

Anarchism & Sexuality

Tracey McLennan, Gordon Asher in exchange with Jamie Heckert

Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power

Edited by Jamie Heckert, Richard Cleminson
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Jamie Heckert is a founding member of the Anarchist Studies Network and the editor of two collections of perspectives on anarchism and sexuality – a special issue of *Sexualities* (2010) and *Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power* (2011) co-edited with Richard Cleminson.

Anarchism & Sexuality is described by the co-editors as “a set of serious, sustained engagements with the complex relationships between anarchism and the politics and practice of sexuality ... a collection of passionate, provocative papers that incite the reader to recognize the relevance of anarchist ideas to queer and feminist sexual politics.”

Heckert and Cleminson further clarify their intentions as: “first, to make fresh anarchist perspectives available to contemporary debates around sexuality; second, to make a queer and feminist intervention within the most recent waves of anarchist scholarship; and, third, to make a queerly anarchist contribution to social justice literature, policy and practice” (p1).

Anarchism & Sexuality consists of a collection of works, many of which have origins in a 2006 conference and workshop convened on the same theme, which are intermixed with four “poetic interludes” and an interview with Judith Butler – whose book *Gender Trouble* (1990) fundamentally challenged the way we conceptualise gender – relating her work to dialogues around anarchism.

We would like to thank Jamie for this opportunity for exchange and for the speed and generosity with which he responded to our questions – themselves the result of divergent exchanges following engagement with this collection of works and discussions around the issues they raise.

Tracey McLennan/ Gordon Asher: One of the aims of both the ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’ conference and the book, is that they were intended to provide a space for academics and activists to be together and to learn from each other.

This aim is picked up by Gavin Brown in his contribution ‘Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’ where he discusses his concerns about how his presentation would be received by the more “‘activist’ elements of the audience” (p201).

Throughout the book, is “activist” used to convey ‘experience-based writings’, perhaps not formalised as Participatory Action Research, or more infrastructure-based action, which includes activist organisations, regular workshops and conferences, publications and social gatherings?

Do you feel that there is a clear distinction between activists and academics, specifically with regard to the complex relationships between anarchism and the politics and practices of sexuality?

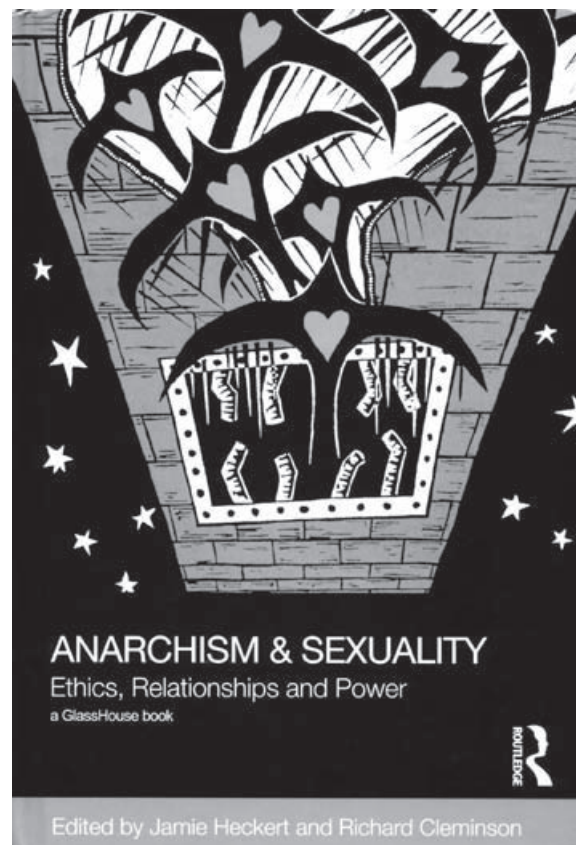
If so, how do you interpret what is meant across the book by “activists” in terms of engagement outwith academia?

As one of the editors, alongside Richard Cleminson, how do you perceive the book to approach any such division?

How does academic exploration/ criticality – in the form of ‘queer theory’, anarchist studies – connect with contemporary sexual activism, politics and practices aiming at the realisation of sexual equality and justice?

Jamie Heckert: Thank you for starting off with such key questions! I’ve long been interested in these different identities: activist and academic. And they do fit together interestingly with queer theory

which likes to shake up questions like “are you one of these or one of those?” So no, I don’t feel there is a clear distinction between activists and academics. These labels are not truths of selves anymore than ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’. Each of us has complex thoughts and feelings, desires and behaviours. We all have effects on the world around us, of which we are a part. So, I suspect when Gavin was writing about his concern, he was aware of the normativity that goes with these identities. Just as societies of control function, in part, by getting us to worry about whether we are ‘real men’ or ‘real women’, with a clear line in between, the same can go for academic and activist. Obviously, right, if you are a real activist, you can’t be an academic and vice versa. Or so they say. Sometimes.



When we are attached to either identity, or both, we might look to others for reassurance that we are contributing to our communities. And of course, that feedback can be invaluable. However, not being attached to either identity can lead to a more relaxed and selfless form of service. Not worry about being either a ‘good activist’ or ‘proper academic’ (or trying to do both at once) frees up a lot of energy to simply contribute to the wellbeing of others. And what we need for wellbeing may not be what we think. Contributions can be surprising, strange, queer – neither good in a straightforward way nor proper, expanding our understanding of what both scholarship and other forms of organising and creating can involve. Working with the contributions to this book have certainly done that for me, and I am deeply grateful.

