Spring 2008

Academic Aunting: Reimaging Feminist (Wo)Mentoring, Teaching, and Relationships.

Laura L. Ellingson
Santa Clara University, lellingson@scu.edu

Patricia Sotirin

Academic Aunting: Reimaging Feminist (Wo)Mentoring, Teaching, and Relationships
Laura L. Ellingson and Patty Sotirin

Abstract: In this essay, we explore the potential of aunting relationships for rethinking feminist selves and relationships, especially in academic settings. Relationships between generations of academic feminists have often been described using mother-daughter metaphors. We suggest some limitations to framing teaching and learning across academic generations (e.g., teacher-student) and among colleagues (e.g., peer review of scholarship) using maternal imagery. We then argue that the figure of the aunt offers a powerful trope for negotiating relationships between the "waves" of academic feminism. Aunts provide a generative alternative to mothering and sisterhood as frameworks for feminist womentoring, teaching, and scholarly reviewing.

> *For the aunts, keepers, and teachers who helped to raise me up.*
> Dedication in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*
> by third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker, Editor

The tensions that mark the boundaries separating second wave and third wave feminists are often referred to in the terms of the nuclear family: the third wave "daughter" is locked in a struggle against the second wave "mother," and both remain mired in a patriarchal academic system. Institutionalization of Women's Studies in higher education over the past three to four decades made it possible for feminist academics—as teachers, researchers, and mentors—to nurture many of the next generation of young feminists. Yet, the excerpt above from Rebecca Walker suggests that relationships among generations of feminists need not be limited to a mother-daughter model. We hold that this generational model is much too limited to accommodate the complexities of contemporary feminist relationships. "Aunt" is one of the titles Walker confers on the nurturing women who helped "raise her up" to find her voice as a third wave feminist, author, editor, and activist. In this essay, we explore the potential of aunting relationships for "raising up" feminist selves and relationships, especially in academic settings. We begin with a brief overview of the history of U.S. feminist movements. We then argue that the figure of the aunt offers a powerful trope for negotiating relationships between the "waves" of feminism and provides a generative alternative to mothering and sisterhood as frameworks for feminist mentoring, teaching, and scholarly reviewing.

Waves of Feminism

The second wave of feminism is generally thought to have been sparked by Betty Freidan's public acknowledgment of the problem that had no name—middle class mothers and housewives who could not, or would not, find their sole identity and satisfaction in the domestic sphere according to the Victorian-esque ideals that characterized the post-WWII United States (Wood, 2006). This revival of the women's movement, the first wave of which had crested and then largely dispersed in 1920 following the achievement of women's suffrage, continued throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as second wave feminists and their allies worked to reform divorce, child custody, domestic abuse, and rape laws; legalize abortion; denounce sexism in the media; criminalize sex-based discrimination in hiring and admissions; promote women's voices in the political sphere; and found women's studies programs at universities (e.g., Wood, 2006). "Sisterhood is powerful" was a pervasive trope in second wave feminist consciousness-raising, urging women to unite as sisters against common oppressions based upon their sex. Yet this trope de-emphasized the differences among women, at times marginalizing the contributions of womanists and feminists of color, lesbians, Third World women, and others to women's movements (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker).

The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s as a recognizable movement. Yet just as there was and is tremendous variation in beliefs among second wave feminists, it is difficult to precisely determine who is a third wave feminist and what ideological and political beliefs characterize the third wave. Lotz (2003) identifies three types of third wave feminists: Reactionary feminists, who primarily seek to criticize the theory and praxis of Second Wave feminists; Women of Color and Third World feminists, who focus on the intersection of gender with other identifiers such as race, class, and nationality; and Postfeminists who (despite tremendous variation in the meaning of this term) seek to extend Second Wave feminist theorizing by shifting the focus of theory and praxis from issues of equality to issues of difference. Two themes pervade writing by and about third wave feminism: multiplicity of identity and living with contradictions (Heywood & Drake, 1997; Siegel, 1997a).

