

# Becoming Anarchist: The Function of Anarchist Literature

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## Abstract

Mapping types of anarchist literature, its modes of production and typical tropes and themes, this paper argues that there is a consistency in values produced through modes of production and both content and form in anarchist literature. Furthermore there are two functions of anarchist texts: interventionist representations, in which anarchists interrupt the dominant image machinery, and cultural prefiguration whereby anarchist values are engaged within the text, prefiguring the society we are building through our actions. Anarchist literature thereby both reflects and produces a model for the project of becoming-anarchist, a literary expression of the always-incomplete permanent anarchist revolution.

My friend Coco and I were recently talking about why we make art. Coco was really interested in creating images of ourselves that could in some way interrupt advertising, TV, Hollywood and other celebrity images — interventionist representations against the culture machine. Also, Coco said, it is important to tell stories that other people like, and it is very satisfying when people come up to you and say, hey, that happened to me too, or that's how I felt too. I've been a writer for a long time now, and I feel that anarchists often do not value our own writing, or we hide our bookishness, because we are unsure of the role or the importance of literature in anarchist social

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movements. As Margaret Killjoy writes in her “Conclusion” to *Myth-makers & Lawbreakers* (2009), “I think that perhaps we anarchists, in our desire for direct action, overlook the beauty and subtlety of the symbolic” (p. 185). But is it just beauty and subtlety that we are after when we write or read? What types of publications do anarchists like to produce? What are some of the alternative literary value-based structures that we have created to publish and distribute anarchist literature? When we do write, what are some of the recurring themes, images, tropes and figures? This paper will explore these questions in order to investigate the function and relevance of anarchist literature, arguing that the relationship between anarchist lifestyles and direct actions, as represented in anarchist literature, is crucial to understanding both the concerns of anarchist politics and the function of anarchist literature in disseminating these concerns.

## 1 Types of Publications

It will come as no surprise to anyone that both fiction and non-fiction anarchist texts are published in a range of formats and by a variety of publishers beyond (and sometimes including) the mainstream. Certainly anarchists publish books with anarchist publishers, such as Black Rose Books in Montreal, Freedom Press in the UK, or AK Press and PM Press in California. Typically anarchist presses publish non-fiction books, including everything from political analysis to autobiographies to vegan cookbooks. Anarchist publishers sometimes hesitate to publish fiction or poetry, but there are some exceptions. PM Press, for example, has recently come out with a stellar line of radical fiction; CrimethInc. publishes books of poetry; Autonomedia also publishes fiction, if infrequently. Anarchist fiction and poetry writers also publish books with conservative presses at times. As anarchist comic artist Alan Moore argues, these capitalist publishers “are prepared to forgive you anything if you’re making enough money for them” (Killjoy, 2009, p. 53). The irony of capitalists publishing anti-capitalist tracts is not lost on Moore. On the other hand, some more DIY-oriented anarchists maintain consistency between the means and the ends by self-publishing books collectively or individually. Contemporary examples include the CrimethInc. ex-workers’ collective (Killjoy, 2009, p. 58–69) and Toronto’s Jim Munroe at *nomediakings.org* (p. 150–65); historical examples include Diane di Prima who, in the 1960s and 70s self-published important

books by Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde and revolutionary Black Beat poet LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (Giannini Quinn, 2003 p. 185–6), as well as a journal called *The Floating Bear* (1961–69). Currently there appears to be a trend toward publishing autobiographies by radical women, including Assata Shakur (1987), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2001), Ann Hansen (2001), Diane di Prima (2001), and Diana Block (2009), to name just a few.

Beyond books, there is a long-standing anarchist tendency to publish magazines (from Emma Goldman's landmark journal *Mother Earth* [1907–1915] to the more contemporary *Green Anarchy* and CrimethInc.'s *Rolling Thunder*) and zines (of which there are far too many to list — for a sampling, see [zinelibrary.info/english/anarchism](http://zinelibrary.info/english/anarchism); there is now a trend to anthologize zines into books such as CrimethInc.'s *off the map*, and PM Press's *Burn Collector*, both personal narrative zines). More recently academic journals (*Anarchist Studies*, *Perspectives*, and this one), comix (*WWIII Illustrated* magazine, and artists Seth Tobocman, Fly, Coco Riot, Alan Moore, Erik Drooker, etc.), comic journalism, and DIY videos (e.g. *Made in Secret* by the East Van Porn Collective, a DIY video about making DIY porn videos) have joined the fray. What these types of publications all have in common is that they tend to espouse anarchist politics in one way or another, whether in fiction or non-fiction. They also sometimes share a commitment to alternatives not just in content, but also in the process of how texts are created and distributed. Although many studies of alternative media start with a presumption that the most important aspect is 'alternative' content, I would suggest this is not the case in anarchist texts. For anarchists, the means and modes of production should ideally be consistent with the form and content of the texts produced, though this is not always the case. An examination of these modes of production will help contextualize the subsequent analysis of the concerns addressed within anarchist texts.

