Canon and Identity
Thoughts on the Hyphenated Anarchist

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ABSTRACT

The topic of canon is more than a discussion revolving around texts, historical figures, or someone's status in relation to that canon. This paper argues that the canon itself includes a way of applying and understanding one's identity in the canon. I explore the ways that identities are negotiated within the canon and seek an understanding of the workings of the canon. Taking the relations between anarchism, queer theory, feminism and religion as texts, this paper analyzes the canon and suggests directions for making the canon more anarchist by understanding the canon and its relationship to identity through the folklore of myth.

KEYWORDS

canon, narrative, identity, queer theory, religion, folklore, action

Generally, when one is in a conversation with a colleague or comrade about canon, the discussion revolves around texts, historical figures, or someone's status in relation to that canon. Questions of place in the canon or validity in the canon are the most frequent topics. There has been much ink spilled on the

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content of the canon, who is a part of the canon, and what this body of information has meant. I am not sure that many words, print or otherwise, have been spent on our understanding of the meaning of the term canon from an anarchist perspective. This is a category or genre that tends to be assumed, understood as natural and allowed to pass by. This paper argues that this is one of the primary problems with the canon, and it seeks an understanding of the workings of the canon and to suggest directions for making the canon more anarchist.

Canon is often understood as the best of the best, necessary writers, the starting points or the formative texts and peoples associated with a genre, discipline or ideology. This includes essays, zines, groups, events, books and the people who wrote and produced these items. These items do not act on their own—they are interlaced and constitute a larger narrative. The zine or text has to be understood in a context. The canon and what we believe is a part of it are the building blocks for a narrative about us; those who adhere to the canon. The canon is the stuff of analysis, from which we build critiques and future actions and through which we define ourselves. The canon can be understood as a narrative that constructs our identity. It is part of the story we tell about ourselves. Because of the link between narrative and identity, we should understand the canon as a myth.

Myth is, as morphology, often used in differentiating ways. This paper will borrow and use the definition of William Bascom from the field of folklore. A myth in this paradigm is an origin story that is not necessarily given a truth value (Bascom 1965, 4). The myth is the narrative that is used to form and constitute and define a group, and most often is constituted as an origin story. The creation narratives present in many cultures are myths that define humanity, its features, goals and ends for the communities that have created these myths. Other narratives are added to this base narrative to create a full story arch for the community.

Looking at the canon as a narrative arch, we can then use canon to understand the identity of a community. Treated as a myth, the canon, then, is both a prescriptive narrative and descriptive narrative. One uses the canon to understand what is anarchist and what is not anarchist. The individual is defining identity through this set of texts, authors, ideas and even actions as relationships to others in a narrative structure with the accompanying tropes, devices and nuances. I can use the canon to describe texts that are anarchist and prescribe anarchist actions or create new texts by applying these narratives as a filter. Further, the way texts are used and understood will be a part of

the canon as well. Rogers Abrahams says that, "identity has become the encompassing term for cultural, social, and spiritual wholeness. It also emerges in discussions of territorial integrity, often as a rhetorical ploy in struggles for maintaining domain" (Abrahams 2003, 198). This is an apt and useful definition for canon, as the canon is not only what we use to include and create, but also to preclude and destruct.

Identity then, is what is at stake when defining the canon and thus what our understanding of canon is shaping. How we understand the canon will dictate how we understand identity, both for ourselves and others. In everyday speech we use this idea to define who is or is not anarchist and how we are to understand ourselves in relationship to them, their writing and their actions. When I define the anarchist canon, I am describing what it is to be an anarchist for me and often for others. At the same time, I am defining what it is not anarchist and the "other" in relation to this identity. Asserting an identity and applying the canon then both constitutes the "I" and the "you" or "other."

Because canon structures identity, it also contributes to the construction of narratives. These narratives then, have a reciprocal effect on the canon, defining what can and cannot be included. "Identity seems to be built on notions of an ideal life-plan or an archetypal map of the actual world" (Abrahams 2003, 199). This life plan or map is a projected narrative on history and the future. The narrative force of the canon shows that it deals with more than our texts and historical figures and that actions; lifestyles, choices and developments are also part of the canon. It has the power to map out a person's life, the life of a movement, the life of a particular action or event or even how I judge and categorize the lives and narratives of others. The anarchist narrative, however I form it, becomes my standard for critiquing and judging just like a canon.

Insofar as students of expressive culture have looked for texts, objects, and figures that represent such larger wholes, identity has been used more to refer to groups rather than individuals. But unlike other such keywords as tradition or authenticity, the semantic domain of identity is not tied to styles, but rather to (apparent) matters of substance, states of being, or existence in its display (Abrahams 2003, 205).