In keeping with the "wave" metaphor, we hold that it is not an essentialist, age-based generational gap that separates second and third wave feminism; rather, second and third feminist "waves" constitute experiential cohorts responding to specific political-historical moments. We acknowledge that coming to feminism is a substantively different experience for those who did so in the 1970's than for those who did so in the 1990's. Differences are undeniable and yet, a kinship exists among second and third wave feminists (Findlen, 1995).

Tension between the Waves

More often than not, the discourses of feminism emphasize the disjunctures between second wave and third wave feminist thought and politics. Sadly, a degree of antagonism in the confrontations between waves of feminists exists, and caricatures abound. Some third wave feminists emphasize their break from second wave feminism by characterizing the second wave as rigid, outdated, lacking complexity, ideologically coercive, and unable to create novel forms of sexuality in the face of hegemonic heterosexuality; they often express resentment, ambivalence, and defiance in their discussions with and about second wave feminists (e.g., Walker, 1995; Alfonso & Triglio, 1997). Some second wave feminists denounce third wavers as short-sighted, ungrateful, politically promiscuous and enervated, and as promoting forms of sexuality that betray feminist ideals; they often express confusion, frustration, and disappointment over the representation of second wave feminism by third wave feminists (e.g., Steinem, 1995; Davis, 1995, Orr, 1997).

Third wave feminists often invoke mother/daughter metaphors in such antagonistic portrayals: "Thus, feminist sensibilities, culminating in a sense of entitlement on the part of many women in this next generation, are present even as these women do battle with their feminist foremothers" (Orr, 1997, p. 42). Detloff's (1997) account of the "politics of contempt" that mark the "intergenerational" tensions among academic feminists suggests that an aggressive and mutually painful struggle for differentiation remains inherent to career progress in academe. However, as Siegel (1997) observes, "If intergenerational dialogue among feminists is to move forward, it must move beyond narrative scripts in which the second wave necessarily becomes the bad mother and the third wave the bad child" (p. 65). The aunt trope offers one way to accomplish this move to a new script.

The Aunt as a Feminist Trope

The aunt is a familiar, often minor character in familial narratives, a gendered node in kinship webs, a designation for affective obligations and ambiguous responsibilities, and an unlikely locus for refiguring feminist relationships across second and third wave perspectives. We advance the aunt as a heuristic trope for contemporary feminist relations and political agency. We propose a feminist reframing of the aunt as a complex identity whose constitution affects enactments of familial relations and affective possibilities; and we reframe aunting as a set of cultural performances that embodies contemporary anxieties over identity, self-in-relation, and otherness (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006; Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006, 2007). These refigurings hold considerable advantage for third wave feminism and the potential for refashioning relationships between second and third wave feminists.

Consider the advantages of aunting over the second-wave trope of sisterhood. Aunting accommodates contradiction and possibility in ways that the relational strictures of sisterhood could not. For example, while sisterhood obscures differences of class and race, aunting facilitates familial bonds across differences—after all, our aunts may be quite unrelated biologically, ethnically, socially, or culturally. The practice of granting "honorary" aunt status suggests that aunting relationships are not bound by the obligations of nuclear familial relationships, but instead can be entered into voluntarily or conferred on the basis of affection and respect rather than obligation or lineage. Aunting moves out of and beyond (second wave) sisterhood—aunts are sisters and yet, their relationships as aunts are neither equivalent to nor predefined by sisterhood. As sisters, we might experience our relationships as exclusionary and predefined by lineage, heritage, or politics. But as aunts, we can be both more inclusive, developing our aunting relationships with diverse others, as well as enjoying exclusive connections in those relationships, whose definitions—as kinships, friendships, mentorships, colleagues, or whatever—are ambiguous and open for exploration (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006; Sotirin & Ellingson, 2006).

Aunting moves us beyond the impasses and antagonisms of the mother/daughter trope as well. For third wave feminists, the aunt figure offers the opportunity for female-centered intimacy without the intense identification of a mother/daughter relation. Aunts may take the place of the mother, serving as mentors, caretakers, and teachers, in relationships where intimacy is premised more on desire and connection than on familial duty, thereby avoiding the tensions of the mother/daughter relation that sometimes stymy second and third wave interactions.

