

# AMERICAN ELECTRA

Feminism's ritual matricide  
By Susan Faludi

No one who has been engaged in feminist politics and thought for any length of time can be oblivious to an abiding aspect of the modern women's movement in America—that so often, and despite its many victories, it seems to falter along a “mother-daughter” divide. A generational breakdown underlies so many of the pathologies that have long disturbed American feminism—its fleeting mobilizations followed by long hibernations; its bitter divisions over sex; and its reflexive renunciation of its prior incarnations, its progenitors, even its very name. The contemporary women's movement seems fated to fight a war on two fronts: alongside the battle of the sexes rages the battle of the ages.

How many times have we heard women say, “No older woman helped me in my career—my mentors have all been *men*”? How many surveys report that young women don't want, and distrust, female bosses? How often did we hear during the

last presidential election that young women were recoiling from Hillary Clinton because she “reminds me of my mother”? Why does so much of “new” feminist activism and scholarship spurn the work and ideas of the generation that came before? As ungracious as these attitudes may seem, they are grounded in a sad reality: while American feminism has long, and productively, concentrated on getting men to give women some of the power they used to give only to their sons, it hasn't figured out

how to pass power down from woman to woman, to bequeath authority to its progeny. Its inability to conceive of a succession has crippled women's progress not just within the women's movement but in every venue of American public life. The women's movement cycled through a long first “wave,” and, in increasingly shorter oscillations, a second and third wave, and some say we are now witnessing a fourth. With each go-round, women make gains, but the movement never seems able



*Susan Faludi is the author of Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women and Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man. Her most recent book is The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America.*

to establish an enduring birthright, a secure line of descent—to reproduce itself as a strong and sturdy force. At the core of America's most fruitful political movement resides a perpetual barrenness.

That barrenness underlies a more general dismay about feminism I hear all the time from women: "Why does it feel like we're sliding backward?" "How did 'feminist' become a dirty word?" So often these comments are conflated with generational appraisals: "Our mothers' feminism isn't relevant anymore." "Young women are narcissists who don't care about politics." Despite all the displays of cross-generational boosterism—all those Take Our Daughters to Work Day events and "You go, girl!" exhortations—the rancor is palpable. As a women's studies professor burst out

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to me one day over lunch, after we had talked for an hour about her students' boredom with women's history and the galling necessity to woo them by planting the words "girl" and "sex" in every

course title, "We're really furious with these young women, aren't we?" And they with us.

I've been to a feminist "mother-daughter dinner party" where the feel-good bonding degenerated into a cross fire of complaint and recrimination, with younger women declaring themselves sick to death of hearing about the glory days of Seventies feminism and older women declaring themselves sick to death of being swept into the dustbin of history. I've been to a feminist conclave convened to discuss the intergenerational question where no young women were invited. After the group spent hours bemoaning the younger generation's putative preference for a sexed-up "girly girl" liberation, one participant suggested asking an actual young woman to the next meeting—and was promptly shot down. I've delivered speeches on the state of women's rights to college audiences whose follow-up comments concerned mostly the liberating potential of miniskirts and stripping, their elders' cluelessness about sex and fashion, and the need to distance themselves from an older, "stodgy" feminism.

At the age of fifty-one, and by birth cohort a member of neither the second nor the third wave, I am not exempt. Sometimes I find myself in rooms where, by default and despite my years, I'm expected to represent the youthful feminist viewpoint because there's no one younger around. More often, a middle-aged grumpiness tends to place me on the "old" side, as when I open a leading feminist work and find a prominent third-wave feminist defending

her "extreme bikini wax" or read a feminist blog in which a young woman avers that "wearing a Wonderbra is a statement of empowerment" and expounds on the pleasures of "choosing between 'apricot sundae' and 'mocha melt' eye shadow." Well, fine, I think. Who cares? When I first began writing about women's rights nearly two decades ago, I liked to say that feminism was the simply worded sign hoisted by a little girl in the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality: I AM NOT A BARBIE DOLL. Now I'm not so sure.

Feminism takes many forms and plays out in efforts in which younger and older women do collaborate over serious issues, usually out of the spotlight. It would be inaccurate to say that the generational schism is the problem with feminism. The primary hurdles feminism faces are the enduring ones. Basic social policies for working mothers are still lacking and sex segregation in the workplace and the attendant feminization of poverty have hardly changed (the top ten full-time jobs for women in the United States—secretary, waitress, sales clerk, etc.—are the same as thirty years ago, and over the course of their prime earning years women make 38 percent of what men make); male dominance of public leadership is still the rule (men occupy 80 to 95-plus percent of the top decision-making positions in American politics, business, the military, religion, media, culture, and entertainment); sexual and domestic violence remain at epidemic levels (nearly 20 percent of American women report having been sexually assaulted or raped, and 25 percent of women are physically or sexually attacked by their current or former husbands and lovers); and fundamental reproductive freedom is perpetually imperiled (mounting, onerous legal restrictions; violent attacks on family-planning clinics; and no abortion services in more than 85 percent of U.S. counties).

But these external obstacles also mask internal dynamics that, while less conspicuous, operate as detonators, assuring feminism's episodic self-destruction. How can women ever vanquish their external enemies when they are intent on blowing up their own house? As feminist scholar Rebecca Dakin Quinn wrote more than a decade ago in "An Open Letter to Institutional Mothers," an essay chronicling her own bruising intergenerational experience at a women's studies conference, "Mothers and daughters stand divided; how long until we are conquered?"

The June 2009 annual meeting of the National Organization for Women filled the plaza of the Sheraton Indianapolis Hotel & Suites

with all the accustomed trappings. Vendors hawked “This Is What a Feminist Looks Like” infant bodysuits and placards advertised sessions on everything from discrimination in the insurance industry (“Classist, Racist, Sexist Auto Insurance: An End Is in Sight”) to better sex for the handicapped (“Accessible Orgasm: Women with Disabilities and Sexual Empowerment”). A band named Mother Jane, the evening’s entertainment, tuned up, while an exercise instructor handed out invitations to “Yoga for the Larger Body.”

In the less public precincts, organizers mounted a quieter but far more serious effort, preparing their slates and counting up their support for the event that would be the convention’s culmination, a moment many of NOW’s followers believed could be the most critical in the organization’s political history: the election of the first NOW president who might honestly declare (to borrow from JFK’s 1961 inaugural address) that “the torch has been passed to a new generation.”

