Until All Are Free

Black Feminism, Anarchism, and Interlocking Oppression

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> *We are all feminists, united in our recognition that women's subordination exists. Our struggle needs to be fought alongside the struggle against other forms of oppression. … We are all anarchists, united in our belief for the need to create alternatives to this capitalist, patriarchal society wherein all are dominated and exploited.* —Revolutionary Anarcha-Feminist Group of Dublin

There is growing recognition among activists that we need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of our struggles if we are to harness the collective power necessary to overcome interlocking systems of domination. As Francesca Mastrangelo comments in an editorial piece for *The Feminist Wire,* we need to begin to "recognize that our liberation is bound up in the liberation of every person."[1] Or, as expressed by labor organizer Ai-Jen Poo, "The way we try to think about it and the way the world is, we're all interdependent and interconnected… Those connections are fairly invisible to most people most of the time. We're taught not to see those connections."[2]

In part, this sentiment—the need to recognize that "we" are an "us"—may speak to the times. Since the heyday of the alter-globalization movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, critiques of global capitalism and neoliberalism have been a thread across mobilizations. This current has only become more pronounced in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008–9 and the widespread adoption of austerity measures that benefited big business, banks, and those in power, at the expense of everyone else. And economic inequality and the trend towards corporatization only continue to deepen. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that there is a sense of common cause across struggles in their shared anti-capitalist thrust.

There is also an atmosphere of intense urgency in recent movements, as we seem to have reached a crisis point on numerous fronts. The deleterious impact of climate change is ever more evident as extreme weather disasters are becoming par for the course. Fascism appears to be rearing its ugly head in Europe, and now here in the US with Trump's surge in popularity. And people of color and trans* folks face daily instances of systemic oppression, the possibility of violence and death or other threats. So, feelings that "we're all in this together" and the need to find ways to cooperate, at the risk of financial, climatic, and societal collapse, may also be contributing to calls for united struggle.

Yet, along with the current historical moment, there may be another reason activists are coming to see their efforts as intertwined—namely, the importance of Black feminism in contemporary activist thought. In fact, while Jo Reger has noted that feminism is everywhere and has "become a part of everyday cultural beliefs and norms," and "like fluoride… is simply in the water," it is equally arguable that *Black feminism* in particular has come to inform current activist culture in the way it underscores interlocking oppressions.[3]

It also seems that the analysis of Black feminism has a particularly deep resonance with anarchist understandings of mechanisms of power, which similarly foreground a linking across all

[1] Francesca Mastrangelo, "Love is Not Enough," in "Love as a Radical Act Forum," *Feministwire*, 10/29/2013.

[2] Sally Kohn, "Activists Use Love and Empathy to Create New Alliances and Possibilities with the 'Enemy,'" *YES! Magazine*, 7/1/2013.

[3] Jo Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

systems of domination. Again, this is important to note, so as to ensure that the impact of Black feminism on contemporary anarchism is not overlooked. This currency across the two schools of thought is also notable, however, as it very well may be the coming together of Black feminism and anarchism that is encouraging the shift in orientation away from a more fragmented conceptualization of struggle, and towards the idea of our struggles as interdependent. And, especially given the increased presence of anarchism in mobilizations since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, it seems plausible that the confluence of these streams of thought is having a powerful combined impact on radical political thought and culture.

Regardless of what is driving it, the notion of interlocking oppressions holds real revolutionary potential. In underscoring the connectedness of all forms of domination, it leads to creation of stronger movements that are capable of mounting more successful challenges to oppressive systems by breaking down structural barriers that prevent communities from building power. However, the question remains as to how activists can begin to move beyond simply espousing their connectedness towards actual practices of working to address domination simultaneously in all its forms. Looking to Black feminism and anarchism can help to advance theoretical and practical models for how to do so.

Black Feminism: From Intersectionality to Interlocking Oppressions

As Karma Chavéz and Cindy Griffin comment in the introduction to their collection of essays on intersections in communication scholarship, "During the midst of multiple, interwoven struggles for liberation catalyzed in the middle of the twentieth century, in the United States, feminists of color, working-class feminists, and lesbians articulated the 'interlocking' nature, as well as the 'double' or 'multiple jeopardy' of having several oppressed identities."[4]

One of the earliest and most influential articulations of this was Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality." There have been, however, numerous expressions of what metaphor or concept best illustrates the complex nature of multiple oppressions. Among these, the idea of interlocking oppressions as posed by the Combahee River Collective perhaps best captures the interconnectedness of all systems of domination.

