" radios and, later, other short-distance radio technology known as "Citizens' Band" in recognition of the new technology's potential to enhance the civic knowledge and participation of ordinary women and men. Inventors and operators quickly learned

that different frequencies or wavelengths defined the particular range across which one could communicate. Higher frequency short waves work better for transmission over long distances, including transatlantic communication, while lower frequency long waves are more effective for transmission within cities, regions, or states. Transmitters, such as towers, or later, satellites, could extend the range of either type of wave. If we think of feminist movements as composed of both short and long waves, and if we imagine the lecturers, organizers, writers, newspapers, 'zines, rallies, and so on as transmitters, then it is possible to expand significantly the richness and complexity of each phase of feminism. Moreover, this model introduces greater human agency than the oceanic wave model. Oceanic waves loom up as a kind of natural force out of unknown depths. Radio waves certainly build on natural phenomena, but their use involves the intervention of women and men to shape, transmit, and listen to the messages.

Before exploring this model further, however, it is important to note that over the past decade, many scholars have critiqued the existing wave metaphor and suggested that it flattens out the past and creates historical amnesia about the long and complicated trajectory of women's rights and feminist activism. Still, the oceanic wave model remains ubiquitous in US academic publications, public media, and popular understandings.<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when US feminists first identified themselves as part of a Second Wave. One marker of its popular currency appeared in Martha Weinman Lear's article "The Second Feminist Wave," published in the *New York Times Magazine* in March 1968. In it she writes, "proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the great sandbar of Togetherness." Clearly, Lear did not coin the term, but she did disseminate it widely.<sup>7</sup> The wave metaphor has a longer history, however. It was wielded, for instance, by Irish activist Frances Power Cobbe in 1884, in an essay about contemporary social movements. Cobbe claimed that some "resemble the tides of the Ocean, where each wave obeys one uniform impetus, and carries the waters onward and upward along the shore." Women's movements, she argued, were the best example of such waves: "Like the incoming tide ... it has rolled in separate waves ... and has done its part in carrying forward all the rest."<sup>8</sup> Such

imagery was widely embraced—usually unselfconsciously—by feminists in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. The resulting narrative of feminist waves shaped understandings of the movement among activists, journalists, and academics. When younger activists constituted themselves as a Third Wave, they accepted the metaphor, if not the *modus operandi*, of their foremothers.

Yet the propagation of new waves was not simply a means to recognize distinct eruptions of activism across time. Feminists in each wave viewed themselves as improving upon, not just building on, the wave(s) that preceded them. Thus even as advocates of women's liberation in the 1960s and 1970s eagerly sought out foremothers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we frequently insisted that we were broader in our vision, more international in our concerns, and more progressive in our sensitivities to race, class, and sexual politics than earlier activists. Indeed while celebrating individual foremothers who represented racial, class, and ideological diversity, most Second Wave feminists came to identify the First Wave as comprised largely of white, middle-class women focused on achieving narrowly defined political goals, most notably suffrage. In contrast, they claimed the Second Wave as more inclusive and more transformative. Similarly, when a Third Wave emerged, its advocates recognized the advances made by their (more immediate) foremothers, but insisted that the overarching goals and assumptions of these Second Wave feminists were still limited. Thus, spokeswomen for this wave, too, proclaimed themselves broader in their vision, more global in their concerns, and more progressive in their sensitivities to transnational, multiracial, and sexual politics. In most Third Wave writings, the Second Wave appears as largely white and middle-class, focused narrowly on issues of equality and access, while the new generation champions greater inclusivity and more transformative strategies.

Battles over feminist legacies have influenced popular as well as scholarly understandings. Feminist claims about earlier generations have been incorporated into books and articles in many disciplines, as well as in newspaper and magazine stories, museum exhibits, political rhetoric, and documentary films. In the process, images of each wave have become circumscribed. Thus, even in positive portrayals—like Ken Burns's documentary *Not for Ourselves Alone*—the First Wave is almost always limited to the period between the Seneca Falls

Woman's Rights Convention of 1848 and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 with the battle for women's suffrage considered its primary (sometimes its sole) focus. It is also largely a national story despite nods to similar movements elsewhere in the world.