## 2 Modes of Publication and Distribution

There are several important features in anarchist textual publication and distribution that set these modes of cultural production apart from the mainstream. The first is a DIY or Do It Yourself ethic (McKay, 1998) which has a range of principles from anti-professionalism to self-determination; from, as CrimethInc. puts it, a desire

to “fuck capitalism” (Killjoy, 2009, p. 66) to not wanting to give up creative control. DIY is the next step to take after noting how badly something is being organized and run, such as a party, a punk scene, or a publisher. Rather than complain endlessly, people with a DIY ethic take action and do things themselves. Recently this has been revised to ‘Do It Ourselves’, to emphasize the collective nature of these undertakings, which is consistent with social anarchism, rather than capitalist individualism. “A clear correspondence does exist between DiY culture and other general anarchist themes. Most DiY groups are avowedly anti-authoritarian, and they stress the anarchical value of leaderless, anti-hierarchical organizations” (Blackstone, 2005, p. 814).

This leads to the second important feature of DIY, which is collective process. Not all anarchists write or publish collectively, but the collective or affinity group is nonetheless an important space for the production and distribution of anarchist literature. Someone going by the name ‘Professor Calamity’ explains the process this way:

I only write using a collective approach. This takes many forms, depending on the individuals I am working with. I write non-fiction with the Curious George Brigade and we do it by arguing about every line and having long discussions about every topic before we start hitting the keyboard. When I write fiction, we usually talk first about the ideas and characters. We verbally hash out the story and then huddle around the computer and take turns typing. (qtd. in Killjoy, 2009, p. 73)

Collective process, as we see here, can incorporate practices such as task rotation, consensus decision-making, resource-sharing and skill-sharing. In this instance, people engage collectively in artistic production using consensus decision-making, and rotate the task of creative production, sharing the resource of the single computer. This collective approach puts into practice prefigurative anarchist horizontal grass-roots value-based practices (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). Prefigurative politics is understood to mean that we are creating the world we want to live in by the way we organize our lives today. Therefore in unique and interesting ways, anarchist collective writing challenges commonly held conceptions of the lone genius author, or the function of the author that determines how we interpret the work or works (Foucault, 1970). A collective author can produce

interesting results in the text itself, leading to a more collective protagonist, such as in the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), where the protagonist is the broad-based Algerian liberation movement. In a more explicitly anarchist film, the documentary *Breaking the Spell* (1999), we see a collective protagonist produced through a series of interviews with protesters and organizers of the 1999 Seattle WTO shutdown in collaboration with the “Eugene Anarchists” named in the subtitle. Though narrated by the ‘girl’ of the title, the novel *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (1903) was produced collaboratively by the Rosetti sisters, and its protagonist is actually ‘the anarchists’ also named in the title. The narrative corpse — in which one person starts a narrative and a second person continues it, and then a third, until it is deemed complete — is another example of a collective process that can produce different kinds of texts, and that can articulate a multiplicity of voices through a diversity of artistic styles.

A third feature of anarchist literature or DIY production is that specific textual production collectives may intentionally be organized around marginalized identities or groups. For example, the zine *Our Culture, Our Resistance* (2004) was written and published by a loose-knit Anarchist People of Colour (APOC) collective. Other texts may be published by anarchafeminist collectives (e.g. *Quiet Rumors* (2002) by the Dark Star Collective) or anarchaqueer collectives (e.g. the *Queerwind zine* (2003) or *Crée par des Queers made this* [2010] by QTeam). Sometimes texts are produced by groups or collectives like the Montreal radical queer affinity group, QTeam, whose main task is not textual production but political organizing; other times the collective exists solely for the purpose of producing texts, such as CrimethInc., PM Press, and other anarchist publishers. Often textual production is connected to anarchist organizing, so that people who are involved in producing texts are also involved in grassroots activism, protests, and other activities with revolutionary aims. The importance of identity-based textual production is that it provides space for the articulation of voices that are typically silenced in mainstream and sometimes also in anarchist spaces and discourses, thereby challenging the perception that the state and capitalism are the two most important oppressions that anarchists critique and resist. Instead, texts produced from an identity-based perspective demonstrate how these two oppressions are connected to racism, sexism, ableism, colonialism and heteronormativity, adhering to the broadly accepted anarchist principle that each person’s liberation depends on the liberation of all others.

Fourthly, anarchists tend to apply anti-copyright, or copyleft, to their texts. Ellie Clement and Charles Oppenheim (2002) argue that although copyright is widely understood to belong to and benefit the producer of an artistic work, copyright law in the UK originated to protect publishers rather than authors (p. 44). The debate among anarchists revolves around the question: Is intellectual property theft in the same way that material property is theft? Many anarchists believe that knowledge should be shared with those who can best benefit from it, based on the concept of 'usufruct' rather than possession or ownership of ideas. "Usufruct is the freedom of individuals in a community to appropriate resources merely by virtue of the fact that they are using them. Such resources belong to the user as long as they are being used" (Clement & Oppenheim, 2002, p. 42). Texts are of course different than land or factories. There is a distinction between land-based property, which exists in one location and is finite, and intellectual property, which consists of information, knowledge and ideas that can be replicated across space and time almost infinitely (Clement & Oppenheim, 2002, p. 44). Furthermore, with the advent of the internet, copyleft and anti-copyright, which were popular in the 1990s, have transmogrified into the legal protections offered by creative commons licenses under four basic premises: attribution, share-alike, non-commercial, and no derivatives (Creative Commons). The practice of "distributive use" (Clement & Oppenheim, 2002, p. 48) has also become important to anarchists — a publishing mode that is both anti-copyright and open distribution or open source, making use of the growing cyber commons. Anarchists, however critical of intellectual property laws they may be, do not like to fully give up their rights of ownership to just anyone, as Clement & Oppenheim (2002) found in their interviews with a range of publishers in the UK:

