

A VINDICATION OF FEMINISM AS IDENTITY POLITICS: TOWARDS A
COMBAHEEAN RESPONSE TO ZERILLI'S "FREEDOM-CENTERED FEMINISM"

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Abstract

C. MARTIN CAVER: A Vindication of Feminist Identity Politics: Towards a Combaheean Response to Zerilli's "Freedom-Centered Feminism"
(Under the direction of Susan Bickford)

This paper is primarily an extended critique and meditation on Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and The Abyss of Freedom*. In that remarkable text Zerilli attempts to move beyond the perennial debates of identity reification, deconstruction, and calls to a "strategic essentialism." Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, she helps us to refocus on the primacy of politics as an active doing instead of a rule-governed practice. However, in so doing she downplays the work of feminists committed to just the sort of political engagement she champions, yet who insist on making claims based on identity. I attempt to show that these identity claims should not be perceived as a rule which politics should follow, but as essentially political themselves. Using the Combahee River Collective Statement as an illustration of this, I show how identity claims are not necessarily claims to privileged knowledge or preferential treatment, nor are they confining caricatures that lock their claimants in oppressive stereotypes, binding them to the recognition they seek. Instead, the Combahee River Collective shows how identity politics names the exclusion felt by specific identity groups and enacts a new political discourse where their perspective and their interests are taken seriously.

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The Caricaturization of Identity Politics

In a scene from Paddy Chayevsky's screenplay for *The Hospital* we witness a raucous community meeting about plans for a hospital expansion which would replace tenement housing with a drug treatment facility. First, a Black man speaks out using Marxist critique to admonish “middle-class Black traitors and flunkies who are selling out the Black proletarians.” Then a white woman rises, claiming the floor and shouting, “Let's get back to the abortion issue. What the hell does the male establishment know about abortion?” She is then cut off by a Black woman who demands, “Who the hell raised the issue of birth control? The issue at hand is the control of drug addiction in this community...”¹ This scene is one of many in the film that depicts, albeit in caricature, a loss of faith in the social movement politics of the 1960s and the rise of a more fragmentary identity politics. I describe this scene here, because this paper (with the humblest of aspirations) attempts to respond to a set of problems typically associated with identity politics in general and feminist politics in particular. Generally, I want to counter the common understanding of identity politics which assumes that it is a separatist, exclusionary force that hinders progressive coalition-building. Specifically, I want to respond to Linda Zerilli's path-breaking approach to feminist political thought, which invokes the work of Hannah Arendt to propose a way of sidestepping the problems associated with feminism as a form of identity politics. Drawing on Michel Foucault and the Combahee River Collective, I will seek to productively critique Zerilli's approach by

1 Chayefsky, Paddy. *The Hospital*. Shooting draft. 1971. Movie Script Source. 27 April 2013. <<http://www.moviescriptsource.com/movie-script.php?id=192>>

explaining how it mischaracterizes what second-wave feminists were doing when they asserted a politics of difference that took identity and experience as fundamental. In so doing I hope to offer a vindication of sorts for the identity politics bemoaned by figures like Todd Gitlin, Richard Rorty, and Nancy Fraser.²

To begin I will reconstruct Zerilli's main arguments with regards to her theory of "freedom-centered feminism." This vision of politics is one which inspires even as it confounds. In deceptively comprehensible prose she guides us through an analysis of *Sexual Difference*, the publication of the Italian feminist Milan Bookstore Collective. Here she argues that the Milan Collective exhibits precisely the type of feminist politics that could help us get beyond what she calls "the category of women debates" that have plagued feminist political thought ever since women of color and post-structuralists began mounting critiques of "woman" as a coherent, unified group. Zerilli sees the Milan Collective as employing a new feminist practice of political judgment which is crucially productive in three ways. First, it is not a form of identity politics, which she sees as anti-political in that it fractures political community (particularly on the left), ties us to the "what" of conscripted categories of injury instead of the "who" which distinguishes political actors, and makes authoritative epistemological claims instead of contingent political ones. Second, her account of feminist political judgment is one that focuses on a non-sovereign conception of the subject, which seeks to take us out of the problems associated with treating women as a unified willing subject motivated to action by consciousness of injuries, and instead envisions a feminist politics motivated by a desire

2 See for instance: Gitlin, Todd. *The Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York: Holt, 1996), Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Fraser, Nancy. *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1996)

for feminist interlocutors, agnostic to the potential ends of such a practice. Third her account leads us to rethink the nature of democratic political power, a power that enters the world when actors come together freely to inaugurate political claims which build the world anew. I will respond to this by raising a series of questions about the implications of her arguments and their efficacy. Then I will seek answers to those questions by taking a close look at another feminist group, the Combahee River Collective. By analyzing what the CRC was actually attempting to do in its theorizing, consciousness-raising, and organizing work, I believe it will become apparent that Zerilli's project is quite valuable, but that it must be further extended in ways she does not seem to anticipate fully. First, it must take into account the ways in which epistemological claims can themselves be seen as political. Second, it must appreciate the ways in which political power is not *only* constituted by actors, but prefigured in the field in which action takes place.

What I hope to reclaim over the course of this paper is a feminism that overcomes the caricature of essentialism and dogmatism that has been foisted upon it. What seems clear to me in reading the works of the CRC is that they mark a critical addition to the category of women debates which goes beyond questions of epistemology (of a right way to think about feminist politics) or an argument about which feminist theory (liberal, socialist, standpoint, radical, poststructural) most accurately articulates the oppression of “women.” Instead, we can see in the CRC's political claims an epistemological perspective that had been denied them. That this could be read in Zerillian terms (as a political judgment that affirms freedom without following a deductive logic) shows at once what is promising and problematic about her approach. On the one hand we see it

shows how a vision of an “ungrounded claim to freedom” is so promising for feminist political thought. This freedom is one enacted by nonsovereign subjects (those reliant on one another for both perception of and action in the world) as they engage in judgments of the social objects and phenomena around them. These judgments build the social world anew because they are unmediated by universal rules and as such they are contingent, not determinate. For feminism this then holds the promise of making “women” a political subject that is claimed by feminists and that is enacted through judgments (and desire for those judgments) amongst them. However, we can also see how potentially problematic this vision might be in that by focusing primarily on a fundamental freedom, we lose sight of the ways in which feminism (even as identity politics) is also important as a vision of fundamental justice. The CRC is integral in the illustration of this, because their claims were claims *to have a claim*, to matter, and to be heard as “levelly human,” *while also* Black, lesbian, feminist, critics of capitalism, and community activists. Zerilli either misapprehends their claims as not fundamentally political or she is not fully cognizant of their c, and this shows all the more how the *space* in which such ungrounded/unqualified claims are made often needs to be foregrounded/qualified in order that such claims make sense and get a fair hearing.