At the same time, labels and identities have some use, as long as we don’t take them too seriously. And so sometimes in this book, activist is used to refer to people involved in social movements who don’t necessarily spend a lot of time engaging with the kind of political theory you find in university library books. Oh, activists read, of course! I was just at the Anarchist Bookfair in London with its thousands of participants and many more thousands of books and, magazines and zines. But apart from those of us who are also involved in academia, they don’t tend to write articles for peer reviewed journals. So the word

‘activist’ is used in the book in various ways to recognise those differences. And when some of us get into a university in one way or another and open the doors, it can be amazing to share that space with people who have diverse ways of engaging with social change, different ways of writing and speaking, and to listen to and learn from each other.

This book is very much a product of those queer, liminal spaces. It’s not *either* an academic book or an activist book. It’s both/and, and, and, and! The writing comes from, and contributes to, thoughtful activism and engaged scholarship. It’s less about categories and more about connections. In the book, queer theory and anarchist studies, interwoven with ethnographic, biographic and literary storytelling, work to nurture a sense of imagination, to see not only what might be possible, sexually and socially, but also what already is. Too often, politics is focused on the future, and what is missing in the present. Perhaps awakening to the beauty and vitality of life, even with what we call the state and capitalism around, is even more radical. This book does that in many ways: bringing attention to the potential playfulness of power (Lewis Call), the revolutionary nature of love (Laurence Davis), the diverse ecology of contemporary queer autonomous spaces (Gavin Brown, Marta Kolářová & Kristina Weaver), the erotic nature of nature (Helen Moore) and the wealth of historical and theoretical inspirations available to us (Jenny Alexander, Judith Butler, Lena Eckert, Judy Greenway & Stevphen Shukaitis). Even the very painful and/or angry autobiographical pieces (Fergus Evans, Jamie Heckert & Tom Leonard) have their beauty.

TM/GA: Among the aims of the conference that gave rise to the book were “to bring the rich and diverse traditions of anarchist thought and practice into contact with contemporary questions about the politics and lived experience of sexuality.” Both in style and in content, the book is conceived as aiming to question, subvert and overflow authoritarian divisions. Given these points, can we ask you about the choice of fiction in Laurence Davis’s contribution ‘Love and Revolution in Le Guin’s *Four Ways to Forgiveness*’, and Lewis Call’s ‘Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany’.

Do you have any thoughts on whether more contemporary fiction may have made the book more involving for non-academics? For example, questions of imbalance of (male) power, sexuality and ethics are explored in much contemporary popular vampire fiction – with (predominantly female) humans occupying what is often an uncomfortably physically weaker and seduced/ submissive/ subsumed position. As Caitlin Brown writes: “The power dynamic of male vamp/ female human is in fact uniquely set up for the possibilities of subversion and exploration of the nature of power in any male/female relationship. It is a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and the varied responses to this power imbalance available open to women.”¹

Contemporary vampire fiction has also covered subjects such as alternative approaches to sex and relationships. The fourth series of *True Blood* makes an attempt at covering the subject of *polyamory* – consensual, responsible non-monogamy – both between the vampires themselves and in a relationship between a human woman and her male vampire boyfriend.²

To what extent do you feel that the book, both in style and content, achieves its aims

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to “question, subvert and overflow authoritarian divisions... between seemingly mutually exclusive activism and scholarship; between forms of expression such as poetry and prose”?

How do the contributions begin to address the situatedness of academia and the limitations on academic publishing (beyond the recognised limitations of its current hardback format)?

JH: You know, Jesse Cohn, the anarchist literary theorist, and I half talked about writing something together about the race, class, gender and sexual politics of *True Blood*. But I must admit, I lost interest early in the second series. It seemed to me to lose some of its emotional and political subtlety and rely more on the shock factor of gore and violence. So I’ve not caught up on the whole polyamorous plot. But I am curious. Maybe I’ll give it another go.

Clearly there is value in a popular cultural pedagogy that engages with material that people are already reading or watching and I’d be delighted to see folk developing that in relation to anarchism and sexuality. Would that have attracted more non-academics to the book? I don’t know. I do know that Lewis Call and Laurence Davis have written beautifully engaging essays inviting readers to engage with literature they may not already know. Of course, Ursula Le Guin is pretty famous (and contemporary as far as I’m concerned!), especially for her anarchist classic *The Dispossessed* and her genderqueer feminist one, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. These examples of political science fiction are only the tip of the iceberg of the tremendous body of work she has produced a lifetime. Davis brings to our attention one of her lesser-known works linking it with a contemporary questions around love, violence and radical social and personal transformations. I had already *Four Ways to Forgiveness* as I am a devoted Le Guin fan. I even wrote her a public love letter. But I when I read it again after reading Laurence’s essay, I saw so much more than I had before.

While Laurence presented an earlier version of his essay at the Leeds conference that gave birth to this book, Richard and I contacted Lewis to rework a paper he’d written earlier to fit into the collection. We loved it for a number of reasons. Like Le Guin’s story suite, the novels addressed focus very much on questions of racialised slavery and the politics of unlearning hierarchies. Revolution, in a word. While Le Guin emphasises the gentle, tender aspects of love, Call brings out the kinky side in novels by Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany. So the essays complement each other beautifully.