Many of the anti-copyright statements include statements regarding those who are permitted to copy, typically including a reference to their status within the capitalist society. For example, a 'non-hierarchical revolutionary group' is allowed to copy freely, but 'governments and corporations' or 'journalists and rich bastards' are excluded. Anarchist publishers are far less willing to allow their material to be disseminated by the mainstream capitalist media than by the media within their alternative public realm. However, if they were to write a novel or create a *magnum opus* which involved the input of significant

energies, or as one publisher put it, 'real work', then some copyright, control or recognition for the work was desired. Very few of those who created works which were more permanent and of significant lasting value were happy to relinquish their rights over it. (p. 61)

Thus anarchists like to protect their own intellectual property, not necessarily so that they themselves can make money from their creative work — although it seems some form of recognition is desired — but so that others who did *not* do the work may *not* profit from it, extending an anti-capitalist principle beyond the self to the text.

Anti-copyright is based on sharing information freely, and is therefore closely connected to the fifth important mode of distribution, which is the infoshop. Infoshops or "street libraries" (Dodge, 1998, p. 62) are a kind of "collectively run library that archives alternative-press publications" (Dodge, 1998, p. 62) providing other community resources such as free photocopying, workshops, and skill-shares. Infoshops "often serve as venues for concerts, video screenings, and political discussions, besides providing a space for like-minded organizations to hold meetings" (Dodge, 1998, p. 62). Infoshops are thus, Dodge argues, similar to libraries in providing information such as books for people to peruse free of charge, but clearly they are so much more, as they also give out a great deal of information in the form of pamphlets and zines for free, providing much more current and perhaps more radical information that is not available in libraries. They also serve as radical gathering spaces where knowledge can be shared in other ways: through informal discussions, collective meetings, and skill-sharing. For Dodge, "infoshops share a common devotion to seat-of-the-pants information democracy" (1998, p. 64), challenging intellectual property rights by providing knowledge to any and all comers. Infoshops therefore are consistent with the value-practice of horizontal direct democracy used in anarchist organizing.

Simultaneously engaged with and in opposition to capitalism, like infoshops, anarchist 'distros' are the sixth element in the production and distribution of anarchist texts. Distros have grown out of the 'merch' table model of the punk scene, where people distribute punk records, CDs, T-shirts, pamphlets, zines and other items at a table set up at the back of a punk show. A book distro is similar to a bookstore but without the store. Examples include Kersplebedeb in Montreal, and the now-defunct Black Cat green anarchist distro on

the west coast of Canada, among others. Books and other items are warehoused, often in a person's basement or apartment, to be hauled out for punk shows, political talks, film screenings, mass protest convergence spaces, or bookfairs. Distros may have an on-line store as well. They are usually run by people who are interested in cutting out the capitalist distributor between the book publisher and the book reader. This distribution process includes two steps. First, books go from the publisher to the distributor (such as Disticorp, which bought out most of the independent distributors in Canada a few years back), and second, they go from the distributor to the bookstore. Both the distributor and the bookstores take a cut of the profits, leaving very little for the author or publisher. Anarchist distros cut out the bookstore and reduce the distributor's mark-up, and can thus reduce prices on texts. They can also put funds raised through book sales into producing other texts that they might give away. Some publishers, such as CrimethInc. and AK Press, serve as publishers of certain books and additionally as distributors of books produced by other presses.

Anarchist distros love anarchist bookfairs, the seventh element in anarchist literature production and distribution. Anarchist bookfairs have become a mainstay in many cities in Europe, North America and beyond over the past fifteen years or so. The bilingual Montreal Anarchist Bookfair/ *Salon du Livre Anarchiste* is in its twelfth year this year; San Francisco, NYC and London, UK also have very successful, well-established annual bookfairs. Smaller towns such as Victoria, BC have started to hold them as well. Anarchist bookfairs are not just spaces for selling books. They almost always integrate a festival of anarchy that includes everything from anarchist theatre and poetry events, to punk and hip hop shows; from workshops and walking tours to anarchist soccer and child-care spaces. There are often skill-shares, and out-of-towners are billeted. People travel great distances to attend bookfairs (and not always by the most legal means either, often preferring freight-hopping, hitch-hiking, ride sharing, and scamming bus tickets).

