The Promise of Prefiguration:
Theorizing Anarchism and Anti-Oppression

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Abstract

Experiments in alternative political, economic and cultural institutions saturate the radical left in North America. Including free schools, radical childcare provision and the latest wave of financial district 'occupations', the most compelling projects have developed multidimensional analyses of violence impacting their communities. An applied theory called 'anti-oppression' has emerged with these experiments, providing a new language to facilitate the construction of radically inclusive and empowering forms of political community.

With roots in anti-nuclear and radical feminist organizing, anti-oppression draws from multiple resistance discourses (anarchist, anti-racist, feminist, queer and indigenous) to actively reinvent social movement praxis. While academic work has only tangentially engaged with this grassroots project, activist writing and workshopping has facilitated the spread of anti-oppressive principles throughout the radical left, supplying practical tools to problem-solve privilege and oppression within social movements. Notably then, anti-oppression is a political project more often concerned with developing practice than theory, yet a project embedded in rich theoretical terrain.

In this paper I explore this terrain as part of a larger research project examining the emergence of anti-oppression in North American anarchism. Introducing anti-oppression theory as it has been developed in key activist texts, I suggest that it represents a powerful development in the painstaking but empowering struggle to politicize racism, hetero-sexism and ableism within social movement organizations. I theorize anti-oppression's relationship to anarchism and feminism in terms of 'prefiguration', referencing its intensification of the anti-authoritarian impulse central to anarchism and its radical response to feminist work on intersectional privilege and oppression.

Introduction

      Experiments in alternative political, economic and cultural institutions saturate the radical Left in North America. Including free schools, radical childcare provision and the latest wave of financial district 'occupations', these projects are part of a long history of 'prefigurative' political struggle that refuses to separate its ends and means (Avrich and Pateman 1995; Bey 2003; Schantz 2006; Ervin 2008). The most compelling of these exhibit a multidimensional analysis of oppression combined with anti-authoritarian organization. Many groups are actively developing principles and practices that problem-solve power and privilege within their organizations while building empowering forms of political community. Anarchists call this work 'anti-oppression'.

      Movement scholars suggest that this form of anti-oppression corresponds to a 'new' anarchist politics that emerged in the mid-1990s. Gordon writes that anarchism's rebirth occurred in the "convergences of radical feminist, ecologist, anti-racist and queer struggles, which finally fused in the late 1990s through the global wave of protest against the policies and institutions of neoliberal globalization" (2008:32). In a similar manner, Day credits both the 'new social movements' of the 1960's and "'older' traditions of marxist and anarchist socialism" with forming the roots of this 'newest' social movement (2005:4). These activists continue to renovate theories of oppression and resistance traditionally associated with the 'old' and 'new' Left. The editors of *Upping the Anti* conceptualize this process as an interweaving of three critical tendencies: "anti-capitalism, anti-oppression, and anti-imperialism" (Conway et al. 2006:7-11). This intentional interweaving of resistances is significant because it transforms the composition and trajectory of social justice struggle. Activists' cross-pollination of theoretical and practical work produced a network of novel social movements that gained international recognition as they agitated against the threat of neoliberalism at the turn of the 21st century. The mass convergences of the alter-globalization movement were the product of innovative networks composed of grassroots anti-authoritarian activists. Such fusion of community organizing and large scale demonstrations were pivotal to the consolidation of 'new' anarchism and emerging anti-authoritarian discussions in North America concerning 'anti-oppression' politics (Bevington and Dixon 2005:195; Martinez 2002).

      This paper theorizes anarchist anti-oppression as an evolving and prefigurative project that, while conditioned and constrained by the ideas and environment in which it is embedded, actively constructs relationships and organizations. This conceptualization of anti-oppression comes from and is attuned to activists' varied attempts to theorize how oppression is reproduced at inter-personal and organizational levels and how this process can be interrupted. Moreover, I propose this as the groundwork for a forum in which different practical experiments in interrupting (raced, gendered, able-bodied) domination in anarchist organizing can be studied and learned from. While it is a shared analytical and practical project, anti-oppression is neither singular nor static in its responses to power and privilege. Anti-oppression is contextual and reflexive, and works to build alternative and empowering forms of activist community using analysis from feminist, anti-racist, queer, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and radical disability activism. By conceptualizing anti-oppression as dynamic and prefigurative, both its particular relationship to anarchism and its broader radical potential become apparent.