This version of the First Wave echoes the portrait drawn by two of its most historically minded advocates: Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The six-volume *History of Woman Suffrage* they launched in the 1880s with Matilda Joselyn Gage ensured the centrality of voting rights and national citizenship in future renditions of this particular feminist moment. Although scholars now recognize Stanton and Anthony's historical effort as deeply political, their version still dominates textbooks, synthetic works, and documentary films.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the story told in the *History of Woman Suffrage* is driven by the work of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), headed by Stanton and Anthony, with far less attention paid to rival organizations. The American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), for instance, disagreed with the NWSA on a number of crucial issues. The AWSA supported black male enfranchisement in the 1860s, argued for female political rights on the basis of women's moral superiority, and advocated state-by-state rather than federal efforts to gain voting rights, all approaches initially opposed by the NWSA. In addition, although African American allies of Stanton and Anthony were featured in their volumes, black women's independent suffrage organizations were barely acknowledged.<sup>10</sup>

Still, despite the continued power of the story related in *History of Woman Suffrage*, it—along with the autobiographies, speeches, and correspondence of Stanton, Alice Paul, and several other white suffrage leaders—has fueled a second and more critical portrait of the First Wave. This second narrative focuses on suffragists' efforts to limit rights to white, educated women. It has led to broader claims that the movement was not only narrow in its goals but also racist and elitist in its vision. In this version, the few women of color who advocated women's rights, most notably Sojourner Truth, were heroic but unable to overcome the prejudices of their white counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, scholars who work on particular time periods offer complicated and compelling stories filled with diverse characters and contentious struggles.<sup>12</sup> But these richer stories get lost in most synthetic versions, whether offered by academics, journalists, or activists.

Even the most thoughtful historical syntheses of the Second Wave generally attenuate the legacy of earlier women's rights campaigns as they highlight what was distinct—and distinctly radical—about the 1960s and 1970s. The authors of these studies were often active in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s and then carved out careers in academia. Sara Evans, one such activist-turned-scholar, has written widely on women's activism in the United States, including the efforts of black, white, and immigrant women. She regularly notes the diversity and contestation among nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers, including suffragists and feminists. Still, she begins her popular 2003 synthesis on recent feminism, *Tidal Wave*, by stating:

The “first wave” of women's rights activism in the United States built slowly from its beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century, finally cresting in 1920 with the passage of the [N]ineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing women the most fundamental right of citizenship, the vote. It swelled slowly and steadily, riding this single, symbolic issue. By contrast, a “second wave” . . . in the last half of the century arose almost instantly in a fast-moving and unruly storm, massive from the very outset.<sup>13</sup>

Thus individuals who only read this version of Evans's work will continue to think of the First Wave as narrowly focused on suffrage.

More problematic, however, are works that combine a narrow vision of early women's rights and feminist activism with unexamined assumptions about its racist and elitist character. Although numerous scholars have explored racism, ethnocentrism, and class prejudices among women's rights pioneers as well as twentieth-century feminists, most also recognize that such views were contested by more progressive-minded peers. This sense of contestation is easily lost, however. Thus in the foreword to Ella Shohat's powerful anthology *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, Marcia Tucker, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, claims,

There was a time, not very long ago, when the terms “feminism” and “race,” no matter how or by whom they were defined, belonged to separate worlds; only rarely could one hear a call echoing across the infinite chasm of difference. . . . The first [sic] wave of feminism in America, in the late 1960s, seemed blind to all categories other than “male” and “female.”<sup>14</sup>

In a book devoted to the multivocal, multicultural, interdisciplinary, and transnational character of contemporary feminism, Tucker's foreword eradicates in one paragraph the deep historical roots of debates around gender, race, and feminism that informed both earlier movements and histories of them.<sup>15</sup>

Activists who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s often embraced such circumscribed versions of earlier movements. Many took women's history or women's studies courses in college; some majored in the field. A few, like Rebecca Walker, were the daughters of well-known 1960s activists, writers, and/or academics. They thus had a better chance of knowing the history of feminism in some detail than did those who embraced women's liberation in a previous generation, before women's studies had been invented. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, introductions to Third Wave anthologies often focus explicitly on setting younger feminists apart from their predecessors.

In the 2004 collection *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*, editors Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin initially take a different tack. They claim, "One of the luxuries that our generation has enjoyed is that we've reaped the benefits of all the social justice movements that have come before us." And they note, "Our feminism has *roots* in past feminist work."<sup>16</sup> Yet when they turn to more detailed discussions of that "past work," the roots hardly seem worth watering. The Second Wave, they argue, "placed a select few issues at the center of what is thought of as feminist activism, neglecting the full range of experiences that inform women's lives." Its "inattentiveness to racial, cultural, sexual, and national differences" made clear "that a feminist movement cannot succeed if it does not challenge power structures of wealth and race." Thus, Labaton and Martin conclude, "unlike second wave feminism, which operated from a monolithic center, [the] multiplicity [of the third wave] offers the power of existing insidiously and simultaneously everywhere."<sup>17</sup> Sara Evan's massive "unruly storm" has seemingly been replaced by Marcia Tucker's account of a single-minded focus on "male" and "female."