This leads to the last but not least element: illegalities. Anarchists tend not to follow the law. If they find a rule, chances are they will want to break it. This goes for anarchist literature production too. Mass photocopy scamming is a favourite mode of textual production, as described by Al Burian in *Burn Collector* (2010), in which he gets a job on the midnight shift at Kinkos and photocopies boxes full of his zines under the counter. Many others have been known



to copy zines for free at various workplaces. Pirating of texts is another way that anarchist literature is reproduced, as is evident in many of the copyleft or anti-copyright statements used by anarchist book and zine producers. One producer calls itself Pirate Press to make their transgressions explicit. Clearly this is connected to the challenges discussed above to intellectual property rights, but textual production challenges other forms of property rights, too. Here the challenge is explicitly to the ownership of the means of cultural production. Writers and artists also engage in creative public space redecoration, including things like guerrilla poetry put up with spraypaint or chalk, culture jamming of billboards, guerrilla art strikes where public walls are reclaimed with community art, and the like. These actions combine artistic expression with direct action protest, using processes that are more directly democratic, interventionist and participatory than mainstream, and even some alternative or independent press production.

Through these various practices, anarchist textual production becomes in itself a form of direct democracy through collective, decentralized, horizontal processes that attempt to cut out capitalist hierarchies and profits. It is also a mode of direct action that constitutes an attack on capitalism and other forms of oppression and exploitation in its modes of production and distribution, and in its challenges to intellectual property rights and information control.

If this is *how* we produce literature, what are the concerns of anarchist texts? Is the content somehow related to or consistent with the modes of production? I would suggest that the prefigurative politics engaged in producing and disseminating texts are also at work in the content produced.

### 3 Typical Tropes, Figures, Images and Themes

As far back as the mid-1800s, the vagabond, the tramp and the hobo were common images in anarchist literature and art. John Hutton (1990) explores the “anarchist icon of the tramp, a figure conceived simultaneously as nonconformist hero and prototypical social victim” (p. 296), examining the role of this iconography in anarchist literature as well as neo-impressionist art. He finds that “The vagabond was seen as proof that one could reject bourgeois society and its constraints more or less at will, evading the rules and restrictions imposed by the dominant social and political order”

(p. 298). As an outlaw figure, sometimes by choice but more often by circumstance, “the vagabond was often grouped with other social outcasts as the real enemy of bourgeois society: an essay in the anarchist paper *Le Libertaire* asserted flatly that “Those without trade, the jobless, trimardeurs, bums, prostitutes, declasses, are the revolutionaries of tomorrow” (Hutton, 1990, p. 299).

Certainly this figure re-appears in the 1960s in novels such as *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, and much later in Diane di Prima’s memoir of her role in the Beat Generation, *Recollections of my life as a woman* (2001). The memoir describes her life as a sexually active woman with multiple male and female partners, having children with several of them, travelling back and forth across America, reading, writing, publishing and performing poetry. These two texts — the first a fictionalized account of a real group of radical poets, writers and artists, and the second a non-fiction account of different fragments of the same loose-knit group — also capture a kind of generalized protagonist, which is the Beat Generation itself. For this group, values such as travel for the purpose of self-discovery, living in the moment, rejecting the constraints of normative, consumerist America, and radically transforming the process, context and legitimation of creative writing (for example, William Burroughs’ cut-ups, Kerouac’s kickwriting, diPrima’s and Amiri Baraka’s revolutionary poetry, the self-production of radical poetic papers such as *The Floating Bear*, the narrative corpse, etc.) were key. The nomadic figure is central in much of this writing — the person who intentionally uproots themselves, feeling no allegiance to a particular geographical space, state, or hometown, but rather living and fomenting revolutionary thought and letters, in print and through performance poetry, wherever they might find themselves. The road is also key. Being on the road is a crucial part of actually being in the world. The surpassed boundaries of towns parallel the transgressed boundaries of literary convention.

More recently, tropes of the nomad and the road have appeared in several CrimethInc. books — including *off the map* (2003), *Days of War, Nights of Love* (2000) and *Evasion* (2002) — as well as the aforementioned zine compilation, *Burn Collector*, among many others. A few years back a friend and I produced a zine called *Scabies Guide to New York* (1997), a satire of mainstream travel guides that is a kind of punk-poverty street guide for people travelling from Canada to New York City, including instructions on how to dissemble normalcy in order to cross the border. John Hutton notes the

crucial difference between those who come from a secure middle-class background and travel the country fomenting revolution, and those who come from poverty and/or racialized groups, who may be at the mercy of capitalist neoliberal policies, engaging in illegalized migration for employment purposes. The Beat Generation, the punk scene, and the anarchist milieu all contain elements from a range of these demographics. For example, *off the map* is a personal narrative by two anarchist women who travel around Europe staying at punk and anarchist squats, bringing an important feminist and queer perspective to anarchist histories. Their travel narratives provide a radical counterpoint to the typical British *bildungsroman* whereby a male nobility of some sort goes out on his very bourgeois travels through Europe before returning home to marry and settle down. Often anarchist travel literature depicts a white male of middle-class background, and it's unclear whether there is much literature from the perspective of people who travel out of necessity, to access better labour opportunities, as exiles, immigrants or refugees. It is important therefore that CrimethInc.'s books do provide a critique of the heteronormative, masculinist domination of anarchist revolutionary road narratives.