Moreover, one may have more than one aunt, each of whom offers a different embodiment of female possibilities, a different negotiation of the same/different dialectic; such multiplicities avoid the "my mother/my self" quandary of a mother/daughter relation yet hold out the promise of an ongoing relational commitment in which selfhood is constituted as always in-relation. For example, in the case of academic feminist teacher/scholars as aunts, there is no sense that any one feminist aunt must meet all the needs or desires of the student niece (or nephew), or that in working with another aunt the student niece is being disloyal. The aunt relationship is often engaged more intermittently, serendipitously, and in response to immediate exigencies than the mother relationship. In this sense, the aunt offers more flexibility, responsiveness, and tolerance for difference than the mother as a trope for second and third wave feminist relationships.

As a feminist trope, the aunt can be taken to mark an affective node in feminist community networks. We cannot name our aunts without situating ourselves within such networks: "my aunt" marks a place within familial relations and implies "my" place within a history of chosen relationships and collective commitments. Connections must be situated within the conditions and experiences of contemporary family life, including mobile lifestyles, patterns of generational loyalties and caretaking, and the continual re-creation of family histories out of personal and public memories. Accordingly, we take the figure of the aunt to be "made up" by a diverse and sometimes contradictory complex of relationships, expectations, and experiences. In this sense, feminist aunting is very much a response to the current exigencies of the feminist movement as well as an illustrative figure in the collective memory of feminist thought and experience. Just as importantly, aunting responds to and shapes the changes that mark physical and social growth, and, in the case of feminist aunting relations, intellectual and ethical development. In short, the trope of aunting offers rich possibilities for refiguring intergenerational feminist relationships and practices. We turn now to some concrete proposals that demonstrate how the aunt relationship might become an important alternative model for feminist academic relationships.

Aunts as Mentors, Teachers, and Reviewers

We suggest that themes of multiplicity and contradiction integral to third wave feminisms illustrate how tensions between second and third wave feminists might be productively reframed. Specifically, we suggest that there are a number of important academic roles feminists play that can be reframed productively as performances of aunting: mentor, teacher, and reviewer.

Mentoring Aunts

The trope of aunting enables us to highlight the flexibility of feminist mentoring. While mothering must by cultural fiat entail a relationship of mutually sustained and intense involvement and commitment, aunting is diversely configured within a variety of cultural, social, and personal circumstances. After briefly reviewing traditional masculine icons of mentoring, we discuss feminist, maternal models and explore how we can expand and frame feminist mentoring through conscious invocation of the aunt.

The classic figure of the mentor is in Homer's *Odyssey*: Mentor is an old friend and wise counselor, in whom Odysseus entrusts his household during his long absence. This classic tale of mentoring appears to involve a feminine dimension in the guise of the goddess Athena. Appearing as Mentor, Athena guides Odysseus's son Telemachus in his search for his father and, concurrently, in his passage to manhood and male privilege within the patriarchal Greek culture. Yet the tale is an unrelievedly masculinist "coming of age" story as Mentor/Athena facilitates Telemachus's ambitions to join his father as a man and a king.

The contemporary conception of mentoring is steeped in masculinist experiences and relations as well. Mentoring as a corporate practice is defined within an instrumentalist, exchange model of relations in which the mentor and mentee both use the relationship for advancing their separate interests (Kram, 1985). Where the mentee gains access, connections, status, and protection, the mentor gains political and social support. The corporatist, masculinist model dominates academic practices of mentoring as well. The importance of the invisible college and networking to academic careers has long encouraged instrumental relations among professors and students, especially graduate students. A turn to collaborative and dialogic models during the nineties recast mentoring as co-learning. These more relationally-focused models of academic mentoring have made ideological inroads into the academy but have not displaced the legacy of autonomous research and instrumental, hierarchical mentor/mentee relations.

