

Forever Cleaning Up After Others

Reflections on Creating Digital Collectives of Mutual Care

Sonia Muñoz Llort and Nerd Teacher

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At the beginning of 2020, around the start of the pandemic, we realised that we had an immense need for a supportive community, somewhere that helped us realise that we weren't alone despite our growing isolation both emotionally and geographically that intensified the feelings of loneliness. Much of this comes from the fact that, as educators in schools and academia, we rarely have the space to discuss how the practices we're forced to engage in are inherently abusive and authoritarian, how we're engaged in work that forces us to focus on racialised capitalist structures and are required by the system to prepare students to work in that world. We were rarely able to share how the contradiction of working in those spaces constantly makes us negotiate our own values and understanding of the world.

Much of this came down to the lack of anarchist infrastructure that exists in many places, which is a topic that often goes overlooked in a culture that appears largely focused on the idea of "just join an organisation" and "just go do something" without recognising that we many of us have a need for safe, caring, and supportive infrastructure that enable us to do sustainable work towards liberation. Many of us felt constantly frustrated by the infrastructure around us, which rarely focused on building community. Many of us were effectively cut off from spaces that we ordinarily would've been working in because of how the pandemic impacted them, causing them to close down or go into hiding. Others lived in countries that had next to no leftist infrastructure at all, let alone spaces that were explicitly anarchist or even remotely anarchist-adjacent.

All of us felt isolated and alone, wanting to find people to cultivate an inclusive community with, even if it had to be something digital, even if we had to be spread across large distances.

A lot of hard truths have been learned in the past two years about how many organising spaces and collectives have been built around ego and saviourism rather than community and liberation for all. For some of us, we recognised that the spaces we genuinely cared about didn't really want us there in the first place and saw limited use or value in us beyond our labour and how they could use our existence. We saw them focusing effort on ineffective strategies that were focused entirely on short-term "wins," actively refusing to build anything that could be sustainable and would exist in the long-term.

Overwhelmingly, many of those organisations didn't actually seem to care about us, either as activists or human beings. Like the workplaces we were already infuriated by and sought refuge from, they saw us as productive bodies.

So, along with other people who felt similarly, we started building a space that we needed, a space that we *hoped* others would want or need and could help bridge the gap as best we could. This space took the shape of a digital collective that could hopefully help create community during a time of excessive lockdowns, physical alienation, and a lack of *safe* and *inclusive* radical infrastructure within our respective regions.

We started a digital collective to create a sense of community, for mutual aid, and for support among anarchist educators. This space was intended to be a safe space outside of academia, outside of the persistent institutional oppression, and with a clear goal of lifting practical experiences in anarchist learning spaces and environments.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the feelings of loneliness and alienation were overwhelming. We needed, at the same time, to open up to the realisation of how temporary chaos could shine light on systemic failures. These failures were like open wounds that, in our everyday capitalist society, remained difficult to address. But due to how so many places across the globe

effectively *stopped*, many more people had time to reflect upon what life was like pre-pandemic, how it was perpetually abusive and exhausting, and that there was a need to break away from that deadly form of “normal” that was connected to our workplaces, compulsory schooling, state control... to almost *everything*.

Fighting for accountability and mutual care

As we started building this community and as we started trying to collaborate with and provide resources to others, we kept running head first into the same few issues we had met in other collectives before the pandemic. Though we weren't surprised by any of this, we were tired of running into the same behaviours that have negatively impacted so many people in other collectives: the perpetual refusal to unlearn the most common elements of patriarchy and whiteness, the complete lack of desire to even consider the most basic of accessibility needs, the constant resistance to understand how much cisnormativity and heteronormativity influenced our very thoughts, and the persistent assumption that we should follow the same standards as the very imperialist “educational” institutions we were critiquing.

Both of us, as non-binary and gender non-conforming people, are ignored both in society and academic spaces. This happens even more because we are disabled. At this point, it's like we are automatically seen as incapable of being able to be reflective or knowledgeable people, as if we are either too demanding for asking for whatever it is that we need to feel included and recognised. Having to always be the people who directly deal with the internalised queerphobia and cisheteronormativity in others is so exhausting, but our only options for dealing with it in our spaces tends to be that we either have to constantly remind people that *we exist* or remain entirely silent.

For the record, we tend to prefer the former over the latter, though we completely understand why marginalised people often choose silence. We're forced to pick battles and decide where we can expend what little energy we may have, even among the people who claim to stand with us in solidarity.

