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Talk by Dana Densmore for the panel "Cell 16"

### **Cell 16: Gender and Agency, with Digressions into Naming**

In the opening plenary session, both Deborah Belle and Sara Evans spoke of their dismay at the "myths" about the Women's Liberation Movement, aka "second wave feminism" that they encountered when they moved into the scholarly academic world after their time of activism in the movement on the ground. I'd like to address one of those myths here, as another original activist who now has one foot in the scholarly world.

I have heard an idea floated in some sectors of academic feminism and gender studies that so-called second wave feminism was "essentialist." What seems to be meant by this is that we were naïve and primitive about gender, not aware of its fluidity and the extent to which it is "performative" and not an essential quality. According to this idea, this limitation was because it came before the widespread emergence and political activism of transsexual people and people choosing to identify themselves as neither gender, and before the publication of scholar Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*. Furthermore, one suspects that our problem may be traceable to the fact that we ("second wave" feminists) inhabited the dark ages before the rise of women's studies programs wherein feminist theory, authentically articulated, seems to be understood to have originated.

But the important question is whether it is an accurate assessment. Of course, in any movement at any time there is a wide range of views and perspectives, in the thinking of "second wave" feminists as in the thinking of "third wave" feminists and as in the thinking of feminists of the academic scholarly tribe. So here and there one can find examples of essentialist thinking during the early days, whether reactive and rhetorical or a matter of deep principle.

An example of what I took to be the former would be the Redstockings "Pro-Woman Line" in which everything that the patriarchy fastened on to sneer at and use as proof of women's

inferiority was turned around and argued to be evidence of women's greater strength and moral superiority. Another example, one with a very different tone but in some ways arguably having the same rhetorical aim, might be Valerie Solanas's *Scum Manifesto*. These were already on the ground in 1968.

A little later, reflecting the excitement and empowerment of the women's movement itself, a sense arose of the contrast between the life-giving power of women in challenging the old ideologies and idolatries and the rigidities and anti-life oppressiveness and destructiveness of the male ways of being in the world. The theory being worked out by Mary Daly and those influenced by her, and the work of neo-pagans and others who were finding meaningful outlet for their spiritual yearnings in goddess religions and their rituals, did move very distinctly and in a principled way into what the academics mean by essentialism.

But on the whole I would argue that it is not an accurate assessment of "second wave" feminism. A great deal of early "second wave" feminist theory was neither asserting gender fluidity *nor* its opposite. The aim was rather the simple one of analyzing the operation of patriarchy and its systems of oppression (the more theoretical angles) on the one hand, and asserting resistance and encouraging resistance in others (the shucking of the oppressor's foot from our necks) on the other. Many of the early papers, of course, included both analysis *and* exhortation.

If these analyses and tracts spoke of women and men, the point was not to assert some inherent dichotomy of gender but to recognize social realities. For example, rapists were predominantly self-identified as men and the prey the rapists sought was predominantly what they (the perpetrators) saw as female. Or the articles were recognizing the reality that want ads in the newspaper were classified by "male" and "female." Or that psychologists (both serious and popular) pontificated endlessly about "woman's nature" and the role she must adopt for her own psychological health.

These categories were made for us, and we were largely occupied with resisting and undermining them and their consequences for our lives.

Most of the early second wave theory was concerned with that oppression, analyzing its way of working and asserting our rejection of its false ideologies.

The approach of Cell 16, as reflected both in much of our writings in our theoretical journal *No More Fun & Games*, and in our political actions, was firmly in that camp. Gender did exist as categories in people's minds, and on the ground real human people were being hurt by those concepts.

We were suspicious of anything said about gender as intending, or at least functioning, to put us in a box. In fact, I would argue here that, even without knowing all that the transgender and boundary-challenging queer activists have since taught us, and without having read Judith Butler's analysis based on that new information, we anticipated the conclusions about gender she reports and discusses by some thirty years.