Zerilli and the Milan Collective's “Freedom-Centered Feminism”

Zerilli's objective in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* is multiple. At its most fundamental, however, it is an argument for a politics capable of moving past what she calls “the subject question” and the roadblock this question represents. The subject question for Zerilli is a legacy of Enlightenment philosophy which perceives the

individual subject as inherently sovereign, capable of judging and willing by virtue of a perfectly free will. Feminism, Zerilli tells us, has been entangled both with this ideal (“be it an 'I' against all others or an 'I' multiplied and extended into an omnipotent 'we'”) and its deconstruction (in which it becomes “both the limit and the condition of feminist politics”), but that in either case the space of politics is constricted (Zerilli 2005: 10-12). For Zerilli only a politics that moves beyond the subject question and accounts for the nonsovereign character of political action will rescue us from unproductive discourses on the “category of women,” “difference versus equality,” and “objectivity versus feminist epistemology.” Moving beyond the subject question helps to sidestep each of these debates, because each of them perceives of women through the lens of a sovereign subject inherited from modern political theory. Simply put, a feminism that moves beyond the subject question is the “freedom-centered feminism” which she wishes to inaugurate. Drawing on Arendt, Zerilli proposes a perspective on feminism which centers on the plural nonsovereignty necessary for political judgment and political action, and which she thinks is denied by identity politics and facile claims of equality. In what follows I will track these arguments with respect to the specific example of a “freedom-centered feminism,” given by her lengthy analysis of the Italian feminist group known as the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective.

Zerilli's focus on the Milan Collective is two-fold. First she sees them as having developed, a “feminist symbolization of sexual difference,” a way of relating to one another through self-chosen cultural images of women as free, authoritative interlocutors. Second, she sees them as practicing a form of political judgment that refuses to elide differences between women and instead sees female identity as a political claim, made

amongst women as a practice of feminism. A feminist symbolization of sexual difference is integral to Zerilli's account of freedom-centered feminism, because it allows women to move beyond a politics of equality that is centered on (traditionally masculine) notions of sovereignty. As Zerilli argues:

In the absence of the practice and symbols of free horizontal social-symbolic relations among women, liberalism gives rise to the 'terrible invitation' to pursue freedom and equality with men by repudiating one's sexed body and one's affiliations with women. This repudiation of sexed being, far from enabling female freedom, destroys it. (97)

How does this work? For Zerilli and the Milan Collective, it seems that up to now women have either claimed equal rights as undifferentiated from men, thus denying their sexed identity; or they have insisted on a victimized identity “whose symbolic figuration is hegemonic” and “denies the existence of the female gender – only a 'female condition'” (102). This female condition is an identity based on injury, “housewives, women with abortion problems, raped women,” and it is this identity that makes them undifferentiated, vis-à-vis the rest of society (100). This claim that “all women are the same” within a patriarchal frame of reference is one with which the Combahee River Collective will take issue (95).

However, what this means for Zerilli and the Milan Collective is that society is let off the hook. Either women's sexed difference is effaced and made compatible with equality (difference that does not make a difference), or women are recognized only as victims, which entails an endless “game” of recrimination politics without ever being taken seriously as “bearers of a desire that seeks social inscription but no reparation” (102). For Zerilli and the Milan Collective it is paramount that women abjure reparation for two reasons. First, because freedom lies elsewhere, through the figuration of women

as free outside of their subjection. Second, because reparation is an unquenchable desire that goes so deep that it can never be fully compensated but only rationalized by society through endless episodes of non-threatening redress. This idea that identity politics only consists in the re-inscription of injuries and the pursuit of a recriminative strategy designed to pursue reparation indefinitely is what I seek to combat here.

On Zerilli's account what feminist politics requires is neither the symbol of the heroic woman, which provides a superior and unattainable icon, nor the victim, which serves as a wretched and confining one (112). Instead of these modes of figuration women must look to symbolic figures of "entrustment," of "examples (not rules)" of a new symbolic order of "female origin," which ground feminism in the "material and symbolic practice of free relations among women" (114). These symbols of entrustment include "the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi," "the relationship between the poet H.D. and Bryher in Greece," and "the friendship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, among other exemplary relationships between women" (114). All of these are figures which symbolize for Zerilli and the Milan Collective a co-authorization, an acknowledgement of each other's desire for freedom, one that says "Go on ... Go ahead" (114-115). They are important and necessary because they represent a freedom prior to the consciousness of injury, oppression, and subjection (101). They represent a knowledge that "makes consciousness possible" (101). Zerilli states, "What allows a woman to become conscious of oppression, in other words, is not the bare fact or truth of oppression but a symbolic representation of female freedom" (101).

She describes this symbolic representation in various ways. It is a "symbolic authorization" that women give to one another simply by attributing to each other the

authority of such symbols and by acknowledging their shared desire for this authority (115). It is also “political work on the symbolic,” a “new symbolic practice,” whereby women look beyond recrimination, injury, and lack and towards a “something more” that is neither equality nor reparation but instead a desire for relations under these symbols of freedom (102). It is a form of politics, a relationship founded in entrustment, and addressed to women by women. This symbolic representation, this discursive politics, critically confronts women's differences through political judgment which it mediates not by *a priori* rules but through this symbolic representation of women as authoritative female interlocutors. The desire for this politics is the desire for a “power, a 'female plus' ... that valorize[s] *both* the female gender and the individual woman in her difference from other women” (112). In other words, symbolic representation is a judgment about what images of feminist politics are freedom-affirming, a judgment which is used to mediate the differences between women in light of these images. It is a form of aesthetic political judgment that actively results in the (non-sovereign) feminist freedom it symbolically represents. To paraphrase Richard Rorty, “It enacts the taste by which it will judge itself.”³

Zerilli's Vision of Feminist Judgment

Zerilli draws heavily on an interpretation of Hannah Arendt's work to describe the form of political judgment she has in mind. Following the Milan Collective she calls it a

3 Rorty writes about ironist literary heroes as those who “create the taste by which he will be judged.” I see Zerilli making a similar invocation for her vision of feminism on the terrain of politics. See Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) at p. 97

“practice of disparity” (110). What is judgment as a “practice of disparity”? It is a “necessary first step” in making the inequalities amongst women “speak in free social forms” (110). Zerilli argues that, unlike a principle of equality, which serves to render women the same as men and other women; a “practice of disparity” preserves equality as a political claim, an “equalized” relation of unequals engineered from “outside” (111). Through this practice women judge one another and their status vis-à-vis men in relation to the symbolic representation of freedom discussed above. This becomes a “third term,” a “*tertium comparationis*,” which maintains equality as something relational, a political judgment not about anything inherent in the objects being compared, but an active claim about the subjects making the comparison (111-112). This politicization of equality (and inequality) allows pluralism to surface, as differences and judgments of those differences appear. It thus troubles the “monologic” notion of a “‘proper’ feminist viewpoint and with it the unity of the group” (110). However, while the security of ideological thinking may be lost, a world of “genuine interlocutors” comes to life. According to Zerilli the interlocutors are:

... those women who have preferences like and unlike mine, who see from a standpoint not identical with my own, and whose opinions I am called upon to judge or by whom my own dearly held opinions will be judged and perhaps unsettled even to the point of crisis.” (110)

This mode of judgment, which is grounded neither on “doctrinal formulas or ‘argumentative logic,’” exists only through the “entrustment” of women to other women as they acknowledge and co-authorize each other's desire for freedom (111). This “entrustment,” this acknowledgment, is enacted publicly as women express a grateful reciprocity towards one other, and thus engage in a new form of feminist politics. This “freedom-centered” feminist politics encourages women to judge and be judged by other

women, to choose membership in a genealogy of women while maintaining individuality, and to transform the “I-will” of self-sovereign, masculinist, and “recriminative” politics into the “I-can” of non-sovereign, feminist, and “non-recriminative” politics of a promised community (117). This promised community is *literally* promised; it is enacted – by women for one another – in the present.