In 1989, Crenshaw first debuted the idea of "intersectionality" in her essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Noting that "the experiences of women of color, poor, and immigrant women are subsumed and erased in legal practices, political decisions, and social norms," Crenshaw explains that this erasure reflects an inability to "think outside of singular axes of identity" and results in the assumption that all women are middle-class white women.[5] To illustrate this, she suggests that domination should instead be thought of as analogous to a four-way traffic intersection in which injury can come from a number of directions: "[It] may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimi-

[4] Karma Chávez and Cindy Griffin, *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 5.

[5] Chávez and Griffin, *Standing in the Intersection*, 4.

nation or race discrimination."[6] While clearly a critical and necessary intervention into Second Wave feminist thought and the invisibility of interactions across racial, class, sexual and gender analysis, too often this particular metaphor has been limited by its interpretation of oppression as having an "additive" quality, rather than a more slippery and dynamic relationship.

Consequently, feminist theorists have struggled to find alternative ways to best capture the messiness and conceptual complexity of the overlapping, interactive nature of multiple oppressions. Adding nuance to Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, these theories have sought to underscore the ways in which multifaceted identities are shaped by the many structures of domination and ever-shifting contexts. These metaphors have included everything from Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzalduá's "Theory in the Flesh" to María Lugones' "Curdling." And as Chavéz and Griffin comment, "Each metaphor or perspective offer[s] something slightly different."[7] Yet, the idea of "interlocking" oppressions seems to be most instructive for understanding the ways in which, regardless of the exact relational nature between the specific sets of oppressions in any given case, one thing remains certain—that all forms of subjugation and domination are integrally related to one another, and that striving for an end of any form of oppression necessitates struggling to end all oppressions. They are not only intersecting, but are inextricably tied together.

This conceptualization of interlocking oppressions was first expressed by the Combahee River Collective more than a decade prior to Crenshaw's coining of the term "intersectionality." Writing in 1977, this group of Black feminist lesbians issued a statement in which they asserted that

> the most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.[8]

As they argue, it would be impossible to address only a single issue at a time. In other words, as Black women; as Black women lesbians; as Black women lesbian workers; as Black women lesbian workers with family, and from communities where others remained subjugated for numerous reasons—in order to be truly liberated requires addressing these simultaneously occurring and inseparable experiences of oppression. Hence, their insistence that "… we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions… if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."[9]

Or as they write elsewhere in the statement, "We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often

[6] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1241–1299.

[7] Chávez and Griffin, *ibid*

[8] Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement, 1977," in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table / Women of Color Press, 1983), 210.

[9] Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement, 1977," 215.

find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously."[10] Consequently, they maintain that one cannot even conceptually parse them out and must instead conceive of the idea of "racial-sexual oppression." Moreover, although it was a "combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position [that] drew [them] together initially," over time, the Collective members had come to realize that, along with addressing heterosexism, "the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy."[11] In other words, in order to contest any form of subjugation means the need to take on "the System" as a whole.

To be sure, other analytical frameworks certainly offer useful theoretical contributions to unpacking the dynamic, overlapping, and interactive nature of oppression. Yet, this more holistic understanding put forth by the Combahee River Collective on the interrelated and interlocking dimensions to systems of domination is essential for understanding how power, privilege, and subjugation operate in contemporary society. Given what can be considered the deeply diffused Foucauldian capillaries of power throughout society, coupled with the overarching reach of capitalism and corresponding systems of racial-sexual domination into every facet of life, it would be impossible to address each instance of oppression a single case at a time.

By extension, if all oppression needs to be confronted concurrently, the Combahee idea of interlocking oppression is also vital, as it suggests a need for a politics of solidarity. For instance, although they recognize the complicity of Black men in upholding patriarchy, they also recognize the subjugation of Black men along lines of race and/or class. Similarly, while white feminists very actively participated in upholding racism, they were nonetheless impacted by patriarchal domination. In other words, context is key for understanding the complicated and dynamic nature of domination and subjugation. Oppressors may be oppressed, and oppressed may be oppressors—so the only solution is to work together to eliminate all forms of oppression.