Feminist revisions of mentoring relationships and practices have advanced alternative models that embrace affective relations (hooks, 1994), women's ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986), "womentoring" (Dahl, 1998), and an ethics of care in academic relationships. In reconceiving mentoring relationships, feminists have turned to the mother/daughter model as a counter to masculinist, corporatist models. Framing academic mentoring in terms of mothering can reflect an experience of mentoring that emphasizes productive nurturing across differentials of power, experience, and wisdom "between the woman who wants and the woman who knows" (de Lauretis, 1989, p. 25). Elizabeth Bell, the first recipient of the annual Teacher/Mentor Award conferred by the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender, has written with her advisees about her mentoring and teaching relationships as relations of "entrustment," a symbolic mediation of the world through an exchange of knowledge and desire between a mother figure and a daughter figure (Bell, Golombisky, Singh, & Hirschmann, 2000). Bell argues that unlike the feminist maternal model of women mothering the world, hers is a model that acknowledges the power disparity between mothers and daughters and valorizes the daughter's desire to know and her debt to the mother as well as the mother's power to teach. Bell and her advisees explicitly adopt maternal imagery to describe their experience of mutual love and support within, through, and across their differences as feminist advisor/mentor and mentees, vowing to "enact our commitments to our daughters in the name of our mothers" in their lives within and beyond academia (p. 45).

The limitation, as we pointed out earlier, is that the mother/daughter analogy interjects the tensions troubling second and third wave relations more generally into the practice of feminist mentoring. In contrast, aunting offers a relational model that admits the rich multiplicities of feminist academic teacher/student relations while deferring the intensity of mother/daughter dynamics. Aunting does not require us to engage in the blurring of mother/self but allows space for the empowering experience of difference between second and third wave feminists and their mentors. My mother may be my self but my aunt is not: she may bear striking kinship resemblances and we may feel intensely connected but she does not bring to bear the same tensions that a mother does.

While some academic aunting relationships may be characterized by nurturing qualities and/or apprentice roles, other aunting relationships may be based on intermittent, even fleeting, connections that nonetheless hold considerable significance for both parties. Wiltshire (1998) advises women to recognize the mentors who have facilitated their growth and well-being even when those mentors do not announce themselves or appear only briefly or intermittently. Her recovery of the "classical" sense of mentoring fits well with our understanding of the mentoring role of the aunt. This classical sense

> has to do with discernment of choices rather than with self-advancement in choices already made. It has to do with the company we keep, some of it quite unexpected and perhaps short-lived. It has to do with risk and change as we continue to grow. It has to do finally with a strange assurance that we are not alone on the road. (p. 2)

Wiltshire argues that Athena's mentoring disguises in the *Odyssey* are reprised in the numerous mentoring figures women encounter in their everyday lives, including the "attentive elder" and the "family member." While this validation of Athena's disguise as Mentor neglects the troubling masculinist and patriarchal contexts of the *Odyssey*, another of Athena's mentoring disguises affirms the value of aunting as a mentoring relationship. Wiltshire notes that non-nuclear family members are important mentor candidates. Turning to the *Odyssey*, she draws attention to Athena's only feminine mentoring appearance in the narrative, as Iphthime, the sister of Odysseus's wife and Telemachus's mother, Penelope (pp. 32-34). Iphthime appears in order to comfort Penelope who is distraught over the absence of both her husband and her son (who is off with Mentor). What Wiltshire fails to discern is that Iphtime is Telemachus's aunt; in this guise, Athena speaks as a mentor not only to support her sibling but to promote her nephew as well.

Thus we suggest a mentoring continuum, valorizing both the relationships in which our academic "wise women" pass on the wisdom and craft of feminist scholarship and the momentary "aunting" encounters that matter to emerging academics and that draw both parties into a mutual acknowledgement of their kinship as academics and as feminists. While the former may involve the intense time, effort, and emotional engagement that Bell and her students described as "entrustment," the latter may involve those fleeting moments of mutual confirmation and respect that Wiltshire advises us to discern – for example, engaging in productive disagreements during a conference panel, experiencing empathetic connections with each other's experiences as feminist teachers or scholars, crafting generative feedback to a proposal or manuscript, facilitating collegial connections toward fruitful collaborations and alliances and/or creating opportunities for others (awards, calls, ideas) in the context of shared feminist commitments. Such encounters among feminist scholars need not develop into sustained relationships to be mutually significant and beneficial. While it would be odd to characterize these often coincidental interactions as mothering, as instances of aunting they suggest fluid networking and both intellectual and affective immediacy as ways that academic 'kinship" is accomplished. The value of the aunt as flexible mentor is even more pronounced when we consider ongoing relational shifts that constitute and accompany changes in our academic and personal selves over the course of our transitions from student to junior faculty to senior faculty, and/or as we move along creative, less linear career trajectories. Geographic, theoretical, and professional distances may develop between previously close mentor/mentees, while new or long-dormant relationships flourish. Like our biological/legal family aunts, our academic aunts often do not live close by, and we see them only periodically. But aunting connections offer us a sense that "we are not alone in this world" even as these relationships shift and change (Wiltshire, 1998).