The illustration Zerilli gives of this within the Milan Collective is the story of how its members began to judge one another during the compilation of what came to be known as the “Yellow Catalogue,” or “*Catalogo giallo*” (107). This was a pamphlet on social interpretation which grew out of the reading of women's literature and the ways it facilitated the group's judgment of one another (107). Here we learn of how, during a discussion of Jane Austen, one woman spoke out saying that “The mothers [who prevent their daughter's freedom] are not the writers; they are really here among us, because we are not all equals here” (108). This statement, on their account, had the effect of making them feel freer, because it was one that liberated them from a vision of equality that was “neutral, genderless” and which “crushed every nonrecriminative female desire ... and articulation of difference in the name of a commonality based on membership in an oppressed group” (108). In turn they began to perceive themselves as unequal, different; but in ways that did not stymie their fledgling associational desires, which had always been there, obscured “underneath the so-called power conflicts between women as that which made them painful and endless,” as if through conflict the painful lack of robust associations could be overcome, rationalized (109).

Zerilli interprets this episode as exposing “a mode of difference that is irreducible to social differences (for example, gender, race, class, sexuality),” in other words,

“differences of taste” which could not compel agreement (109-110). Focusing initially on the judgment of “prototypes” of female literary figures (and in turn the women making claims about these figures), the Milan women avoided idealizing either “the superior woman” associated with “the politics of equality” or “the wretch” associated with the politics of recrimination. These “prototypes” were instead figures who simply “authorize those women who authorize them,” remaining always “subject to judgment, argument, and debate” (112-113). These then gave way to the examples of “entrustment” mentioned above (Ruth and Naomi, H.D. and Bryher, Woolf and Sackville-West) as the figuration of an associational desire beyond social value (“the economy of use,” “the betterment of society”) became clearer (113). For Zerilli this is the figuration of a radical claim to democratic participation, an associational desire that is “unqualified” in that it makes no reference to social utility. She sees feminist politics then as an unqualified vision of women's freedom, untethered to rights, means-end logic, or any prevailing assumptions about what political questions are important. She insists that this sort of freedom is “always 'out of order'” (9).

Zerilli and Second-wave Feminism

One of the main goals of this paper is to point out the ways in which Zerilli's approach to feminist political freedom may result in either a repetition or a compounding of some of the problems she associates with the “category of women” debates that serve as an impetus for her work. To that end, I will here look specifically at her criticism of second-wave feminism and seek to point out what I take to be significant relationships

between her original arguments and those criticisms. On my reading Zerilli makes three main critiques of second-wave feminism. First, she argues that it presents a too-unified category of women as the subject of feminism (ix). Second, she argues that this category and the implications therein is used to justify a “rule-governed theorizing” whereby theory is reduced to an anti-political form of deductive reasoning which she calls “the false security of epistemology” (48, 64). Third, she argues that this form of theorizing results in the misguided attempt to pursue a feminist freedom through a (traditionally masculine) “fantasy of sovereignty” that is incapable of creating a space (through freedom as a world-building practice) where the category of women can be articulated as a “political relation” (20, 97). While these criticisms are neither misguided nor poorly received, I will attempt here to explain why Zerilli’s critiques may lead her to misapprehend ways in which feminism as identity politics can be seen as not only world-building and politically creative but also self-consciously contingent and anti-epistemological.

To begin, Zerilli is of course right to point out that some first- and second-wave feminists considered the category of women to be fairly monolithic or at least as sharing some basic, uniform relationship to the power of men. Zerilli herself, however, admits that the notion that second-wave feminism ever really held a coherent view of women as a group is itself suspect, stating that “the orientation provided by this putatively collective subject was illusory at best” (1). Ultimately she does side with third-wave feminists who argue that “differences matter and the very category of identity itself is suspect” (20). This is certainly the right inclination to have (to problematize categorical accounts of identity), but slightly problematic in that it obscures the similarities between certain types

of second- and third- wave theorizing on the category of women. Catherine MacKinnon for example defines women as a constructed concept that nonetheless has real implications that must be taken into account. MacKinnon argues that “since no woman is unaffected by whatever creates and destroys women as such, no woman is without stake in women's situation” (MacKinnon 38). In this way, even one of the avatars of second-wave feminist theory argues “women become defined politically” as “the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women (38, 1987: 6). No less than Judith Butler herself claims to share resonances with this approach (Butler 1999, xii). So to begin, the typical distinctions between second- and third- wave feminists may on closer examination give way to a more nuanced genealogy.

This sort of critique, however, is largely beside the point for Zerilli's purposes, because she is less concerned with the content of the so-called category of women debates (women as a coherent subject v. women as a subjected identity group) than with the mode of theorizing which fueled them. She describes this as a desire on the part of both second- and third-wave feminists “to form universal concepts under which to subsume particulars in the name of predicting and achieving social change” (Zerilli 2005: 34). For second-wave feminists, then, an example of such a universal concept would include patriarchy, the strategic oppression of women for the maintenance of social power (MacKinnon 48). What is problematic about the use of this concept on Zerilli's account is that it offers a pre-fabricated universal response to what should be the ongoing political contestation of particular claims, particular judgments. She argues that “Second-wave feminism tended to think about political claims as truth claims (that is, as claims that need to be and can be 'justified' in the epistemic sense of giving proofs)” (Zerilli

2009: 91).

This assertion is problematic for two reasons. First, it overlooks the way in which some second-wave feminists saw their project in anti-dogmatic, non-deductive, intersubjective ways. Second, it fails to perceive how the claims that Zerilli describes as “truth claims” are themselves self-consciously political. This is the case, for instance, when they are the conscious choice of an epistemological perspective that grounds itself not on an objective (masculine) truth but on an intersubjectively constructed political reality. Some second-wave feminists explicitly rejected the idea of objective truth claims, while for others, this rejection was implicit in the very self-consciously political claims they were making. MacKinnon puts it thusly, “Truth is in a sense a collective experience of truth, in which 'knowledge' is assimilated to consciousness, a consciousness that exists as a reality in the world, not merely in the head” (MacKinnon 98). What is important is that an adequate (intersubjective) account is given of the lived social reality of the world. This move, from epistemology as scientific and objective to epistemology as situated and political, is significant. It “contextualizes verification, rendering epistemology ... 'the study of the life situation of consciousness, an inquiry which is ultimately political and historical” (99). Moreover, not only is the epistemology itself politicized, but the choice of an epistemology is also revealed as political. MacKinnon quotes Kuhn to argue that choosing an epistemology is “like the choice between competing political institutions' because it *is* a choice of political institution – one that women never chose” (99). Zerilli thus seems to downplay the political character of such “epistemic” claims-making, whose reasoning and justification is not deductive, but intersubjective.