Fifty-five-year-old Kim Gandy’s presidency had lasted eight years. With her retirement came an opportunity that many NOW members, and in particular many younger members, found hopeful. The candidate who seemed to be in the lead was thirty-three-year-old Latifa Lyles, a charismatic speaker attuned to a youthful sensibility, a black woman who insisted on a more diverse constituency, a technologically savvy strategist who had doubled the organization’s Internet fund-raising and engaged the enthusiasm of a host of feminist bloggers. A feminist activist since she was sixteen—when she told her mother she was going on a “school trip” and ran off to the 1992 reproductive-rights demonstration in Washington, D.C.—Lyles had worked her way up the ranks in NOW, from chapter leader to national board member to youngest-ever national officer. She had spent the last four years as national vice president for membership under Gandy, who championed Lyles as her successor. “It’s hard to ignore the fact there’s been a generational shift in this country, and an organization that doesn’t recognize that is living in the past,” Gandy declared. “Latifa’s youth is not a detriment but an advantage. . . . She’ll take NOW to a different level.”

“I never paid attention to a NOW election in my life until I knew Latifa was running,” Jessica Valenti, the founder of Feministing.com, a leading young feminist website, told the Associated Press. “This could be the moment where NOW becomes super-relevant to the feminist movement again.” If elected, Lyles would be the youngest NOW president ever, and the first

black president since Aileen Hernandez, who held the position for a year in the early Seventies. Lyles seemed a shoo-in. When she declared her candidacy that spring, she was unopposed. The only other prospect, sixty-two-year-old Olga Vives, had dropped out of consideration after suffering a heart attack.

On Saturday morning, Lyles broached the thorny subject of age from the hotel ballroom’s dais, surrounded by a youthful group of officers and campaign aides. “Why have I been the youngest woman in the room?” Lyles asked of an organization that, she said, must represent more than one generational wave. “There is great strength and power in our image not as



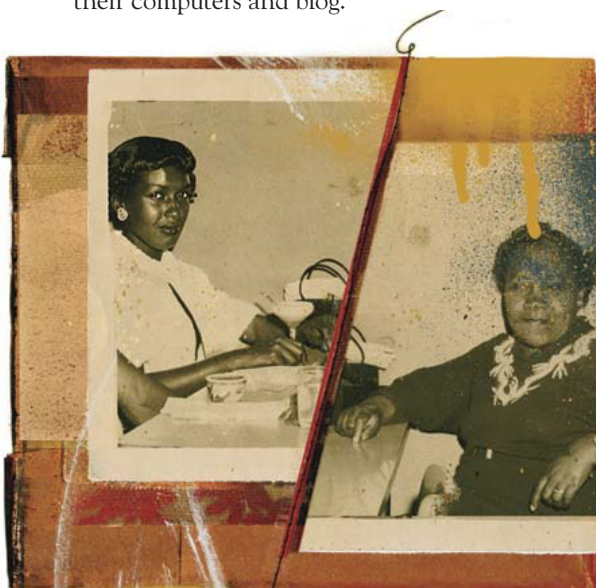
the first, second, or third wave, but the wave of the future.” Her words elicited ecstatic hoots and noisemaker rattlings from young women, many attending their first NOW convention, including some high school girls who had started a NOW chapter in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and undergraduates from Mississippi shaking orange pom-poms (Lyles’s campaign color) and chanting, “Two-four-six-eight! La-ti-fa is our candidate!”

Cheerleaders notwithstanding, Lyles was addressing a deeply riven constituency. Just weeks before the convention, another candidate had jumped into the race, fifty-six-year-old Terry O’Neill, who made a point of representing the concerns of NOW’s older, more traditional constituency. She had enlisted two young women to run on her slate, but her campaign was geared to her boomer sisters: its rallying cry was a return to Sixties-style street activism, and its



view of young feminist social networking ranged from tolerance to bewilderment.

As I wheeled my luggage down the Sheraton corridor on the convention's first day, a phalanx of O'Neill supporters, boiling into the hallway after a strategy session in the candidate's hospitality suite, stopped to talk. Their conversations revolved around a central theme: "I'm so sick of these young women treating us like a bunch of old bags who need to get out of the way." "I actually heard one of them say, 'We don't need Gloria Steinem feminists anymore!'" "They aren't willing to do the kind of grass-roots campaigning we did. All they want to do is sit at their computers and blog."



The preoccupations of the younger side of the generational divide were on rampant display the next afternoon at the young feminist workshop, which included tips on how to recruit other young women (do *not* use the NOW logo when advertising your event) and a prep session on Twitter marketing, led by a young woman in stiletto heels—along with tirades on the transgressions of NOW's elders, people "so grumpy and crotchety that as a young woman, you come into that meeting, you're like, 'I'm *never* coming back here.'" "Many a time I'd hear, 'Oh, why are you wearing high heels? We fought for so long not to have you wear those high heels!'" "I've been in meetings where Seventies-ish women say to me, 'Oh, we're so glad to have some young blood!' It's creepy, and we don't like it."

Online discussions of the NOW presidential election degenerated into bitter accusations from both sides—and it was hard not to hear in the competing diatribes the voices of a good old-fashioned mother-daughter squabble.

After some older NOW members said that Lyles lacked the requisite "education and experience" for the job, younger women complained that their elders were infantilizing them—to which a NOW veteran retorted, "When I stop seeing attacks on people because they are considered to be 'older,' then I will remain quiet." The younger women who questioned O'Neill's late entrance into the race were accused by the older women of being "young and ignorant" children who "stomp their feet and demand something that is now owed to them." "We have to take back the women's movement since it's obvious these third wavers can't get the job done," an older woman said. "Only when they are afraid of us will they respect us." With such grace notes, an event recently imagined as an institutional baton-passing was suddenly threatening to tear the organization apart—and tear it apart along dismayingly predictable lines.

