Women's Liberation Explosion at BU:
Going from one to many collectives in 1969-70
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This paper was presented as part of "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s," a conference organized by the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University, March 27-29, 2014.

I left a dying Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1965 at age 17 with a full scholarship and arrived to my dorm at Boston University. I had been through a gruesome senior year in high school after my girlfriend and I had been caught together. The threats were dire – and she ended up slicing her wrists and almost dying. I was put into forced therapy with a shrink who wanted all the details over and over again: What did she do to you? What did you do to her? This was five years before Stonewall.

How I looked forward to the freedom and independence a big urban university seemed to promise. However, I was in for some unanticipated restrictions. At BU we women were not permitted to wear pants unless a date came to pick us up on his motorcycle and our housemother was around to give dispensation. We had to wear skirts even in the common rooms of the dorm. Our weekday curfew was 10:00 pm and on weekends it was midnight. Men had no curfews, of course. Things changed within a year – at least in terms of pants and curfews.

Reproductive rights issues were also in flux. I was part of the 1967 action at Boston University by birth control activist Bill Baird to challenge the law forbidding birth control for single people. By pre-arrangement a few of us women students took condoms and foam from him in a big auditorium full of witnesses in an act of civil disobedience. Baird was arrested, and he took that case all the way to the Supreme Court.

I was already politically active when I came to Boston, having founded a student civil rights group in Pittsburgh at about age 14. At BU I got involved in anti-racism work and the anti-VietNam-war movement. In fact, I took a year off after my junior year to work full-time for the New England Resistance, the main lefty anti-war group in Boston at that time – the equivalent of SDS in other towns. That didn't really work out – long story – but I gained a lot of political experience. I was in charge of security, for instance, and have a great photo of me holding a giant walkie talkie, the size of my forearm, while standing very tiny among the visiting Black Panthers, whose security I was in charge of coordinating. Below us on the Boston Commons were about a quarter of a million demonstrators.

Eventually I met Roxanne Dunbar who had organized the first women's group Cell 16 which talked about "female liberation." Once I experienced that women's liberation "click," thanks to Roxanne, I was never to see the world the same.

I returned to BU in September 1969 to complete my degree, and with others I formed the first women's liberation collective at Boston University. We lived together in a big commune and stumbled through the wrenching and illuminating process that became known as consciousness-raising. Suddenly I could group together and name my tormentors. Suddenly I wasn't to blame. Suddenly I wasn't the only one. The only one to have been raped, to have been belittled, to have been defined by my biology. The

intimacy of those collectives and the sense of joy and pain as our picture of reality came into anguished focus made for the most intense human sensations I will probably ever experience.

We talked about the first time we were treated like a girl, instead of like a kid, and all the restrictions and limitations that brought down on us. We talked about our first period, our first fuck, our dangerous male relatives and neighbors, the difference between our possibilities and those of our brothers or boy cousins. We talked about our bodies, that sense of betrayal for some of us and elation for others as those bodies matured into a gender. That was a year of hell and a hell of a year.

There are a number of things the historians seem to be leaving out of their reports of the founding of the women's movement – and widespread mental health disruptions is one such phenomenon. Forced to recall abuse by the consciousness raising process, forced to reconstruct reality in light of all we were realizing, a lot of women got very freaked out. When a couple of our members had resulting emotional breakdowns, it was a real lesson in class differences. One went to McLean's, then a posh retreat favored by pop stars; another was left to do the Stelazine shuffle in a state hospital, until we managed to liberate her.

Throughout those early days, we struggled to create a language in which to speak publicly about these revelations. After a very long, stoned brainstorm, we coined the term "sexism" – to reflect a parallel to racism – and that very night at about 2:30 or 3:00 am we went out to 700 Commonwealth Ave., then a new white brick dorm, and we spray-painted in huge letters: *Smash Sexism*. The next morning by 6:00 am it had been painted over white and an unwitting report in the newspaper said that vandals had written something perverted on the walls of the dorm. We're still laughing about that.

While writing this, I Googled the word sexism and found that Wikipedia cites two times that the word was used by other women about that time – once in 1965 and once in 1968, both in academic settings. Words have a way of coming to life when we need them, I guess. I'm sure none of us in the collective were aware of either of those other instances.

Interest in women's liberation was explosive at BU – as in many places. We had so many students asking to join our collective that we provided a matching service. Once ten women had approached us, we'd get them together to form their own collective. Several of us would mentor each new group until they coalesced. By the end of the year, we produced seven or eight women's liberation collectives at BU. This was the only time in my life that I was to have offspring.

We helped each new collective find a particular project to work on, in the belief that it would help them build an activist identity together. Our collective had already staked out our corner of the struggle. We took on facilitating revenge for women who had been raped. As I was studying the martial arts – which later turned into a 20-year career – and had begun teaching my sisters in the collective, we offered women who had been raped help in taking revenge.