Since the Combahee first issued their Statement, Black feminists and other activists have taken on this language of interlocking oppression. For example, Black feminist and lesbian poet Audre Lorde, in her 1985 address, "I am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," draws directly on this approach to oppression theory. In this talk she speaks to the prevalence of homophobia in Black feminism and Black women's activism, commenting, "When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggle on both these fronts are inseparable."[12] Along with these inseparable struggles, she also calls on her audience to recognize the necessity of contesting homophobia with these efforts as well. As she comments, "Homophobia… is a waste of woman energy, and it puts a terrible weapon into the hands of your enemies to be used against you to silence you, to keep you docile and in line. It also serves to keep us isolated and apart."[13]

This kind of exclusion, she explains, does a disservice to the movement as it robs it of the "vital insights and energies" of Black women who are part of the wider "Black family," regard-

[10] Ibid, 213.

[11] Ibid

[12] Audre Lorde, "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," (Women of Color/Kitchen Table Press, 1985), 3.

[13] Ibid, 6.

less of their sexuality.[14] In essence, by failing to see their struggles as related, and by actively excluding Black lesbians from Black feminist spaces, they were limiting their radical potentiality to overturn patriarchy, while bolstering heteronormativity. For this same reason, she demands recognition for the interconnectedness—and the possibility of this interconnectedness—of being a Black, a woman, and a lesbian, insisting that these oppressions can and do exist simultaneously, hence demanding simultaneous "destruction" (to draw on the language of the Combahee River Collective).

Patricia Hill Collins also underscores interlocking notions of oppression in her concept of the "matrix of domination."[15] As she explains, "Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought re-conceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance."[16] Collins, however, explicitly emphasizes the importance of avoiding "additive models" for understanding dynamics of oppression reflected "in the either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought."[17] This, she argues, fails to capture the dynamic and multiple axes and levels of oppression, hence necessitating adoption of a "both/and" model.[18]

bell hooks, in her idea of a "politics of domination," further helps to elucidate this paradigm shift. As she explains, looking at the multiple axes of oppression such as race, class, and gender and their situational relationships elucidates the ways in which they share "ideological ground." This common ground is "a belief in domination, and a belief in the notions of superior and inferior, which are components of all of those systems… [It]'s like a house, they share the foundation, but the foundation is the ideological beliefs around which notions of domination are constructed."[19]

In a very similar way, over a decade later, in "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," Peggy McIntosh speaks about the interlocking nature of oppression. In this piece, McIntosh discusses the invisibility of systems of privilege that confer unearned benefits and resources on certain social groups at the expense of others—namely, men at the expense of women, and whites at the expense of people of color, or heteronormative individuals at the expense of homosexual and non-gender conforming persons. In so doing, however, she seeks to avoid the pitfall of an additive approach to understanding oppression. As she comments,

> One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms that we can see and embedded forms that members of the dominant group are taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on my group from birth. Likewise, we are taught to think that sexism or heterosexism is carried on only through intentional, individual acts of discrimination, meanness, or

[14] Ibid, 7.

[15] Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–238, accessed March 4, 2016. http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html.

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid

[19] Ibid

> cruelty, rather than in invisible systems conferring unsought dominance on certain groups.[20]

To be fair, there are certainly significant limitations in the theoretical usefulness of privilege theory, and an identity politics corresponding with this. Namely, much like additive approaches to intersectionality, privilege theory can be grossly reductionist, erasing more complex relational dynamics of power and oppression. And we might easily critique McIntosh for failing to actually incorporate an interlocking model of oppression in her analysis of privilege. Even so, the salient point here is that McIntosh's piece is clear evidence of the infusion of Black feminist discourse into generalized understandings of oppression and domination among white feminists. In fact, this piece in particular may have had an especially influential role in helping the broader diffusion of Black feminism into activist theories of power, as it remains one of the foundational essays (for better or worse) used in activist anti-oppression trainings. So, again, although McIntosh may not have ultimately avoided relying on an additive theoretical model, it is still noteworthy that she also explicitly states that these mechanisms of domination are interlocking.