Our approach also celebrates the reciprocity of aunting relationships, not as self-interested and instrumental exchanges but as mutually supportive and respectful, set in terms of what is done together – the practices of academic civility, the creation and preservation of academic wisdom. Academic nieces and nephews often are appreciative and supportive, giving credit where it is due, pausing to say thank you, taking opportunities to celebrate their academic aunts —such as nominating them for well-deserved awards for teaching, research, and mentoring—and passing their aunts' wisdom forward to others.

In summary, reframing feminist academic mentoring as aunting permits greater professional and personal latitude in the performance of this relationship. As aunts, academic mentors and mentees may be extremely close as friends and as scholars but the relationship does not carry any obligation to develop such a relationship. Rather, as aunts and nieces or nephews, the mentoring relationship is

responsive to personal and professional preferences and possibilities. In addition, an emerging scholar may enjoy more than one aunting relationship, allowing us to acknowledge our academic "kinships" and expand on the opportunities to pass on the wisdom and craft of feminist scholarship. Finally, academic aunts as mentors affirm that we need not, indeed, cannot travel alone through the ivory halls; academic aunts enable our passage.

Reviewer-as-Aunt

Invoking the aunt as a trope has significant implications for the process of peer reviewing, a critical yet disparaged practice of scholarship. We suggest that approaching the review process as aunting could help to humanize and reconfigure this practice by incorporating an ethic of care in community (Gilligan, 1982). Peer review is conducted to ensure the high quality of journal articles, yet this practice unapologetically invokes the power of masked evaluation, a manifestation of apparatuses of knowledge, or underlying structures and systems that establish and maintain taken-for-granted standards for judging the appropriateness of topics, methods, writing, etc. in scholarship (Foucault, 1980). Stories of disciplinary pressure and resistance as well as the damage suffered through such struggles are legend but one stands out for feminist scholars. Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) brilliantly critique the field of communication for its disciplinary practices, including the process of peer review. They point out that peer review not only assures standards of quality but enables a strict policing of the field, disciplining anyone who tries to move outside accepted (sexist, racist, classist, etc) boundaries with their scholarship. Speaking of two particularly incendiary manuscript reviews they received, Blair et al. maintain that

> The focal work of both these reviews is the designation of approved and disapproved identities; that is, articulation of the range of what one is able to say and how, as well as who one can be as an acceptable member of a group, in this case the discipline. The related issues of approved readings and approved politics emerge in connection with the identity prescriptions. (p. 397)

While decrying such masculine disciplinary strategies, feminist journals nonetheless have embraced the model of anonymous peer review in order to establish credibility within their fields and thus protect and promote the careers of feminists who publish their work within these journals.

We have experienced personally and heard stories from dozens of scholars and graduate students about reviews that were hostile, nonsensical, cruel, dismissive, unhelpful, made claims irrelevant to the actual manuscript submitted, and/or engaged in ad hominem attacks on the author(s). We also have our own stories and have heard others' stories of helpful, insightful, firm-but-kind, detailed reviews that helped to make our manuscripts far better than we could have made them alone. We suggest that imagining the review process as one involving aunts and their nieces/nephews would be helpful for both reviewers and authors in reconfiguring the review process as a relationship that mutually facilitates excellence rather than a mode of disciplinary policing that runs rough-shod over affective and intellectual investments.