Finally, let me address the way Zerilli presents second-wave feminism as succumbing to a “fantasy of sovereignty” (10). This critique goes beyond her critique of the method of second-wave feminism (as being epistemological) to the object of its thought, namely, a coherent, unified female subject. Zerilli argues that even if second-wave feminists criticized the political sovereignty of men as based on female submission, they were still “inclined towards a conception of freedom that either sets the individual woman against 'all her sex' ... or required a woman's full identification with 'her sex' ...” (10). In other words, women combated a male, “objective” sovereign subject with a female version, one that either ignored sexual difference so as to attain the universal ideal of the male subject (“the exceptional woman”) or one that emphasized sexual difference but only within an equally sovereign, unified category of women (10). What is problematic for Zerilli is that by focusing on sex inequality instead of freedom, women bought into an ideal of the merely *willing* subject, whose sovereignty requires that it remain unrestrained and unitary. Thus they lost sight of an ideal of the *doing* subject, whose nonsovereignty both requires and enables it to speak and act with others in light of the plurality of each’s perspective, and in so doing to engage in politics, building up the world. The latter takes primacy for Zerilli, because without it we relegate ourselves to a politics that is “instrumental and adjudicative,” one that theorizes deductive, universal rules to which the intrinsic particularity of politics is then subsumed (10). This type of politics “minimizes the possibility of freedom as action” (10). In other words, it loses sight of the way that freedom, an uncoerced concerted activity which builds the world anew, is conditioned by our plurality, our individual inadequacy to act politically. Our focus, following Zerilli, should not be on the question of the subject but on the question

of the world: how non-sovereign subjects build the world through their judgments and actions, and how they create the space in which things can become politicized.

Maintaining a concept of freedom based on the political relations of non-sovereign, plural subjects is no doubt crucial if we are to move beyond a politics primarily concerned with use-value and means-ends reasoning. However, it is also important not to misapprehend two important aspects of feminist identity politics. On the one hand, we can see ways in which the pursuit of justice on behalf of one identity group can be a liberating preface to a fuller democratic politics amongst the entire citizenry. On the other hand, we can see how claims about identity can be both epistemological *and* world-building. First, following Hannah Pitkin's subtle critique of Arendt, we can see, for example, how Zerilli's similar marginalization of justice claims within politics might be re-thought. Pitkin argues that politics motivated by private interest need not preclude freedom in the Arendtian/Zerillian sense because participation changes us to become more aware of shared standards and our stake in them as an "I want" becomes an "I am entitled to" (Pitkin 347). Pitkin also argues that politics motivated by what once seemed merely "personal troubles" can help redefine political community ("build the world") as we learn how our interests are "embedded in social relationships" and as we "discover the value of public institutions" (348). Pitkin specifically gives an example of a housewife "who learns for the first time that she is not alone ... that what troubles her is part of a social structure that can be altered" (348). This vision of the way that questions of social justice can fit with an Arendtian conception of freedom (as potentially generative, as part of the groundwork by which freedom can take place) stands in stark contrast to Zerilli. While she admits that "the rise of the social ... and the entanglement of women in it ...

is an established fact,” she sees this fact much more pessimistically than Pitkin as a “politically problematic inheritance,” that which might cause “the value of expediency to trump claims to freedom” (Zerilli 2005: 8,9). However, in light of Pitkin’s work, I question the force of this pessimism.

Second, claims regarding women’s identity seem to be more diverse than Zerilli wishes to allow. As she describes them they only serve to entrench a sovereign notion of the subject (12). On this account claims of identity are either claims of recognition meant to repair the female subject to full political existence as a (negatively free) willing agent, or they are the multiplication of identical sovereign wills into a singular (still negatively free) collectively willing agent (10,12). In either case plurality, the “condition of politics,” the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the individual to act politically, is lost. However, the identity claims which came out of consciousness-raising were by no means a sovereign “I” “multiplied and extended to an omnipotent “we” (10). These were spaces of contestation of challenge, of new knowledge. Kathie Sarahchild writes how conscious-raising sessions were often disruptive and interruptive, explored tangents, and were not primarily a therapeutic strategy, a space to be nice and tolerant of everyone, but were a specific process “to get closer to the [intersubjective, not objective] truth” of the condition of women in a world marked by patriarchy (Sarahchild 148). Likewise, Catherine MacKinnon says consciousness-raising, by “socializing women’s knowing,” is “the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women’s social experience, as women live through it” (MacKinnon 83). She describes it elsewhere as a “face-to-face social experience that strikes at the fabric of meaning of social relations between and among women and men by calling their givenness into question and reconstituting their

meaning” (95). This seems to be every bit the world-building project Zerilli has in mind.

Let us look at an illustration Zerilli gives in order to see the divergence between her theory and consciousness-raising. Here she describes an example from Arendt of people sitting around a table (Zerilli 2005, 19). The table is important, because it is a worldly object that both “relates and separates men at the same time,” and this space, this worldly in-between, is where politics occurs. It is not given, but chosen, ultimately created through our judgments (otherwise we might sit on the table instead of at the table). The crisis in contemporary feminism for Zerilli is like the crisis of modernity for Arendt, because they are both marked by a loss of this common worldly in-between, objects that can highlight women’s differences and yet remain shared in common so as to relate them to one another. For Zerilli the problem with second-wave feminism is that it believed that gender identity could serve as the worldly in-between that relates women politically (20). However on her account, gender identity cannot become political, cannot be politicized, unless women see their claims as fundamentally free, prior to any question of their subjectivity or social value. Thus, Zerilli argues that the identity of women based on injury and victimization, which she believes characterized second-wave feminism, does not suffice as a political relation that affirms freedom (100). Instead of a category of woman that has as its primary figuration (in the words of the Milan Collective) “the wretchedness of the female gender,” “the housewives, women with abortion problems, raped women,” on Zerilli’s account women can create the worldly in-between of politics simply through a freely chosen figuration of women as authoritative interlocutors and a shared desire for such co-authorization (100). In so doing they claim “women” as the political subject of feminist politics.

What I wish to argue is that this project is well-intentioned but problematic for two reasons. First, it does not respond to those who thought second-wave feminism was exclusionary to some women. In fact, given that this approach primarily focuses on the freedom to make claims and not the social and material conditions of women vis-à-vis men (and other women) it may be even more exclusionary. Would women who felt excluded or voiceless within second-wave feminism feel more at home in a context where the ability to make claims (perhaps as inflammatory as one Milan Collective member's "I don't care at all about the women who must deal with abortions") is regarded as a more important source of freedom than the freedom that comes from the critical recognition of forms of inequality and shared struggle? Feminist politics has suffered perhaps from a lack of shared priorities and tactics, something common in any mass movement. However, it remains unclear why the choice of gender and the differentiated social and political conditions that term implied for many second-wave feminists is not an equally valid world-building political relation as Zerilli's ideal of self-authorized figurations.