Now, one *might* look back and say that the urgency of the situation was such that we didn't have the luxury of pondering such subtleties as whether gender was fixed and innate, or if so whether it corresponded reliably to genital morphology or to chromosomes, and so on. But in 1968 Cell 16 *did* see what is now, in the academic jargon, called the "performative" function of gender, as very much related to our analysis of what we called female liberation.

We didn't want to call the movement "women's liberation" because we didn't believe that "woman" was real. It was patriarchy's idol, a fantasy, an oppressive and alienating prescription whose intention and function was to force female people into a limited subservient role for the service and convenience of the ruling class, the patriarchy, the ones who invented and enforced the definition and imposed it on female people (as they demarcated that class).

Should one of us demur, or refuse the definition, or act outside its limitations, all the patriarchal voices joined ranks to assert that she "wants to be a man" or even "is a man" (by which, of course, they meant that she was a freak, not that she had entered into the privileged respected class).

We resisted the prescriptions in many ways, personal and political. We made theater of the cutting of one woman's long blonde hair;

we picketed the Playboy Club; we trained our bodies with martial arts and taught self-defense to other women.

But we also found a very direct vehicle to deconstruct the gender idol. Roxanne managed to arrange a showing of the film "The Queens" which we screened under our group's auspices (handling out flyers in the lobby). The film couldn't have made our point more clearly. It was a documentary about a drag queen competition and in the course of the film we followed the competitors from their normal "man" selves looking quite conventionally male, and not at all like the conventional appearance or manner assigned to women, through all the elaborate and sometimes painful processes of girdling, padding, hair removal and hair dressing, make-up, and costuming. Even though we had watched the whole process, and even though we had seen the contestants unmistakably as "men" at the beginning, by the end, as they presented themselves in the actual competition as "women," the audience could not help but see them as women.

The transformation, to our external eyes, was complete. And our point was made. Being a "woman" was something that was just a matter of construction---a matter of make-up and costume and mimicking arbitrary conventions of movement and voice. We could do it, and so could a paunchy, balding man. It wasn't real. These men were having fun with the transformation, but if it wasn't fun for us, we were in no way stuck with it. It wasn't who we were, whatever those imposing the role might claim.

So who were we? We were, and are, human beings. We wanted to be allowed to be human, whatever that might entail. Were there any innate differences between male humans and female humans? The prescriptive demands, the incessant training from birth and even before, were so heavy there seemed no way to know, so it wasn't an important question. We proposed that perhaps, after a moratorium on the whole concepts of male and female, a prolonged allowing of everyone to be just who they were, perhaps extending over several generations, maybe some tendencies would emerge. Since even under the present heavy conditioning, some women are more of any given "masculine" quality than most men, and some men show more of any given "feminine" quality than most women, surely under free self expression there would be no *consistent* pattern. But some tendencies might emerge statistically. Or not. That wasn't the important thing: the important thing was that the

patriarchy take its foot off our necks and let us be whatever range of human qualities felt right to us.

Instead of dividing all human qualities into "male and female" (which, for some bizarre reason all documented societies seem to have done) why not let the human range play itself out? Human diversity is enormous. We see it not just among ourselves despite the societal pressures to conform to gender stereotypes but among different cultures around the globe. Other societies may have their own gender stereotypes, but they are different from ours.

In 1968, we, the women who came to call themselves Cell 16, started to publish a theoretical journal of female liberation. What were the range of concerns and analyses that occupied us in that field of inquiry, and what did that say about what we thought was important to understand and to do?

First, we might note that it was a journal. It intended to be serious, to work out theory, not just be agitprop. Second, it was a journal of "female liberation" not women's liberation. I already spoke about what that meant to us. If we could have brought it even more to the bare bones of who we were, we would have, but at least we could avoid the phony "woman" label. And why not say "feminist"? We respected the history of that word, but it was too close to the scorned and undignified "feminine" to sit well with us. (Practically every term associated with women had such unpleasant baggage in the language made by the patriarchy for its purposes, it was hard to find something neutral, let alone dignified.) And finally, there was the main title: *No More Fun & Games*. A refusal to be trivialized, to be played with, to function as entertainment and sport for men.