Evans, Tucker, Labaton, and Martin are not setting out to denigrate earlier feminist movements, nor are they especially egregious in their critiques. Rather they are describing versions of those movements that are readily available, thereby reminding us how ubiquitous such characterizations have become. The fundamental trope



of US American feminist history seems to be that each wave overwhelms and exceeds the preceding wave, and this trope lends itself all too easily to Whiggish interpretations of ever-more radical, all-encompassing, and ideologically sophisticated movements. Too often, activists highlight their distinctiveness from—and superiority to—earlier feminist movements in the very process of constituting themselves as the next wave. The very nature of oceanic waves reinforces this sense that one wave of feminism peters out and another, larger one replaces it.

Several important dimensions of feminist activism are lost in these narratives. First, the chronology of women's rights and feminist activism in the United States is generally framed as discrete and separate episodes even though such movements actually overlapped and intertwined. The decades excluded from the waves—before 1848 or from 1920 to 1960—are too often assumed to be feminist-free zones, an assumption belied by recent scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Second, the issues that define the feminist agenda are often circumscribed as well. Racial justice, labor rights, divorce, religious authority, domestic abuse, the plight of prostitutes, sexual freedom, and international politics all attracted the attention of women activists in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, yet suffrage remains the centerpiece of most references to the First Wave. Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s, campaigns for welfare rights and other economic justice issues occurred alongside and in collaboration with more familiar feminist campaigns for educational and occupational access, abortion, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Similarly, working-class women and women of color played central roles in defining and challenging sexual harassment and other forms of workplace discrimination that are too often framed as white, middle-class concerns.<sup>19</sup> And battles over free love and prostitution that erupted in the nineteenth century were joined by battles for reproductive rights and lesbian rights in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.<sup>20</sup> In addition, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, US feminists were influenced by and worked with activists in other parts of the world—Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century and, in addition, Latin America, Africa, and South and East Asia in the mid- to late-twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

Third, when the commonality of struggles facing US feminists — taking on the interplay of race and class with sex discrimination, for instance; or the connections between US feminism and global campaigns for social justice; or the role of sexuality in women's rights campaigns — are ignored, the feminist learning curve is severely fore-shortened. Campaigns to nurture connections with female abolitionists and radical women in Europe in the 1830s and 1840s, for example, resonate — in their successes and their shortcomings — with attempts to build international alliances with suffragists and pacifists at the turn of the twentieth century or to create bonds between white US women and their “sisters” in Third World liberation movements in the 1970s. Feminists currently involved in global campaigns against sweatshops, the traffic in women, and the World Trade Organization echo these historic movements even as participants develop their own distinct strategies, agendas, and technologies. The failure to recognize earlier efforts narrows the ground on which new programs, tactics, and coalitions are built. Alternately, it nurtures, in Joan Scott's apt phrase, a “fantasy echo” that allows activists to create a version of past movements rooted more in imagination and desire than historical evidence.<sup>22</sup>

Still, it is easy to see how younger generations of activists come to their perspectives on earlier movements. For example, despite the wide range of women who participated in feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s, most scholarly studies of the so-called Second Wave published in the United States have been organized around competing factions of liberal, socialist, and radical feminists, which are presented as largely white and either middle-class or classless. At the same time, some studies that incorporate the activities of African American, Chicana, Asian American, American Indian, working-class, and lesbian feminists present these efforts primarily as reactions to a straight, white, middle-class movement. Meanwhile, studies that focus specifically on black or Chicana feminism often treat these movements as isolated from or parallel to rather than in conversation with predominantly white or “mainstream” feminism. Although scholars are now seeking to integrate diverse actors and issues into a more multifaceted version of this era of feminism, nearly all of us still use descriptors — black, Chicana, Red, Asian American, labor,

or lesbian—to describe participants, organizations, or theoretical interventions that are not white and middle class.

Despite claims to greater sophistication and sensitivity, Third Wave activists confront many of the same difficulties as their predecessors in mobilizing diverse constituencies around common goals. Thus Third Wave scholars and activists often write about, even as they lament, racially distinct segments of contemporary feminist movements—the predominately white Riot Grrrls, for instance, versus Black hip-hop feminists.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, scholars analyzing contemporary movements have explored the specific relations between earlier and more recent evocations of feminism in Hispanic/Chicana and African American communities, alternately highlighting disjunctions and continuities in their visions, strategies, and goals.<sup>24</sup>