Anarchism: Collective Self-Liberation For All

Although a bit of a question of the chicken and the egg, we can see a similar adoption of this type of interlocking analysis of oppression in contemporary anarchism. To be sure, conceptualization of systems of control as interconnected, and hence requiring the concurrent rooting out of all forms of domination, is at the very heart of anarchist theory and praxis. That being said, contemporary anarchist thought also undoubtedly reflects the influence of Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and bell hooks among countless other Third and Fourth Wave scholars. Indeed, this is particularly evident in queer anarchism and poststructuralist anarcha-feminisms. Either way, there is at the very least a clear resonance across the two. And given the prominent role anarchism has played in twenty-first-century movements—what some suggest has been an "anarchist turn" in activism—it becomes all the more necessary to consider the connections across them.[21]

In order to understand the relationship between anarchism and its emphasis on interlocking oppressions, it is helpful to look at its historical roots and philosophical underpinnings. Contemporary or traditional Western anarchism—what is considered to be "classical" anarchism—has always been predicated on the belief that one must look at all centralization of power as problematic, and view all systems of domination as inextricably interrelated.[22] Seeking to make sense

[20] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," Working Paper No. 189. (Wellesley Coll., Mass. Center for Research on Women, 1986)

[21] Duane Rouselle and Süreyyya Evren, eds., *The Anarchist Turn Symposium*, May 2011.

[22] It is important to make the distinction here that what I am looking at, and what is typically considered classical anarchism and of the anarchist canon is largely Western in origin, beginning in mid-eighteenth-century Europe (albeit, including Russia, which is also part of Asia). That said, there is arguably a much longer and deeper tradition of anarchist thought (or, if not in name, at least anarchist sensibility) that extends back as far as many of the ancient Eastern philosophies and certainly beyond the boundaries of the West. For an important collection on non-Western anarchism see Raymond Craib and Barry Maxwell eds., *No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries: Global Anarchisms* (Oakland: PM Press, 2015) as well as Maia Ramnath's *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle* (Oakland: IAS/AK Press, 2011).

of the rapidly changed social landscape in the wake of industrialization, nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers such as Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Max Stirner, among others, endeavored to resolve how to respond to new forms of inequality and coercion that now derived less from feudal or manorial rule than from an increasingly centralized state and exploitative labor conditions under capitalism. Unlike their Marxist counterparts, however, for whom the primary concern was the working class, for these early anarchists the real goal was to ensure freedom from domination of *all* types and for *all* peoples—including women and men, and (usually) people of all races. As Bakunin expresses,

> What all other men are is of the greatest importance to me. However independent I may imagine myself to be, however far removed I may appear from mundane considerations by my social status, I am enslaved to the misery of the meanest member of society. The outcast is my daily menace. Whether I am Pope, Czar, Emperor, or even Prime Minister, I am always the creature of their circumstance, the conscious product of their ignorance, want and clamoring. They are in slavery, and I, the superior one, am enslaved in consequence.[23]

This emphasis on the necessity of eliminating all forms of oppression as integral to attaining a fully free society has remained one of the fundamental principles of anarchist thought. To be sure, being anti-doctrinaire, anarchists may conceive of numerous visions and versions for what this may look like in practice, or what steps are necessary for achieving this form of liberated society. As Peter Marshall describes, anarchism is "a broad river" within which "it is possible to discern a number of distinct currents."[24] In the most general of terms, however, some of the primary concerns for anarchists are with ensuring freedom for all from domination and top-down coercion of any kind, and the ability for all humans (and living beings, for that matter) to achieve their highest potential and the greatest well-being possible. Moreover, this further implies that all are freely able to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, while enjoying equal access to the resources necessary to do so.

Necessarily, this idea of a free society as being dependent on whether or not all members are liberated implies that one cannot decouple one's own liberation from that of another.