Now, I don’t want to do make some sort of high culture versus popular culture hierarchy, but it does seem to me that the writing of Le Guin and Butler (I’ve not read Delany yet) has an emotional subtlety and complexity not likely to be found on television. Neither of them are academic. They’re smart, to be sure, but not academic. Rarely does either television or academic writing touch me, move me, in the way that these women do. Of course,

everyone is different. What touches one person can leave another cold. It’s like that thing Foucault said, “What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.”³³ There are things in life that are easy to enjoy – and sexy, scary vampires can push those buttons for sure. And there’s nothing wrong with that, at all. It’s just that sometimes the more challenging pleasures that must be cultivated with effort are ultimately more nourishing, more sustaining. The things that come with ease might be easy because they reinforce our sense of who we are and how the world is. Learning to let go of those ideas and opening our hearts and minds to the beautiful complexities, and ultimate simplicity, of life can be much harder. Stories can help us do that. They can be guides. As Le Guin once wrote, “All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don’t, our lives get made up for us by other people.”³⁴ I’m sure *True Blood* is doing that, too. Which is great! I’ll just be interested to see whether these essays bring more attention to these wonderful writers. (As an aside, Lewis has also written a remarkable essay using *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to explain Lacan and anarchism.⁵)

I’ll leave the question about achieving aims up to the readers. The book doesn’t do that on its own. As Le Guin once said, “when it’s published you’re sending it out into this void, hopeful it’s full of readers. And the way they read it is what makes it a story. They finish it. If it’s not read, it doesn’t really exist. It’s wood pulp with black marks on it. The reader does work with the writer.”³⁶

As for academia, well. Does it have a situatedness? Sure, we might say it has histories and associations with privilege. We might say it has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. The book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered. Street theory, movement knowledge, personal insight – each of these are acknowledged and honoured in this book, even when they might be interwoven with high theory. For another, a number of us talk about our experiences in academia, the patterns of relating we experience, our desires to open up different spaces, to relate differently. The book is also an invitation to scholars, a word which means both teacher and student, to find their own ways to do scholarship, to find their own voices. And, most importantly, to learn to do that cooperatively, compassionately. Because academic institutions and academic publishers are, on one level, competing for prestige and profit. And for this macro-political economy of academia to function, it requires an everyday level of compliance, competition and emotional disconnection. The book isn’t just to theorise the relationship between love and revolution. It’s here to help us practice it, to experience it.

TM/GA: There is discussion in the book about hierarchies of relationships – covering why we struggle to talk about ‘intimacy’ and the way certain types of relationship are seen as being of more worth than others. The word ‘relationship’ here meaning any individual or group who feel close to each other rather than necessarily something romantic or sexual. This issue is picked up in both Jenny Alexander’s ‘Alexander Berkman: Sexual Dissidence in the First Wave Anarchist Movement and Its Subsequent Narratives’, and Lena Eckert’s ‘Postanarchism and the Contrasexual Practices of the Cyborg in Dildotopia or The War on the Phallus’.

Would it have been possible to have more discussion of how sexual vs non-sexual intimate

relationships are ‘normatively’ perceived/ located in the context of sexual rights and justice – hierarchies in law, sexual commerce/ work?

(This relates to what the International Network for Sexual Ethics and Politics describes as: “ascriptions of both positive and negative values to sexual practices that have impacts on those who do them and on societies in which they are done – what is pathologised, prejudiced against and discriminated against and what is held up as healthy, virtuous and legitimate – the vagaries and ills of contemporary moral values, legal rules and political and cultural discourse on sexuality”.⁷)

JH: Of course! The book asks more questions than it answers and there is certainly space for a lot more thinking about anarchism and sexuality, or anarchism and intimacy more broadly. For me, anarchism as opposed to statism, hierarchy or domination means learning to listen with care to ourselves and each other rather than blindly follow the authority of norms or laws. This doesn’t mean blindly refusing authority, either. Each of us has something to share from what we’ve learned in our lives. Some will have learned deeply and have the skill to express that in the way that helps others live their lives well. We might call that good authority. Good authority is characterised not by the desire to control or the belief that one knows the right way for others to live, but by love.

TM/GA: In Jenny Alexander’s ‘Alexander Berkman: Sexual Dissidence in the First Wave Anarchist Movement and Its Subsequent Narratives’, a question is raised as to why should “emotionally significant deep attachments where those concerned choose not to share bodily fluids be deemed less socially significant than fluid-bonded states”? (p39) If intimacy rather than sex is important, and attachments that don’t include sex between non-blood relatives are of equal importance, how then might attachments between humans and non-humans be seen?

(Particularly around how power might be used in an ethical way when the balance of power is so much in favour of the human side of the connection.)

JH: Wonderful question! For most of our evolution as a species, attachment to the nonhuman world has been incredibly important. It takes a lot of effort to create mass confusion that exists placing humans outside of nature. We, too, are animals. So, yes, let us honour relationships with particular non-humans, whether companion animals or trees, and with the non-human world more broadly. Gavin writes about this a bit in his chapter when he talks about Queer Pagan Camp and the relationships there with land and spirit. The developing field of ecopsychology⁸ has a lot to offer here, too, in making space for those of us not raised indigenous to acknowledge and nurture our intimate relationship with fields and forests, oceans and skies, gardens and parks. So, too, the intersections of anarchist, feminist and indigenous politics.⁹

The second part of your question intrigues me. I admit I immediately and contrarily think about the way in which climate change highlights that humans aren’t quite so powerful as we like to imagine. We cannot control the nonhuman world, because we are only a small part of it. Sure, we’re influential, but we’re not in charge. Where is the balance of power here?

I’ll also let Bakunin answer this. “[Human beings suffer from] a nostalgia for which there is no remedy upon earth except as is to be found in the enlightenment of the spirit – some ability to have a perceptive rather than an exploitative relationship with his [sic] fellow creatures.”¹⁰

TM/GA: Could you comment, particularly with regard to the balance of power, on intimate or significant and deep relationships between human and non-human animals? Further, is the claim that by treating animals badly we build up habits that will lead to us treating humans badly relevant?