Of course scholars in many disciplines have challenged narratives that circumscribe US feminist movements by offering rich and detailed portraits of particular activists, ideologies, communities, and campaigns. They have, for example, examined demands for suffrage that preceded the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention of 1848; debates over sexuality and free love; African American women's battles to gain rights in churches, fraternal orders, and other public arenas; suffrage in the context of US imperialism; and struggles for economic justice among a range of working-class and immigrant women.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, a number of historians have demonstrated that the decades between 1920 and 1960 were filled with efforts to claim women's equality, sexual rights, and social justice on a wide range of fronts.<sup>26</sup> And studies of the 1960s to 1980s continue to flourish, with many offering complex narratives that trace multiple origin stories, influences, campaigns, and participants.<sup>27</sup> Finally, studies by a few scholars who identify as Third Wave seek to link the most recent feminist activism to earlier generations and agendas.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, in recent years conference panels, review essays, and special issues of journals, including *Feminist Studies* and *Feminist Formations*, have complicated particular waves or contested the wave model itself.<sup>29</sup> The online journal *Third Space* has also included discussions and critiques of waves; and a number of anthologies have addressed these issues as well, including Jo Reger's *Different Wavelengths*, Stephanie Gilmore's *Feminist Coalitions*, and my own *No Permanent Waves*.<sup>30</sup>

Yet despite this burgeoning body of scholarship, the more conventional wave model of feminism continues to thrive in academic and popular discourse. Since it seems impossible to dislodge the metaphor, it is crucial that we consider types of waves that offer new conceptualizations of the feminist past. And thus we return to radio waves.

My thinking about radio waves first emerged in the late 1990s out of conversations with historian Steven Lawson, who was developing the concept of “radio neighborhoods” as a way to think about activist networks in the civil rights era.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Ednie Kaeh Garrison submitted an article to *Feminist Studies* on Riot Grrrls, youth subcultures, and new technologies (published in 2000), in which she mentions in passing that radio waves might be one possible way to rethink feminist periodization. I offered my own early version of the radio waves trope at the Organization of American Historians annual meeting in 2002, and Garrison expanded on her ideas in Reger’s *Different Wavelengths* in 2005. As Garrison notes, in recognizing that “language has the power to shape consciousness,” we are seeking “a wave metaphor that registers different, multiple and simultaneous ... frequencies.”<sup>32</sup> But while Garrison focuses on the importance of this metaphorical shift specifically for the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, I consider it equally significant for illuminating multiple and conflicting strains of feminisms across the terrain of US history.

Radio waves not only help us think about how competing versions of feminism coexist in the same time period, but they also continue to resonate even in moments of seeming quiescence. In addition, radio waves recognize explicit hierarchies of power (through wattage, volume, and geographical reach) that are crucial to understanding the dynamic interplay of feminists within a specific period and across time. Thus radio waves encourage us to tune into more varied feminist frequencies and to pay attention at the same time to differential access and to static, jamming, and other disruptions.<sup>33</sup>

Overall then, radio waves allow us to think about movements in terms of different lengths and frequencies that occur simultaneously; movements that grow louder or fade out, reach vast audiences across oceans or only a few listeners in a local area; movements that are marked by static interruptions or frequent changes of channels; and movements that are temporarily drowned out by another

frequency, but then suddenly come in loud and clear. Rather than members of the First, Second, or Third Wave, people can tune into or become broadcasters for the National Public Radio of feminism, the Corporate Broadcasting System, or the community radio station; and we can switch stations as well. Radio waves remind us that feminist ideas are often “in the air” even when people are not actively listening. Some ideas or approaches may dissipate with time, others can gain new life as circumstances change, and still others may be tuned out by one group of activists but gain the ear of others. Radio broadcasts can also be purposely jammed or inaccessible beyond a small area, limiting the audience for particular feminist messages. Finally, radio waves offer an important way to think about the circulation of feminist ideas and networks within and across generations since they do not supersede each other. Rather signals coexist, overlap, and intersect.

Radios and radio waves have played critical roles in a variety of social and revolutionary movements in the twentieth century, in the United States and beyond. Similar to computers, text messaging, and iPhones in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and other contemporary political actions, radios served to connect activists and residents across cities and regions in the mid to late-twentieth century. Studies of the Hungarian Revolution, the US civil rights movement, and protests against female genital mutilation all recognize radio transmissions as exerting a crucial influence.<sup>34</sup> While these studies focus on the literal use of radio waves to disseminate information to activists and their potential supporters, I want to highlight their metaphorical power by offering a brief example of how the model might work in illuminating and complicating the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement.