**I**n the past few years, such seismic generational rifts (what feminist activist Marie C. Wilson dubbed "the San Andreas fault" between older and younger women) have repeatedly burst into view—and repeatedly been denied by some feminists who are understandably queasy about airing dirty laundry, and by others who suspect the conflict has been trumped up. In a *Nation* column last year, Katha Pollitt urged her colleagues to quit "parsing feminism along a mother/daughter divide." She was responding to a series of feminist generational flaps that had gone viral, most notably one in which older feminist writer Linda Hirshman denounced two young writers at Jezebel.com—one of whom went by the moniker "Slut Machine"—for bragging on an online talk show about having unprotected sex with men they'd picked up in bars. The young women had dismissed date rape ("You live through that") as not worth reporting, because, as one of them put it, "I had better things to do, like drinking more." Pollitt contended that the Hirshman/Slut Machine divide was artificial. "Media commentators love to reduce everything about women to catfights about sex, so it's not surprising that this belittling and historically inaccurate way of looking at the women's movement—angry prudes versus drunken sluts—has recently taken on new life, including among feminists."

Point taken, and the media are, indeed, glad to apply a bellows to any argument between women; they have been pumping up the young-old female conflict for years now. But around the country, feminists have set up events to try and confront a divide they find all too real, gatherings like one I attended ear-

lier this year in Manhattan called “No Longer in Exile: The Legacy and Future of Gender Studies at the New School.” The organizer of “Exile,” second-wave feminist and New School literature professor Ann Snitow, was intent on soldering bonds between younger “theory” academics, partial to deconstruction and pop-culture studies, and older women’s studies scholars, who tend to come from a more activist background. She encouraged graduate students to investigate the New School’s gender history and invited younger and older feminist academics to present their thoughts—from a stage bookended with two large poster-sized photos of the New School’s unsung founding mothers. Such demonstrations of continuity are intrepid because they so often curdle. At the 2002 Veteran Feminists of America gathering, a star-studded panel of second wavers denounced their juniors from the stage (Erica Jong: “We have produced a generation of uppity women who feel entitled”), while young women in the audience fumed.

In 2007, young feminist writer Courtney Martin, former Planned Parenthood president Gloria Feldt, journalist Kristal Brent Zook, and writer Deborah Siegel organized “Women, Girls, Ladies,” a feminist road show meant to foster a “fresh conversation” between younger and older women. “It is time that women of all ages talked and listened to one another instead of rehashing the same cliquish complaints in isolation,” Martin proclaimed. But the fresh conversation was soon mired in familiar rancor.

During the next year’s presidential campaign, Martin confessed to “a dirty little political secret” on *Glamour* magazine’s Glamocracy blog, a secret that “makes me feel unfeminist and silly. . . . I’m not backing Hillary Clinton—and that’s at least in part because she reminds me of being scolded by my mother.” Linda Hirshman promptly scolded her, on Slate, as one of those “yo-mamma feminists” who treat Hillary Clinton and her older female supporters with contempt. (Not that contempt didn’t go both ways: feminist writer Robin Morgan, in her February 2008 online essay in support of Clinton, “Goodbye to All That, Part II,” derided young women “who can’t identify with a woman candidate because she is unafraid of *eeeweeuu* yucky power, who fear their boy-friends might look at them funny if they say something good about her.”) Despite the efforts that “we old ’60s feminists” had made to “put to an end this image of the scolding, selfish older woman,” Hirshman wrote, “yo-mamma feminists contend that even gainfully employed, productive, and liberated women were selfish dominatrices who must be rejected.” Courtney Martin quickly lashed back in *The*

*American Prospect*, calling Hirshman “sharp-tongued” and urging women to refocus on “the real feminist battles at hand,” which “are not mother versus daughter.” Easier said than done.

The “Women, Girls, Ladies” stop at Harvard University began with the four panelists testifying to their shared desire to close the age gap. Martin started talking about how she couldn’t relate to the women’s movement until she went to a third-wave event on her college campus, where a young feminist addressed them in “fish-net stockings.” While “older women think that’s ridiculous,” she said, “it’s about seeing ourselves in the movement. . . . It’s about being seen.” The contest was on.

Martin’s views were echoed by several young women in the audience, who talked about blogging, body image, and their lack of interest in the older generation’s approach to activism. “My feminism is so much more subjective than the idea of, like, a feminist *movement*,” one young woman said. Then a white-haired woman in the audience, a self-described “radical feminist and probably at the end of my life,” took the microphone and threw down the gauntlet: “What I’m not hearing here is . . . a definition of [what] feminism is, and I feel it isn’t about food and it isn’t about how your mother looked when you were growing up. . . . I want to know if there is a level floor here where we can all stand together and say as one group, ‘Yes, we are all feminists.’”

No response. The panelists asked young women in the room to raise their hands if they considered themselves to be feminists. Nearly everyone did. Then they asked whether the younger women identified with their elders’ version of feminism. Only one hand went up. Courtney Martin turned to the old radical and said that she felt her remarks had been “belittling” to Martin’s generation, and that “even though I’m incredibly grateful, and I mean that like in the most real deep way,” she was tired of having to show her gratitude to her feminist elders. “It’s like I can’t say thank you enough times, is sometimes how I feel.”

Generational indictments proliferate in activist gatherings and scholarly conclaves, electronic forums, periodicals, and books. The titles speak for themselves: “Mean Spirits: The Politics of Contempt Between Feminist Generations,” “Are Younger Women Trying to Trash Feminism?” “The Mother-Daughter Wars,” and “Am I My Mother’s Feminist?” The answer to that last question was evident in Jennifer

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Baumgardner and Amy Richards's *Manifesta*, the 2000 *cri de coeur* of the third wave, which summed up the state of intergenerational feminism with this chapter title: "Thou Shalt Not Become Thy Mother."

For years, NOW has tried to attract young members with Young Feminist Task Forces, Young Feminist Summits, and Young Feminism Conference Resolutions ("... BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that NOW and the Young Feminist Conference Implementation Committee [CIC] renew their commitment to implementing previously passed resolutions such as those mandating a Young Feminist Resource Kit and ...").

In 2003, NOW's leadership invited a third-wave feminist to address its national convention. The young speaker, Rebecca Walker, a co-founder of the Third Wave Foundation and the daughter of famed feminist author Alice Walker,

used the opportunity to trounce her elders for "not listening" to her generation. Walker's lecture shouldn't have come as a surprise—her generational grievance first surfaced eight years earlier in

*To Be Real*, an anthology she edited of third-wave feminist writings in which she charged older feminists with reining in her generation's freedom of expression. The young contributors to the anthology—which was light on politics and heavy on expressing "the self" (via, among other things, fistfighting, public nudity, and masturbating to an account of a gang rape)—bore an animus toward older feminists palpable enough to trouble even the most tolerant. In the anthology's preface, Gloria Steinem, who is not only Rebecca Walker's longtime mentor but her godmother, wondered at the tendency to treat feminism "as a gigantic mother who is held responsible for almost everything, while the patriarchy receives terminal gratitude for the small favors it bestows."