Secondly and relatedly, we could say that if other feminist projects suffer from a "fantasy of sovereignty" then Zerilli's suffers from a "fantasy of efficacy." What this means is that Zerilli's approach brushes aside questions about how to make claims upon men or anyone who is not willing to hear such claims and respond in turn. While Zerilli acknowledges the existence of "the formal public realm ... protected by law," for her it is more important to understand that nothing guarantees or eliminates any particular space of appearance as a sight of politics and thus freedom (20). She celebrates, for instance, the way second-wave feminists created political spaces out of "coffeehouses, living

rooms, kitchens, and street corners” (20). That they were creating a politics seems more crucial to Zerilli, however, than why they were engaging in these actions, meeting in these places. This was not only because they did not have easy access to institutional channels of power, but also because they shared in the revelation that the private realm needed to be publicized, that within the context of sex inequality, the public/private distinction merely served to reinforce patriarchal domination. Second-wave feminists recognized that both institutional (public) and non-institutional (private) sites were spaces where political power is felt, and they attempted to combat the domination they experienced in both realms through both an enacted politics to which Zerilli gives primacy and a discursive politics she sees as secondary. Second-wave feminists desired to mobilize women in order to change not only the social oppression which isolated them from one another and inhibited their ability to enact their political freedom, but they also mobilized to challenge the sex inequality within the institutions that enforced this inequality and which disguised it as neutrality and objectivity. On Zerilli’s account of feminism, where politics occurs between women in the name of women, how is inequality between women and men ever adequately addressed? On Zerilli’s account this inequality, this patriarchy, is set aside and women are tasked with enacting their freedom despite its existence. Yet we must ask then what kind of freedom is enacted as such? Is this not an other-worldly freedom, similar perhaps to the superiority of the German Jews described by Arendt who refused identification as Jews, a “superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo land” (Arendt 1968, 18)?

Returning to the analogy of the table, second-wave feminism saw through the practice of consciousness-raising not an objective truth, not a rule by which to practice

politics, but a series of inequalities which conditioned their lives. On the Arendtian analogy it would be like discovering that the table, the worldly in-between, was skewed towards others or that you were at a different table, belonging to a different world altogether. Feminists can and should choose for themselves a worldly in-between which they enact through politics, but they will ultimately also have to reckon with the (publicly and privately) institutionalized worldly in-between of extant (patriarchal) politics, make judgments about it, and make claims on it. From the two points I attempt to show here, we can see how Zerilli's project may actually exacerbate what is thought to be a shortcoming of second-wave feminism (its lack of attunement to difference), while diminishing what it is generally thought to have inaugurated. This would include a greater awareness of sex inequality, a consciousness of the political effects of patriarchy on women's lived experiences, and a politics that directly confronted masculine conceptions of freedom. It attempted to do this not with its own vision of sovereignty, but through a practice of world-building consciousness-raising.

One potentially fruitful illustration of my arguments lies in the writings of another feminist political group, the Combahee River Collective. The CRC presents potentially significant qualifications to Zerilli's approach, in that it shows the ways in which her categorization of freedom relies on having women willing to participate as interlocutors, willing to have their views "challenged to the point of crisis," and willing to tolerate deep diversities of feminist desires and projects. They show that the vision of women's liberation inaugurated in their "Statement" was not a quest for misguided sovereignty, but instead a quest for a justifiable authority; not for the freedom of an unmoved mover, but the freedom of an equal participant. Their *Statement* is neither an "I-will" nor an "I-can,"

it is a “We-shall.” Furthermore they offer a broader vision of how feminism fits into the world around them. They address their project not just to each other, but to all audiences, seeing the inequality they experience as bound up with other forms of inequalities and oppression. Finally they may help shed light on the way that the symbolization of feminist freedom may need to be rethought, so that sexual difference, the attribute which Zerilli describes as applying to women “who make a political claim to membership in a genealogy of women,” can have the potential to apply to all women. In other words, the CRC may help us see how an ungrounded politics motivated solely by the desire for freedom without regard to how this freedom is constituted is already sneaking a form of (non)judgment into its practice, and that this formulation may be exhilarating for some and oppressive for others.

The Combahee River Collective and “The Truth That Never Hurts”

The Combahee River Collective came together as a branch of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in Boston in the early 1970s. Disillusioned with the infighting of the NBFO and its more reformist and heteronormative organizational approach, the Combahee River Collective decided to strike out in a new direction, taking their name from the site in South Carolina where Harriet Tubman helped to organize and lead a military offensive in which 750 slaves were able to escape to freedom (Harris 2001: 294). Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, is quoted as describing the feeling she got from the political organizing and consciousness-raising retreats as having been “the first time that I could be all of who I

was in the same place” (Harris 1999: 10). The Collective met for several retreats beginning in the late 1970s until they disbanded in 1981 (Harris 295, Smith 1998: 171). Besides serving as a supportive space for consciousness-raising and reflection, the group and its members also organized around several political issues, most significantly a string of murders targeting women, which led them to produce the pamphlet “Six Black Women, Why Did They Die” and subsequently organize community meetings and political coalitions with other feminist groups (Harris 299). This pamphlet and their response indicated a concern to not only publicize what was happening (and which media outlets had largely ignored), but also to empower women with a message combining practical knowledge about self-defense with the insight that the violence in their communities had its roots in both racism and sexism.⁴ Later, their “Statement,” in which they formally laid out the Collective's political perspective, would elucidate this unique form of marginalization facing Black women in terms of “interlocking oppressions,” and in so doing inaugurate an “identity politics” which grows out of this shared experience. Barbara Smith calls this recognition of one another's shared identity and its continued presence in the world “the truth that never hurts” (Smith 72).

I will present three main critiques of Zerilli's approach to feminist politics using the analytic perspective of the Combahee River Collective. These critiques arise in relation to Zerilli's account of identity politics, her conceptualization of political action and its motivations, and finally her depiction of political power and in what it consists. I will use the Statement of the Combahee River Collective somewhat as a foil for Zerilli's own appropriation of the Milan Collective's *Sexual Difference*. I hope to offer a counter-

4 “Six Black Women, Why Did They Die?” Combahee River Collective, reprinted in *Radical America*, vol. 13, no. 6, 1979, pp. 44-46 (accessible via <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1124979008226934.pdf>)

narrative about identity politics, one that focuses on what inspires identity groups to action, and the nexus of power into which they act. I will argue, for instance, that identity politics does not entail perform the reparative conundrum which is so troubling to Zerilli. As a matter of fact, we may be able to think of identity politics in rather Zerillian terms. However, this will require us to rethink the conceptualizations of political action and political power offered by Zerilli and broaden them. Namely, by looking at the political organizing of the Combahee River Collective we can see that politics (“understood as a relation of no-rule that depends on the presence of others”) is fully compatible with social concerns and claims of justice (Zerilli 2005: 21). Likewise power, which Zerilli (drawing on Arendt) understands as “that which 'springs up between men when they act together and vanishes when they disperse'” has to be more thoughtfully brought into conversation with the Foucauldian account of power relations as “a mode of action upon the actions of others” (Zerilli 21, Foucault 2000: 341).

Identity Politics as Neither Reparative nor Epistemological

Beginning then, with the Combahee River Collective's Statement, we can see it is a manifesto of sorts for identity politics. However, identity politics on this account is not an essentialist judgment of what politics, what reparation, is necessitated by certain identities (although it has been interpreted as such). Identity politics here is a judgment about politics, namely that it occurs in a field conditioned by “interlocking oppressions” and that as Black lesbian feminists marginalized from other social movements, their experiences of identity open up a “potentially most radical politics” (“Statement,” 212).