Conceptualizing each other as aunts, nieces, and nephews rather than faceless professionals is a critical aspect of such a revised review process. Rather than the "blind justice" of standard approaches to reviewing, reviewing-as-aunting could incorporate an ethic of care that would involve engaging each other in dialogue, respecting differences, and facilitating the development of each other's insights and ideas. Consider how the aunt reviewer might frame her/his self in relation to the manuscript author. Rather than engaging an author from a position of anonymous authority, the reviewer who positions herself or himself as an aunt may well assume a more responsive stance that takes compassion as well as scholarly quality into consideration. So, for example, rather than adopting a tone of condemnation or superiority when the work does not seem to measure up to scholarly standards, an aunt reviewer might temper criticism with care for both the potential of the manuscript and the author. While this reviewer may not care personally about the author, adopting an aunting relationship casts both reviewer and author as scholarly "kin" and members of a community that both care about; hence, a respectful and helpful review contributes to their shared kinship.

The model of reviewer-as-aunt also defers the maternal impulse that some reviewers enact; that is, the impulse to write pages and pages of helpful suggestions in an effort to nurture a solid revision. We both know more than a few reviewers who spend an inordinate amount of time on reviews while sacrificing their own scholarly projects. These reviewers provide detailed comments on the scope, methods, organization, and content of the manuscript, along with copious suggested citations, lengthy lists of grammatical and style errors, and repeated exhortations for the authors not to give up. As an aunt, excessive sacrifice is not necessary in order to express compassion and care; rather, the relational commitments of aunting encourage more limited—though still careful—attention to a particular manuscript in order to provide helpful, constructive, but not necessarily exhaustive, feedback and encouragement.

In sum, viewing manuscript reviewing as aunting offers benefits to both authors and reviewers. Further, as individual aunts and nieces/nephews engage each other in productive, constructive, and sufficient (but not excessive) scholarly exchange through the peer review process, they can positively influence the culture of

academic communities by fostering both an ethic of care and a sense of balanced, reciprocal relationships.

Teacher-as-Aunt

Bell's (1997) brilliant, witty, and painful musing on teaching her "women and communication" course gives voice to the many feminist teachers who seek to illuminate the social costs of patriarchy. As noble as this cause is, the personal cost can be staggering:

> The self-surveillance I constantly engage in ("Did I say that right? Am I being fair? Whose point of view is being excluded? Will they like me?) reads like a chapter out of Deborah Tannen . . . The ways in which my "competence" falters changes each semester, and I search for reasons, make corrections, do things differently, and, in the end—after many sleepless nights—cut my losses. (Bell, 1997, p. 93)

While Bell does not draw upon maternal imagery, she does stress the intense level of responsibility and personal guilt she feels when she "fails" to reach some students. We liken this to the intensity of the mother-child bond that implies a deep and lasting connection with tremendous responsibility for meeting the dependent's needs and may inspire, in the process, tension, emotional wounds, and burnout. Bell is not alone in her guilt over not doing enough for students and/or failing to be a "good enough" feminist model for students (see, for example, hooks, 1989; Smith, 1982; Tompkins, 1992; Weiler, 1991).

Conscious invocation of the aunt figure to frame one's understand of one's self as a feminist teacher may provide a degree of comfort and liberation for feminist teachers weary of confronting apathetic, resistant, or outright hostile students. Aunt-as-teacher suggests a teacher who is a resource and a guide, but not *the* resource or *the* guide for a group of students. The aunt may have an impact on a student that is anywhere from profound to slight. Yet any level of impact may be deemed a type of success. Like the variety of relationships we have with nieces and nephews who are biological or legal kin, aunt-niece/nephew relationships in the academy presume variation and multiplicity.

As feminist teachers, casting ourselves as students' aunts means that there are other aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and parents around to help our students; we alone are not responsible for meeting the needs of every student. It can be enormously freeing to accept that we are only small parts of an extended network of academic kin, and while we are responsible for doing our best, we are not individually responsible for the well being of every student in our village. We raise this point because, although we may not often articulate this when we confess a teacher's "guilt" over failing to bring students to

a more critical awareness, we believe that the foundation of guilt is in the belief that we must reach every student in order to be good feminists. As aunts, we know that setting impossible standards for ourselves limits our ability to serve anyone as we grow increasingly frustrated by our inevitable imperfections.