Alexander Berkman summarizes this nicely in "ABC of Anarchism":

> Anarchism means that you should be free; that no one should enslave you, boss you, rob you, or impose upon you. It means that you should be free to do the things you want to do; and that you should not be compelled to do what you don't want to do. It means that you should have a chance to choose the kind of a life you want to live, and live it without anybody interfering. It means that the next fellow should have the same freedom as you, that every one should have the same rights and liberties. It means that all men are brothers, and that they should live like brothers, in peace and harmony. That is to say, that there should be no war, no violence used by one set of men against another, no monopoly and no poverty, no oppression, no taking advantage of your fellow-man. In short, Anarchism means a condition or society

[23] Mikhail Bakunin, "Solidarity in Liberty: The Workers' Path to Freedom," 1867.

[24] Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009), 6.

> where all men and women are free, and where all enjoy equally the benefits of an ordered and sensible life.[25]

Simply looking at these principles, it is easy enough to see the resonance with the Combahee collective's perspective on interrelated struggle. There is the idea of one's personal liberation being dependent on the liberation of all. There is emphasis on empathetic concern for the well-being of others, not out of obligation or paternalist duty, but rather from the notion of a shared struggle and shared fate among all living beings. And there are the ways in which this perception catalyzes reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid—other mainstays in both Black feminist and anarchist practice.

Certainly, there is also a long tradition of feminist-informed anarchist thought dating back to the late-eighteenth century, which helped to clarify understandings of the interdependence of struggles with a feminist lens. As explained by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in the introduction to *Quiet Rumors*, a collection of anarcha-feminist texts, "Up until recently the terms anarchism and feminism were rarely found in the same sentence, much less interpreted as integrally related, Emma Goldman being the single example people could identify."[26] Yet, as she points out, there were countless others lost to the annals of history—Lucy Parsons, Mother Jones, Helen Keller, Louise Michel and "thousands of other historical figures and contemporary feminist anarchists."[27] These women were helping to advance the critical perspective that "true equality can never be achieved within the capitalist system… [and] we need to be clear that when feminist gains are won, it is in the name of true equality for all people… [r]eal feminism requires complete social restructuring which can essentially be equated with true anarchism."[28]

Even in the early days, there were some threads within anarchism coming from feminists of color who helped to further push anarchist political theory towards even more recognition of the dynamic, overlapping nature of all oppressions. Lucy Parsons—one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World and widow of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons—was one of the first celebrated anarchists of color, having likely been born a slave and documented as having both Mexican and Native American ancestry. Reflecting her commitment to syndicalism, she provided incisive critique of divided struggles and called on radicals to "sink such differences as nationality, religion, politics, and set our eyes eternally and forever toward the rising star of the industrial republic of labor."[29] Meanwhile, in Argentina, early anarcha-feminists, some of whom helped to publish *La Voz de La Mujer*, saw their "anarchist feminist propaganda… [a]s inseparable from a growing awareness of the mechanisms of economic and social exploitation of Argentinean women with immigrant origins," and as "[materializing] these working women's expectations within a vast project for a libertarian society."[30]

Yet it is in contemporary forms of anarcha-feminism that we see explicit connection with (and influence of) Black feminism in terms of emphasizing simultaneity of struggle. In "Insurrection at the Intersections: Feminism, Intersectionality, and Anarchism," Jen Rogue and Abbey Volcano

[25] Alexander Berkman, *ABC of Anarchism* (Freedom Press: 1977, reprint 1929

[26] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. "Quiet Rumors: An Introduction" in Dark Star Collective, *Quiet Rumors: An Anarcha-Feminist Reader*, Third Ed., (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), 11.

[27] ibid

[28] Revolutionary Anarcha-Feminist Group, "Why Anarcha-Feminism?" in *Quiet Rumors* (2012), 14.

[29] Lucy Parsons. "1905 Speech to the IWW."

[30] H. Finet, "Female Anarchism and Conviviality Among Workpeople in Buenos Aires (1890–1920)," in Gwendolyn Windpassinger, *Queer Anarcha-feminism: An Emerging Ideology? The Case of Proyectil Fetal,* Diss. 2012,138.

put anarchism in conversation with Black feminism and offer a specifically anarchist critique of the "additive" approach to intersectionality. Instead, they highlight the importance of adopting a lens "through which to view race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. as mutually-constituting processes… categories [that] do not exist independently from one another; [but] rather, they mutually reinforce one another… [in] overlapping, complex, interacting, intersecting, and often contradictory" ways.[31]