It is not, then, an epistemological judgment about identity (what should be afforded people on the basis of their identity, how we define identity, or what group is most deserving). It is the judgment that a claim to be recognized as “levelly human” within a field of politics that marginalizes certain races, sexes, sexualities, and classes is a radical one. It is simply an extension of principles of equality, justice, and the analytic lenses of feminism and Marxism to the lived experiences of Black women. These experiences “condition” but do not “determine” their lives (otherwise there would be no struggle against them). The CRC sum this up by saying:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (CRC 210)

I read this not as invective but as corrective. Identity politics here is not some striving towards the fantasy of a sovereign subjectivity, but is an intersubjective awareness of unequal power relations between different publics. Such an awareness cannot happen in isolation. Instead, one needs others to substantiate it, verify it. The CRC, for instance, writes how “Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics...” (CRC 211). This sort of claim is less about seeking reparation from others and more about inaugurating a political space for and by Black lesbian feminists. It is one which had not been possible in their associations with other organizations, yet it was one which was imperative in order for them to adequately express themselves, to be taken seriously as interlocutors. On this view the CRC are simply trying to inaugurate a world-building politics in the shadow of other publics from which they have been excluded.

In this sense, we might think that Zerilli, who appropriates Arendt to explain the somewhat separatist feminist politics of the Milan Collective, would be willing to interpret the politics of the CRC in similar fashion. However Zerilli does not regard identity politics in this way. She sees it as primarily the re-inscription of a recriminative standpoint, a new “rule” by which to measure political claims. She argues that feminism as identity politics gets “caught in a vicious circle, [whereby] the subject's political demand for recognition and reparation repeats, in the form of a compulsion, the very experience of injury that subjugates (but also constitutes) that same subject (Zerilli 100). She argues that feminism (second-wave/identity-based) has the tendency to confuse politics with fabrication, whereby politics becomes the application of a total theory, the achievement of a master plan, and political subjects are transformed into the passive objects, the raw materials, of a worldview which prefigures their interests and their claims (36). Zerilli then draws on Arendt to claim that, contra this view of politics as a “form of fabrication or making,” politics is instead fundamentally active, a practice, not a theory (37). She says with Arendt “Political actors know not what they do ... because when we act, we cannot know (predict or foresee) what the consequences of our action will be” (37). And yet, even though political actors cannot in this sense “know what they [will have] do[ne],” why should that stop political actors from explaining their intentions in terms of shared political judgments?

What if we think of feminism, not as the application of a theory of politics to political discourse, but as making a political claim to a theoretical perspective, responsive to their experiences? Such a claim is political, because it argues that identities, subjects, and even the way we theorize about politics has been created by relations of power, and it

is a judgment that these relations of power are unequal, must be made more reversible through recourse to alternative theoretical perspectives. Such a view of feminism could reconcile Zerilli's problematization of the phrase "the personal is political." She argues that this claim implies that every instance of power relations is an instance of politics. The claim, "when it identifies power with politics, risks effacing the very special character of democratic politics and also underestimating the possibility that it could be driven out of the world" (23). However, it is not clear when we look at feminism as the claim to a claim, to a perspective, why this would risk effacing democratic politics.

Zerilli's objections to identity politics and the Foucauldian view of power relations as always already political are related. On the one hand, Zerilli distinguishes between political claims which seek to solicit agreement (aesthetic judgments) and those that seek to compel agreement (logical arguments, claims from identity). She argues that the latter cannot be thought of properly as political claims, because they do not take into account human plurality, and the world-building qualities of politics. She would probably argue that the CRC's statement is one that gives a justification to compel others to agreement. Something like, our community is given in our experience, our identity, experiences and identities which are necessary to speak in the name of Black feminists. I see two problems with this reading of the the CRC Statement. First, by seeing this claim as only epistemic, whereby (according to Zerilli) the category secures the ability to make political claims, we fail to take note that the announcing of the category itself, the creation of the category, the claim to a category, is a *political* act, not just a philosophic one. Second, we lose sight of the way that while the naming of oppression is deeply experiential, neither feminist politics nor Black feminist politics are "given" by those

experiences. Instead they are constituted by a political and world-building response to them. This is often referred to as consciousness-raising.

On the other hand, Zerilli in making her argument that the term “the personal is political” is often misused or misinterpreted, seems willing to exclude notions of other forms of power from political discourse. She states, “What makes a claim political is not something that inheres in the object or the practice that the claim is about” (Zerilli 2009: 92).” For example she argues, “I think we do better to interpret that slogan [‘the personal is political’] as productive of the political character of the gendered division of labor. There is nothing intrinsically political about housework, sexuality, or reproduction” (92). But what if we see second-wave feminists' claim not as arguing that there is anything intrinsically political about these objects and practices but that patriarchy (and racism, heterosexism, and capitalism according to the CRC) had made them thusly. There was not an essential claim, but a first-order claim to apprehend the political structure of society as shaping these objects and practices in profoundly political (and oppressive) ways. I think this difference is significant. The CRC states, “We had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening” (211). And later, “A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political” (213). Zerilli, following Arendt, seems to worry that by paying attention to the ways in which power circulates, produces subjects and points of resistance, we lose sight of the way that political relations and discourse are world-productive, can create the world anew (Zerilli 2005: 21-23). But when we look at the CRC we see them very much creating a new world. They were able to organize together with interests they made political through public articulation and

through a shared judgment that patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and capitalism had helped to make their life experiences in Zerilli's terms “the object of a dispute ... the occasion for the speech and action with which people create the common world, the space in which things become public, and create it anew” (23).

Feminist Motivations and Foundings

The motivation and genesis of second-wave (and subsequent Black feminist) political thought was not epistemological, a politics justified on the epistemological ground of the category of women. The CRC shows us that it was instead motivated by a shared first-order political judgment, the judgment in favor of an epistemological perspective that recognizes the power of patriarchy and its connection to other forms of oppression. The CRC states, “There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives” (CRC 211). Why should we read this as epistemological in the sense Zerilli sees it? Where do we find a rule being applied as a universally compelling guarantee of correctness? Why is this not anything other than a “political realization” (intersubjectively formulated) that is guided not by an a priori rule, but a motivating principle. It is a communal, political judgment that makes a claim to a new thinking about the world, namely that in light of the experiences shared by Black feminists and the political reflection upon them, a new politics should be inaugurated. It is a claim to have a claim. It is a judgment that their should be a judgment. It is an action that seeks to elicit similar actions.

Whereas the Milan Collective makes a claim to other women for a shared idea of “women” as politically constructed, the CRC makes a claim to all readers to be recognized as “levelly human.” Their form of political judgment does not spring from the symbolic but from the lived. “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly from our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else's oppression.”⁵ Likewise Zerilli wants to shift from thinking of women as an identity category to thinking about women as the political subject of feminism, brought into existence by speaking in the name of women (Zerilli 166). The CRC show that women cannot be conceived of as a political *subject* until there is a realization that they are also treated as a political *object*, an identity, shaped by power and oppression, different women in different ways. They seek to point out that one should not simply voice a claim to women without first taking this into account, not as a rule to be followed, but as a political judgment in and of itself to be shared.