Naming remained a problem on other levels. When someone names something, they place it in a pigeon-hole of their choice. Adam naming the animals is understood as giving him sovereignty over them. The media was obsessive about wanting to name our group. We would say that we were just part of the female liberation movement. But they didn't like the idea of movement, so they began naming our group "Female Liberation." But that was no good, because we still wanted that to be the name of the movement.

So finally we realized we needed a name for the group. I said that the movement was like an organism and we were a cell of that organism. The organism idea appealed, and someone suggested

the alliterative Cell 16, named after the street address at which we met, with the bonus of planting the idea that there might be another secret fifteen. (And although Marxist ideas appealed to some of the group, the sectarian idea of the "cell" wasn't part of this choice, nor was it characteristic of our fluid, anti-authoritarian grouping.)

In this paper I have put quotation marks around the term "second wave feminism" because not only was that a term we did not use, if we had known that academics would assign that term to our movement we would have protested that it already had a perfectly accurate self-selected name: "women's liberation movement." (Our choice did not prevail; but that's fine; the movement collectively chose.)

Why not let us as a movement name ourselves? Why get rid of the very characteristic term "liberation" and the very important phenomenon of a "movement" and even the word "women" in favor of a somewhat bland designation of theory? (Others at this conference have pointed out a process of the academic world dropping these words one by one till we have only the completely unpoliticized "gender and sexuality studies.")

A word here about what I see as the difference between so-called second wave and third wave feminist activism. As I gather from the blogs and social media pages that I have been following, the third wave activists see themselves as denizens of the internet, using the internet to blog and share links and analyze and encourage resistance. "Analyze and encourage resistance": sound familiar? Not only is the goal and sort of material communicated the same as what we early second wavers were doing, but the content fits right in. As I read the naming and analyses of the manifestations of misogyny and war on women, I see clear-eyed statements and insightful analysis that would fit right into one of the *No More Fun & Games* journals. There is one difference, though, in tone. The third wavers are often confident enough to take a humorous tone. They can make fun of the ridiculous attempts to suppress women, despite the real damage often being done. For us in the late 60's, humor was, while not entirely absent, in shorter supply in our writings. We didn't know how it would turn out. What would men be willing to do? Would it be fighting to the death over the barricades, as men's violent reactions and rhetoric seemed to threaten?

As it turned out, it did not come to that. Our call for women to refuse to stay with men who were abusive or disrespectful turned out to be powerful incentive for a re-evaluation of behavior, if not a full turning-over of consciousness. Today there are many more male allies, and many more female allies as well. Some of us can even arrange to move in circles where the worst outrages of misogyny don't have a large impact on us in day-to-day ways. This frees us to fight the remaining challenges with a bit of detachment, and throw our efforts in support of those whose situation in life does not allow them that same protection.

And the use of the internet has another important benefit. These blogs may not have the outreach of Fox News or other mass media, but they have vastly more outreach than our little *No More Fun & Games* journals or the mimeographed papers of other early second wavers. An exposé can occasionally "go viral" on Twitter or Facebook and force immediate change or at least backtracking.

But why is there a second wave and a third wave? What made the gap? To most of us from the early second wave days, it is dismaying and discouraging to see how bad things are in certain parts of society---rape culture, the attack on our hard-won reproductive rights, use of the internet to terrorize women who speak out or assert opinions as humans. How could it be that forty-five years later these things are still going on and, indeed, seem to be worsening?

Yes, there was a gap. The women's movement that took off in the 60's and early 70's was so transformative that the next generation coming up was able to imagine that the job had been done. Indeed, some saw no problem and thought no job ever needed to be done. Taking on the reality of the media's caricature (the "hairy, man-hating feminist", the "feminazi") and the sneers of those whose privileges were curtailed or threatened, some of the gap generation resented the un-humorous intransigence of their mothers who had fought the battles that *allowed* them to think that they could have equality and also have the male approbation for being feminine and sexy. They could have equality *and* the fun and games.