Walker pursued a sustained *j'accuse* against her feminist elders—whom she called ageist, racist, classist, homophobic, and maternally challenged—at numerous venues from the National Women's Studies Association's annual convention (where she reproached older feminists for failing to recruit conservative women) to the Re-Imagining Conference (an assembly of Christian lay and clergy feminists, where feminist theologian Mary Daly shouted back, "I'm not dead yet!").

Walker's campaign peaked during the 2008 publicity tour for her memoir, *Baby Love* (about having her first child at thirty-five), which

turned into a highly public smackdown of second wavers in general, and her own mother in particular. "The truth is that I very nearly missed out on becoming a mother—thanks to being brought up by a rabid feminist who thought motherhood was about the worst thing that could happen to a woman," Walker stated in an article bearing her byline in Britain's *The Daily Mail*. "I honestly believe it's time to puncture the myth and to reveal what life was really like to grow up as a child of the feminist revolution." The *Mail* headlined the piece "How My Mother's Fanatical Views Tore Us Apart." "I never called my mother a fanatic," Rebecca Walker recently told me, and complained that the article was "a tabloid piece I didn't write," based on an interview she had granted. Nevertheless, she told National Public Radio in 2008 that she said "95 percent of what's actually in the actual piece." Whatever the truth of Alice Walker's alleged failings, what's striking, in Rebecca Walker's jeremiads and in the tabloid sensationalism they engendered, is how easily a brief against the personal parent became a broadside against the public ones.

Even when feminist division is ostensibly *not* about generational conflict, it often seems to be the subtext. In *Not My Mother's Sister*, an insightful exploration of younger feminists' efforts to craft a third-wave identity, women's studies scholar Astrid Henry observed that many of the current fights in feminism—over race, sexual orientation, and sex in general—also operate as coded expressions of generational acrimony. By billing only *their* wave as "interracial," third-wave feminists square off against a supposedly all-white second-wave movement—a stance that, ironically, erases many black feminist foremothers. Similarly, young lesbian feminists reject their Sixties predecessors by typecasting older lesbians as frumpish big mamas plodding around in hausfrau muumuus and baking nutritional nut loaves, while their bad-girl daughters are breaking the bedsprings with a battery of sex toys and strap-ons.

Sex is the movement's Mason-Dixon Line, now as it was in the Eighties, when battles over pornography were known as "the sex wars." Those old skirmishes have now been reimagined by third wavers too young to have been part of them as a generational showdown—even though second-wave feminists were on both sides of the Eighties fight. Sex isn't the source of the divide between feminist generations so much as its controlling metaphor, used, Astrid Henry noted, to conflate power and prudishness, as when third-waver Merri Lisa Johnson casts feminism as "a strict teacher who *just needs to get laid*."

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daughter relations. Over and over, a younger generation disavows the women's movement as a daughter disowns her mother. There is in all this a terrible irony: It wasn't always this way in American life. And it especially wasn't this way in American feminism. In many respects, the U.S. women's movement got its start as a mother-daughter enterprise.

**O**n March 3, 1913, the day before Woodrow Wilson's inaugural, on the marble steps of the U.S. Treasury Building, a stately woman bearing a golden spear and dressed in the classical Greek robes, armored breastplate, and plumed helmet of Columbia descended the stairs to "The Star Spangled Banner," soon to be joined by other older women named Justice, Liberty, Peace, and Hope, each accompanied by their symbolic heirs, young girls in robes and scarves strewing roses and tossing golden balls. The occasion was "The Allegory," an elaborate pageant involving a hundred women, many of them prominent figures in the arts. Among the 20,000 spectators was a *New York Times* reporter who called it "one of the most impressively beautiful spectacles ever staged in this country."

Such extravaganzas were a symbolic rite of suffrage-era feminism, with a recurrent theme. A month later, when the New York Woman Suffrage Party staged its pageant at the Metropolitan Opera House, classically costumed maternal elders presided as dancing garlanded girls received a torch lit from the "altar of freedom" and passed it along, hand to hand. In the many similar spectacles presented across the country in the final decade of women's long struggle for the vote, the central feature was the very one most absent from feminism nearly a century later—a celebration of the mother-daughter bond and the transmission of female power and authority from one generation to the next.

American women's political consciousness had its upwelling in the decades after the Revolution, when the nation's founders imposed the concept of "republican womanhood" on female citizenship. Women were invited to participate indirectly in the project of American democracy in lieu of electoral status—as pure and pious domesticated overseers of the nursery, raising civically virtuous sons. It was basically a disenfranchisement, but it retained one element of power, which women would learn to expand and exploit far beyond its intended purview. As historian Linda Kerber summed it up: "The model republican woman was a mother."

Republican womanhood represented a radi-

cal break from the Puritan view of mothering, which regarded women as *less* virtuous than men, and too irrational and emotional to oversee the religious salvation of children. The expanded moral duties of republican mothers might not seem an obvious portal to the larger world of civic engagement—they qualified as virtuous precisely because they weren't sullied with the muck and compromise of politics. And yet, this reconstitution of maternal authority provided a wormhole for American women's entrance into public life. In the course of the nineteenth century, women who desired to enter the public realm refashioned the republican angel of the house into the crusading mother of the commonweal, ushering in what female reformers would call "the empire of the



mother." Maternity came to serve as the justification—and "mother power" the fuel—for storming the political ramparts (whether or not the women doing the storming were literal mothers), and, increasingly and importantly, that power came to be directed at rescuing and raising the status of civically virtuous *daughters*.

The problematic aspects of Victorian maternal protectionism are well-known—its cloying sentimentality; its consecration of "feminine" piety and sexual purity; its patronizing views of minority, immigrant, and working-class women; its "protective" rhetoric that often cast women as weak. What gets overlooked is the degree to which this maternal campaign centered around an increasingly radical desire for mothers to arm their daughters,

both literally and figuratively, against male control, especially male sexual control. The “mothers’” crusade posed a challenge to the core of male chivalry.