JH: Relationships are relationships. Nurturing a capacity for sensitivity in any relationship will affect others. And vice versa. So yes, I certainly agree that treating non-human animals badly is intertwined with treating human animals badly. Is there a one-way causal link? I’m not so sure about that.

With regard to the first question, I’m not



sure what the balance of power means. Does that relate to a notion of power as something you either have or don't have, like an object that can be weighed? I experience power as something you do, or perhaps on an even more subtle level, something that moves through us. So I'm not very interested in trying to measure power relationships but to nurture a capacity for sensitivity, for perceptiveness. What would it mean to acknowledge that non-human animals also have emotions and desires, and to honour those by listening?

For many, a perceptiveness and a sensitivity to the emotions of non-human animals is entirely incompatible with eating them. Emotionally and spiritually, that is my own way in life. It is not everyone's way, nor would I want to impose it.

I've noticed, in myself and others, that trying to have a certain diet for political reasons can be less about loving other beings and more about judging oneself as not good enough in one way or another. The diet becomes yet another method of control. I'm also inspired by a politics of becoming-indigenous, connecting with the land individually and through the processes of nurturing cultures that are internally and deeply intertwined with place. For most indigenous peoples, eating meat with respect for the spirit of the animal and with a profound awareness of the interdependence of life, is an integral part of the culture.¹¹ For the UK, Simon Fairlie¹² has made some pretty compelling arguments for eating small amounts of locally raised meat as part of an ecologically sustainable diet.

While I keep a vegetarian diet myself, I do wonder about food and climate change. Where does my vegetable fat and protein come from at the moment? How much energy is used to get them to my plate? How much could we produce locally? What could we swap for olive oil traded by sailing ships? When we look at things like nut production, such as Martin Crawford's¹³ sweet chestnut trials in Devon, the question of how to relate with the squirrels who are generally much quicker at picking the nuts immediately comes up. When I was growing up in Iowa, we ate grey squirrels. Martin also kills and eats them both to sustain himself and in order to get accurate measurements of the productivity of the chestnut trees so that those of us who prefer to eat the nuts can benefit from the results. And I know I certainly prefer the respectful hunting of wild squirrels to the industrial production of meat.

Eating, of course, is not the only intimacy. We all share our lives with non-human animals, even if we don't intentionally have any in our homes. They live all around us and have evolved with us. We cannot escape this intimacy, but we can cherish it.

TM/GA: The book mentions labels in a number of contexts.

Jenny Alexander relates to how their use can lead to lack of discussion in some situations when discussing Alexander Berkman. She makes the point that Berkman is well known as an early 20th century political figure and an anarchist, who served 14 years in prison for the attempted assassination of businessman Henry Clay Frick as an 'act of propaganda of the deed'. However, his writings on sexuality have been "largely unmarked in his re-circulations in anarchist and scholarship-of-anarchism contexts from the 1960s to now." (p32) Jenny Alexander suggests that this lack of attention may be because the intimate relationships he described having in prison "do not fit the categories by which we in the twenty-

first century are generally given to understand passion, sexual desire and intimacy." (p32) Berkman describes his encounters with two other male inmates as passionate but that there was not any physical relationship between Berkman and either of the other men.

In 'Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator' you discuss your own concerns about how labels can be applied for positive reasons – identifying as an outsider can bring the benefit of support from other outsiders and provide a way of dealing with spending time in what might otherwise be a hostile environment. However, an effect of this can also be that those same labels may "inhibit transformations of consciousness or social relations" (p160) – labels limiting and constraining how people think and act.

Gavin Brown – 'Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces' – writes of his worries about being labeled overly intellectual by the activist members of the 2006 conference audience. He also says, "...and worried how the more 'activist' elements of the audience might react to my attempt to uncover impulses toward autonomy in a range of spaces beyond activist circuits." (p201)

Sexual identity is a personal, public and social construct. Labels pathologise, prejudice and discriminate against... and labels are adopted, adjusted, and reconfigured in the social imaginary. Sexual practices have impacts on those who participate in them and on the societies in which they are done.

Why does the conference/ book seek to specifically focus on anarchism in terms of its relation to sexuality, when most notions of sexualities apparently sit productively within neo-liberalism?¹⁴ In what (anarchistic) political way can lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual perspectives, queer perspectives and approaches, be said to be distinctive?

JH: For starters, the relationship between a diversity of sexualities and neo-liberalism isn't so clear cut. Yeah, there are many ways in which the impulse toward LGBTQ liberation has been diverted by the attractions of privilege and profit. That's understandable when we are seduced by the confusion of individualism. And it kind of works for some people. We suggest anarchism is a rich tradition of resources that can help everyone have the kind of freedom and well-being that capitalism promises that can never deliver, not even to the so-called 1%.

While the labels of LGBT have been taken up by hierarchical institutions, the impulse for liberation has been left behind. Emma Goldman spoke to this many years ago:

"Individuality is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of Individualism; much less with that 'rugged individualism' which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his [sic] individuality. So-called Individualism is the social and economic laissez faire: the exploitation of the masses by the classes by means of legal trickery, spiritual debasement and systematic indoctrination of the servile spirit, which process is known as 'education'. That corrupt and perverse 'individualism' is the strait-jacket of individuality. It has converted life into a degrading race for externals, for possession, for social prestige and supremacy."¹⁵

If someone believes that externals are what

makes for a good life, they may well throw themselves in with neo-liberalism. Anarchism potentially offers something deeper.

