Making “Waves”: The Politics of Periodization and Race in Feminist Theory

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This essay seeks to make waves. Of two kinds. First, there are the waves feminists, including myself, are known for making--at dinner parties, at faculty meetings, those who know us turn our way, expectantly, when a colleague, father, or aunt says something ranging from the surprisingly silly to the shockingly sexist. Our fellow travelers have come to look for the gentle billow that heralds the swell--the memo, the remark, the raised eyebrow, the extended dialogue (in the street or over wine), the full-throated sit-in or march-out. Making waves, along with consciousness-raising, is a central part of feminism’s strategy of changing gender relations and challenging patriarchy. Upsetting the boat has saved many of us, our sisters, and our men-folk, too. Today, for this Symposium on Critical Race Feminism, I want to make a few waves, this time within feminist theory.

Which takes me to the second kind of wave feminists have made. In organizing our own history--hard won--we have paid tribute to the waves our foremothers made. First Wave, Second Wave, the intriguingly rebellious Third Wave--the periodization of feminism reflects the significant waves that women’s activism rippled through history, challenging gender supremacy in our culture. The “Waves” paradigm demarcates feminist history, identifying the exemplar ideological and activist moments that proved crucial to feminist movement. Thus, historical Wave-making is a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the political wave-making of earlier feminists. Not surprisingly, designating history according to epochs of feminist activism itself made political waves, challenging a history of ideology and politics marked by presidencies, wars, and reconciliations, Locke, Hegel, Kant, Marx, Nietschze, and Freud, with one marked by Wollstonecraft, Anthony, and Roosevelt, abolitionism, suffrage, marriage reform, birth control, and bra burning.

How then do I propose to make my own waves through this essay? Well, I would like to suggest that, as politically path-breaking and methodologically significant as the Waves paradigm is, it fails to capture the full impact of feminism and women’s resistance on American culture. The Waves periodization, which typically commences with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 has proven under-attentive to one of the primary institutions of gender supremacy in our history: chattel slavery. This American institution lasted from 1662, longer than the entire history periodized by the Three Waves. But the extant historiographic paradigm fails to capture and theorize enslaved women’s resistance. This essay will show that identifying the gendered supremacy of slavery and enslaved women’s manifold resistances sheds new light on anti-sexist politics and ideology. It is not my goal to accuse feminism of malicious racism or privileged essentialism. Rather, I believe that the Waves periodizations reflects a series of assumptions that are only partially accurate. Rectification yields a longer, broader, richer feminist history which does us all proud. In the true spirit of feminism, then, I propose to (re)-make W/waves.