Meanwhile Chris Crass, founder of the Catalyst Project, directly speaks to how Black feminism informed "the anarchism taken up and developed in the 1990s [which] was a product of the movement experiences of the preceding four decades," including "The Black Freedom movement, the women's liberation movement, and other liberation movements… challenging multiple forms of oppression."[32] In fact, he credits the Combahee River Collective's "'integrated analysis of oppression" that "suggests that systems of racism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism operate with and through each other… interconnected" as "truly revolutionary" and highly influential for the anarchists of the 1990s who "increasingly took up this 'integrated analysis.'"[33] In an interview, Crass further explains how, for the Catalyst Project, intersectionality specifically means taking on a more "collective" approach to liberatory politics by

> … addressing our privilege as white people by examining the differences in the ways those privileges manifest based on gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Intersectionality complicates how we understand relationships of power and what's needed to transform them… If intersectionality is a framework for recognizing the ways in which oppressions are wrapped up together and structure society, then collective liberation is a corresponding framework for looking at how we organize to transform those relations of power. [It] is an approach to organizing that recognizes that our liberation as white people is wrapped up with and dependent on the liberation of communities of color who are living on the front lines of racial and economic oppression.[34]

Similarly, Richard Day, in his account on anarchist currents within contemporary movements, describes how "feminist critiques of power" have come to be a critical influence on alterglobalization organizing.[35] Moreover, as he sees it, due to their increasing anarchist underpinnings, there is a growing confluence across struggles as they come to adopt what he refers to as a "groundless solidarity/infinite responsibility"—the idea that "increasing numbers of people all over the world are converging on the notion that the new global order needs to be fought on all levels, in all localities, through multiple, disparate—interlocking—struggles."[36]

Chris Dixon's recent work, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements*, however, perhaps most expressly addresses the relationship between anarchism and Black feminism, as well as interlocking oppressions, as he specifically focuses his analysis of contemporary

[31] Jen Rogue and Abbey Volcano, "Insurrection at the Intersection" in *Quiet Rumors* (2012), 48.

[32] Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), 3. The Catalyst Project is an activist training organization that focuses on racial justice and workers' rights.

[33] Ibid, 5.

[34] Ibid, 255. Here Crass is directly referencing the Combahee conceptualization of interlocking oppressions.

[35] Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (Ann Arbor, MI; Pluto Press, 2005),197.

[36] ibid, 201–2.

movements on the interconnectedness of struggle.[37] Dixon reflects on the ways that contemporary movement participants—from indigenous rights to labor to racial justice mobilizations—have come to understand their struggles as shared. As he notes, for these activists, it is clear that

> systems of oppression and exploitation—whether we're talking about patriarchy, heterosexism, white supremacy, ableism, capitalism, so on—actually work with and through one another and cannot be disentangled from one another. And in fact require, if we're going to try and ultimately do away with them and create a different way of relating, a whole different social structure. That's going to require us to have a kind of multilayered revolutionary politics that takes on all of these things at once.[38]

In particular, Dixon highlights the coming together of three political currents—Black feminism, prison abolitionism, and anarchism—as formative for the kind of "integrated analysis" and anti-authoritarian sentiment that he argues has come to be at the heart of contemporary activism in the US and Canada.

Towards a United Struggle

What, then, is the importance of recognizing a perception of interrelatedness of struggles among activists and the relationship between Black feminism and anarchism? To begin with, at the very least, it suggests a need to acknowledge the critical value of Black feminist thought in contemporary activism. To-date there remains a deeply problematic erasure of the important contributions by activists of color and feminist scholars of color from our movement theory and literature. This not only replicates racist-sexist dynamics of power in how we talk about and understand our struggles, but in our interpersonal relationships and internal movement dynamics as well. It also points to a natural resonance across Black (and Third/Fourth wave) feminism and anarchism—which has been largely overlooked by activists and academics alike. These facts alone suggest a reason to explore activist conceptualizations of interlocking oppressions.

