CHAPTER 5

Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong

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The Second Wave wasn’t funny. There was no humor. It was an earlier stage of feminism. We were breaking barriers. It was so new. I actually think that there’s going to be a much more profound feminist movement. I think it’s going to be very different—very mystical and not fearing the feminine. [It won’t be] repressing but really inviting the feminine.

—Eve Ensler, author of The Vagina Monologues

For the last decade, young girls in the United States have been told by the advocacy organization Girls, Inc., to be “Strong, smart and bold.” Meanwhile, sneaker giant Nike’s memorable ad campaign tells girls and women to “Just do it.” And most girls raised in the wake of the 1976 bestseller Free to Be... You and Me were told by parents and teachers, “You can be whatever you want.” These sound bites challenged girls to rise to their potential—which girls certainly did, as witnessed by how many of them play sports and say they want to be president when they grow up. But it also left them confused. Confused because these messages boiled down to integrating themselves into a male world and proving they could do masculine things. We argue that it is a progression of feminism that younger “third-wave” women (and men) are embracing gniliness as well as power.

In part, these slogans were responding to second-wave feminists, who presumed that girls needed a self-esteem boost. The second-wave femi-
nists based their presumption on their memory of what it was like to be a girl in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In marked contrast to today’s girls, these girls of yesteryear were protected rather than challenged, and restricted rather than encouraged. The world in which they grew up deprived them of access to male things and enforced their participation in female things. This left them to assume, and thus promote, the notion that to be a “good girl” you had to master “boy things.” That girls should do this while rejecting femininity. Go to work, play sports, be tough, but don’t do it while wearing nail polish, pink uniforms, or crying. Prizing work, sports, and strength are good and essential messages for girls—we need to have access to what is characterized as boy stuff—but as feminists we have to address the other half of this message: What does it mean to be a girl today? And, more narrowly, what message are we sending to girls and boys about the value of femininity?

Before we can answer that question, though, we have to ask, How are we defining “girl”? Do we mean those preadolescents who are climbing trees and playing with Barbie? Or do we mean those grown women on Sex in the City who in their independence, their bonds with female friends, and their love of feminine fashion invoke a sense of eternal girlhood? We mean both. Further, as we will discuss later, both challenge second-wave feminists in ways that have distorted feminist theory (or just feminist received wisdom) on the topic of girls and giriles. There is a jealousy when it comes to the lives of young girls because they are so radically different from what older women experienced. Meanwhile, the vampirizing that goes on among the Carrie Bradshaws and Bridget Joneses in popular culture and the real women who call themselves “girl” is threatening because female power still gets translated as how well we can attract men. It isn’t a specific constituency that we need to address, but the essence of what it means to be a girl—or girile or girile—not the person possessing it.

As we wrote in our book Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future (2000), what we are calling “girile” is this intersection of femininity with feminine culture. “Girile” says we’re not broken, that our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girile encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for ‘we’ve been duped.’ Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues. Also, what we loved as girls was good and, because of feminism, we know how to make girl stuff work for us. Our Barbies had jobs and sex lives and complicated relationships with friends and family. Sticker collections were no more trivial than stamp collections; both pursuits cultivated the connoisseur in a young person.

“While it’s true that embracing the pink things of stereotypical girlhood isn’t a radical gesture meant to overturn the way society is structured, it can be a confident gesture. When young women wearing ‘Girls Rule’ T-shirts and carrying ‘Hello Kitty’ lunch boxes dust off the Le Sportsacs from junior high and fill them with black lipstick and green nail polish, it is not a totem to an infantilized culture but a nod to our joyous youth. Young women are emphasizing our real personal lives in contrast to what some feminist foremothers anticipated their lives would—or should—be: that the way to equality was to reject Barbie and all forms of pink-packaged femininity. In holding tight to that which once symbolized their oppression, girile’s motivations are along the lines of gay men in Chelsea calling each other “queer” or black men and women using the term ‘nigga.”