Zerilli says that the freedom she envisions is not a property of the subject, “not the freedom of will whose goal is sovereignty,” but a freedom experienced as “world-building,” “in being with others and acting in public space” (91). The CRC states plainly, “our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy” (212). Sovereignty of the will is different from personal autonomy. It is personal autonomy gone imperial. Instead of simply the presence of a will, of having a personal, private space shaped by contexts yet still individual, sovereignty of the will sees agency as completely controlled by our will and as acting solely in response to its demands. Freedom thus relates to sovereignty and

5 Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1982. p. 212

autonomy in ways that do not seem fully theorized (or experienced) by Zerilli. As Sharon Krause puts it “Agency does not need a sovereign self, but it does need a self” (Krause 4). Zerilli's worries about thinking of politics as a space where subjects with sovereign wills engage with one another as a means to an end, namely to get more (negative) freedom is reasonable. But her vision of politics as an activity by which non-sovereign actors practice freedom through claims-making which may or may not garner assent, assumes that such actors have personal autonomy. The CRC's claim then, viewed from this perspective, is not that the category “women” does not include them, but that the way it has been politically constructed was such that it included Black women only as adjuncts. In order to make a claim to political freedom, they first had to claim their own autonomy, their own selves, which they found through the exchange of perspectives with one another in the practice of consciousness-raising.

Another problem for Zerilli also seems to be that, among political claims that solicit, that anticipate and posit assent, she does not distinguish between those that are and are not intelligible. The CRC seems to argue that in order to have meaning at all, the category “women” must be qualified, must be used carefully, otherwise Zerilli's project simply repeats the mistakes of the past with impunity. As the CRC states, “Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation (211).” What does the constitution of women as a political category instead of a supposedly epistemological one gain us if the same forms of hegemonic politics arise as before? As Zerilli herself states the freedom she envisions has always been part of the first-order political claims-making of the

feminist movement. Perhaps it is not simply a new attunement to freedom that is needed but also a concomitant attunement to the way that the practice of freedom can be just or unjust. For instance, certain privileges might make the public in which you practice your freedom more visible than others, more hegemonic than others, perhaps more effective than others. My point is that once we acknowledge the space of political action is constituted and conditioned by human plurality, then to have any meaning a claim must be intelligible (if not to those it addresses, then at least those in whose name it is made), and implied in this intelligibility is the cognizance of what politics requires in a given setting. In the context in which the CRC was active (and in which many Black feminists still act) the “practice of freedom” by some could ignore the very material reality which constitutes different groups' identities and in practice could preclude the possibility of a shared political discourse. Take, for instance, a recent example involving so-called “slut walks” in major cities worldwide.⁶ Groups of predominately white feminists decided to publicly march while subverting typical norms of dress in order to protest rape culture and gender violence. They received a great deal of media attention. Some Black feminist organizations responded by publishing open letters explaining why they would not participate in these sorts of actions and why the premise of these actions were offensive. One in particular from a group called the Crunk Feminist Collective sums up these insights quite nicely. Here they argue:

While white women often want to deploy “woman” as a universal category and have the nerve to get angry and defensive when Black women like myself point out differences in our experiences, it is Black women themselves who have demonstrated what it really means to care about women as a group. For we put our bodies and our psyches on the line to show up at events called “Slutwalks” knowing that we are both more vulnerable to the same violence that brought other

6 A good overview of this topic can be found here: <http://www.theroot.com/views/slutwalk-signs>

women there and yet that we have little social privilege and power to reclaim the terms in the ways that many of the others marchers do ... So, too, our histories with feminism. ("I Saw the Sign...", 2011)

This response, however, went largely unappreciated by either slut walk organizers or the media, and yet, for a time the "slut walkers" became a visible political subject of feminism.

Ultimately, Zerilli's account of politics seems to raise questions as to the desire for distinctively *feminist* politics as such. For if our vision of political practice is one where we are guided by an unqualified claim to political freedom, one where we refuse to "cover over the abyss of freedom" with claims from identity, why would we be engaged in anything particularly *feminist* per se? As Zerilli states, "Female freedom is radically ungrounded: neither foundationalist nor consequentialist, its only *raison d'être* is itself" (97). If feminism is an ungrounded politics of unqualified claims, why is it feminist? On this account feminist politics is just something that "women" (conceived as a political claim) simply do because they desire a political category of women, the creation of which enacts their participation in public affairs and nondomination. But then why "women" and not "humans," say, or some other category? On this account there is no reason to think "women" in a feminist context might not be "men" in another context. There is no reason to think female freedom might necessarily involve any discernible difference from male freedom. Was not the claim to an unqualified freedom also *liberalism's* *raison d'être*? Was not feminism's response that this is a fantasy, and that oppression against women gives lie to it and must be addressed in order for them to share in it? Was not what made feminism in all its various waves *feminism* as such was that it represented a claim to freedom that was also necessarily a claim to justice for women?

We can see that the CRC attempts to show in their Statement that feminism *qua* feminism does more than just make an unqualified claim to participation and nondomination. It names the interlocking systems of oppressions which shape (qualify?) the space in which such an unqualified claim gets heard. Moreover, their vision is arguably more Arendtian, more expansive, than the Milan Collective, because they address their claims not just to other women, but to all human beings. Their argument is precisely that they cannot settle for a politics of claims only addressed to and from women, because the oppression named by feminism does not even affect all women equally, and that black women suffered from interlocking oppressions that had left them voiceless. They state:

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the factionalization that white women who are separatists demand ... We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. (CRC 213)

Thus the origin of their claim was to have a claim, a distinct perspective that mattered, and to not be taken for granted as corollaries or adjuncts of civil rights, black power, feminist, or socialist politics. Politics for the CRC requires more than just participation in public affairs and non-domination, it involves the subversion of existing power relations across the political field in which their claim appears. It is a maneuvering that attempts to break into the field of consciousness of all women and men.

Feminist Political Power

The Combahee River Collective Statement does inaugurate a politics of identity, but if read carefully, we see their claim was not just to a politics of identity or identity

difference. Instead of this, or just this, it was a claim to a justifiable autonomy within a discursive political space that is already shaped by (often unspoken) hegemonic and dominating identities. For instance, in reference to lesbian separatism they argue that “As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic” (214). Moreover they argue:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual ...” (213)

Both of these selections show that the CRC understood well the fluidity and contingency of identity. They did not believe in biological essentialism, and they could tell that building a politics based solely on one identity would fail them. However, they also understood, the way identity carried with it real implications (often oppressive and limiting) for their lives and that identity politics was concerned with the vagaries of these implications. A better history of second wave feminism might show that while they called for a feminist epistemology, this epistemology was not fundamentally essentialist but historicist, taking different forms at different times. Furthermore, this analysis would show that second-wave feminism did not believe that it was premised on a stable category of women, but that it was in fact premised on the first-order politics to which Zerilli claims a desire to return. There was a first-order political claim to a feminist politics premised on a shared judgment of politicized social relations.

The work of Michel Foucault is quite helpful here. While Catherine MacKinnon is quite right to critique him for his relative inattention to the question of gender and the way it differentiates the discursive power of constructs like sexuality (a lacunae which

Judith Butler would later attempt to fill), she is nonetheless quite right to praise him for using questions of “method, power, class, and the law” as sites of analysis in the construction of discourse (MacKinnon 1989: 288). With Foucault, we can imagine how feminist political power is not just expressed when women and allies coming together in public action, but that it is also expressed when it names itself alongside powers already extant in the field of politics. Zerilli herself makes note of this aspect of Foucault's thought in two regards. First, she says that the Arendtian use of the term power (as that which maintains the space of appearance through action with others) is done not to deny other types of power (as domination or discursively interconnected relationships) but to emphasize both the fragility and the limitless possibility of political action understood as plural and nonsovereign (Zerilli 2005: 21).⁷ Second, she is critical of Foucault's response to the discursive notion of power, what he calls a “practice of freedom,” which prepares subjects to a critical awareness of their own subjectivity. She sees this proposal as misguided in that it merely continues “the Western tradition's ... displacement of political freedom as a relation of the world and to others” (15).