      I explore this theoretically as part of a larger research project examining the emergence of anti-oppression in North American anarchism. Introducing anti-oppression theory as it has been developed in key activist texts, I suggest that it represents a powerful development in the painstaking but empowering struggle to politicize racism, hetero-sexism and ableism within social movement organizations. I theorize anti-oppression's relationship to anarchism and feminism in terms of 'prefiguration', referencing its intensification of the anti-authoritarian

impulse central to anarchism and its radical response to feminist work on intersectional privilege and oppression. In the first section of this paper I frame anti-oppression theory within anarchism through the politics of its production and dissemination. Following this, I sketch the contours of this 'anti-oppression' politics in relation to complimentary academic applications of intersectionality and the precedents for my theoretical work. I situate this notion of anti-oppression more fully in the final section of this paper through an examination of the politics of 'new' anarchism.

Anarchist Knowledge

A commitment to expanding critiques of power is embedded in a range of social movement struggles. Diverse and interconnected movements have advanced political analysis of domination as both material (colonialism, capitalism, hetero-patriarchy) and cultural (White and cis-/male supremacy, individualism, hetero-normativity). Many now push beyond the limitations of this (material/cultural) binary to respond to multiple and intersecting systems of oppression. Activists are increasingly implementing this analytical work in their organizational structures, internal cultures and resistance strategies. Yet not only do social movements continue to be met with state repression, their radical analysis of domination and the evolution of their politics are obscured by liberal interpretations of resistance and social justice. This is an important reason to search out, document and share activists' radical work.

Popular discourse often separates activists' nuanced conceptions of injustice from their struggles through 'legitimate' legal and political channels. Critiques of settler colonialism, White and cis-/male supremacy, ableism, hetero-sexism and capitalism are rarely articulated in mainstream media. The state and liberal media often erase or dismiss such radical social critique and criminalize the political projects adhering to them, such as decolonization, collectivism and gender justice. Militant social movement actors and tactics are treated similarly. In this way, "histories of institutional reform in which freedoms are bequeathed from above" overwrite activists' success in "tear[ing] freedoms, resources and rights from the hands of elites" (Blaug 1999:44). The separation of militant tactics and critiques from struggles within 'established' arenas of politics is not only artificial, it is ideological. It strips the hard won victories of anti-racists, feminists, anarchists and others of their radical edge and submerges them in liberal narratives of progress.

This process of submerging radical dissent is made possible by a series of myths surrounding the origins and development of Canada and the United States. These 'national mythologies' justify or erase the settler states' intensely violent history alongside multiple systems of exploitation and oppression (Razack 2002:1-4). Dominant media and policy frameworks regularly leave the state undisturbed in its founding myths and thus reproduce it as the primary and legitimate mode of politics. Social movement organizing is legitimate in these discourses only insofar as its method and message conforms to a 'civil society' codependent with the settler state and criminal justice system. If an activist project's conformity is in question, the relation of power to knowledge enables politicians and legal authorities to construct such radicalism as "alien, subversive, dirty, or sick" and thus a threat to liberal democracy (Campbell 1998:3; see also Wæver 1995; Foucault 1977; Neocleous 2008). Such discursive moves frame social justice struggles as a 'threat' by associating social order with the oppressive and exploitative status quo. Operating alongside the national mythologies of North America, discourses of threat pre-empt public knowledge and support of social movement struggle and promote division among activists.

Contemporary anarchism works to subvert and build alternatives to the power/knowledge