Girlhood, like the singlehood embraced by these girile (and their foremothers, such as former Cosmopolitan editor Helen Gurley Brown), is more a state of being than an age. The writer Strawberry Saroyan invokes this sense when describing her friendship with Natasha: “I now believe, when I recall not only the years of our friendship but our friendship itself, there’s one thing that keeps sprouting to my mind, and it’s the idea of girlhood. Yes, the idea of it: the sense that I believe that both Natasha and I had that we were living out some time in our lives—our twenties—and trying to become some person who was almost mythical in our own heads.” When we’re feeling girile, it’s because we feel independent, irreverent, and free from judgment—and this could happen at nine or ninety. When little girls sing Spice Girls songs and adult women throw parties to celebrate this season’s premier of Sex in the City or host Madonna parties, it’s this fierce, fun independence they are tapping into. Prizing, acknowledging, or valuing the “feminine”—be it the domestic sphere, being a mom, or a talent for adornment—is within the scope of feminist history and future.

Given that girile is associated with qualities feminists are arguing for—why, then, is it so often interpreted as such a rejection of feminism? In part, this is because older feminists fought for women not to be lured by feminine trappings. They created an analysis of beauty culture which suggested that fulfillment most likely does not lie solely in one’s vacuum cleaner, and proved themselves worthy of male colleagues, whether as guitarists or astronauts. The feminist movement from the 1960s until today did a very good job of ensuring that females of all ages could be valued in society for more than our sex appeal. Feminists proved that we weren’t hardwired to be good at housekeeping, but what they overlooked in this process of ensuring that women were “taken seriously” is that some women—and men—are drawn to feminine things (i.e., “unsersous” things). Beyond that, feminine things weren’t truly the problem; being forced to adopt them was. Second-wave feminists fought so hard for all women not to be reduced to a “girl”—they didn’t lay claim to the good in being a girl. (The women of the time who did fill that niche tended to be anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly, preaching the joys of home and hearth from her executive office.) Inadvertently, feminists and nonfeminists alike
have been left with a mixed message: Girls might have the potential to be powerful, but girl things assuredly do not.

Older feminists have identified this degrading of feminine and female traits, of course. Cultural feminists of the 1970s even tried to create a gynocentric alternative lifestyle, glorifying women's ways of doing everything from talking to sex. Why, then, is there such resistance to accepting girliness and girlishness as part of feminism? (For the moment, we will limit our analysis to girly feminists and address the issues and conflict prompted by "real" girls later.) This brings us to the real nerve that girlies expose: one of young women rebelling against mothers. As we wrote in Manifesta: "In the same way that Betty Friedan's insistence on professional seriousness was a response to every woman in the office being called a girl, this Third Wave generation is predestined to fight against the equally rigid stereotype of being too serious, too political, and seemingly asexual. Girly culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual; against the necessity of brass-buttoned, red-suited seriousness to infiltrate a man's world; against the anachronistic belief that because women could be dehumanized by porn, they must be; and the idea that girls and power don't mix. The problem with this rebellion is that it further concretizes the myth that older feminists hated sex and men."

The consumerism inherent in girlie doesn't help the situation, either. For so many second wavers, feminism was linked to socialism—or at least to critiquing capitalism. They were fighting a patriarchal system that maintained itself off the backs of women. They were also adopting the politics of the time to incorporate women. Many of the influential second-wave feminists were "red diaper babies," meaning their parents were Communists. Today Communism is a humbled force and women participate in that capitalist system as much as men do. Younger women, who have grown up with increased access to the "good" parts of capitalism, have begun to ponder the fact that asking women to opt out is essentially asking them to choose to be marginalized. Young feminists came of age in a much more disposable and capitalistic time than did their second-wave predecessors. Many young feminists do not take rejecting consumerism as their major organizing principle, which is often read as rejecting feminism. (Not so. People tend to fly now rather than take the bus; it's not a rejection of middle-class or working-class values. It is simply what people do now.) We are not arguing that capitalism and clothing can't be political. Who makes your clothes and under what conditions is highly political. But when there is a critique of girly-feminists and their clothes, the point is rarely the plight of sweatshop laborers. The butt of the critique is usually the young women espousing feminism while wearing Gucci. Defining girly is too often expressed by what young women wear (miniskirts! lipstick!), and thus what gets focused on is the accessory, not the content of the person wearing it.