Women had long been told they needed male saviors to protect them from other men. This is the con game that Seventies feminists dubbed “the protection racket.” The lives of most Victorian women weren’t being disfigured by rape by strangers but by early marriage and early and life-threatening pregnancy. By expanding their orbit of influence into the public realm, nineteenth-century female reformers set out to disrupt the male protection racket’s reign. *They* would deliver their daughters from both the rapist and the savior. Through temperance, abolition, and anti-prostitution campaigns, they took the male rescue fantasy and recast it as a mother-daughter emancipation drama.

This is the central trope of abolition literature and rhetoric, in which female writers and petitioners repeatedly condemned slavery as a violation of maternal rights. The “Bereaved Mother” was the star figure in abolition pamphlets, poems, and songs, and female slave narratives foregrounded a heroic maternity, with mothers battling to save themselves and their daughters from bondage’s sexual exploitation. The same maternal mission infused other female reform efforts of the late nineteenth century, from female-run “protective” organizations for girls to the settlement-home movement, which cast “social motherhood” as a “revolutionary force,” as Jane Addams put it. The all-female colleges established in the late nineteenth century created campuses where male power couldn’t invade and female professors practiced “spiritual maternity” toward their student “daughters.”

The largest and most powerful female reform movement of the nineteenth century was temperance. Forged in female revolt—after the Daughters of Temperance were excluded in 1853 from the all-male World’s Temperance Convention (which they renamed the *Half-World’s Temperance Convention*)—the women’s temperance movement was built around a mother-daughter protective vision. Its adherents commonly addressed each other as “mother” and “daughter.” Frances E. Willard, or “Mother Frances,” the powerful head of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, rallied her flock under a God she described as a “great, brooding Motherly spirit” and envisioned a government remade into a “Mother State.” Willard adored her own mother—in particular for not foisting traditional femininity on her and her sister—lived with her mother her whole life, published an epic-length hagiography to

her, *A Great Mother*, and had her own ashes buried in her mother’s casket.

Willard’s famous mantra was “Home Protection,” but beneath the sentimental facade of home and hearth, she led a systematic campaign to rescue American daughters from male domestic tyranny. Under her direction, the WCTU moved far beyond the prohibition of liquor—which temperance activists saw as an accelerant to male sexual predation and domestic violence—to campaigns to raise the marital age of consent, create sex-education programs (preferably taught by mothers), eliminate domestic servitude, improve working conditions, ordain female clergy, and, ultimately, win women’s suffrage.

The women’s suffrage movement—the culmination of all these reform efforts—represented its cause over and over as mothers protecting the bodily integrity and bolstering the power of their daughters, a message driven home in its literature, speeches, songs, art, and ads. The most popular speech of suffrage founding mother Elizabeth Cady Stanton was her address to American daughters, titled “Our Girls.” Stanton’s own daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch, was instrumental in revitalizing suffrage in the early 1900s—and would later commemorate the struggle by organizing a mother-daughter event at Seneca Falls, where her mother had famously first called for women’s rights in 1848.

What turned that century’s mother-daughter alliance into the nightmare of dysfunction that hounds feminism a hundred years later? The first cracks in the foundation were evident by the turn of the century, as an industrialized and urban society, along with all the new educational and economic opportunities that female reformers had fought so hard for, began pulling daughters away from their maternal moorings. The “new” feminism that emerged among the citified, educated daughters of the 1910s embraced the modernist impulse to leave the past behind. “Women, if you want to realize yourselves,” Mina Loy wrote in her 1914 *Feminist Manifesto*, “the lies of centuries have got to be discarded. . . . Nothing short of Absolute Demolition will bring about reform.” Increasingly that included the demolition of their reforming forebears.

The final break was ferocious, a cataclysm called the 1920s. The change wrought by that decade could be illustrated by two covers of *Life* magazine. The first, on October 28, 1920, showcased a proud Columbia in flowing Greek robes and a helmet, congratulating a young New Woman with a voting ballot in her hand, celebrating the ratification of women’s suffrage.



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The festivities were short-lived. On its February 18, 1926, cover, *Life* introduced the *new* New Woman, a glossy teenage socialite in a body-clinging shift, doing the Charleston with a rich old man. The flapper, the iconic female image of the Twenties, would dance her way across dozens of magazine covers, jitterbugging with sugar daddies, motoring with college boys, admiring her own image in the mirror—and never sharing the stage with an older (or any) woman.

A similar transition afflicted the popular spectacle of the suffrage pageant. That display of anointed maidenhood lived on, but in grotesquely altered shape—as the Miss America Pageant,

inaugurated in 1921, just a year after women won the vote. The figure who presided over the “beauty maids” of the first Miss America Pageant wasn’t Columbia but “King Neptune,” a sixty-

eight-year-old man with a crown and a Poseidon pitchfork. (Neptune, who was actually Hudson Maxim, the inventor of smokeless gunpowder, sat on a throne surrounded by his all-female “Court of Honor,” who were instructed to address him, variously, as “His Oceanic Majesty,” “the Marine Monarch of the Sea,” and “Jupiter Pluvius.”) Contestants were no longer billed as “the daughters of Columbia” but instead as “the fair daughters of Uncle Sam.” They received their laurels from an all-male judging panel, which was hardly intent on showcasing a mature vision of womanhood. The first year’s winner was Margaret Gorman, who was only fifteen when she was nominated, and heralded as the *smallest* of the contestants—five foot one with “doll-like” measurements of 30-25-32. Reporters tracking her down to get a quote found her at a playground, shooting marbles.

The prevailing pageantry of the 1920s wasn’t simply an infantilization of the girl. It was, more ominously, an eviction of the mother. The forces arrayed against the mother were many. Some of her antagonists would be presented as allies, sympathetic “experts” who knew better than she did how to do her job. Mothers, the new and reigning “behavioralist” psychologists held, knew nothing about “scientific” child rearing and would do irreparable harm to children if they followed their own instincts instead of the male authorities. John Watson, the so-called father of behaviorism—and a J. Walter Thompson ad executive— inveighed against “the dangers of too much mother love” in his best-selling *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*. The popular

*Parents* magazine, launched in 1926 by George Hecht, a thirty-year-old bachelor, featured hectoring columns by male pediatricians and self-castigating articles by mothers, such as Stella Crossley’s March 1927 testimonial, “Confessions of an Amateur Mother,” promoted with the teaser, “‘Criminally ignorant’ is the charge this young mother makes against herself and others like her.”