This example focuses on one of the “short waves” within a large and diverse nineteenth-century movement. The activists who comprised this wave came from white Quaker and free black communities and resided mainly in western and central New York state and eastern Pennsylvania.<sup>35</sup> But their network also included individuals from New England and the Midwest and reached out to allies in Britain, Canada, and Europe. This wave, which included Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, Abby Kelley, William C. Nell, Sojourner Truth, and Amy Post, among others, was high frequency: that is, it reached

across vast distances, socially and geographically, and its members were involved in multiple movements and organizations. The efforts of this particular circle of “short wave feminists”<sup>36</sup> were concentrated in the period from the 1820s to the 1870s. They advocated universal principles of human rights, and they considered class, race, and nationality inextricably intertwined with gender. In many ways, this US-based “short wave” resonated with and echoed a network of radical activists that had emerged in France in the 1830s. Calling themselves Saint-Simonians, they also combined spirituality, economic rights, and republican political ideals to demand gender and class equality and individual emancipation.<sup>37</sup>

Existing on the same bandwidth but at a different frequency with these “short wave” movements was the “long wave” campaign for women’s suffrage, which stretched in the United States from the 1840s to the 1920s and focused explicitly on political rights within the nation-state.<sup>38</sup> And there were other feminist networks in this period whose members organized campaigns around sexual emancipation, economic rights, religious authority, and other issues.<sup>39</sup> The so-called First Wave thus included a range of frequencies within a particular time period, frequencies that sometimes overlapped, but could also be as distinct from each other as they were from later eruptions of feminism.

In the “short wave” that is the focus of this example, white Quaker and free black participants worked together regularly — such as Frederick Douglass and Amy Post, who joined forces in a variety of campaigns. Others met less frequently, perhaps attending the same conventions and corresponding with each other periodically. Still others never met in person but shared a broad constellation of ideas and influences and read the same reform papers and pamphlets. Together they formed the equivalent of what Steven Lawson has called a “radio neighborhood.” He defines a radio neighborhood as “a community of listeners tuned into a station or program from which they derive shared meaning and a sense of identity and engagement.”<sup>40</sup> This neighborhood might be as broad as all of those who listen to National Public Radio or Rush Limbaugh or as narrow as those tuned into a local station during a specific historical moment — such as WENN in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights battles of the 1960s — or a particular show, such as Garrison Keillor’s “Prairie Home Companion.”

Of course, mid-nineteenth-century feminists were tuned into their own frequency. They forged a community by listening to the voices of the oppressed, identifying with them, and engaging in a variety of activities to promote emancipation and justice. This “neighborhood” included free blacks and fugitive slaves as well as radical white Quakers and a few black Quakers, disowned evangelicals, and freethinkers. Nearly all considered themselves “universalists,” believing that “all these subjects of reform are kindred in their nature.” In defense of such multifaceted efforts, Lucretia Mott argued that activists “will not love the slave less, in loving universal humanity more.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, they argued, activism on behalf of one cause furthered the advancement of others. Thus in 1845 the Reverend Samuel J. May authored a “Sermon on the Rights of Women,” which he sent to Amy Post to sell at an antislavery fundraising fair. And participants at that fair were then called upon to join a protest against the US war with Mexico.<sup>42</sup> It was this multi-issue approach, forging connections among diverse causes across different regions of the country that defines this group as a short wave phenomenon.

Indeed, this coterie of short wave feminists was internationalist in scope. Some, such as Mathilde Anneke, immigrated to the United States and continued their activist work here after the failed revolutions in Europe in the 1840s. Others, such as Frederick Douglass, traveled widely and formed personal connections with activists in Britain, Europe and Canada. Douglass in particular connected his political views to the Scottish enlightenment and visited Glasgow in 1846 and 1860, challenging not only the city’s slave traders but also the leaders of the Free Church of Scotland, who he argued should refuse to worship with those who owned or traded in slaves. Other activists, such as Amy Post and Sojourner Truth, never left North America, but embraced issues and causes that reached from the United States to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, Great Britain, continental Europe, and beyond. They eagerly (if often anxiously) awaited news of the US war in Mexico and British activities in Afghanistan, the famine in Ireland, revolutions in Europe, and emancipation celebrations in the French West Indies. They then linked these developments to domestic campaigns against slavery, racism, colonialism, and class exploitation and for American Indian sovereignty, religious freedom, and

women's rights. In 1850 a meeting of the Friends of Human Progress attracted radical Quakers, black activists, and freethinkers from this circle. Participants drafted "An Address to Women" that drew examples of female oppression and achievement from throughout the world. Although some were rooted in Orientalist stereotypes and others indicated more cultural sensitivity, the report concluded, "when we speak of the Rights of Women, we speak of Human Rights."<sup>43</sup>