Well, we know how it turned out. Although overall, things are vastly improved, in some critical areas things are backsliding, and there is an uncivility and unapologetic tone to attacks on women.

No need to cite the egregious examples; we know them all too well. But there is a new resistance rising up, and these third wave activists are doing a great job.

I spoke of the Cell 16 focus on agency. We roundly and thoroughly rejected being told by anyone what we were by virtue of being "women." That applied to the ideologies of patriarchal institutions but also to anyone wishing to keep the same categories but to change the valence (such as motherhood or other female roles being sacrilized). What were our major focuses?

First was our analysis and writing and promulgation of our theoretical analyses. We were trying to sort out and hone and clarify what the tapestry of problems were by which the oppression of women reached into every aspect of life. We wanted to get it so searingly transparent that even women with the most to lose (the privileges of playing the role, the threats that had to be risked to refuse or resist)---that even those women would recognize their lives and the power relations that held sway and the price they were paying in human dignity. That was what we could do to cause the movement to spread widely enough that men would be forced to re-evaluate, or if not that, to accept that they could not control women's human drive to life. We weren't speaking to men; we were speaking to women. We trusted, and were proved right in this, that when enough women said "no" they could not be forced to carry on. It was only when we ourselves took the deal, accepted the ideology, each one of us isolated, that such gross injustice could prevail.

There were two other major areas in which we made assertions of our agency. One was in rejecting abusive relationships some women were entering into out of the ideology (promoted by psychologists) that we "needed" sex. Celibacy, we said, was preferable to unhealthy relationships, and was an honorable alternative until such time (should it come) as one found a love relationship that supported and celebrated one's human character and dignity. This came out in reaction to our dismay of seeing women sacrifice their feminist principles and their energies to struggle with a man who could not accept an equal. Willingness to honor celibacy allowed women to leave abusive men. Then men could choose to become decent or not, but if not, they would not have women's psychological and domestic support.

More central to our program was the equipping ourselves and other women to defend ourselves against the violence then as now used to keep women in their place and punish women who stepped out of their place (such as walking down a public street). But indeed, then as now, it wasn't even necessary to step out of place, because for many men hatred of women was so deeply experienced that just being female was enough (in their view) to warrant being punished by rape, sexual torture, and death.

And it wasn't just the reality of the need to fight for one's life against actual attacks. It was the feeling that one was vulnerable, the sense as one moved through the world that any pathetic creep could jump out and assault and our attempts to protect ourselves would be even more pathetic and ridiculous. How could we have any sense of dignity or privacy with that hanging over us? So at the very beginning we plunged into serious martial arts training ourselves and began self defense classes for other women, leading after a few years to a formal martial arts school for women.

We weren't begging men to be nice to us, which has never worked. We were taking our own agency to see to it that our chances of feeling like the victims of an assault were as small as we could make them. Of course, there might always be some circumstances in which anyone could be overpowered. But we would be capable enough that we would not feel like a victim: even if overpowered, we would not feel ineffectual or ridiculous. The assailant (who would most likely be surprised by any resistance) would get a good run for his money, and probably be very sorry to have tangled with us.

The mind-set of agency felt central when we were challenged by women who resisted our call to such serious training by complaining "Why should we have to do all that? Let men change!"

We shook our heads, wondering what kind of superstitious thinking that was. Intensity of feeling, wishing it were so, concentrating on the unfairness as if that were sufficient to magically change reality—these alone will not create the change. Many millennia have demonstrated that calls on moral decency have very little efficacy in restraining men from using their physical power to abuse women.

What, then, *might* cause change to happen? Our view was, as we expressed it in one flyer we put out after a particular nasty string of

serial murders and dismemberments of women, "Attacks against women will stop when it becomes as dangerous to attack a woman as to attack a man."

We acted ourselves, and proposed that others act, in such a way as to directly stop the assaults in their moment, with the long-term side benefit of prevention of future attacks by removing the satisfaction for the assailant.

The gender-based violence was refused by our commitment to our own agency and our own assertion of our human dignity. What we knew ourselves to be *essentially* was human.