Moreover, considering teaching as aunting relationships rather than more intense mothering duties enables a redemption of teachers a student does not enjoy learning from and with. It is inevitable that students will encounter teachers whose teaching styles do not complement their learning styles as well as some other teachers' pedagogical approaches do. Personality conflicts also occur, despite sincere efforts on both sides. We document elsewhere that aunts who are disliked by nieces/nephews nonetheless function in important and positive ways within kinship networks (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006). For example, an unpleasant aunt can serve as a reminder of the value of other kin relationships, facilitate connections to other kin (e.g., cousins), and provide cautionary tales of the costs associated with lack of responsible decision making. Likewise, disliked aunt teachers can and do impart important scholarly and life lessons; they may show us a different perspective, opening us to insights and intellectual avenues that counter more familiar and comfortable perspectives. They may challenge students to recognize relational responsibilities in order to productively negotiate a tense relationship.

In sum, framing feminist teaching relationships as aunting relationships offers a productive way to negotiate the collaboration between instructors and students. As aunts, feminist teachers can acknowledge their shared (not sole) responsibility for nurturing students. As nieces and nephews, students can acknowledge and appreciate the positive contributions from aunt/teachers with whom they ultimately do not forge close connections.

Conclusion: The Possibilities of Feminist Aunting

We need not overthrow the mother/daughter or sistering tropes that have defined the agency of feminism and the relationships among feminists for the past several decades. They remain useful in understanding and working through our relational connections and are certainly critical to the history and development of feminism as a continuous struggle. But as we have demonstrated, these tropes are often limited and limiting for maintaining the vitality of feminist commitments and communities. Third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker, in the book acknowledgements we quoted in the opening of this article, could have attributed her political (self)consciousness solely to her feminist mother, Alice Walker; instead, she thanks numerous "aunts," her feminist "kin" related through intellectual, affective, and political commitments to her and her mother. Around their kitchen table, these aunts apparently cared about

Rebecca and she for them in ways that facilitated not only feminist sensibilities but a long-lasting relational network. Walker's acknowledgements confirm the value and resilience of feminist aunting.

Our discussion has defined aunting as a guiding trope for feminist kinship and agency that accords with the features of multiplicity, fragmentation, and contradiction in contemporary feminism. Aunting affords important relational resources for working out the connections among second and third wave feminists – latitudes for self-discovery, connection without traditional and unreflective obligations, multiplicities of self-with-other (against the demand for equivalences in "my mother, myself" or in "sisterhood"), ethical agency that accommodates contradiction and mystery—as well as relationships among mentors and mentees, reviewers and authors, and teachers and students.

Of course, there are dangers of aunting that accord with the advantages we have emphasized: kinships that are too loosely bound, differences that overwhelm connection, and indifferences that dispel care. Also, the aunt is a feminine model and thus remains burdened within an academic world that continues to foster masculine values and ways of relating. It is not our purpose here to defend aunting as a requisite or exclusive trope for feminist agency. But we do contend that aunting allows us to admit these dangers whereas mothering and sistering make such admissions much more problematic. The trope of aunting can revitalize feminist movements within the academy and help us to move beyond while continuing to honor intergenerational bonds and acknowledging status differences.

Finally, our discussion of the aunt as a feminist trope has implications for scholarly relations and practices. Aunts as feminist mentors, teachers, and keepers are not defined through pre-established lineages or obligations but through ongoing commitments and struggles, mutually defined identities, and shared passions. As we reflect on aunting, we discover a myriad of aunts and aunting relationships that offer models for feminist mentoring, reviewing, and teaching. Aunting, with its multiplicity of forms, creates space for doing academic kinwork in ways that foster connection, difference, mutual growth, and creative trajectories among feminist scholars and within feminist academic communities.

Note

References

Alfonso, R., & Triglio, J. (1997). Surfing the third wave: A dialogue between two third wave feminists. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 7-16.