But this creates unspoken hierarchies that provoke us to live in a constant state of self-defense. It forces us to permanently live with an underlying rage that exists beneath the surface, a rage that is always there and feels inescapable. At times, it feels like an epic multi-headed monster, especially when we have to deal with it both in society and in spaces that *claim* they support us.

We are constantly under attack because we're expected to act as perpetual educators, even as we seek respite from having to always do that work. Because of this, it's so difficult to even meet our *own* needs – needs that overlap with the very same ones that so many others have openly told us they need addressed, too. But because we're doing the work of providing basic education around how the internalised hierarchies kept hurting our ability to organise together, we found that we kept losing time and energy for things that could be done to meet the more explicit needs of care and support that others were asking for. We were stuck in a continuous cycle, not just personally but also one fueled by our compassion for and solidarity to others who we also knew experienced this level of violence, if not in more horrifying ways than we do.

The level of anger has become more palpable, more than just the constant background noise to everything around us. But all of these issues were compounded with the complete rejection to

reflect *at all* on how any of those issues were manifesting in how our collective was organised and just how common they were.

And the story repeats itself...

As has been common in our experience in other collectives, we noticed that most of the responsibilities, including organising activities and meetings, fell on us to deal with despite having shared tasks among us. We each had a set of responsibilities that were primarily for us to take care of, though we also knew that we could either ask for help or give notice that something might be delayed due to our personal lives. Some tasks were mundane and common, like making sure that we checked the collective's various channels of communication; other tasks were more sporadic, like graphic design and the development of any materials that we needed in order to share information about or facilitate meetings or events.

But some of the tasks were routinely left incomplete, and members who had volunteered to do them hadn't communicated with us at all about leaving them undone or not having time to do them. Messages and emails would go unread for days until we finally checked them; information would go unpublished or unshared unless we logged on and actively checked that someone had done it. More often than not, we were finding that we had to pick up the pieces. We started to feel as if we were obligated to just get them done so we could maintain the kind of structure that we needed, that was co-created and agreed upon, that supported us emotionally. We felt that we had to just get on with it in order to keep things going, to make sure that we could continue building a community space.

In many ways, it felt as if this digital collective that was *very* important to our well-being, something we saw as necessary to our own mental health, was being treated as a hobby by other people. It seemed like it was something to do whenever they had time or whenever they felt like it, as if it could be put away and neglected until they decided to deal with it. And while we never wanted the collective to feel like a job or to require people to do things when they weren't able to, we *did* want people to communicate that they were having trouble or that they didn't have enough time; we wanted them to let us know so we could help distribute the responsibilities more evenly among us, making it possible to better provide space to people who *also* needed a similar community and keeping things going while others rested and took breaks when they needed to.

Beyond *internal* communication about responsibilities, we noticed a growing issue with the ways in which external communication was handled, how some people would continually use their personal email to communicate with people who our collective wanted to collaborate with. Though these collaborations were intended to be for *everyone*, everything that happened felt secretive and exclusive.

Frequently, we would reiterate that external communication needed to be done in an open manner towards all the members of the group. This either would take place through the collective's channels of communication, like email. We also were open to communicating through personal accounts, depending on the person's preferred platform, but we were clear that these messages needed to be shared and, as best as possible, collectively responded to when decisions had to be made. We modelled this repeatedly and precisely. We clearly explained what was needed and why it was important. We made it clear that we wanted, in the event of any negative inter-

actions, to be able to reflect upon what could've been done differently in order to avoid them in the future. We wanted to have access to clear information, even if it was a copied message pasted into our collective workspace. But one member continued to hide information and engage with people *outside* of the collective on *behalf* of the collective, never sharing any of the communications that were sent, never elaborating beyond "there was a problem." We always asked them to elaborate on what they meant, but we would be met with nonsensical stories that blamed the other person.

We didn't know the truth. We just knew that, every time this member communicated with people outside the collective to suggest a collaboration, there were always problems. They would tell us that someone had suddenly "ghosted" us or that there were issues as a result of their relationship with another academic. We had nothing to go on but their word, as flimsy as it always felt. How were we supposed to know when the communication was taking place in a space that was disconnected from the one we intended to share?

Beyond the fact that we couldn't understand why interactions with other people continually fell flat, it felt like they were continually misappropriating the work of the collective in favour of their own ego and personal CV. Keeping certain contacts close to their chest felt as if they were greedily protecting their precious connections and networking opportunities. It felt counterintuitive to the health of the community, making it harder to build a larger and more supportive network.