The ascent of the "girl" as a strong and distinct feminist identity is probably one of best examples of what differentiates third-wave feminists from second-wave feminists. We see third wave not as a specific set of assumptions or theories, but as an evolution of feminism building on previous generations. And where does that leave us? We have riot grrrl, Spice Girls, Indigo Girls, Girl Power, gURL.com, Rockgrrl, cybergrrl, Bamboo Girl, indiegrrl, "New Girl Order," and even this collection, All About the Girl, to name just a few examples of third wavers appropriating the word "girl" within a feminist context. Although these terms have come into common usage, there is still a need for clarity about this girl stuff and, even more broadly, why there is a need for a third wave of feminism.

Younger women grew up in a feminist-influenced time. We grew up not just with feminism, but also with critiques of feminism—from within and without (the proverbial backlash). Because of when we were born, younger women can take certain freedoms for granted—namely, the right to choose whether to have a child, the freedom to play sports, and access to many formerly male-only institutions such as the Supreme Court and the U.S. Army. This is our birthright, and though older feminist are chagrined at our sense of entitlement, they want us to have access to abortion and sports, and that is in fact what they fought so hard for. Nonetheless, they don't understand that our entitlement is a mark of their success. If we can play sports, why don't we? In other words, why be a girl if you don't have to?

One of the first third-wave feminists to theorize formally about girlie was Debbie Stoller, a founder of Bust magazine and author of a forthcoming book about knitting. Stoller's theory is all over the pages of Bust, in its vibrator pushing and its do-it-yourself bikini pattern, and can be simplified as "girl is good." Stoller believed that you shouldn't have to make something masculine in order to make it valued by society. In fact, we should bring feminine things into masculine spaces. This might mean painting one's nails during the coffee break in the board meeting. We also need to value traditionally female skills like knitting and canning vegetables or decorating. Furthermore, Stoller did not believe in preserving these feminine traits just for women, but also in opening up the girly space for men's girlie aspect. Bust regularly features men in sensitive or domestic arenas. One weakness of Stoller's theory is that it can be prescriptive, too, leaving one with the impression that the only way to be a good third-wave feminist is to be superfeminine—the reverse of what women felt in the early 1970s. We can't replace one set of rules (glorifying male roles) with another (glorifying traditional femininity). The third-wave goal is to present a range from which feminists can feel comfortable to express themselves.

People often question whether "girlie" isn't just an American phenomenon or further proof that feminism really is about only White, middle-class women. Or, rather, they will ask if worrying about Manolo Blahnik's
and vibrators could possibly have relevance to a woman escaping genital mutilation in Kenya or an illiterate girl in Afghanistan. “Is it really something you can take to other parts of the world?” we are often asked, as if the two of us are trying to sell Aboriginal women baby doll tees. Girlie certainly has its limitations, but there is proof of its appeal and power around the world and in many disparate communities. Remember the women in Afghanistan sneaking lipstick, something forbidden to them under the Taliban? Another example of girlie being international is the acceptance of *The Vagina Monologues* as a cultural event in countries as contrasting as Kenya and Afghanistan, as well as on hundreds of college campuses in the United States.