The role that canon plays in identity-formation thus helps illuminate how we constitute ourselves and the process of our becoming. This means that the idea of canon itself has to be treated gravely: the discussion is not just about content, but about the evaluation of identity. The canon can constitute a system for

comparison, inclusion and exclusion within the content.

What my group defines as the canon or the content for the identity for the group is much deeper than a bit of history or a reading list. This defines the ideas, methods and identities that are performable for acceptance and solidarity. As much as anarchism seeks to redefine social and political affiliations and roles, it is itself subject to the ways these forces produce identity. To reiterate the point made earlier: identity can be prescriptive. When one seeks to become a part of the group there are forms, texts, actions and the like to which one must adhere in order to be filed into the ranks and before one can be called comrade. Likewise, if one already accepts these texts, ideas or actions then they can be described as being a part of the group. One may not self identify with a particular group but may be judged to be in the group, at least by definition, descriptively.

The issues raised by identity and canon are complex and in order to understand them better, I want to use a couple short examples. I am going to look at three areas within the anarchist paradigm—queer theory, feminism and religion—that are somewhat contested within and between different groups. This paper is not seeking a complete history of the identity formation within these groups; rather, a few examples of how these identities are contested and are made problematic will suffice to explore the processes inherent in the anarchist canon. This paper seeks to recognize how the canon's content can be used and applied in order to reveal a "canonical method" in anarchism.

One of the most apparent features of anarchism, even for outsiders, is the naming structure. Naming is definitely a part of identity formation and recognition. Terms or titles designate, or index, a canon or a set of attributes associated with the referent of that term. Walk up and down the rows at an anarchist book fair and terms like anarcho-queer, anarcha-feminist, anarcho-syndicalist, Christian anarchism, Islamic anarchism, etc. pop up. These are titles that index definitions and bracket identities off from each other. A second common feature is the hyphenation of terms. These terms are interesting for our study as they represent a negotiation of the narratives. They have developed to describe a new identity, the result of a sort of Gestalt convergence that has reached a point in which it needs to be named.

Terms are not just shifts within the anarchist paradigm—they are the attempts to meld, mix, and negotiate identity across groups or canons. These hyphens mix two terms that have their own somewhat discrete canon. For example: Queer theory has its own history and canon apart from the anarchists, as does

feminism. For a particular group of individuals, neither term 'queer' nor 'anarchist' adequately describe their experience. The new hyphenated term, 'anarcho-queer,' not only brings together two groups it also signals the emergence of a new identity, outside the binomial represented linguistically by their juxtaposition.

There is a set of negations going on here. The hyphenated term is a space in which canons can be negated and added to in order to create a new canon or myth and in turn to construct one's identity within a group. In placing terms together, there are at least two canons that are being negated in part. I cannot assume that the anarcho-queer theorist is the same as a queer theorist, because in this term there is an indication that they are not only or fully a queer theorist. There is a negation of part, known or unknown, of the canon of queer when I add anarchist. My preconceived notion is negated and a space is formed that can be filled with new information. This is the creating of a void, as one who reads or hears these terms needs to be informed about this new identity. The same can be said about the anarchist canon in relation to the anarcho-queer theorist. There is something about anarchism that does not fully describe the anarcho-queer theorist, and to read the standard anarchist canon would not lead me to an anarcho-queer critique; it is lacking. Anarchism's completeness in relation to the subject is negated by the hyphenated term in this context.

Anarcha-feminist as a term has developed through critiques of freedom, action and issues of inclusion and exclusion. The zine *What the Fuck is Anarcha-feminism* illustrates how these new terms assert a new identity in the face of feminism. This zine is basically a list of negations of the expectations of someone adopting a feminist identity and functioning with a popular feminist canon. The negations are presented both through a textual critique as well as a list of terms that describe anarcha-feminism (e.g., london anarcha-feminist kolektiv n.d.). A new canon and a new way to read the old canon (thus creating a new canon) negates and asserts parts of the old canon to create a new one. Ideas of actions, goals, and methods redefine the narrative. Popular ways of action in feminism such as voting are negated and brought into question. Anthologies like *Colonize This!* (Hernández and Rehman 2002) disrupt and negate the old narrative along race and color lines as well. These identities are asserted because the canon currently holding the monopoly on identity is thought to leave out or neglect a key part of someone's identity and struggle.

Colonize This! is "a collection of writings by young women of color that testifies to the movement—political and physical—of a new generation of global citizens, activists, and artists" (Hernández and Rehman 2002, xi). This text fills the void in the literature, one that was presumably created by the exclusion, or passive negation, of a dominant group. This text challenges the assumption that 'feminism' prior to this text was full or complete, as well as many of the paradigm's conclusions and actions that flowed from it. Narratives by women of color index a history of white middle class feminism and the ways that it excluded narratives that did not fit its canon. That isn't to say that these feminists as a whole outright rejected these narratives but that their feminism had blind spots and omissions.