When discussing the collective in academic settings, they would claim that it was theirs and give themselves a title for a position that didn't exist. It always felt as if they wanted to seem important, to be *seen* doing something even when they actively made it difficult to do anything at all. Simply put, there was a refusal to recognise that the collective didn't belong to any one person; it was meant to be shared among everyone who wanted it, who needed it.

This enraged us. It made us feel alienated and disqualified our efforts to create small and sustainable spaces to share outwards. We were disgusted by the selfish behaviours that disconnected us, that continually gave us clear messages that our opinions on anything were not welcome. We wanted to see the collective growing as if it were a tree: healthy roots to support the top heavy crown, growing simultaneously to create long-term networks of care, compassion, and liberation.

This cycle of behaviour continued to happen regardless of how often we brought it up at assemblies, with the frustration of being overlooked and neglected, growing every time we had to take it up with the others. As in many other situations outside the collective, we didn't want to be seen as 'feminist killjoys', but at the same time, we continued to spend a ridiculous amount of time talking between ourselves about how we could break out of this cycle of patriarchal attitudes that continually pushed unfinished collective tasks onto us by default.

All of that left us acting as the support arm of the collective, which was something that we unwillingly tolerated. This was never something that was directly 'delegated', but we recognised the continuance of a perpetual unspoken 'tradition' that has often existed throughout the history of patriarchal anarchist (among other) organising: Cisgender white men leaving work for everyone else and rarely engaging in the necessary task of unlearning the hierarchy into which they were born, rarely asking how things even get done when they're not the people doing it.

When these members of the collective failed to carry out the tasks they had *chosen* to do, we felt obligated to take them over. They were necessary to our functioning, to building a community.

Because of this, we found that we were taking on the overwhelming majority of the care work and becoming increasingly more responsible for ensuring that everyone was aware of *how* to build the environment to be as inclusive as possible. While we were busy trying to build the cohesive and supportive network elements, we were also having to constantly be cheerleaders for everyone around us regardless of how tired we were or how much *we* needed the same support.

Because of our experiences elsewhere, we constantly had to make it clear that *everyone* needed to consider topics about accessibility and ableism. No one else was considering how difficult our space might be for a range of disabled people, and no one else was putting in the effort to ensure that anything we created was as accessible as possible. This is still something that we struggle with because *we* simply don't have the energy on our own, especially when we're constantly pushing for others to even *consider* them.

But we also found ourselves constantly fighting against the queerphobia, misogyny, and racism that is inherent in so many structures that we take for granted. It felt like our messages weren't getting through to other people, as if they weren't even taking the time to reflect upon how they had internalised so many forms of bigotry throughout their lifetime, as if they couldn't be bothered to simply *think* about unlearning them.

And when we found ourselves fighting against the desire of certain members to recreate academic structures in the collective, the very structures that we both had openly rejected because of the abuse we have endured throughout compulsory schooling and academia, we started finding that we were burning out. We found that we were *tired* of having the same discussions and feeling as if we had to create a bibliography in order to justify why we wanted to do something. Certain personalities seemed to be working on their CV, on building their *personal* connections, on building their careers; they wanted us to engage them in *their* ways of knowing and learning, forcing us to ignore the ones that *we* felt comfortable in.

Thankfully, in these processes we realised and implicitly understood that we could support each other. This gave us small moments of peace, allowing us to access the oasis of support in this dreadful capitalistic desert.

Invisibilization as fuel to anarcho-feminist resistance and co-creation

For us, creating this space came from a need for mutual support and mutual care; it's not a hobby that we just do when we have spare time. Our commitment to fighting the reproduction of oppressive patterns, hierarchies, and structures is downplayed by the aforementioned processes. The space we hoped we could co-create as safe, inclusive, and free was just another replication of many other collectives we have participated in before, except it was in a digital format.

To us, it seems like an impossible task to provoke people to give up their own privileges and their own internalised patriarchal attitudes to understand that they *must* understand how they recreate the very hierarchies they claim to fight against. Instead, many people directly sabotage collectives and groups due to being driven by their anarcho-curiosity instead of working to unlearn the behaviours they have been encouraged to perpetuate in a racial capitalist and patriarchal system. Rather than striving to build an underlying foundation of anarchic principles in their behaviours and everyday lives, in the way they interact and can relearn from other peo-

ple, they resist the very actions they need to participate in to unlearn harmful and oppressive behaviours.

It doesn't matter that their *active* refusals or *passive* resistance isn't intended to hurt us directly, that they don't mean to cause further harm or frustration, but the *lack* of recognition that they need to work on themselves and to reflect upon their own behaviours and actions strongly impacts on the ways we collectively create spaces that further respond to the growing need for mutual care to exist alongside mutual aid.