In advertisements for mass-produced products that mothers used to make themselves—from dresses to baked goods—the message resounded that mothers’ skills were obsolete, unsound, and unnutritional. Young women were urged to learn their housekeeping and cooking skills from “professionals” instead of mothers—at homemaking and cooking “institutes” established by corporate entities like GE and Westinghouse. “Daughters, fresh from domestic science in school,” sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd reported in their 1929 classic, *Middletown*, “ridicule the mothers’ inherited rule-of-thumb practices as ‘old fashioned.’”

Mothers were deemed incapable even of advising their daughters on menstruation, which was now the province of the new “feminine hygiene” industry. Johnson & Johnson’s first ad campaign for Modess sanitary napkins in the 1920s, called “Modernizing Mother,” showcased vibrant young girls making fun of their stick-in-the-mud mothers for shrinking from the latest consumer goods and styles, with captions like, “Don’t be a ‘Fraid-Cat, Mother, There’s No Danger” and “Step on It, Mother—This Isn’t the Polka.” The accompanying text paid homage to “the modern daughter” who “is the champion of every new device which adds to the pleasure and ease of existence” and “will not tolerate the traditions and drudgeries which held her mother in bondage.”

The Twenties marketplace reversed the authority relationship between mother and daughter: mothers might elevate themselves by following their daughters’ consumer cues, but daughters had nothing to gain from the accumulated social and political experience of their mothers. In the era’s hit films and bestsellers, mothers are absent, vanquished, or literally killed off. In fashion, the buxom, maternal curves of the Gibson Girl gave way to the washboard look of the flapper. The new consumer culture substituted sexual liberation for political power, promoted shopping “choices” over real-life options, and promised young women the “freedom” to display their bodies, smoke and drink with the boys, and adopt the male perspective. As the *New York Times* noted approvingly in 1922, the modern girl “take[s] a man’s view as her mother never could.” In the mass media, story after story by “ex-feminists” declared the disgust of young women with their mothers’ “feminist pother.” As Dorothy

THE TWENTIES MARKED A PIVOT  
POINT BETWEEN THE OLD MATERNAL  
FEMINISM AND A FEMINIST CULTURE  
MUCH MORE MATRICIDAL

Dunbar Bromley wrote in *Harper's* in 1927, "Feminism' has become a term of opprobrium to the modern young woman."

Within a painfully few years after women won the vote, a gleeful press was pointing to young women's lack of electoral ardor as proof that suffrage was—the favorite headline—"a failure." Feminist legislative efforts were largely derailed, a paltry number of women ran for national office, and one of the few items on the maternalist agenda to make it through Congress—a maternity and infancy aid bill—was rescinded in 1929. The few women who did break into politics felt like daughter-less Columbias. Democratic Party officer Emily Newell Blair forlornly observed, "I know of no woman who has a following of other women."

So much of the language and imagery of popular and psychological culture aimed at women in the Twenties suggests a kind of custody fight. Who was going to win the daughter? Would it be the maternal Victorian reformers, the daughters' former champions, now cast as scolds, hags, and prudes? Or would it be the male expert whose voice became the Oz-like authority lurking behind the curtain of the ascendant commercial culture? Would young women reach for the torch of liberty that Columbia brandished in the suffrage pageants or for the "torches of freedom" that the American Tobacco Company promised as the new harbingers of female emancipation? In 1929, Edward Bernays, "the father of PR" and American Tobacco consultant, staged a pageant for the post-suffrage age: a march down Fifth Avenue (seeded with debutantes and secretaries recruited by Bernays) to demand women's "right" to smoke Lucky Strikes in public.

In the history of American mother-daughter relations, the Twenties marked a hinge moment, a pivot point between the old maternal feminism and a feminist culture much more matricidal. American female reformers had fought for eighty years, down multiple generations, to win a tangible tool of political power for their female progeny. Never before had mothers given their daughters so much. But the bequest would be renounced. To the daughters, emancipation wasn't something girls attained with a mother's aid, because now your mother was unmasked as your oppressor. Liberation was no longer an intergenerational collaboration but a fight to the death between generations.

**T**he legacy of the 1920s feminist betrayal haunts modern feminist life. The women's movement went dark for nearly half a century. When it revived in the Sixties and Seventies, the mother-daughter bond no longer dominat-

ed its mission. In fact, the mission often seemed to be mother-daughter conflict. Even as the second wave appeared on the surface to reject the intrusions of 1920s commercialism—the second wave's first big demonstration was, after all, a protest against the Miss America pageant—it retained another 1920s code, not as an oversight but as a founding trait: the driving principle of matricide. The young women who gathered around the Freedom Trash Can at the 1968 Miss America protest would soon be discarding not only their foundation garments but the very notion of maternal foundation.

Tellingly, one of the other big radical feminist demonstrations of 1968 was a mock "burial" of traditional womanhood at Arlington Cemetery, in which young women denounced the "motherist" role. Administering the last rites to mother was a popular motif. Within the new women's liberation movement an attitude prevailed that feminist poet Adrienne Rich famously diagnosed as "matrophobia." "Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted," Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born*, "The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr." To many second wavers, feminism wasn't a bridge between generations but a firewall.

"Hating one's mother," feminist scholar Elaine Showalter said, "was the feminist enlightenment of the '50s and '60s," and her generation of second wavers absorbed it. Comments collected by historian Joyce Antler make for painful reading:

Betty Friedan: "There was my mother and her discontent, which I never understood. I didn't want to be like my mother. . . . Nothing we did ever seemed to satisfy her."

Anne Roiphe: "Everyone had a version of the bitter tale to tell. Sometimes it seemed as if we were engaged in an Olympic competition to decide whose mother was absolutely the worst."

Andrea Dworkin: "We were set against each other, every mother Clytemnestra, every daughter Electra. I did not want to be her."

So many young radical feminists of the era saw their mothers as consumerist saps and their feminist elders as dupes of a capitalist system their generation would dismantle. They would do without mothers, literal and political, and build a power base as a peer group instead, united around the slogan "Sisterhood Is Powerful." "We experienced ourselves as motherless daughters," second-wave feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler recalled. "We were a sibling



horde of sisters.” But suspicion of the maternal bond, even when exercised among “sisters,” kept getting in the way. In her 1976 essay, “Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood,” radical feminist Jo Freeman observed that the women within the movement who were the most frequently attacked were the ones who best fit the mother role. “Ironically their very ability to play this role is resented and creates an image of power which their associates find threatening.” Sisterhood, unmoored from the experience and history of previous generations, devolved into sororicide.