(I say potentially because interpretations of anarchism sometimes gets caught up in that great distraction of resentment.) Anarchism emphasises freedom *and* equality, individuality *and* community. Nathan Jun has summarised this as vitality, which certainly describes the life of Emma Goldman. And while Sheila Rowbotham is correct to say that we can't all be Emma Goldman, we can each be vital, vibrant, full of life in our own ways. And we can help each other to do this.

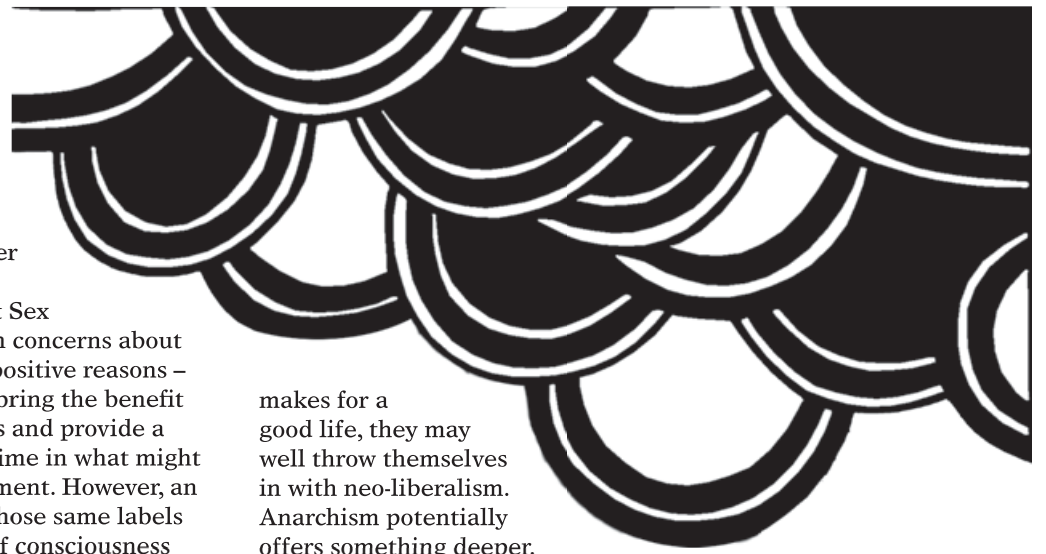
But not when we let labels get in the way. Folk like Jasbir Puar, Jin Haritaworn, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler and others have pointed out how the label Muslim is linked with the labels terrorist and homophobe, creating racial divisions within potential LGBTQ communities and reinforcing those global patterns of relationships who might call Empire. So, neo-liberalism isn't working for Muslim LGBTQ folk. And when being gay is about wearing certain labels, it becomes a class issue. I'll never forget performance artist The Divine David saying, "I can't afford to be gay."

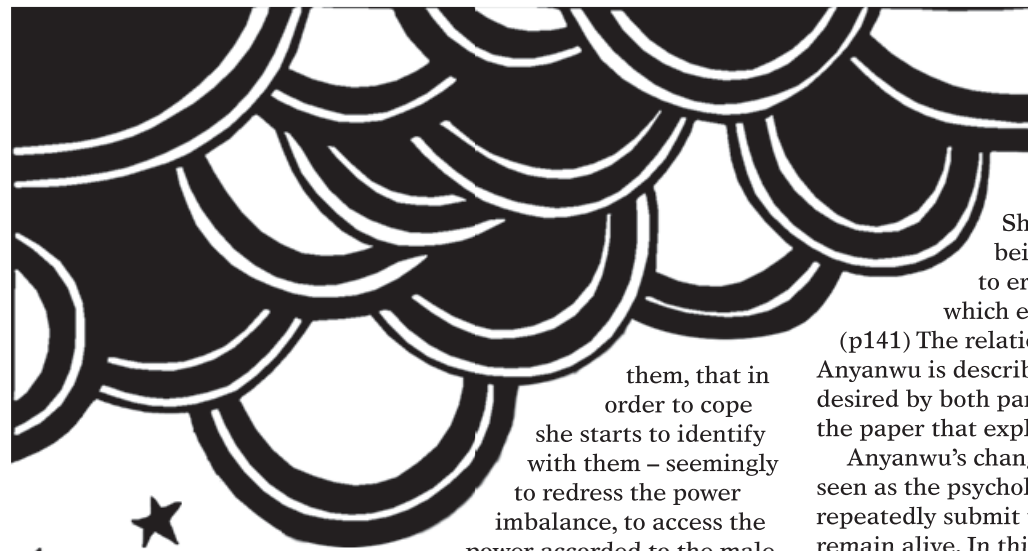
So while some LGBT identities may reinforce state and capital, others are creating queer alternatives. Still others may be queering that supposedly clear border between the state and anarchy or autonomy (like Gavin does in his chapter).

Is there something distinctive about LGBTQ contributions to anarchic politics? Probably yes, but not necessarily. Ben Shepard, for example, highlights the role of playfulness in queer anarchist politics¹⁶. And while you don't have to think of yourself as queer to be playful, there is something outside the normative about adults playing in streets or on the picketline. Like Emma Goldman, we want dancing in our revolutions. And like Ursula Le Guin, we want loving in our revolutions. Queer approaches to anarchism also include playing with gender, sexuality and intimacy. They may also involve a seriousness around painful experiences of gender/sexual/racial violence.