This was long before any kind of social consciousness around rape or sympathy for assaulted women among cops or judges. Rather, rape was generally considered the fault of the woman. She was considered to have been "asking for it," because of her behavior, her dress, or her sexual history. Remember, a husband was legally permitted to rape his wife in Massachusetts until 1981. That's 1981.

But in 1969, women all knew that to go to the cops about a rape was to experience another assault on some level or another. We offered women on campus a choice of how they wanted to deal with their rapists. Some wanted their rapists to suffer physically and some wanted them out of sight.

One pacifist woman wanted us to take her to her rapist's apartment so that she would have our support as she confronted him. Once we got inside, he was disgusting, laughing in her face at how she had really wanted it no matter how much she protested. He was so fearless despite several of us invading his apartment, that she changed her mind. She asked us to grab him so that she could slap his face.

Another woman had been raped on a date with a student at Northeastern, I believe it was. She told us, "I have a photo of him. I want to make a poster that says RAPIST at the top and ask the women of Northeastern to take care of him." We made that poster and hung it on a tree. A Northeastern woman who had been assaulted by the same guy called a meeting in the cafeteria, after seeing the poster, and one by one, several other women said that he had raped or pressured them. They became the kernel for a new women's collective at Northeastern. He withdrew from school and left town right away.

It was a discombobulating time for me. As a working class scholarship student, I had been struggling to juggle my studies, my revolutionary work, and my need to support myself. Unlike many other BU students and members of my collective, I wasn't cashing checks from wealthy parents – I was earning my way. I finally left my job as a French fry girl in a pre-cursor to McDonalds on Comm Ave because it only paid 99 cents an hour. Instead, I began working as a topless dancer, first in Brighton and then in the Combat Zone. It was a much more lucrative gig, paying $25 cash each night.

My life was strange. In the mornings I was a college student; in the afternoons I was plotting a feminist revolution; and in the evenings I was sweet-talking deluded men who were paying extortionate fees to the mafia owners for my bloody Marys – or as they were known in the business, tomato juice.

Later that year (1970), I was part of the first group of out lesbians to march in Boston's International Women's Day march. Betty Freidan had infamously responded to rumors that lesbians were going to turn up by saying that she would not be "cowed by the lavender menace." Women in NY and Boston and LA had been meeting quietly, forming a new aspect to the movement, and practicing saying the word lesbian out loud. In my case, I had not discussed these meetings with anyone in the collective, except for the other dyke who was attending them as well. We spent the week dying all our clothes lavender. We turned up all mono-color to this historic march, some of us high on acid, and some not. We were not all that well-received by many at the march. In fact they wanted us to stay in the back. Because my straight sisters didn't even know I had been meeting with this group, it highlighted a division in our collective that never quite healed.

The following year I was part of a new collective. We were all working class lesbians and the collective was called Stick It In The Wall Motherfucker Collective. For one of our first projects, we produced very cool calling cards to hand to men hassling us on any level in the streets. The cards said: "This card has been treated with a chemical. One hour after you touch it, your balls will begin to shrivel."

Unlike some other towns, Boston feminists were very resistant to dealing with class. I remember repeatedly being scoffed at by privileged women who denied that I could be working class, being that I had just finished college. I was perplexed by why I was the only one in Stick It In The Wall Motherfucker Collective to be challenged. My friend Diane Balser explained it to me: "It's because you're Jewish" she said. It was an important lesson for me in the intersection, as the academics now call it, of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. And of the resistance of privileged feminists to an analysis filtered through those lenses.

Our collective's newspaper *Lavender Vision*, the first issue done in collaboration with a group of radical faeries, was one of the first-ever queer publications. We could only afford to bring it out twice. Our collective joined the take-over of 888 Memorial Drive – several of us were interviewed for the amazing documentary "Left on Pearl." I went on to have a 20-year career as a martial arts master and to live abroad for 24 years on a couple of different continents, always active in the local women's movement, whatever different form it took.

Now I'm 66 and desperate to find a kick-ass collective, so let me know if you hear of anything. Thanks for inviting me to speak.

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Bio: Sue Katz is a wordsmith and rebel who has lived and worked on three continents: first as a martial arts master, then promoting transnational volunteering, and currently teaching fitness and dance to seniors and elders. Her fiction and non-fiction have been published for decades in anthologies, magazines, and online. Her new collection of short stories about the love lives of elders, ***Lillian's Last Affair***, is a true labor of love. She wrote the book ***Thanks But No Thanks: The Voter's Guide To Sarah Palin*** in 28 days and nights. Read her edgy blog "Consenting Adult" at www.suekatz.com, "friend" her at facebook.com/sue.katz, or write her at consentingadultpress@hotmail.com.