The poor revolutionary wandering figure is included by Alejandro de Acosta in his three meditations on what he calls "anarchy tactics": daydreaming, field trips and the politics of psychogeography, arguing for tactics without teleological strategies. "Whatever effects they may or may not have, they exemplify in thought that aspect of anarchist practice called direct action" (de Acosta, 2010, p. 135). Similarly, Nathan Jun figures the anarchist nomad as a desire-motivated but ultimately non-teleological revolutionary:

Like the nomad, the flaneur wanders aimlessly and without a predetermined telos through the striated space of these apparatuses. Her mobility itself, however, belongs to the sphere of non-territorialized smooth space, unconstrained by regimentation or structure, free-flowing, detached. The desire underlying this mobility is productive; it actively avoids satisfaction and seeks only to proliferate and perpetuate its own movement. (Jun 2010 p. 154–55)

The counter-cultural role of the nomad, tramp, vagabond or hobo is just one example of a popular, resilient image in anarchist literature in which mobility is underpinned by an anarchist challenge

to borders and other forms of oppression. While Jun argues that the desire which drives the nomad's explorations is productive, it would seem that a non-teleological *dérive* beyond the cityscape is intentionally non-productive. Perhaps this is what is intended by the active avoidance of satisfaction; and yet the anarchist nomad aims at more than a self-focused perpetual motion, seeking people with whom to form affinities, to travel, to engage creatively, collaboratively, affectively, sexually and politically. There is a drive, a kind of wild desire that explodes into action, that is itself action. This action however is not productive in the capitalist productivist sense of the word, in which everything we do is geared to manufacturing some kind of end-product, even if that product is a creative work. Rather it is only the process of living, of traveling, and of creating that is desired.

The connection between nomadic lifestyles and anarchist direct action, as represented in fiction and indeed non-fiction texts as most of these examples are, is crucial to understanding the concerns of anarchist politics and the function of anarchist literature in disseminating these concerns.

#### 4 The Function of Anarchist Literature

What then, is the function of anarchist literature? Certainly anarchists are concerned with propaganda by the deed via direct actions more than they might appear to be concerned with propaganda by propaganda. If this were the case, however, then we might not have such a rich tapestry of historical and contemporary anarchist representations. Can literature be an *attentat* or attack on the state, as Mallarmé so famously claimed?

It would seem that there are in fact two main threads apparent in discerning the function of anarchist literature, which I will here loosely characterize as interventionist representations and cultural prefiguration.

##### *Interventionist representations.*

In the past ten years or so, radical literature has suffered a range of setbacks, from the open hostility after 9/11 against radical writers, to the collapse of the independent book market, that have led to a silencing of dissenting voices and images. In the same time period

advertising has proliferated astronomically, as have celebrity culture, images of violence against women, and an unmitigated desire for hyper-consumerism. In this context, representations of, by, for and from within anarchist culture are increasingly important.

Timothy Murphy argues that despite the challenges of the historical moment, “Literature can survive the silence imposed by violence and repression to speak again, and it assists its writers as well as its readers in so surviving; this is the lesson taught over and over again by literary history. However, I see no compelling reason that writers or readers of any perspective should be forced to remain silent” (Murphy 117). But there is more to anarchist literature than a simple refusal to remain silent. What is at stake is the reframing of worldviews that better reflect the values we espouse. Mainstream literature, TV and film rarely represent reality, and they seldom re-imagine future utopias. As Jesse Cohn argues in the context of comics:

We are always seeing the world through frames, a world as seen through “enframing” (Heidegger 36–37). The anarchist project demands that we find ways to reframe the world, to see it anew by breaking with the framework of conventional perception, transforming the means of perception into its own object, calling attention to the frame as frame, making ourselves aware that it is a frame — and not the limits of the world itself. (Cohn 2007)

In other words, anarchist literature has as its task a radical break with conventional perceptions, revealing their constructedness and simultaneously experimenting with form and content with the goal of creating something new, extending the limits of the possible. Alan Moore, also on the topic of comics suggests that:

any form of art can be said to be propaganda for a state of mind. Inevitably, if you are creating a painting, or writing a story, you are making propaganda, in a sense, for the way that you feel, the way that you think, the way that you see the world. You are trying to express your own view of reality and existence, and that is inevitably going to be a political action — especially if your view of existence is too far removed from the mainstream view of existence. Which is how an awful lot of writers have

gotten into terrible trouble in the past. (Moore qtd. in Killjoy, 2009, p. 52)

It is exactly this trouble that, one might argue, anarchist literature strives not to avoid but to achieve. A confrontational politics is almost inevitable in anarchist creative ventures, as they attempt to become direct action interventionist representations that interrupt flows not just of capitalism and governmentality, but also of sexism, racism and heterosexism — the normative images and textual representations of our time. Cohn thus argues for an artistic obstructionism or “antiauthoritarian insubordination” (Cohn 2007) in anarchist literature, an intentional disruption of hegemonic cultural flows.

One of the contemporary paradigms that makes this obstructionism necessary (and we hear echoes of criminalization of dissent here in the charge of ‘obstructing police’ so often meted out at protests) is the impossibility of the real. If we stop to look at the real world for too long, we will realize that humanity has arrived at a moment of geopolitical and interpersonal impossibility, as if we had collectively jumped aboard the impossibility drive of *Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1989). Franz Kafka of course captures this brilliantly, and the study of his work by Deleuze and Guattari (1986) points to his ability to collapse the distinction between literature and the real. For Cohn, this means that one of the functions of an ‘anarchist aesthetic’ is “an apprehension of empirical actuality as senseless, preposterous, impossible” (Cohn 2007). Anarchist literature therefore must reveal the preposterousness of the current moment, not for the purpose of becoming cynical and bitter, but because we must imagine and then find a way out of this impasse.