Anarchism, like any ism, has the potential to become rigid, dogmatic. To keep it vital, we can each bring our own experiences, our own truth, our own individuality. The labels might fall away.

TM/GA: Laurence Davis's 'Love and Revolution in Le Guin's *Four Ways to Forgiveness*', describes a slave character within Le Guin's work. The character is shunned by her own people and sexually abused by her captors. Over time, she starts to identify strongly with these masters. She has no agency to avoid spending so much time in their company and so being intimate with





them, that in order to cope she starts to identify with them – seemingly to redress the power imbalance, to access the power accorded to the male protagonists. (p117) Later in the

books, her circumstances change again and she becomes a writer and speaker, campaigning for freedom for the oppressed. (p118)

Throughout 'Anarchism & Sexuality' there was an affirmation of how difficult it is for individuals and groups to change how they act and respond with regard to ethical thinking and feeling about an equality of relations as a personal endeavour.

A plurality of oppressions resonate through institutional and state forms. How is the impact of living and working conditions and experiences, the impact the social environment has on people, considered in the book through anarchist thought?

Does an emphasis on the critical ethics of the self outline a limit to an anarchist political articulation of the "critical understandings of the role of law, politics and culture in the prohibition, permission or regulation of sexualities, both in its oppressive deployment and possibly liberating possibilities in contemporary societies"¹⁷?

JH: To start with the last question there, the self is a great place to start. Start where you're at, say the buddhists. That doesn't necessarily mean we stop there, that we can't also talk about law, politics and culture. Of course we can! But let's not skip over the immediate.

And so, Laurence and Lewis focus on the effects of slavery on people and how they unlearn that with love and/or kinky sex. I wrote about emotional slavery, domestic violence and fantasies of success and how I'm learning to unlearn those through spiritual practice. Jenny wrote about the role of hypersexuality in both capitalism and certain queer anarchist spaces, inviting us to look to Alexander Berkman for inspiration to recognise other loving forms in our lives. Gavin wrote about how self-organisation can create spaces for people to practice relating differently, to let go of the effects of oppression and to learn new skills.

Throughout the book, subjectivity, our sense of our selves as individuals, is acknowledged as a collaborative production. The book is also full of anarchist ideas, inspirations and practices for collaboratively producing ourselves differently. Not because there is something wrong with us as we are, but because we might find joy in finding a bit more spaciousness, integrity, freedom and equality in our lives.

TM/GA: In 'Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany', Lewis Call points out that Foucault has suggested that it is impossible to eliminate power – asking that we "entertain the hypothesis that it is, after all, possible to exercise power in an ethically responsible way" (p136)

He goes on to describe a relationship between two characters from Octavia Butler's Patternist series. The relationship starts with Doro forcing another character, Anyanwu, to submit to him. She does so in order to avoid being killed. Over time "she learns to eroticise the power relations which exist between her and Doro".

(p141) The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu is described as an ethical relationship desired by both parties. However, there is little in the paper that explains how this can be so.

Anyanwu's change in viewpoint could be seen as the psychological fallout from having to repeatedly submit to the will of another in order to remain alive. In this extreme imbalance of power, Anyanwu appears incapable of sustaining any individuality. Her own opposing wishes and agency is completely overtaken by the control which Doro exerts over them; a control of all of her actions and restriction of her choices.

Could you say more about this "exploration of the nature of power in any male/ female relationship" as "a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and the varied responses to this power imbalance available open to women"¹⁸?

JH: Have you read *Wild Seed*? It's incredible! And I think Lewis is spot on in his reading of what appears to be a paradox. How could Anyanwu love someone who could kill her? I'm not sure the story is about a power imbalance between women and men as that would suggest power is an object that some people have and others do not. And that reading is understandable. Doro can kill at will. Nothing can stop that. Except, perhaps, love. Lewis suggests a poststructuralist reading of power, not as a noun but a verb. It's not something you have, it's something you do. And there are different ways to do it. Doro's practice of power is state power – power over life. And he is a beautifully tragic character, unable to find love because he desires control. Anyanwu is a shape-changer who learns she does not have to be afraid. She practices power from below. Yin, rather than yang¹⁹. And in doing so, disarms Doro. What an anarchist!

TM/GA: 'Anarchism and Polyamory'²⁰ – a collection of writings on the theory and practice of open relationships from an anarchist perspective – sees anarchism as a political practice that challenges mainstream economic, social and political power relationships, and polyamory as a similar challenge to the mainstream view of romantic relationships. In 'Anarchism & Sexuality', polyamory is discussed by Marta Kolářová in her contribution 'Sexuality issues in the Czech anarchist movement'. Both works raise a question regarding pressure to conform to social norms from within anarchist movements.

Kolářová describes how polyamory is frowned upon amongst Czech anarchist movements: "Anarchists practising polyamory have been criticised by others. This form of social control in the movement has pushed multiple relationships to dissolve and shamed individuals into returning to monogamy." (p188)

Social pressures around conforming to polyamory in UK anarchist movements are described in 'Anarchism & Polyamory' in Sour Mango Powder's contribution 'Let them eat cake: Anarchist polyamory theory and reality'²¹, where the author describes pressure put on women

to engage in sexual relationships with what he describes as "in-group dominant males." (p27) Discussion of the pressure to conform is continued in 'The rise of polyamory: leftist men's self-serving cure all for sexism' where the author "Lost Clown" describes her break away from being a practising polyamorist because the power imbalance existing between men and women in anarchist movements in the 1960s meant that for women polyamory resulted in them not being "seen as human, but as sexual chattel." (p44)

Given these explications of different potential tensions between anarchism and polyamory, could you comment on whether you are aware of such issues existing in UK anarchist groups? – and if so, how they have been, or could be, addressed?