Few of the young feminists had heard of a mother-daughter team like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriet Stanton Blatch. They had no historical memory, only a vague image of (as radical feminist Shulamith Firestone summed up the prevailing view in her circle) “a granite faced spinster obsessed with a vote.” One rare effort by young feminists to establish a connection with the first wave ended disastrously. The New York Radical Women invited legendary suffragist Alice Paul to their 1969 Counter-Inaugural demonstration. Much to the dismay of the octogenarian woman who had founded the National Woman’s Party and endured imprisonment and force-feeding to win the ballot, the young activists asked her to join them onstage to “give back the vote”—by burning voter-registration cards.

There were attempts—many, regrettably, lame—to find a matriarchal inheritance in the very distant past, or the very symbolic. Activists researched ancient goddesses and pre-literate societies, hoping to excavate inspirational Great Mother figures. Antiwar radical Jane Alpert—who had discovered feminism while on the lam from bombing-conspiracy charges—trumpeted in *Ms.* the fuzzy notion of an ancient “mother right,” matriarchy as a sort of Marxist vanguard that would remake society. In the late Seventies, some New York feminists launched the Foundation for Matriarchy, which declared mothering “the essential revolutionary act.” Their signature project was a newspaper called the *Matriarchist* with the slogan “We Who Nurture Will Govern.” The *Matriarchist* soon died, and the group fell apart after one co-founder accused another of “stealing matriarchy.”

**T**he Twenties generational crack-up would cast its shadow over future feminists, be they second wavers raging against materialism or third wavers embracing it. Second-wave activists rejected consumer culture and merchandised sexuality because they saw their mothers as victims of postwar materialism and hated them for it. By that rejection, they repeated the 1920s sin of matricide. The third wavers

have discarded some of the ideological rigidity and rancor that the second-wave feminists felt toward their personal mothers. But they are no freer of the 1920s curse. In many respects, third-wave politics and postmodern gender studies have shifted from the battleground of doctrinaire Seventies women’s liberation toward the intellectual playground of bodily display and pop-culture-friendly theory—a feminism, as Courtney Martin has put it, that is more “about being seen.” In doing so, they’ve fallen into the 1920s trap of employing a commercialized ersatz “liberation” to undermine the political mobilization of their mothers.

In light of the unfortunate convergence in the Twenties of a mass movement’s collapse with the mass market’s ascendancy, the contemporary “feminist” urge toward shopping and retail culture takes on a more sinister coloring. It’s hard to see as innocent the consumer indulgence that was implicated in the death of first-wave feminism—especially as the old formula, commercialism versus feminist continuity, is playing out all over again, in academe as well as in the marketplace.

Women’s studies was originally envisioned as the repository of feminist history and memory, where accumulated knowledge would be enshrined in a safe box where future generations could go to retrieve it. That academic motherlode is in danger of being decommissioned by the increasing disconnect between practical, political feminism and academic feminist theory, and by the rise of a poststructuralist philosophy in gender studies that prefers the deconstructing of female experience to the linkages and legacies of women’s history and regards generational dynamics, and even the categories of “woman” and “man,” as artifices to perform and discard.

These two legacies—the continued matricide and the shape-shifting contamination of commercialism and commercially infused relativism in feminist activism and scholarship—have created a generational donnybrook where the transmission of power repeatedly fails and feminism’s heritage is repeatedly hurled onto the scrap heap. What gets passed on is the predisposition to dispossess, a legacy of no legacy.

**B**y the final day of the NOW election conference in Indianapolis, the “unity” theme was a standing joke. Plenary sessions were bitterly divided and rife with rumors and allegation. Had Latifa Lyles presided, as vice president of membership, over a dramatic decline in financial contributions, as Terry O’Neill’s forces claimed? Or had O’Neill’s camp manipulated the numbers to present a false picture? Had Lyles’s supporters enlisted young ringers? Had O’Neill’s aides recruited older Hillary Clinton–

turned—Sarah Palin supporters to throw the vote at the last minute?

The polls closed on Saturday night. I was in the Lyles hospitality suite when the results were announced: Terry O'Neill, by eight votes, 206 to 198. The room fell silent in shock. Lyles climbed on a chair and delivered a short and determinedly optimistic speech. "I know we still believe we are the leadership of the future," she said. "There is still a twenty-first-century feminism." Her supporters weren't so sure. Young women talked of turning in their NOW cards, and Lyles's advisers began mulling over whether to form their own organization. (Several young rising stars in the organization would resign their positions as NOW officers, and Lyles would take a job as deputy director of the U.S. Labor Department's Women's Bureau.)

Around midnight, Lyles retreated to her hotel room with a few of her closest strategists, sank onto the couch, and burst into tears. "I'm crying because ... it's not because we lost, but ..." She tried to compose herself. "It's these girls," she said, gesturing to the hallway beyond, where clumps of young women were slumped on the floor, weeping. "They are so young and they really ..."

Justine Andronici, Lyles's campaign manager, finished the thought: "They believed in us."

"Yes," Lyles said. "We gave them a false sense of hope."

The next morning, I had breakfast with the new president, Terry O'Neill, and two of her advisers, former NOW president Patricia Ireland and veteran NOW strategist Janet Canterbury. I told them that some of the young women thought they had thrown the election by bringing in Sarah Palin supporters. Canterbury rolled her eyes. "We just out-organized them," she said. "It's what it takes to win one of these things."

I asked whether they were concerned about their failure to pass the torch to a younger generation—what were the implications for the future of the organization? "To me, it's not about having to pass the baton so much as to *share* it," Ireland said.

Terry O'Neill didn't seem particularly triumphant. "I called Latifa twice last night, and I left a message. And she hasn't returned my call." She sighed. "I'm concerned that there's a drumbeat going on that the voters of NOW are too old and too white to appreciate how great that image [of a young black president] could be. And we're going to have to work very hard to open minds." The breakdown of comity weighed on her. "This is why I haven't been eating for three weeks." Others seemed less conciliatory. The door flew open to admit Olga Vives, the original older candidate who had persuaded O'Neill to run after she herself had withdrawn from the race. "I'm going home," Vives said.