Russian literary theorist Roman Jakobson (1971–85), who wrote during the Russian Revolution, provides several useful terms. The first is ‘defamiliarization’ — he suggests that in order to really see the world, it must be shown to us through an aestheticized form that will snap us out of our daily routines — what the Situationists later called “breaking the spell” (Vaneigem 1967). Furthermore, he suggests that the novel is one of the best ways to do so, because it allows for ‘heteroglossia’ — a multiplicity of socially diverse voices through a kind of dialogic form that does not give easy answers, but rather demands the intervention of the reader. Lastly, he suggests that ‘polyphony’, or the possibility of many streams of narrative at any given moment, is the ultimate accomplishment in a text. In other

words, a character and the situation in which they are placed must be adequately complex and ethically sophisticated to ensure that at any given moment, the protagonist could have a range of possible decisions available, requiring that they make nuanced ethical choices with complex consequences. Thus polyphony emphasizes what is an important value to anarchists – free will – and thereby demonstrates the heightened potential of every decision we make to influence the direction of the future world.

Cohn follows this line of thinking in his piece on “Anarchism, Representation and Culture,” when he suggests that, “A social anarchist aesthetic, in short, does not simply map the ideal onto the real, or take the ideal for the real; rather, it discovers the ideal within the real, as a moment of reality” (Cohn, 2003, p. 60). In other words, we live in a world of multiplicity and motion, and these experiences can be captured within this social anarchist aesthetic that situates literature within the social, rather than, say, as the manifestation of a sublime genius, or the Romantic expression of one’s inner being.

The collectivity emphasized in anarchist literature, in both the processes of production discussed earlier, the collective protagonist, and the notions of obstructionism, heteroglossia and polyphony, are all contributors to a social anarchist aesthetic. These have also been expressed, albeit somewhat differently, in feminist literature. For example, in looking at Diane di Prima’s multiplicitous forms of writing Roseanne Giannini Quinn has found that “creative reciprocity exists in her poetics” (Giannini-Quinn, 2003, p. 189). Di Prima coins the term ‘co-responds’ to indicate the call and response movement in literature that implicates the reader: ‘what co-responds’ in literature for di Prima is a moving toward metaphor, multidimensionality, etc. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari and Maclean (1986) figure the audience or addressee as an “accomplice” (p. 593) of the writer; as the writer articulates a narrative account, the reader is called to accountability toward the knowledge of this narrative. Nathan Jun, similarly, argues that “culture is reciprocal and symbiotic – it both produces and is produced by power relations” (Jun, 2010, p. 152). If literature is reciprocal, and texts call for a response by an accomplice, then connections among members of the symbolic community created by the text are fostered through the textual relationships. This is not just through the sharing of zines, or perusing of books at book-fairs and infoshops, but also through the demands of the text on the reader to be accountable to the writer and their struggles. Deleuze and Guattari see this in Kafka as “A mad desire to drag letters from

the addressee” (Deleuze et al., p. 594) or to drag actions from the reader in the form of further textual production or direct actions. “This exchange, or this reversal, of the duality of the two subjects, the spoken subject assuming the real movement which normally belongs to the speaking subject, produces a *doubling*” (Deleuze et al., p. 594). This doubling is crucial in anarchist literature, as the speaking subject (the writer) and the spoken subject (the voice of the writer in the reader’s mind) form a community.

Diane di Prima, and many other spoken word performance organizers and participants, have recognized the potential of literature to cohere communities. For di Prima, the importance of community meant both a connection to other women (through sexuality and friendship) and alliances across race, class and sexuality. Moreover, in her work she both connects with and moves beyond the premises and bodily expressions of women. In the poem ‘Ave’ she writes, “I must become you/ I have been you/ and I must become you/ I am always you/ I must become you” (qtd. in Giannini-Quinn, 2003, pp. 184–5). This poem echoes the becoming-woman of Simone de Beauvoir – the notion that we are always in the process of becoming and can never quite reach our gender or the other, but rather must interact with and become it repeatedly; and at the same time, we are always already becoming, and cannot not become woman or man, even if we resist the normative compulsions. This is then taken up by Deleuze and Guattari in the post-structuralist notion of becoming, a term which, somewhat simplified, intimates the intimate connections formed among objects, animals, and other humans with whom we are in close proximity as part of a very large desiring machine. For Deleuze et al., “becoming is the object par excellence of the story” (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 599). In other words, in writing literature, the writer is becoming-text-reader, and in reading literature, the reader is becoming-text-writer, in an on-going exchange of mutual aid and accountability. Nathan Jun puts this much more succinctly: “alliances between artists and audiences [are formed] with a mind to blurring such distinctions altogether” (Jun, 2010, p. 157). We see this in the pages of some anarchist publications, which tend to demand that the reader write articles, in interactive media where the reader is invited to post or otherwise participate, or to take a bit of a tangent, in open source software, where the user is encouraged to debug and otherwise improve software for the benefit of others.