JH: I helped organise a session called 'Love, Sex & Anarchy' at the Anarchist Bookfair in London last year. Three of us gave short talks on different aspects of the theme – including sexual violence, the meaning of queer, and polyamory – to introduce the session²². Nearly all of the questions that followed focused on the latter. How do you cope with jealousy? How do you manage time? Why does it seem so hard to love? So yeah, clearly a monogamy and polyamory are key issues for folk in anarchist networks here in the UK.

My concern is when polyamory becomes normative in anarchist circles. As if having multiple romantic, loving and/or sexual relationships is a way to establish one's anarchist identity or credentials. 'Hey, look at me, I'm liberated.' This is the flipside to that 1960s (and ongoing) feminist critique you highlighted, where so-called sexual liberation becomes sexual harassment. 'Hey, baby, what's the matter? I thought you were liberated.'

Now, Laura Stacer-Portwood, writing about the US anarchist movement has argued that sexual anarchonormativity can be 'wielded strategically': "There is power in identity. ... Where the disciplinary power of anarchonormativity is used to promote a queer critique of hegemonic sexuality, and thus makes life more livable for those whose desires are repressed by dominant institutions and discourses, it has positive political potential. Where such power is used to generate new forms of repression or to foreclose relationships of solidarity or to distract from efforts to combat material oppressions, it is less strategically sound."²³

She and I are in disagreement here. I'm not convinced that a new normativity, a new conformity, is necessary to displace old ones. My personal preference is generally to focus on common ground in a way that allows appreciation for difference without it becoming either the truth of the self or the other. Monogamous or polyamorous, gay, bi or straight, or living across or outwith these categories, we all experience challenges in our intimate relationships. Things push our buttons. We get excited, or scared. We love.

I see the question of how to undermine, subvert or overflow heteronormativity as intertwined with the same questions about capitalism. In a recent critical engagement with the book *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, Gabriel Kuhn comments on the narrow, and controversial, definition of anarchism given by the authors. Rather than suggesting there is one true path to dismantling capitalism, an anarchonormativity which can be wielded strategically, Gabriel argues, "the answer cannot be to only organize with anarchists we have no

disagreements with. The challenge for anarchist organizing rather seems to develop forms of organizing that turn diversity from a destructive threat to a productive tool. This is tremendously difficult, but I think it is the only chance we have."²⁴

So for me, an anarchist politics promotes neither monogamy nor polyamory, but provides spaces and practices for us to notice how we might get caught up in our own fears or desires leading us to pressure others. Anarchism, ultimately, is the faith that we can all get along with each other without anyone having to be in control. This requires a great capacity for sensitivity, empathy and communication regardless of whether or how we might label our relationships. These are capacities we can nurture in ourselves and each other.

TM/GA: Christian Klesse in 'Notions Of Love In Polyamory - Elements In A Discourse On Multiple Loving'²⁵ writes: "Survey data collected on USA polyamory communities affirms the educated nature and advanced class-position and ethnically/ racially exclusive nature of polyamory communities, an image which is reproduced in most publications on polyamory."

Could you say something about the subjectiveness of inequalities at work in different relationship practices – for instance, how socio-economic disparities impact the power dynamics of any possible relationship?

Do anarchist critiques of class relations, for instance, help us to address such power dynamics, as regards anarchist emphases on communication, respectful negotiation and decision making, integrity, reciprocity and equality?

JH: I'm sure there are many ways to answer these questions, and other more class-centred anarchists might offer a different approach, but for me, in this moment, the most immediate response is the ways in which the class system depends upon and encourages the delusions of scarcity, superiority and inferiority. Capitalism is based, in part, on a belief that there isn't enough to go around, so the only way to be okay in life is to compete and hoard. As critics have pointed out, it is the systems of distribution and ownership we call capitalism that itself creates this apparent scarcity. However, knowing this intellectually isn't the same as knowing it emotionally. And so many of us learn, in all levels of the class system, that love is something you should earn or deserve by being good enough, that it's something you fight for and, once won, must defend against challengers. Now, it might well be easier for those who trust that the world will look after them, without needing to fight or struggle, to be openhearted. Class or racial privilege might be one source of this trust. And oppression can shut people down emotionally, as they learn to believe themselves inferior and not worth listening to, trusting or believing. They/we learn not to listen to ourselves.

I suspect there is also something about mobility and meeting people who support letting go of norms that don't work for you. I'm sure I would have had very different experiences of love and intimacy if education hadn't helped me find a way out of the small village of my youth. Finding people who listen to you, who believe in you can make it easier to believe in ourselves.

Gordon, I once heard you refer to class struggle as the "struggle against class". I like that, though I would offer a different version: letting go of the belief in class. I don't mean ignore the way in which differential access to resources affects bodies and minds differently. I do mean learning to relate to each other as equals despite the collective delusion that some people are better than others.

TM/GA: A clear theme in the book is how hard it is for those engaged in fighting for social change

to change themselves. In the preface of the book, Judy Greenway is quoted saying that: "It is easier to theorise and to talk about what we would like to be than to talk about what we are" (Greenway 1975:6).