Sheila Jeffreys in *Unpacking Queer Politics* describes the early relationships with lesbian feminism and queer politics and states, "Queer politics, then, was created in contradistinction to lesbian feminism. The dreadfulness of lesbian feminism was its founding myth" (Jefferys 2003, 35). In this example, the negation of the one narrative creates the next. The myth or the starting narrative is born out of redefinition or the negation of another myth. This process is a part of an identity-formation process. This new term outraged lesbian feminists who see the term as exclusionary, not inclusive. In this case, canon or identity is being negated and supplemented in order to fully express and index a new emergent reality. But a new term will have the same problems of the old one: "When used to refer to self or group of identification, the word seems to emancipate, yet when used to refer to others it too often imprisons" (Abrahams 2003, 207). Identity and language of identity in one swipe both include and exclude. The limitation reflects the tendency to treat labels and titles as complete and discrete.

How can there be a relationship between terms when the starting premise is so hostile? One recent book which is not in the anarchist canon per se, *Feminism is Queer* (2010) sheds light on this question. The book was written by Mimi Marinucci and is subtitled "The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory." It attempts to overcome the problems inherent in the application of terms derived from identity and the use of canon. It suggests that one might have a personal narrative that feminists and queers describe, and which are useful to the individual. But Marinucci questions the extent to which one can really be in both camps. And more importantly for our discussion, whether one can one be in both camps and, simultaneously, an anarchist? The discussion highlights a paradox: the need to negotiate identity

within different frameworks for identity to be fully actualized and the simultaneous exclusionary effects of identify-forming descriptive terms for individuals seeking actualization.

Marinucci ponders the suggestion that feminism "as a form of identity politics, will inevitably fail because the identity categories, such as sex and gender, that promise to unite a group of people are always mitigated by additional categories that ultimately divide members of the group"—an application of Simone de Beauvoir's point that making categories (or identities) is a part of the human condition (Marinucci 2010, 68). This is a catch that actually applies to all identity categories. This problem of inclusion militates against the statement— the title of Marinucci's book—that "feminism is queer." The statement that feminism equals queer is an equivocation and the book needs the qualification in its subtitle to soften the ontological implication. Negations brought about by assertions of category would ultimately destroy one or the other identity.

The logic of this argument suggests that it is impossible to make the anarcho-queer compatible with anarcho-feminism. However, compatibility is not necessary as long as the narratives do not completely negate each other. This I think is the final conclusion/ lesson of *Feminism is Queer*. The relationship between these theories, both historical and contemporary, can produce the necessary links for unity. Nevertheless, the question remains: how do communities with differentiating basic myths, backgrounds and identities work together without negating each other and inclusively? Is this an issue of terms that only new terms can fix? My answer is no: we will only fall into the problems with the terms described above. Could more inclusive terms be used? No, because at some point, terms would become so broad as to lose their ability to describe, prescribe and define a referent. If all texts we liked were a part of the anarchist canon the designation and language may lose its meaning.

Paulo Freire offers some insight into why these identities and names are important to us as theorists: "If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process" (Freire 2000, 126) He continues: "It is essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation" (Freire 2000, 127). Language gives subjects a way to understand themselves, and they are able to manipulate their self-understandings through the use of

language. The names and markers we give to ourselves and others signify our role both in the process of change and in the process of oppression. The terms and signals we use for ourselves place us within the narrative of the canon.

If the canon is understood as a way to fit into a larger set or related narratives, then many of these smaller categories are not as important as when we are defining freely our relationships within these networks. This is one way to get to praxis and to keep other valid narratives from negating our own to the point that solidarity breaks down. Much more could be said in relationship to the histories and relationships between anarcha-feminism and anarcho-queer as well as queer and feminist theory. The point here is that identity understood within the lens of praxis can allow us to use these theories as tools for connections and less as distinct categories of difference. The hyphenated term indicates an identity outside of the canon but related to it. This approach can be used for other groups who may be able to work with the anarchist canon or narrative, even though they do not identify with it.

With the previous example we saw seemingly opposing groups being brought together through a process of definition in relation to a larger narrative. Another way that this negotiation between identities can be achieved is through the associations of the narratives. These groups can make their identity and their narrative acceptable to anarchists by showing that the anarchist canon is integral or reflected in their tradition. This is also apparent in Marinucci's work insofar as she attempts to ground the narratives of feminism and queer theory within each other by showing their intimate link and avoiding negations. Another group that employs this approach is the religious anarchists.

Alexandre Christoyannopoulos quotes Ciaron O'Reilly to argue that Christian anarchism, a religious anarchism, "is not an attempt to synthesize two systems of thought," but is rather a "realization that the premise of anarchism is apparent in Christianity." So what is the premise or kernel that is found that links his belief to anarchism? For him it seems to be an issue of the state—in his view, Christianity, in its final logical end, would abolish the state (Christoyannopoulos, 2011, 6). The anarchist feature of a stateless society is said to be an integral part of the Christian religion, in this argument, and is thus linked to the anarchist canon. Is that enough?