I see Foucault as being helpful despite these critiques. To briefly respond, I think it is clear that identity politics is non-sovereign in precisely the way Zerilli wishes that it be. This is because epistemological perspectives still rely on first order political judgments about the world, judgments can be met with assent or dissent. This is clear in reading any number of political theorists who provide epistemological perspectives and yet maintain that they are not dogma (cf. Marx, Foucault, and MacKinnon). It is also

⁷ I do not have the space here to object to the characterization of the public sphere as wholly dependent on action-power, but I think that Patchen Markell makes the case that responsive spectators are equally important to the public sphere in his article “The Rule of the People,” in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 100, No. 1 (Feb. 2006) pp. 1-14.

clear that while Foucault does declare the care for the self as ontologically prior to the care for others, he believes it is necessary in order to live ethically and thus freely. Ethics is the conscious practice of freedom on his account, and it is used in order to combat the question of subjectivity to which Zerilli sees him as being captive (Foucault 2003: 28-29). Foucault's interpretation of the Greeks distinguishes him from Arendt and Zerilli. He says "The Greeks problematized their freedom, and the freedom of the individual, as an ethical problem" (29). He goes on to say, "[Freedom] was a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others ... extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape" (29). Moreover and contrary to what Zerilli claims, this care of the self is not done in isolation; it is not only "relevant to solitary individuals" (Zerilli 2005: 15). Instead, Foucault argues that this care of the self, this ethical practice of freedom, is a "true social practice" which utilizes not only "schools, lectures, and professionals of spiritual direction," but also "relations of kinship, friendship, and obligation" (Foucault 1986: 51-53).

Here we can see how identity politics of the sort practiced by the Combahee River Collective was integral in helping them develop not only strategies for liberation from domination but also practices of freedom which would be able to guard against the solidification of discursive power relationships. It was precisely through the experience of their identity as multiply oppressed that they were led to critical stances towards the often patriarchal Civil Rights/Black Power movement, the often racist feminist movement, and the often race- and gender-blind analyses of the socialist movement. It was precisely out of these experiences that consciousness-raising was different for them, that it lent itself to a more radical politics that saw oppressions as interlocking. Their

practice of freedom was different from the Milan Collective's, because they were in a position to recognize the dangers of the power involved even in supposedly non-sovereign political judgment.⁸ Zerilli's Arendtian perspective, which conceives of a fundamental plurality amongst human beings but assumes a fundamental unity of the common world, does not recognize this aspect of identity politics. It does not perceive how our common world can be fractured along fault lines of race, gender, and class and where voices who wish to participate are left out, dismissed, unheard over the din of the majority.

A Vindication of Identity Politics

This paper has been about identity politics. Do we see claims arising from identity groups as primarily expressions of freedom or expressions of justice? Zerilli's argument is that by looking at these expressions primarily in terms of freedom, a freedom enacted by making such claims in a community of others, we can sidestep definitional questions about what it means to be such-and-such identity group. Defining what it means to be woman, black, white, gay, or straight, simply gets iterated and reiterated in a call and response of political judgments. In so arguing, Zerilli implies that if we presuppose identity claims as claims to a certain type of social justice we risk balkanizing our political world, losing sight of the precious ungrounded ground of democratic politics, and fragmenting what could be vibrant coalitions of diverse freedom enactors. This is because she sees claims to justice by identity groups as operating fundamentally

⁸ Foucault states in "The Genealogy of Ethics" that power is not evil, but "everything is dangerous" and requires us to be vigilant.

within an economy of recrimination and reparation that ossifies certain types of identities (the wretch, the victim) at the expense of other, more freedom-affirming ones *and* that such an economy is not fundamentally political but instead a rule-governed system of exchange which merely serves to reinscribe the status quo. Recourse to arguments about social justice obscures the ways in which freedom must be remain unqualified, lest it be displaced by justifications (Zerilli 2005: 6)

My argument has been that seeing claims to an identity or from an identity as a question of fundamental freedom overlooks the way in which political power operates *both* as action (as Zerilli and Arendt use the term) *and* as discursive power relations, “a set of actions upon other actions” (as Foucault insists).⁹ The CRC recognize the first way political power can be constituted, through organizing. They state that “During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat and, joy and pain, victory and failure.” (CRC 214). They then point out the limitations of this in terms of the second way political power operates, by pointing out the difficulties they have faced. Here they state:

“The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.” (214)

When we think of what is political in this way we can better understand why identity claims can then be seen as *both* enacting freedom, the freedom to enact a particular politics, *and* as enacting justice, enabling a more equitable space in which to make claims within the political power structures that always already exist. In this sense the

⁹ Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power” in Faubion, James, ed., *Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000). p. 341

Combahee River Collective was making a political claim to have a claim, to have their own perspective. They make an unqualified claim to political participation (to be autonomous, levelly human), but they make it in a space that must be qualified in order for their claim to be heard as such within the matrices of power that exist. They are qualifying the space in which the claim is made, not the claim itself. They are not presenting their perspective as objective truth, but as subjective experiences which serve, much like the figuration employed by the Milan Collective, as examples (not rules) of an epistemic vantage point, a shared political judgment about the character of the political space in which they act.

In this sense identity politics is politics on the sort that Arendt and Zerilli envision. Although some who have claimed the mantle of identity of politics as inaugurated by the Combahee River Collective may have appropriated it unfairly, and although some commentaries have likewise characterized it unfairly, their form of identity politics is radical and profound. And, moreover, it is effective. It has worked. In a piece titled “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” Bernice Johnson Reagon makes this point very effectively.¹⁰ Recounting an interview she had seen with Jane Pauley and an author bemoaning the lost possibilities of the 60s-era protest movements, she quotes Pauley as asking, “Where did we go wrong?” Johnson then tells her audience:

“And I say, You fool. You wouldn't be up on the Today show to even ask the question, if we had gone wrong! We have not gone wrong! ... Any of you who have jobs that your mama didn't have, we did that. Nobody else did that!! It is a very good time to be alive – to be in this place, complete with its racism, and its classism, and its garbage trucks running through.” (354)

When we see identity politics as the recognition of identities as a means to level the

10 Reagon, Bernice Johnson. “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” in Smith, Barbara, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000) p. 354

always already disparate field of politics, *not* in order to preserve the identities but to equalize their effects, we can see that it has been quite fruitful. Far from contaminating the political sphere with social questions (such as Arendt feared), or holding us captive to symbolic figurations of injury and recrimination (such as Zerilli laments), identity politics creates a space for political discourse that did not exist prior, and it allows political claims to be heard from voices which had been drowned out. Identity politics, feminist or otherwise, frees us from silence, allows us to be “all of who [we are] in the same place.”

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