There is an echo of this sentiment in 'On Anarchism: An Interview with Judith Butler' when Butler describes the State as "a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour, we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently." (p95)

In 'Nobody Knows What an Insurgent Body Can Do: Questions for Affective Resistance', Stephen Shukaitis explores the issue of how women engaged in childcare tend to be excluded from left activist groups. This point is continued in 'Love and Revolution in Le Guin's *Four Ways to Forgiveness*' when Laurence Davis discusses the Spanish Civil War, saying that "most anarchist revolutionaries in Spain continued to regard personal life and domestic arrangements as entirely private matters. They did not question the authority of males within the family, and assumed as a matter of course that women would take responsibility for domestic chores." (p105) And the not surprising result was that after the changed environment of the revolution, amidst the onset of the Franco regime, "many pre-existing oppressive societal values governing sexuality (and women's sexuality in particular) were allowed to continue intact." (p106)

In 'Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator', you give an honest, mindful account of your own struggles describing how, in spite of distrusting – with good reason – the drawing of lines between the good guys and the bad guys, you still find yourself doing it. (p160) And again when you talk about how "asking for help is one of the aspects of anarchy I find most difficult to practise. For mutual aid to be truly mutual is to acknowledge vulnerability. Dammit, that's just not how I was raised! And to ask, rather than demand, is to accept that the answer might be 'no'. Hearing and reading feminist criticisms of macho behaviour in anarchist spaces, I know I'm not the only one facing these challenges." (p173) You also talk about attending non-violent communication courses and deliberately taking care over who you interacted with during the stressful period of writing up your PhD.

In 'Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces', Gavin Brown discusses how autonomy is always in a process of being built since there is always a tension between autonomy and our dependence on hierarchy. (p202)

Kristina N. Weaver hints at the need for ongoing work in 'On the Phenomenology of Fishbowls' when she comments that she had expected the 2006 conference that gave rise to the book would be "at best the chance to slot a few more nodes into my network of activist and academic contacts; at worst an encounter with the kinds of social policing so common in queer spaces." (p224)

If we, collectively, have an idea about how relationships can be more ethical, about how fluid sexuality can be/ should be, then pointing out the gap between theory and where we are now is a useful, if essential, transitional step. However, while societal constructs/ constellations are always undergoing change, outwith focusing on this difficulty, how might positive societal change at the level of inter-personal relationships be proactively enacted starting from where we are now?

JH: Practice. Gently.

I think Foucault, for example, was on to something writing about counter-practices and practices of freedom. Each of us can find practices that help us to live our lives well, to see that life is beautiful, even when it's painful. We can share our insights freely without expecting others to take up the same practices. The first axiom of queer

theory is "People are different from each other."²⁶ Let's honour that and be gentle with ourselves and each other.

For me, I've learned so much about freedom from non-violent communication, permaculture, yoga and meditation. This could be dismissed as 'mere lifestyle' when clearly what we need is organisation. My question about that is, what enables organisation to work and what makes it fall apart? So many anarchist groups and other efforts at creating alternative systems fall apart because people have trouble working together. That's okay. It's not easy. It's very easy to get attached to the idea of being right, to decide in advance how things should be or which ideas are better than others. It can be challenging to let go of that, to notice that beliefs and ideas can be helpful but don't need to be given too much attention, to listen to something deeper, subtler. Listening to the body and mind, to the land and to others are at the root of anarchism (and sexuality), for me. Everything else follows from that.

Notes

- 1 http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/09/feminism_and_th
- 2 <http://www.tantricnews.com/trueblood-goes-poly.html>
- 3 Foucault, Michel (1989) 'Friendship as a Way of Life', in S. Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84*, New York: Semiotext(e), p310.
- 4 Le Guin, U. K. (2004) 'The Operating Instructions', in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*, Boston, MA: Shambhala, p208.
- 5 Call, Lewis (2011) 'Buffy the Post-Anarchist Vampire Slayer' in D. Roussele and S. Evren (eds.), *Post-Anarchism: A Reader*. London: Pluto, pp 183-194.
- 6 Freedman, Carl (2008). *Conversations with Ursula K Le Guin*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp: 88-89.
- 7 <http://www.insep.ugent.be/insep/>
- 8 See, e.g., <http://ecopsychology-journal.eu/>
- 9 <http://http://journals.sfu.ca/affinities/index.php/affinities/issue/view/8/showToc>
- 10 Quoted in Tift, L and D. Sullivan (1980). *The Struggle to Be Human: Crime, Criminology, and Anarchism*. Sanday: Cienfuegos Press, p2.
- 11 See, e.g., Alfred, Taiaiake (2005). *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press
- 12 Fairlie, S. (2010) *Meat - A Benign Extravagance*
- 13 <http://www.agroforestry.co.uk/trustinf.html>
- 14 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/11/gay-club-scene>
- 15 http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/ANARCHIST_ARCHIVES/goldman/goldmanindiv.html
- 16 Shepard, B. (2010). 'Bridging the divide between queer theory sage and anarchism.' *Sexualities* 13(4): 511
- 17 <http://www.insep.ugent.be/insep/>
- 18 http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/09/feminism_and_th
- 19 Lao Tzu (1997) *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (trans. U. K. Le Guin with J. P. Seaton), Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- 20 <http://www.radicalbooks.co.uk/product/dysophia-1-april-2010-anarchy-polyamory>
- 21 Can also be read here: http://dysophia.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/polyamory1-6_web.pdf
- 22 <http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/49503>
- 23 Portwood-Stacer, L. (2010). 'Constructing anarchist sexuality: Queer identity, culture, and politics in the anarchist movement.' *Sexualities* 13(4):491.
- 24 <http://www.anarchist-studies.org/node/529>
- 25 *Laboratorium*. 2011. Vol. 3, no. 2:4-25
- 26 Sedgwick, E. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p22.