Within the United States, *The Vagina Monologues* has magnetized younger women toward the women’s movement and is a great vehicle for getting at the complexity of the third wave. The play simultaneously calls for sexual freedom and satisfaction for women (Eros and equality), and advocates for women not to be silent about the sexual violence in their lives (human rights and safety). During the show, women wear miniskirts (and look fabulous and happy, sexy and proud) and simultaneously claim it as something they own—they say “no” as a girlie stance. They say “no” without the armor of masculine or conservative clothing that women have been told they need. Women who perform *The Vagina Monologues* understand that feminine things, such as feather boas, hearts for Valentine’s Day, and fancy dresses, aren’t political in and of themselves, but the girl wearing them can be. And the girls doing *The Vagina Monologues* certainly are politically active; they raise money to fund local anti-violence projects, speak out about taboo subjects, and say “vagina” in polite company—a radical act in itself.

A third-wave feminist approach to girls and girlies takes into account sexism and a second-wave feminist critique. The third-wave analysis of girls and girlies acknowledges that four decades of feminism have altered the prescription to “be a good girl” into the philosophy that “girl is good.” This girlie-girl is still entitled to critique beauty standards and consumerism. Feminine accoutrements do not disqualify her. Too frequently, many of the young women we meet on our travels to college campuses might be attracted to these articles of femininity or consumerism, but they analyze that desire from the perspective of others: as a conflict and a potential compromise of their feminism. They make their desires suspect for the sake of a popular feminist critique. They render invisible their own example as a feminist who happens to be attracted to girlie things, or consider themselves the exception to the rule, and everyone else a Britney Spears wanna-be.

While the manifestations of girlie theory have momentum now, its roots go deeper than Stoller, just as girlies were once girls. In the early 1980s, Carol Gilligan, one of the mainstays of the girls’ movement focusing on girls ages nine to fifteen and a leader of second-wave feminism, attempted to address how she herself could politically argue that women were equal to men, but have her own emotional biases against them.

Gilligan, a Harvard psychologist, was specifically reacting to the lack of women’s voices in her field. She noticed that even when women were in what she called a human conversation, it was still a male discourse. She identified this problem and acknowledged that she herself perpetuated it. Once Gilligan realized that she was helping to socialize women toward the patriarchy, she set out to make the conversation one in which women’s and men’s voices could be equally valued, rather than asking women to conform to an approved male dictate.

In other words, long before Stoller was saying girl is good, Gilligan was saying it’s no better to teach girls to take on male values than it is to force them into stereotypical female roles; in fact, it’s the same hijacking of selfhood and autonomy. And when Girlies claim Barbies, pink, eye shadow, and knitting to be as valid as trucks, blue, combat boots, and sports, that’s all part of the resistance, too. Both are attempting to put girls’ “voices”—broadly defined as what girls like, think about, talk about, and what moves them—into the human conversation.

The initial response to Gilligan’s research, which was detailed in her best-selling book, *In a Different Voice*, mostly accentuated the negative aspects of not being a boy. This was the case of a second-wave analysis being applied to third-wave girls. The second-wave approach identifies sexism and the ways boys are given more freedom. A third-wave approach would include the power that girls have today, not extrapolate so much from a context of the past. Girls went from being invisible to being vulnerable. In a way, the girls’ movement that shot up in the wake of Gilligan’s research mirrored some of the feminist reaction to theories like Stoller’s: in both instances, there was no confidence that the individual girl or girlie knew what she was doing. Thus, under the guise of helping girls and women keep their voices, the women’s movement inadvertently mutes them.

This left the third-wave generation conflicted about who they were supposed to be or, more important, what feminists would “allow” them to be. The barrier to individuality and individual expression was no longer “the patriarchy” that hobbled the second wave, but *feminism* (and, too often, older feminists who didn’t understand young women’s midriff-baring tops or thong underwear). Gilligan’s solution to the loss of “voice” (which we interpret as self-knowledge, creativity, and self-worth) was to form strong relationships with other women. When women are sounding boards for one another, affirming their interior monologues, she argued, they will gain the confidence and centrality to eventually change what society values. This is exactly what happens when women come together to perform *The Vagina Monologues*, or when women feel like they have found a friend while reading the pages of *Bust*. 
Today we see the girlie/feminist conflict play out mostly among college-age women and young professional women. Many of the young women we meet (or exchange E-mails with) as we travel around the country are into the ideals and goals of the women’s movement, but they fear that they can’t be both themselves and a feminist. They assume that having any “weakness” for femininity disqualifies them from being a feminist. The personal decisions they make—having boyfriends, shaving, Brazilian bikini waxes, getting married, wanting to have a body like Gwyneth Paltrow, being into fashion—leave others to assume that they are dupes of the patriarchy. Aren’t these the trappings of femininity that their mothers (or Women’s Studies’ professors) rejected? But the fact is that beyond these personal dilemmas, these young women are organizing the Take Back the Night marches, they are demanding that they be able to play sports with the boys and they are being whatever they want to be.