At a practical level, there are still other reasons for considering the interconnectedness of struggles and the salience of the relationship between anarchism and Black feminism. To begin with, at a more emotive or affective level, this implies a changed subjectivity, wherein we are beginning to see ourselves as intimately connected with others outside our own individualized lives or direct experiences. There is a transcendence of divisions—a sense of coming together, common cause, and shared humanity. This sense of "relatedness" among activists also points to the potential for deeper engagement in politics of solidarity. Indeed, interlocking oppression theory as articulated by both anarchism and Black feminism is instructive for moving beyond the rhetoric of interconnected struggle to real actionable solidarity, in providing specific models for how activists can rethink working together.

For instance, the Bay Area Fireworks Collective's "Revolutionary Solidarity: A Critical Reader for Accomplices" offers a powerful and important critique of the concept of "allyship." The pieces in the reader suggest that the term "ally" has become bound up with liberal identity politics

[37] Chris Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[38] Carwil Bjork-James, "Beyond a Radical Minority: An Interview with Anarchist Writer Chris Dixon," 2015,

and "the ally industrial complex," and ultimately been "rendered meaningless." For this reason, the authors recommend adoption of the term "accomplice" as a way to shift towards a more interlocking approach to understanding struggles, and as a way to emphasize action over words.

As one essay comments, while being an ally has come to be adopted by white activists seeking recognition as anti-racist and paying lipservice to their commitment to racial justice, being an accomplice moves past superficial or patronizing forms of false solidarity. Rather, it means acknowledging that as long as any are oppressed, then all are subjected to the mutually-reinforcing systems of domination. They suggest that

> … [this] framework of solidarity affirms that other groups have something of worth to be gained through interactions with them, whether materially or by gaining something less tangible like perspective, joy, or inspiration. The solidarity model also dispels the idea of one inside and one outside, foregrounding how individuals belong to multiple groups and groups overlap with one another, while demanding respect for the identity and self-sufficiency of each of those groups.[39]

Allied frameworks, however, underscore "ideas of *I* and the *other*" as opposed to a more united, collective conceptualization.[40] Moreover, the accomplice model reinforces the notion that struggles are inextricably bound together. As explained in "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,"

> The risks of an ally who provides support or solidarity (usually on a temporary basis) in a fight are much different than that of an accomplice. When we fight back or forward, together, becoming complicit in a struggle toward liberation, we are accomplices.[41]

Along with the anarchist emphasis on shifting from an allied politics to the solidarity politics of being accomplices, another possible inroad for promoting a more interlocking feminism within activist spaces is in the idea that that one learns by doing—something that Third Wave, Chicana-feminist scholar Aimee Carrillo Rowe's "politics of relation" illuminates. In her article, "Be Long: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation," Rowe argues that whom we love is political. As she comments, "The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are (becoming)."[42] Consequently, she aims to "make transparent" the political conditions that shape our belonging and affective ties. Ultimately, she suggests that in order for us to be able to struggle together we need to develop "coalitional subjectivities" that arise through working together across difference while adopting a "politics of relation."

This occurs through the very act of doing together, when individuals jump into alliances allowing us "to see [our] oppression and privilege as inextricably bound to others and [in which we] cannot envision [our] existence and politics as separate from others' existence and politics."[43]

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[39] Anon, "A Critique of Ally Politics" in Fireworks Collective and Cindy Milstein eds., *Revolutionary Solidarity: A Critical Reader for Accomplices*, 2015, 6.

[40] Ibid, 6.

[41] Occupy Oakland. "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex" in *Revolutionary Solidarity*, 2014), 35.

[42] Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation," *NWSA Journal*, 17 (2005),16.

[43] Chávez and Griffin, *Standing in the Intersection*, 11.

In turn, this enables activists to build a politics across power lines, so that they can begin to understand their respective experiences and collaborate towards an emancipatory struggle for all.

Certainly this may be easier said then done; yet Rowe's call for us to reject normative relations predicated on "power over" in favor of "power with," which means a turning "towards" one another, is another example of the kind of shift necessary for advancing a stronger movement for the liberation of all.[44] As she writes, what we most need is to see "that radical modes of belonging hold tremendous potential for transforming who we think we are and how we imagine something called 'feminism.' This is the aim of a politics of relation… the inclination of one toward another, as the basis for community, intimacy, and awareness."[45] In sum, then, as Rowe suggests, perhaps the best way to encourage the development of an interlocking feminist framework is in fact to begin to relate to one another through our interlocked positions. It is not only our oppressions and privileges that are inseparably intertwined, but we ourselves. Recognizing this kinship within our individual experiences or put more simply, our shared humanity—together with the anarchist call for the critical need to work together as accomplices and not allies—may be the best route to our collective liberation.