When I talked to her a few days later on the phone, Vives told me she was disgusted with some of the younger women's early efforts to champion Lyles. After the heart attack, she said, "They spread around rumors that I was sicker than I was. To me, it was ageist. The movement created this expectation in young women that they were fit to lead when they hadn't learned the ropes. They were demanding the top without having to earn their stripes. We created these little monsters with all this 'You can be anything that you want.' That's who we created and that's who is now demanding control."

**A**t "No Longer in Exile," the conference on the legacy and future of gender studies that I attended at the New School in the spring of this year, the promise of youthful ascendancy seemed closer to fruition. If anything, it was the elders who were taking the knocks: the posters of the school's founding matriarchs, Emily James Putnam and Clara Mayer, stationed like chaperones on either side of the dais, were inadvertently whacked to the floor a couple of times as young speakers brushed by them to take the stage.

The hall was a cauldron of enthusiastic support for theoretical and consumer-saturated academic feminism. Judith "Jack" Halberstam, a gender-studies professor from the University of Southern California who favors crew cuts and men's suits, was the most popular speaker. Her 1998 book, *Female Masculinity*, challenged hidebound notions of sexual identity with a vision of hybridized genders. At the lectern she promised to "smash" what she called "this whole mother-daughter thing [that] keeps coming up." By which, it soon became clear, she meant that she would be smashing just the mother part of the equation. "For people of one generation to be complaining about the next generation not reading them, give it up!" she said. "If you're not relevant anymore, you're not relevant. Move on."

If the older feminist scholars were not "relevant" anymore, who was? Halberstam had an answer: Lady Gaga. She cued up her Power-Point presentation to show us an excerpt from the music video *Telephone*, in which (for readers who somehow managed to miss it) Lady Gaga, modeling various wacky outfits on her mannequin torso, gets tossed in jail, (wo)manhandled by butchy guards, and ogled by cat-fighting sexpots—until babelicious Beyoncé springs Gaga out of prison and the gal pals head out to a diner, where they poison all the men (and women, and a dog), before heading off to points unknown in their "Pussy Wagon," shadowed by a police helicopter.

In *Telephone*'s "brave new world of Gaga girliness," Halberstam said, "we are watching something like the future of feminism." A future that the new wave of feminist theorists will usher in. "What one wants to inspire is new work that one barely recognizes as feminism, and that's what I'm going to call Gaga feminism," Halberstam said. This will be feminist scholarship that breaks with "God help us, longevity," commits acts of "disloyalty" and "betrayal and rupture," and even denies one's own sex: "Instead of becoming women, we should be *unbecoming* women—that category itself seems vexed and problematic."

Such sentiments discomfited some of the older veterans of women's studies in the room, who knew all about betrayal and rupture. Despite the conference's title, gender studies at this self-proclaimed progressive university had been repeatedly "exiled"—or rather, obliterated. First, the New School's undergraduate gender-studies major had been folded into the "culture and media" department and eventually eliminated outright; then its gender-studies master's program had been introduced and killed off within four years. Students wishing to delve deeper into feminist questions had to make do with "no-credit study groups," strictly D.I.Y. affairs. After many appeals, the institution had finally agreed this year to offer a gender-studies minor.

Antipathies kept creeping into the two-day-long proceedings, between the early architects of women's studies, now in their sixties, and the thirty- and forty-something proponents of sexuality and queer-theory studies devoted to post-structuralist, post-colonial, and even "post-gender" critiques. Two graduate students who had conducted interviews about the state of gender studies with New School students and faculty reported their findings. Their interviews, Katie Detwiler said, revealed "dispositional minefields, studded with gestures to betrayal, anxiety, nostalgia, contempt; . . . a sense that a younger generation was *betraying* the political projects and promises of other generations; anger and frustration at what appears to be a shared generational political apathy in the face of widespread social injustice," and an eagerness to shuck off the legacy of women's studies and activism as practiced by their foremothers. Her colleague Chelsea Estep-Armstrong summed up the theme they kept hearing: "If we could only make a clean break with the past—create a new wave, a new school, a new theory—we could shed the weight of history."

But to what end? To create a *tabula rasa*, where the past is no longer usable and one can become or *unbecome* anything? Where everything is relative, indeterminate, and a "choice" as valid as any other choice? In other words, the weight-

less, ahistorical realm of the commercial, a realm that promises its inhabitants a perpetual nursery where no one has to grow up. The nineteenth-century feminist dream of "the empire of the mother," which gave way first to the hope that "sisterhood is powerful" and then to the hokum of "girl power," now faces displacement from an even more infantile transgressiveness ("the brave new world of Gaga girliness"?), a cosmetic revolt that has less in common with feminism than with 1920s flapperism. It posits a world where pseudo-rebellions are mounted but never won nor desired to be won, where "liberation" begins and ends with wordplay and pop-culture pastiche and fishnet stockings, and where all needs can be met by the bountiful commercial breast, the marketplace's simulacrum of the mother.

On the last afternoon of the conference, I caught up with Halberstam at the farewell reception. I told her I didn't understand how Lady Gaga's *Telephone* could be the "future of feminism."

"Adapt or die!" she responded cheerfully. "Pop stars are where the inspiration for feminism is going to come from."

But how was *Telephone* a feminist inspiration? Halberstam pointed to the way the video dealt with rumors that Gaga was a hermaphrodite. "She didn't deny them. She *played* with them. You have that great moment where the prison guards take off her clothes and say, too bad she didn't have a dick . . ."

I wandered back into the conference room to get my coat. The hall was nearly empty, except for a lone woman with graying hair, who was gathering her things into a tote bag. I wondered whether I had come across the New School's Ancient Mariness, or the reincarnation of founding mother Clara Mayer. She introduced herself. Her name was Barrie Karp, and for twenty-six years she had taught feminist studies and philosophy at the New School. She was knowledgeable and enthusiastic about recent developments in critical feminist theory—her syllabi included a host of such thinkers, from Judith Butler to Luce Irigaray to Gayatri Spivak—and, she told me, she had appreciated Halberstam's presentation. Still, her modernity hadn't saved her from the generational thresher. Despite the many contemporary theorists she had assigned in her courses, she was taken to task in her last written evaluation for teaching a "dated" Sixties feminism that was "no longer acceptable." Soon after the culture and media department absorbed and then dissolved the gender-studies program, Karp was forced out. Not that her expulsion made way for an *undated* feminist studies. With her departure, the number of professors in the department dedicated to teaching feminism dropped to zero. ■