The participants in this short wave attended to a variety of voices, some of them carried on waves that had originated decades earlier. In their speeches, conversations, newspaper articles, and personal letters, participants referred to Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright, George Combe, Harriet Tubman, Louis Kossuth, and dozens of other activists and thinkers prominent in Europe and the United States. Frederick Douglass was a central figure in this short wave, and his newspaper, the *North Star*, one of its critical nodes of communication. Other free and fugitive blacks also participated in the network as did agrarian radicals, spiritualists, utopian communalists, and free lovers. Some working-class women listened in as well and then joined the conversations. So, too, did former Saint-Simonians such as Jeanne Deroin. Imprisoned for her part in the French uprising of 1848, she and sister activist and inmate Pauline Roland wrote a letter to the "Convention of American Women" in June 1851. Linking their efforts to those of women's rights advocates in the United States, they urged their transatlantic sisters to continue the struggle for "the Kingdom of Equality and Justice ... on Earth" by breaking the chains of the patriarch, the church, the throne, and the scaffold, as well as the slave, the worker, and the woman.<sup>44</sup> Their letter reinforced the claims of émigrés Ernestine Rose and Mathilde Anneke that the struggle for women's and human rights was transatlantic in its dimensions.

Through the circulation of print materials and the correspondence and travels of orators and individual activists, distinct issues and events became part of the conversation in cities and towns throughout the northern United States. Ideas and tactics were transmitted from community to community by reform newspapers, conference proceedings, testimonies of the Friends of Human Progress, itinerant radicals such as Abby Kelley, refugees from slavery such as Sojourner Truth, and exiles from Europe such as Mathilda Anneke. Centered in activist communities in Philadelphia and Chester in



Pennsylvania; Waterloo, Syracuse, and Rochester in New York; Battle Creek, Michigan; and Salem, Ohio, this network of black and white women and men joined forces to promote religious freedom, economic democracy, the eradication of slavery, and the rights of Indians, prisoners, workers, and women in the United States and beyond its borders.

The interweaving of local, national, and international issues was made clear in Rochester, New York, in the summer of 1848. City residents organized a massive Emancipation Day celebration on August 1, 1848, honoring the abolition of slavery in the British and the French West Indies. Held two weeks after the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention, the emancipation celebration also served as the prelude to the Rochester Woman's Rights Convention of August 2. The speeches offered by African American orators Frederick Douglass and William C. Nell as well as by local seamstresses were considered fitting extensions of concerns raised by radical activists who sought to transform class and race relations in Europe and its colonies. The immediacy of such events was captured a few months earlier by Douglass in the April 28 issue of the *North Star*: "Thanks to steam navigation and electric wires, we can almost hear the words uttered, and see the deeds done as they transpire. A revolution now cannot be confined to the place or the people where it may commence, but flashes with lightening speed from heart to heart, from land to land, until it has traversed the globe."<sup>45</sup> The short wave radio was already here, at least for this circle of activists.

Indeed, in this particular short wave, some activists believed that they were receiving transmissions not only from throughout the United States and Europe but also from the spirits. Spiritualists used the language of electricity and telegraphy, combining radical religious faith with scientific currents and both with political goals. Sojourner Truth, Amy Post, and many of their coworkers saw in spiritualism a means of reaching beyond conventional barriers to help create peace and justice on earth. In the 1870s, some of these activists formed new organizations, such as the National Liberal League, in an effort to stave off the increasingly reactionary thrust of US politics.<sup>46</sup> Still, the signal faded as these feminists aged and as a growing cohort of women's rights advocates insisted that a singular focus on suffrage was necessary to achieve success.

Yet if we imagine the history of feminism as a series of radio waves, we can incorporate this short wave into the more traditional suffrage narrative, and thereby highlight a mid-nineteenth-century frequency that was international, interracial, mixed sex, and concerned with material, moral, and spiritual advancement. In broadcasting this history, we can offer a long-forgotten but critical legacy for modern feminists by making clear that nativist, racist, and elitist rationales for white women's advancement did not go unchallenged, and that connections among women's rights, racial justice, and economic welfare in the United States and beyond have been part of feminist movements for generations.

Although this short wave faded in the post-Civil War era, its echo can be heard among some feminists at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as in the 1960s and 1970s, and in contemporary transnational movements for social justice and human rights. Clearly it is a frequency that has resonated within circles of feminists in every era, even though the high wattage of the suffrage movement threatened to drown it out and oceanic waves threatened to bury it at sea.