Bailey, C. (1997). Making waves and drawing lines: The politics of defining the vicissitudes of feminism. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 17-28.

Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind.* New York: Basic Books

Bell, E. E. (1997). Listen up. You have to: Voices from women and communication. *Western Journal of Communication, 61*, 89-100.

Bell, E. E., Golombisky, K., Singh, G., & Hirschmann, K. (2000). To all the girls I've loved before: Academic love letters on mentoring, power, and desire." *Communication Theory 10*, 27-47.

Blair, C., Brown, J., & Baxter, L.A. (1994). Disciplining the feminine. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 80*, 383-409.

Dahl, C. (1998). Women's ways of mentoring. *Fast Company, 17*, 186. Retrieved January 10, 2007 from http://www.fastcompany.com/online/17/womentoring.html.

Davis, A. (1995). Epilogue. In R. Walker (Ed.). *To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (pp. 279-284). New York: Anchor Books.

de Lauretis, T. (1989). The essence of the triangle or, taking the risk of essentialism seriously: Feminist theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, 1, 3-37.*

Detlof, M. (1997). Mean spirits: The politics of contempt between feminist generations. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 76-99.

Ellingson, L. L., & Sotirin, P. (2006). Exploring young adults' perspectives on communication with aunts. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 23*, 499-517.

Findlen, B. (1995). Introduction. In B. Findlen (Ed.), *Listen up: Voices of the next feminist generation* (pp. xi-xvi). Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977.* C. Gordon (Ed.). C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, & K. Soper (Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Heywood, L., & Drake, J. (1997). Introduction. In L. Heywood and J. Drake (Eds.), *Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (pp. 1-20). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black.* London: Sheba.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* New York: Routledge.

Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life.* Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.

Lather, P.A (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern.* New York: Routledge.

Lotz, A. D. (2003). Communicating Third-Wave feminism and new social movements: Challenges for the next century of feminist endeavor. *Women & Language, 26*, 2-9.

Neuborn, E. (1995). Imagine my surprise. In B. Findlen (Ed.), *Listen up: Voices of the next feminist generation* (pp. 29-35). Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Orr, C. (1997). Charting the currents of the third wave. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 29-45.

Sigel, D. L. (1997a). The legacy of the personal: Generating theory in feminism's third wave. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 46-75.

Siegel, D. L. (1997b). Reading between the Waves: Feminist historiography in a "postfeminist" moment. In L. Heywood and J. Drake (Eds.), *Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (pp. 55-82). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

Smith, B. (1982). Racism and women's studies. In G.T. Hull, P. B. Scott, & B. Smith (Eds.), *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave* (pp. 52-56). New York: Feminist Press.

Sorisio, C. (1997). A tale of two feminisms: Power and victimization in contemporary feminist debate. In L. Heywood and J. Drake (Eds.), *Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (pp. 134-149). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

Sotirin, P., & Ellingson, L. L. (2006). The "other" woman in family life: Aunt/niece/nephew communication. In K. Floyd & M. Morman

(Eds.), *Widening the family circle: New research on family communication* (pp. 81-99). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steinem, G. (1995). Foreword. In R. Walker (Ed.). *To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (pp. xiii-xxviii). New York: Anchor Books.

Tompkins, J. (1992). *A life in school: What the teacher learned.* Boston: Addison Wesley.

Walker, R. (1995). Being real: An introduction. In R. Walker (Ed.). *To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism* (pp. xxix-xl). New York: Anchor Books.

Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review, 61*, 449-474.

Wiltshire, S.F. (1998). *Athena's disguises: Mentors in everyday life.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Wood, J. T. (2006). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture, seventh edition.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Zita, J. N. (1997). Third wave feminisms: An introduction. *Hypatia, 12*(3), 1-6.

Laura Ellingson is Associate Professor at Santa Clara University whose scholarship specializes in gender and health communication; she can be reached at lellingson@scu.edu.

Patty Sotirin, Professor at Michigan Technological University focuses on critical-interpretive approaches in organizational communication and issues of culture, conflict, and gender in relational communication; pjsotiri@mtu.edu is her electronic address.