*Cultural prefigurations.*

Not only is there a duality in the subjectivity formed in anarchist literature, there is also a duality in the worlds represented, and thus in the functions of the literature itself. These dualities become evident when we think about prefigurative politics, or what Giannini Quinn more specifically calls “cultural pre-figuration” (2003, p. 186), loosely defined as the ability to prefigure new phases of cultural developments. For di Prima, this emerged as:

her early life as a poet, publisher, theater producer, and activist in the swirling New York 1950s world of Beats, radicals, and anarchists; and in the 1960s counter cultural milieu of fighting obscenity laws, protesting the war in Southeast Asia, and anticipating the formulation of crucial political movements, such as Civil Rights, Second Wave feminism, and Gay and Lesbian liberation. (Giannini Quinn, 2003, 185–6)

For anarchists, and for di Prima, cultural prefiguration goes beyond the simple prediction of the next literary trend to include the transcendence of old forms, old ideologies, the state, capitalism, and all forms of oppression. As Avery-Natale argues, anarchist “activists articulate a desire for creating the new world in which they wish to exist rather than simply asking the state or capital to reform themselves into something less vile” (Avery-Natale, 2010, p. 99). These desires are reflected, for di Prima, in “the power of creativity amid chaos” (Giannini Quinn, 2003, p. 188), writing toward some future unknown in order to make life in the present liveable, and then living that future unknown at the same time. In other words, “revolutionary literature begins by speaking and only sees and conceives afterward (‘I do not see the word at all, I invent it’)” (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 591). The word — and the world — are invented through literature. Literature thus both writes the real present and imagines the ideal future — and for anarchists, these are one and the same. Deleuze and Guattari envision the collapse of life into writing and writing into life, particularly visible in the work of Kafka:

That is why it is so regrettable, so grotesque, to oppose life and writing in Kafka, to suppose that he takes refuge in literature through lack, weakness, impotence before life. A rhizome, a burrow, yes, but not an ivory tower. An escape route, yes,

but certainly not a refuge. The creative escape route involves the whole of politics, the whole of economics, the whole of bureaucracy and of justice. (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 605)

For Kafka, for Deleuze and Guattari, for diPrima, and for anarchists, literature is not a refuge but a rhizome — a maze of interconnected, multiplicitous meandering decentered organisms in the process of becoming-other, becoming-revolutionary as the revolution becomes who we are as readers, as writers, as activists, as community members. Thus we can understand how “living and writing, art and life, are only in opposition from the point of view of a major literature” (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 605), of dominant literary forms in other words, but not from an anarchist point of view. In anarchist literature, we can see “[e]verywhere a single identical passion for writing — but not the same. Each time the writing crosses a threshold, and there is no higher or lower threshold. They are thresholds of intensities which are only higher or lower according to the direction from which one approaches them” (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 605). Writing embodies intensities, prefigures the passion of tomorrow’s culture by writing it into today’s everyday life experience and simultaneously making that textual.

The double-edged sword of ideality and reality is also the double-edged sword of Derrida’s claim that there is nothing outside the text. Often misinterpreted, this statement does not mean that only texts exist and the material world is immaterial, but rather much the opposite — that it is impossible to capture the material world in a text, therefore the text and the material world are two different things. The text is not that world and that world is not the text. And yet at the same time, the text has nothing but the world out of which to make itself, and the world has nothing but the text in which to express itself. Thus life and text are inseparable, and imagination is textual, visual, constrained by what it is possible to say in words, in images. Kafka, therefore, and arguably every anarchist writer, is “far from being a writer withdrawn in his [or her] room, his [her] room is the site of a double flow, that of a bureaucrat with great prospects switched in to real organizations in the making; and that of a nomad taking flight in the most realistic way, who switches in to socialism, anarchism, social movements” (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 606). Anarchists similarly can be seen living in the real world and building — sometimes through text — the new world, in a kind of textual dual power.

Alan Moore articulates a similar idea when he argues that we can only understand our own experiences, whether we share them with others or simply to make sense of them ourselves, through narrative. For Moore, “our entire lives — individually or as a culture — are a kind of narrative. It’s a kind of fiction, it is not a reality in the sense that it is something concrete and fixed; we constantly fictionalize our own experience” (Moore qtd. in Killjoy 2009, p. 50). Thus the past we write about in memoirs, and the futures we imagine, are identical fictions, unsubstantiable except through their similarity to other people’s narratives (as in a court of law or in a testimonial, in which we are asked to bear witness). “We edit our own experience. . . we’re constantly revising, both as individuals and as nations, our own past. We’re turning it moment by moment into a kind of fiction, that is the way we assemble our daily reality” (Moore, qtd. in Killjoy, 2009, p. 50). Narrative is how we come to understand ourselves as political beings in the world, with particular identities, relations, pasts, presents and futures. It is all filtered through narrative, and structured narratologically. As Moore puts it: “We are not experiencing reality directly, we are simply experiencing our perception of reality” (Moore, qtd. in Killjoy, 2009, p. 50); likewise fiction is not a direct narration of reality, but rather a linguistically constrained explanation, told in linear fashion, of what we may have perceived to be our experience of reality. This may sound somewhat convoluted, but it is precisely this open-endedness of life’s narratives and experiences that creates freedom in literature, and by extension in life itself. It is this series of doublings that provide openings into anarchist fiction, and even the utopian possibilities in anarchist science fiction by anarchist writers such as Ursula LeGuin, whose novel *The Dispossessed* (1975) is one of the most well-read books in anarchist circles.