Some may ask why, with us being so conscious about these dynamics and patterns, we didn't choose to confront our other comrades or even completely split from the collective. These are always difficult decisions because, while we have been doing so much more of the care work to keep the collective running, we have also found a lot of comfort and support in each other. In moments of despair, in moments of exasperated frustration, we find comfort in being able to meet and recognise each other's feelings. The very act of validating each other's experiences, recognising all those we have in common, and being able to build on our own understanding of those we do not strengthen our friendship. Being in this collective space, despite what difficulty may exist, has made us aware of these mechanisms and how they are able to persist even within radical spaces.

As anarcho-feminist educators, we have come to realise the importance of unlearning ableist racial capitalist and patriarchal values that we have internalised in our own actions and thoughts. We have recognised that they are the source of annihilation and invisibility in so many of our collectives and movements. Unfortunately, our experience isn't unique and has been recorded across different territories, with worse experiences of oppression and within so many groups throughout history.

Though a lot of women and gender non-conforming people have always found solutions to similar challenges, the truth is that we are all impacted by different presentations of patriarchal and cisheteronormative dynamics across our geographic areas. They are two major issues that continually stand in the way of our many and very diverse paths to liberation, and we must work to unlearn and recognise how we can perpetuate them.

We have to work to dismantle them.

It doesn't matter how hard we hold onto anarchist values and principles if we're not making a conscious effort to both live and practice them in our daily lives, as best we can. It doesn't matter how much anarchist theory we read if we cannot take time to reflect upon how our actions, coerced or intentional, still uphold the hierarchies we seek to destroy. Some may even think that mutual aid is a principle that has a strong foundation within anarchism, but what is mutual aid without mutual care? What are freedom and liberation without respect and acknowledgement? What does resistance against state control mean when we also have to resist similar control, oppression and violence in our activist relationships?

Digital mutual care is possible and necessary

It started becoming clear that we were fucking burning out, that if we just kept going we wouldn't be able to do anything for anyone – ourselves included. But this gave us time to reflect upon the issues we saw, the negative emotions we were experiencing, and how we were

responding to everything. In doing this, we started realising what we needed in a supportive space.

It wasn't *just* that it had to be something that outwardly claimed it would support everyone; it had to be something where that core value was *built-in* with care and intentionality. No longer could we deal with the superficial nature of someone just *saying* they were against bigotry; the people in it had to actively work against it, and they had to be able to think of how their actions impacted people beyond them.

Perfection wasn't expected because that is an impossible goal, but we needed a space where people showed a willingness to genuinely and consciously unlearn harmful behaviours, thoughts, and patterns and relearn liberatory and caring ways of building up together. We wanted a space that, just as we supported everyone in it to unlearn, we were also encouraged and challenged to unlearn whatever we still had internalised.

The pandemic continued to rage on. By 2021, in the midst of feeling as if we were constantly having to activate our self-defense mode and recognizing that we didn't want to be purely responsible for all of the emotional and organisational work in a digital collective, we decided to invite others from around the world to work with us on an entirely new project, though it would still be digital. The feeling of being ignored – as if neither our existence, experiences nor comments were important enough for others in the original collective to actually make an effort to analyse or reflect upon their own actions in order to align with many of the values we all claimed to share – were the catalyst for us to support each other and give it another try.

Since we both felt tired, angry, and fed up from having to do so much emotional work on top of everything else – work that was done while we saw no visible change in those who most needed to recognise how they continued playing into the very structures we were supposed to be working against – we wanted to invite people to openly participate in this other digital project that would be based largely on values that have long been alive in more marginalised anarchist spaces but have received little more than lip service in many more well-known and dominant spaces.

We felt an urgent need to put more focus on anarcho-feminism, on understanding anarchism through a queer lense, on realising the different ways that so many of our spaces could be seen as entirely inaccessible to disabled and neurodivergent people, on recognising the many ways that race and ethnicity were neglected in favour of pure class-based analysis or how all of the related bigotries continued to permeate through our ideas and interactions without us even recognising it. We needed a space that better supported the ideals of internationalism that so many anarchists call for, that could be adaptable and flexible enough while still encouraging processes of both learning, unlearning and relearning. We wanted a space where people could recognise the interconnectedness of systems across the world and be able to handle the many nuances that are often lost in understanding how bigotries function in different geographic locations, particularly as local frameworks occasionally become overwritten by those of people in the United States.