Our book Manifesta was written in part to address exactly that crowd, the ones who say “I took the Women in Mass Media class—why do I still feel the need to wear high heels? Am I weak?” This question is clearly on the minds of young feminists. We have no doubt that younger women connect to feminism’s ideals. We see them living feminist lives exemplified by their righteousness and sense of entitlement. Similarly, they are inspired by feminism’s history when they have the opportunity to learn about it. What they often don’t have, however, is a sense of how to be a feminist. They aren’t clear about what feminism requires from them. Is it about how many petitions one signs? Or showing up for marches? Or reading the feminist classics? Often, too, they perceive that their personal lives undermine their political convictions. To top it off, they often think of feminism as what they can’t do (Don’t be boy-crazy! Don’t shave!), rather than a philosophy that shows them the potential for what they can do.

Many of these young women are like Brooke, whom we met at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Brooke, after noting the dearth of baby-sitting services on campus for employees and students and the abundance of potential student worker bees, wanted to form a baby-sitting service through the university. She saw a barrier and thought: “What can I do? Am I allowed to make these things a feminist issue without the approval of the ‘feminists’?” In other words, if it was such a good idea, wouldn’t the real feminists—the ones who invented V-Day or coined sexual harassment or wrote the books she was reading—wouldn’t they have already thought of it? In Manifesta, Kathleen Hanna (co-creator of the movement known as riot grrrl) calls this nagging, nay-saying voice “The Phantom.” The Phantom says, “Somebody already thought of that. Somebody already wrote that book. Just glom onto someone else’s plan.”

The feminist Phantom is the “feminist mystique.” If the feminine mystique (coined by Betty Friedan) is enforced satisfaction with child rearing and domesticity, the feminist mystique is the attitude that made us feel guilty for embellishing ourselves with girlie things. Worse, the feminist mystique leaves us to assume that the feminist label belongs only to those who have sorted out all their issues and are no longer conflicted about men, sex, their bodies, their incomes, or fashion.

The reason the Phantom has so much power isn’t just about sexism and low self-esteem. It’s also that we spend so much time talking about what feminism was and not enough about what it can be. Because we learn so much more from what people do than what they say, we need to take a step back from rhetoric and put the focus on acts. When we look around at what young women are doing rather than what they are wearing, it’s clear that there is a feminist continuum. Young women are creating zines (just like the second wave created Ms. and Off Our backs), they are protesting hate crimes (just as their foremothers withheld income tax so as not to support the Vietnam War), and they have flooded every profession (moving beyond the access provided by the second wave, which gave us the first female Supreme Court justice and the first female astronaut).

What this leads us to is the fact that girls today—both the ten-year-old with skinned knees and the thirty-five-year-old with the vibrator—possess a freedom and fierceness that women in the 1960s could hardly imagine. That is a poignant reality for the freedom-fighting feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, and there is a spine of pain to their critique that girls are weak or girly or naive. It hurts to see the manifestations in future generations of what one has longed for for oneself. The feminists who implored girls to be “strong, smart, and bold” got what they wished for. Some still need to recognize that the wish came true. And perhaps younger women need to share some of their entitlement with older women, imploving them to “just do it” and be “strong, smart, and bold.”

Notes