Prefigurative culture thus means that writers and readers are doubly accountable to each other, not just to take their texts seriously, but also to model their lives after the knowledge created by both actions and texts. As Sharif Gemie (1994) argues, “anarchists active in artistic avant-gardes could look to their creative practices as a model for a future libertarian lifestyle” (p. 355), both in the content that serves as a call not only to arms but also to community, and the processes of production and distribution. And this community is not limited to self-identified anarchists, but expands outward beyond our communities. “Anarchists have considered other groups — for example, youth, women, squatters or other socially marginalized groups

— as constituting revolutionary communities” (Gemie, 1994, p. 356): communities that are multiplicitous, deviant, criminalized, on the fringes of legality, resistant to certain forms of organization, and compelled to do things somewhat differently than the mainstream prescriptive lifestyle, beliefs, image systems and narratives would dictate. There is thus an implicit and explicit

struggle between anarchism and the state’s culture. ‘When we see the theatres empty, the libraries deserted, the editorial rooms unmanned, the museums abandoned, then we will see a true, healthy reality, which will fulfill our hopes and promises.’ In these passages it can be seen that the community identified is not simply poverty-stricken, despised, oppressed and unrepresented by orthodox political structures; nor is it simply the brute force of an inevitable revolutionary transformation. It is believed to be the source of a sense of reality, and so provides a more convincing, a more reliable ‘self’ than the ‘other’ represented — in anarchist discourse — by the state. (Gemie, 1994, p. 359)

In other words, the state narrates a reality, the culture industry creates an image system that embroils us in its reality, and in combating this as anarchists we are always already in the process of narrating — through lived culture and social relations — a very different reality that is more livably humane. Therefore the production of narratives about the everyday join everyday tactics such as co-operatives, strikes and collective violence such as property destruction and other forms of direct action resistance, that contribute to the identity and power of the counter-community (Gemie, 1994, p. 359). I would argue, however, that this is not a ‘counter-community’ but rather a community with a different set of values that is not necessarily ‘countering’ the dominant culture, but trying to create lines of flight or escape from it. As Gemie argues: “Anarchist writers often made use of images such as ‘the new world’ to suggest their desired society. These at once gave powerful expression to their desire totally to remodel existing society but, more importantly, could also suggest that their world was already present within and against the existing state-orientated world” (Gemie, 1994, p. 360). It is this suggestion that an anarchist world already exists that is so powerful — it exists both in the internal narrated fictionalizations of our lived experiences, and in the texts that we produce when we sit down to

write these narratives. For Gemie, anarchists' "forceful agitational writing aimed to make these communities more conscious of their potential" (Gemie, 1994, p. 364–5). One example of this is the Exodus Collective in the UK, a self-organized DIY community that squatted a building in Luton, and lived according to an anarcha-Rastafarian respectocracy (Blackstone, 2005): "The Exodus Collective served to illustrate one of the most novel aspects of DiY culture as a new approach to the political field in England: how marginalized alternative groups articulate and renegotiate our understanding of power in the civic realm while practicing unconventional lifestyles" (Blackstone, 2005, p. 818) based on action and an alternative set of principles (Blackstone, 2005, p. 813).

## Conclusion

DIY collectives, anarchist literature, textual production, and above all writing — all of these develop out of the desire for something better, something different than what we have grown up with. But "the primacy of writing means only one thing: not literature, but the fact that speech is one with desire, above laws, states, governments. Yet speech is always historical in itself, political and social. A micropolitics, a politics of desire" (Deleuze et al., 1986, p. 606). If speech and writing are 'one with desire' and can therefore transcend the limitations of state structures such as government and the legal system, then we can see how this micropolitics of desire, evident in literature but not reduced to it, might lead us out of the impasse I introduced at the outset: the bombardment of state and corporate produced image systems, the collapse of indie book publishers, and simultaneously, the anarchist emphasis on direct action as the preferred tactic. Certainly I am not arguing for propaganda by propaganda to supplant propaganda by the deed. Rather if we desire to produce texts, we should do so, and if we desire to produce direct actions, we should do that too. The difference is not in what we produce or whether we produce, but that we do these things differently than we did before we started becoming-anarchist, and through this shift, we contribute that singular moment of free-willed decision-making toward radical social transformation rather than just adding another cliché or stereotype to the dominant image system and thus becoming transfixed — simultaneously fixed and broken — by it.

In the end, we write because we love to write. We read because we love to read. When we do these things, we are forever changed by them. We become accountable to the past through fore-runners of anarchist thought, to the present through prefigurative culture, to the future through narrations of the possible, and most importantly – to each other through mutually committing to producing the immediate conditions of a better world in the here and now.

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