We had no particular goal when we sent out invitations. We just felt the need to reach out to other people, to keep on creating a community even while everyone was still trying to exist under the pandemic. And we knew that it needed to be a place where everybody could feel as if their existence mattered, that they were appreciated, and that they could both care for others as others cared for them.

It needed to be a space that was explicitly built around *mutual care*.

But as we built this second space, what we weren't prepared for was the fact that being open about our own vulnerability and need for care actually has been pivotal to this new collective that emerged from our international invitation. As we received feedback to the invitation, and while communicating with collectives around the world, it was also made excruciatingly clear that many people were simply exhausted, that they were too burnt out to do something more. It wasn't only the pandemic that caused this burn out; it was also because they faced the same resistance to their needs and because they were fighting just as much for their needs to be met, making it clear that they also needed collective care in order to create new societies.

In this new collective, the digital atmosphere, the respect and appreciation, and the intentional care for each other is almost a bit overwhelming. People are aware of other peoples' health and situations; we actually listen to each other and try to meet each other's needs collectively.

Is care gender-based? In some of our patriarchal societies, it still is. And this is something that is reflected and reproduced in our digital platforms. We don't think digital collectives are colder or more alienating than those that exist offline. Honestly, for some of us with disabilities or with a lot of care work to do, digital collectives have been a great support in a time of physical distance and increased state control. For us, this second digital collective is a wonderful place to both co-create and support each other. It's a place where we are mostly women and non-binary people.

However, it's also interesting to note that the members of the second collective are also diverse in terms of our life situations and ages, and this also feels like something that breathes new life into much of the work that we do together. Perhaps it's worth considering the ways in which we create spaces where people who have families and where children and teenagers are able to participate as equals. A lot of care work that activists do, either analog or digital, tends to be based on what they're responsible for in real life. This tendency to reinforce these hierarchies is something that both pushes people into certain roles, enables some people to silence those, or functions as a way to ensure some people remain alienated despite the so-called desire to support them.

For some of us, the desire to participate in social movements or collectives has been directly undermined by the fact that these spaces rarely ever develop practices that collectivise care tasks that so many people across the collective would need. They are still frequently dominated by people who retain ageist values and who, intentionally or not, discriminate against and exclude the elderly, single parents, families with children, and teenagers.

In this digital collective, we have an overall abolitionist perspective around educational systems and many other capitalist systems. It feels like the anger and the continuous self-defence state is not needed when we are there. We can just exist, focusing on creating and supporting each other instead of being responsible for pushing other people to unlearn hierarchies, even as they continue to be unwilling to be accountable. It feels free; it feels safe. Regardless of the fact that we're sitting in different places on the planet, we're able to give each other space to rest and to make everybody feel seen. The group is not used to create a platform where people push an agenda of self-promotion. On the contrary, it is a platform that seeks to destroy oppressive structures.

We have mutual goals, and we embrace the diversity among us.

It might happen that different platforms and applications actually facilitate a more loose and interactive communication. In our case, we use completely different platforms for the two different groups, which in every case have been chosen by consensus. We have had conversations between us about the fact that many people might think that digital care is not as meaningful as analog and in-person care.

Of course, we can't replace human touch and physical embrace, which we acknowledge is also needed; we openly recognise that we need to use all of our senses to feel the wide range of emotions. But at the same time, digital communities are very much capable of showing and giving mutual care if all the members of the collectives are aware of our own responsibility to take care of each other, showing love and gratitude for other people's time, effort, and militant engagement into creating new social systems.

There are no big conclusions to be given in this process, though we find that digital collectives provide another space for us to meet the needs we can't elsewhere. These collectives are intended to continue; they are meant to be spaces that include everybody who wants to participate and build together. They are another example of our everyday work, places where we must also hold ourselves accountable for our own actions and attitudes.

At the same time, they are spaces where we can be clear in what needs we have. We can take care of each other through our resistance to and creation of spaces. It's an ongoing process. and as anarchy-feminist educators there are some learnings to get from these experiences. Above all, is the idea that just by rationality we can free ourselves and others. Is it so? Because during this pandemic, struggling to reach out to each other, we have very much become aware that self-experienced safety, appreciation and mutual care are actually the biggest anti-capitalist actions we can do.

It has absolutely been a painful, meaningful and giving process that has strengthened our friendship and expanded it to include new people. Our conversations, common projects and burning desire to create community have been the support we needed to go through this not-quite-finished pandemic. What is certain, is that we are not the same people that got to know each other at the beginning of this pandemic. The messiness and the loneliness brought a lot of us together, despite the geographical distance and the state-control.

But we're here, and we're ready to keep on supporting each other.

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