Still, there continues to be an absence of nuanced analysis of what it means to adopt an interlocking framework in practice. For many, this leads to a naïve and deeply problematic erasure of difference in favor of a totalizing universal understanding of how oppression operates. Calls for empathetic recognition of common cause can lead to the pitfall of reinscribing oppressive dynamics and eliminating differences of experience. This is something that anarcha-feminists such as Rogue and Volcano speak to directly—making the relevance of examining anarchism hand in hand with intersectional and interlocking analysis all the more clear. As they note, "We call for an end to all exploitation and oppression," yet they further observe the necessity of avoiding reducing or flattening "all these social relations into a single framework" in a way that fails to account for how "the gamut of hierarchically-arranged social relations are in their own ways unique."[46] Or, as they further explain,

> As anarchists, we have found that intersectionality is useful to the degree that it can inform our struggles. Intersectionality has been helpful for understanding the ways that oppressions overlap and play out in people's everyday lives. However, when interpreted through liberal frameworks, typical intersectional analyses often assume myriad oppressions to function identically, which can preclude class analysis, an analysis of the state, and analyses of ruling institutions. Our assessment is that everyday experiences of oppressions and exploitation are important and useful for struggle if we utilize intersectionality in a way that can encompass the different methods through which white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, class society etc. function in people's lives, rather than simply listing them as though they all operate in similar fashions.[47]

Chris Crass makes a similar point about his organization's anti-racist work, and admits that "we've made a mistake about applying intersectionality to our work; in some cases we organized

[44] Rowe, 37.
[45] Ibid, 45.
[46] Rogue and Volcano, "Insurrection at the Intersection," 44.
[47] Ibid, 45.

white people as if they were a homogenous group… and we've alienated people we were working with by flattening out differences that can actually be a source of power."[48] In short then, as these writers suggest, adopting an interlocking framework requires recognizing the uniqueness of differences—"unity in diversity," to use a term favored by social ecologist and libertarian communalist, Murray Bookchin—or of the divergent systems of social domination, and each individual experience of subjugation, as being central to a nuanced analysis of mechanisms of control. If all forms of subjugation are reduced to a single axis, oppression cannot be contested, and indeed may only be reified. Consequently, anarchist and Black feminist approaches to interlocking analysis help to underscore this need to account for complexity, uniqueness, and dynamism within the mechanisms of power.

Even so, it is one thing to say that we need to take a cue from Black feminism and anarchism in adopting an approach to oppression analysis that recognizes difference, and another to understand how to navigate the challenges of doing so in actual practices of solidarity. How does one account for difference of experience, or the fact that society confers power on some at the expense of others, while still working towards the simultaneous collective liberation of all? One need only think of the profoundly problematic calls being made by some alleged "allies" to adopt the motto of #AllLivesMatter to see a clear example of how an ostensibly interlocking approach—"we all matter and need liberating, right?"—can still lead to oppression.

One possible solution may be to turn to a new metaphor for interlocking oppression—that of a tangled knot. There are countless strands in this knot, each one representing a different expression of domination, and all tightly bound together. Given their entanglement, it is therefore necessary to loosen all the strands if the knot is to be undone. In some moments, however, one strand may need more immediate attention and loosening than others. In other moments, perhaps it may be necessary to pull on multiple strands at once. While the knot of oppression will remain ensnared until all strands are freed, it is vital to understand that interdependent as the threads may be, each must be attended to both as an individual strand and as part of the collective tangle. This kind of conceptualization helps to avoid totalizing "alls" that erase distinct experiences of subjugation, while still allowing for an understanding that "none are free until all are free." In any case, as we endeavor to figure out how to put into practice a better politics of solidarity based on an understanding of shared and interdependent struggle, at least we have both Black feminism and anarchism as theoretical and practical models to help point us in the right direction.

[48] Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation,* 255.

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Until All Are Free
Black Feminism, Anarchism, and Interlocking Oppression
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