For some the answer is no. For most of the "no's," I would assume it is the assertion of a deity or the other ideas associated with Christianity, real or imagined, that presents the obstacle.

Here we find that a link to the canon is not enough; the canon has to be applied correctly and has to have specific aesthetic attributes. Abolishing the state isn't enough; the rejection of authority has to be pushed further. That push, or method, for applying the canon is often more a part of the canon that we want to admit. The anarchist canon is more than the set of goals; there is a way in which it needs to work. The Christian anarchist has stated that within their group the same end is desired, but the deity remains. Is the acknowledgement of the deity sufficient to place the identity outside the anarchist fold? Is the negation of a deity a part of the canon itself or is it a logical outcome of how the canon is used? These have to be worked out in a discussion of the canon.

The Christian anarchist sees the idea of God and the canon differently to the non-religious anarchist. To this argument, Christoyannopoulos reiterates Dorothy Day's response that God, if in existence, is not something you can reject (Christo-yannopoulos 2011, 6). It would be akin to being against gravity because it pulls you to the ground and oppresses you. The canon not only prescribes what and who, but how we think. In this we see the way a deity is understood in specific terms by the anarchist canon. For the Christian Anarchist, deity is a starting point, and for the anarchist canon, deity is a point to contest.

The religious anarchist, like other types of anarchist, may arrive at their anarchist conclusions from routes outside the anarchist canon. From a religious perspective, one could pull the rejection of property from St John Chrysostom or St Basil the Great. St Basil the Great rejected property above need as theft, irrational, and in some cases, murder (see Schroeder 2009). These two 4th-century writers are not included in the anarchist canon. Is the canon open to include, even as a side note, other texts that come to similar positions or conclusions? Can the parts of the canon one uses be different if the conclusions are similar or the same as the anarchist? If the canon one pulls from is different, can one still be called an anarchist? I think it would be problematic to claim that all anarchists come to their conclusions about the deity in the same way: Harold Barclay does a good job outlining the complexities and currents within the canonical anarchist thinkers' writings on religion in his essay "Anarchist Confrontations with Religion" (in Jun and Wahl 2010). There needs to be a method of negotiating the canon itself which is flexible, but which also retains much of its original make-up in order to account for the complexities of multiple identities.

The hyphenated terms are used to close the gap between two

narratives in the attempt to bring them together, while the non-hyphenated terms make a claim to an inherent link in the ideologies. We can also see this process in the book *Feminism is Queer*. The Christian anarchist is making a similar move in claiming that "Christianity is Anarchist." Other religions may also make a similar claim. The terms themselves are a part of the formation of canon in that these terms reflect how canon is being put together and how the canon will be interpreted within these communities. As an author, I am sympathetic to the non-hyphenated term in that I would like to assume that I can claim a link without dealing with another narrative.

The non-hyphenated term may have more to do with my existence in a context in which other parts of my identity are not questioned or directly marginalized. As a white, heterosexual, male, my personal narrative is not challenged by the overarching myth in the anarchist canon. As much as I attempt to work against some of the difficult elements in the anarchist canon, the religious aspect is what I find problematic. This explains my concern with Christian and religious anarchisms and the canon. The choices in terms may also reflect one's allegiances and solidarity networks, and act as a way to identify others with similar goals and needs within the structure of canon. These terms and their application is then a part of the canon itself.

CONCLUSION

How we use and apply the aspects of the anarchist canon as a part of the canon itself. How far do I have to push the tenets of anarchism? How much can I supplement the canon with writers, tactics, figures, and other texts that are important to aspects of my own identity without either negating others' identities or having my own negated? As anarchists we have to look at more than just the content of the canon. Viewing the canon through identity politics helps us to understand how we are interacting with each other in profound ways: negotiating, negating, vali-dating, and recreating ourselves and others.

In what ways can we negotiate the canon and construct identity without negating others identity? How much solidarity are we willing to lose, gain, or overlook? In this essay, I have tried to give an overview of what the canon is as canon. In the relationships and histories of anarcha-feminism, anarcho-queer, and religious anarchist identities, we see the ways in which the use of canon as a myth and constructed identity defines, validates, and negates narratives within and between these

groups. As we consider the canon, these realities and questions must be a part of the process and discussion in order to ensure that the canon is truly anarchist. Cindy Milstein writes that anarchism is "a compelling political philosophy because it is a way of asking the right questions without seeking a monopoly on the right answers" (Milstein 2010, 73). In order to take this definition seriously, not only does the content of the canon need to be anarchist, but the way we interact with that content, the praxis of the canon, must be inclusive, radical and be truly anarchist.

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