The point, however, is not simply to retrieve one particular frequency within the larger history of women's rights and feminism. Rather, recasting the wave metaphor allows scholars and activists to tune in to moments and movements that have competed for listeners in the past and the present. Such explorations will open up channels through which we can trace signals and echoes from one century to the next while recognizing the static that erupts in any feminist moment. And a richer sense of the past may help us grapple with the issues, however distinct in their particular form, that confront all feminist movements. Hopefully, this approach will help us hear contending voices over the crashing of the proverbial waves.

## NOTES

Thanks to Claire Moses, Judith Wellman, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Martha Jones, Darlene Clark Hine, and Anne Valk for conversations over many years about the issues raised in this article. Thanks as well for the provocative ideas and suggestions of the participants in the *Feminist Studies* "35 Years of Feminist Scholarship" conference.

1. Erik Barnouw, *Mass Communication: Television, Radio, Film, Press* (New York: Rinehart, 1956), 30.

2. See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897* (1898: repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 147–50; and Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), which remains one of the most important and richly detailed studies of this movement.
3. Thanks to Nancy Cott for first alerting me to this development. Thus, my edited collection, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), which is intended to challenge the oceanic wave metaphor, is categorized by the Library of Congress under the following headings: “1. Feminism—United States—History. 2. First Wave Feminism—United States. 3. Second Wave Feminism—United States. 4. Third Wave Feminism—United States.”
4. Although the Third Wave has many origins, one touchstone to its appearance is the article “Becoming the Third Wave” by Rebecca Walker, published in *Ms. magazine* in January 1992.
5. My interest in thinking about radio waves and feminism has been reinforced by exciting new work on women, artistic creativity, and sound. See especially, Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
6. The wave model is far less popular in Europe, Latin America, South Asia, and other parts of the world than in the United States. In France and England, as well as in other western European countries, scholars who use wave imagery are more likely to focus on only two waves, the first at the moment of female enfranchisement and the second from the 1960s on. See Karen Offen's introduction to *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945*, ed. Karen Offen (London: Routledge, 2010), xxix. On recent critiques of the oceanic wave model, see, for instance, Dorothy Sue Cobble's introduction to her *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), and notes 16 and 17, pp. 1–10, 233.
7. Martha Weinman Lear, “The Second Feminist Wave,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 1968, 24.
8. Frances Power Cobbe's introduction in Theodore Stanton, *The Woman Question in Europe* (1884; repr., Chicago: Source Books Press, 1970). Thanks to Karen Offen for this reference.
9. See Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881, 1886, 1902, and 1922); and *Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, directed by Ken Burns (PBS Home Video, 1999).
10. For critical perspectives on Anthony et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, see Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 179–91; Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, eds., *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) xviii, xix; and Nancy Isenberg,

- Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 2.
11. For more nuanced analyses of Sojourner Truth and other black woman's rights advocates, see Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Martha S. Jones, “All Bound Up Together”: *The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
  12. To note just a few model studies that focus on specific time periods and/or issues, see Jones, *All Bound Up Together*; Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Carrie N. Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Anne Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, DC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.
  13. Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 1. For other examples of synthetic studies of feminism by former activists, see Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, rev.ed. (2000; repr., New York: Viking, 2006); Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002); and Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise, 1792 to the Present* (New York: Modern Library, 2010).
  14. Marcia Tucker, “Foreword,” in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998): xi. Tucker also uses the term “first wave” to refer to the movements of the 1960s, suggesting a particularly truncated historical understanding of feminism.
  15. For more nuanced analyses of race in women's rights and feminist movements before the 1990s, see, for example, Jones, *All Bound Up Together*; Terborg-Penn, *African American Women*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Louise Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Allison L. Sneider, *Suffragists in an Imperial Age: US Expansion and the Woman Question, 1870–1929* (New York: Oxford

- University Press, 2008); and Wini Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
16. Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin, *The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), xxv, xxvii.
  17. *Ibid.*, xxviii, xxix, xxxi.
  18. See, for example, Lori Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*; and Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.
  19. See, for example, Baker, *The Women's Movement*; and Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
  20. See, for example, Joanne Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Stephanie Gilmore, "Strange Bedfellows: Building Feminist Coalitions around Sex Work in the 1970s," in Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*, 246–72.
  21. See for example, Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart, *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship*; Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jacqueline Castledine, "Gender, Jazz, and Justice in Cold War Freedom Movements," in Danielle L. McGuire and John Dittmer, eds., *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 223–45; Freedman, *No Turning Back*; and Judy Wu, "Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Peace Activism and Women's Orientalism," in Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*, 193–220.
  22. Joan W. Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (Winter 2001): 284–304.
  23. For analyses of this problem, see Leela Fernandes, "Unsettling 'Third Wave Feminism': Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect," and Whitney Peoples, "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second Wave Feminism and Hip-Hop Feminism," both in Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*, 98–118 and 403–430; and Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "US Feminism—Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave" *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2000).
  24. See Marisela R. Chávez, "'We Have a Long, Beautiful History': Chicana Feminist Trajectories and Legacies," Ula Y. Taylor, "Black Feminisms and Human Agency," and Peoples, "'Under Construction,'" in Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*,

- 77–97, 61–76, and 403–30; and Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminisms?” *Signs* 27 (2002):1059–82, and responses, 1083–94.
25. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins*; Passet, *Sex Radicals*; Jones, *All Bound Up Together*; and Sneider, *Suffragists in an Imperial Age*; and most recently, Lisa G. Masterson, *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877–1932* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
  26. Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*; Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*; Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
  27. Among the many important recent studies on the 1960s–1980s, see Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Baker, *The Women's Movement*; Valk, *Radical Sisters*; Enke, *Finding the Movement*; and Nancy MacLean, *The American Women's Movement, 1945–2000: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2009). See also the articles on this period in Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions* and Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.
  28. See Peoples, “Under Construction,” and Elizabeth Allen, “First Wave Wisdom for a Third Wave World,” in the online journal *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 8 (Summer 2008) at <http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal.htm> (accessed February 23, 2008).
  29. *Feminist Studies* 28 (Summer 2002) issue on Second Wave Feminism in the United States; Kathleen A. Laughlin et al., “Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor,” *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (Summer 2010): pp. 76–135.
  30. See *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 8, no. 1 (Summer 2008), <http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/issue/view/8-1> (accessed February 23, 2008); Jo Reger, ed., *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions*; and Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.
  31. A similar idea, without the concept of radio neighborhoods, is offered by Derek W. Vaillant, “Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago, 1921–1935,” *American Quarterly* 54 (March 2002): 25–66.
  32. Garrison, “US Feminism”; Nancy A. Hewitt, “Rewaving Women's Rights,” paper presented at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, April 11–14, 2002; Ednie Kaeh Garrison, “Are We on a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios, and Third Wave Feminism,” in Reger, *Different Wavelengths*, 239.
  33. Thanks to Judith Stacey and Martha Vicinus for raising issues related to the jamming and disruption of radio waves.

34. See, for example, Mark Pittaway, "Education of Dissent: The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951–1956," *Cold War History* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2002); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and *Moolaadé*, directed by Ousmane Sembene (Senegal: Ciné-Sud Promotion et al., 2004).
35. Free blacks in this movement included both those who had been born free and those who had escaped slavery in the South and resettled in the North. I first analyzed this circle of activists in *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1872* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), and this circle also plays a significant role in Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). It is also being explored through public history and historic preservation programs initiated by Historical New York, an organization directed by Judith Wellman.
36. I use the term "feminist" explicitly here to distinguish this group of activists from those who focused more directly on women's legal, civil, and political rights. I find Nancy Cott's distinction between women's rights and feminism especially useful here and relevant to this earlier period, before the term "feminist" had been coined. See Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 3–5.
37. For more on the Saint-Simonians, see Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); and Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 97–100.
38. I use the 1920s here rather than 1920 in recognition of new work that highlights the ways in which the campaign for US women's enfranchisement extended beyond the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. See Sneider, *Suffragists in an Imperial Age*; and Nancy A. Hewitt, "From Seneca Falls to Suffrage? Re-imagining a 'Master' Narrative in U.S. Women's History," in Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*, 15–38.
39. See, for example, Passet, *Sex Radicals*; Jones, *All Bound Up Together*; and Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
40. Conversation with Steven Lawson, March 15, 2002, Metuchen, New Jersey.
41. Lucretia Mott, Letter, *Liberator* (Boston-based abolitionist newspaper, published by William Lloyd Garrison, 1831–1865), October 6, 1848.
42. On interconnections domestically and internationally among the various campaigns supported by this group of activists, see Nancy A. Hewitt, "'Seeking a Larger Liberty': Remapping First Wave Feminism," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery*, ed. Sklar and Brewer, 266–78.
43. *Proceedings of the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, Held at Waterloo, N. Y., from the 3d to the 5th of Sixth Month, Inclusive, 1850, with an Appendix*, (Auburn, NY: Henry Oliphant, 1850), 14.

44. Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland, "Letter to the Convention of the Women of America," June 15, 1851, published in English in Anthony, Stanton, and Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 1: 234–37. The letter was read to participants at the National Woman's Rights Convention in Syracuse, New York, in 1852 and published in English in *The Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention, Held at Syracuse, September 8th, 9th, and 10th, 1852* (Syracuse, NY: J. E. Masters, 1852), 32–35.
45. Frederick Douglass writing in the *North Star*, April 28, 1848.
46. Hewitt, "Seeking a Larger Liberty."