exhibited here through what Foucault calls "a reactivation of local knowledges" (1977:85). Rather than centralize and Foucault's work exposing the historical contingency and instability of purportedly scientific and social truths revealed their contested and political nature. His focus on the power underlying scientific and state discourses – of authority, legitimation, application and function (Foucault 1972:50-2) – enables a critical analysis of the power relations that construct discourse. When such an analysis applied to state discourses of origin, security and threat as discussed above, one finds a disturbing web of institutions premised on violence and exclusion (Razack 2008; see also Stoler 1995; Smith 2005). When applied to anarchist knowledge and the participatory and grassroots practices that produce it, such a framework highlights its significance a space of subversive and emancipatory practice. To consider the "regime of truth" (Foucault 1977:131) operative in contemporary anarchism means first of all recognizing the collective nature of its processes of knowledge production, transmission, contestation and function. That is, "to read the form itself as political, as part of the doing of political theory, rather than merely the passive vehicle for circulating it" (Ferguson 2011:71). Anarchist knowledge creatively combines a critique of traditional notions of authority and centralized power/knowledge with a prefigurative political orientation. In addition to their content, the very process of anarchist education, workshopping or writing is subversive. Production of zines and other media is a form of self and communal empowerment challenging traditional and authoritarian modes of expertise and knowledge production. Not only are texts often written communally, they are regularly shared and read either face-to-face with the authors or in small communities of activists. Duncombe (2008) provides a seminal analysis of zine (small, self-published pamphlet) production, one of the main mediums of anarchistic knowledge production. While his focus is not solely anarchist texts, he notes a latent politics of DIY (do-it-yourself) and cooperative production processes, the proliferation of informal networking, and the construction of alternative communities as 'antithesis' of dominant culture (see also Eichhorn 2010, Bell 2001). Duncombe's observation of the subculture's 'politics by example' leads him to conclude that it holds the promise of radicalization or political catharsis (2008:199). This promise of radicalization is evident in anarchist texts, many of which could be considered a particularly politicized subset of Duncombe's 'zine underground'. Writes Jeppesen, these texts are "produced by anarchist communities engaged in much more than media production, as part of this culture, anarchist zines produce practices of equality beyond the zine, in effect contributing to the groundwork for long-term social sustainability" (2010a:2). This has implications for the production, dissemination and legitimation processes of knowledge, since the means by which (activist) knowledge is produced and shared are pivotal to its reception and legitimation (Eichhorn 2001; Jeppesen 2010a). 'New' anarchist literature thus emerges as "an autonomous, non-centralized kind of theoretical production, one that is to say whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought" (Foucault 1977:81). Production, dissemination and legitimation of work are important facets of 'new' anarchist knowledge production and are intimately tied together in the work of writing, sharing, archiving, distributing, reading and workshopping.

The subversion of the sort of power/knowledge embedded in the academy and state, and creation of alternative and communal knowledge is visible in many 'new' anarchist texts. INCITE!'s working document on sexual assault, GenerationFIVE's transformative justice resource book, Unsettling Minnesota's *Unsettling Ourselves*, and even a single-author zine like *Said the Pot to the Kettle* are all active in this work. They are representative in form and function of the vast array of knowledge produced by and for 'new' anarchists. INCITE's (2005) *Gender Oppression, Abuse, Violence* framework is the cooperative product of organizers, activists and

academics. It is not provided as an authoritative or expert analysis, but rather as a tool for activists with the goal of education and empowerment. It is framed as a work in progress meant to spark further reflection and dialogue on the subject of violence within activist communities. Generation FIVE is also a collaborative project and draws from a range of political projects concerned with the support of survivors of sexual assault and development of transformative accountability processes. *Toward Transformative Justice* (2007) is not just a product of the authors and editors engaged in its writing and editing. The project is explicitly oriented towards the development and spread of community-building processes around child sexual assault. Their aim is not to provide a manual, but to encourage activists to take from Generation FIVE's framework and innovate community processes fitted to their particular context and resources. *Unsettling Ourselves* (2009) emerged from a working group concerned with decolonization and political coalition between settler and indigenous communities. This document collects writing of academics and activists and supplements them with individual and communal reflections on positionality, ally-ship and anti-colonial struggle. Designed as a resource for other activists, *Unsettling Ourselves* is a call for readers to educate and implicate themselves in ongoing colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in North America. Like the texts above, it provides theoretical analysis and examples from the working group to kickstart a process of reflection and response. Finally, even those contributions to anti-oppression work which come from single authors, like *Said the Pot to the Kettle* (n.d.), emerge from collective struggle. As with most such work, the author explicitly acknowledges the myriad ways their work here draws from broader networks of activism (n.d. 3). They suggest the zine be taken as one imperfect contribution to the larger struggle to politicize oppression within anarchist organizing, and suggest further resources for this work. Such anti-authoritarian anti-oppression works toward community building and knowledge production that actively resists liberal and statist notions of education and resistance. The strength of this is that through the very process of producing and localizing knowledge, they are empowering themselves and their communities. Anarchist anti-oppression thus constructs and strengthens political community through a collective process of confronting racist, ableist, hetero-sexist and classist oppressions.

Anti-Oppression and Intersectionality

With roots in anti-nuclear and radical feminist organizing, anarchist anti-oppression draws from multiple resistance discourses (primarily anarchist, anti-racist, feminist, queer and indigenous) to actively reinvent social movement praxis. While academic work has only tangentially engaged with this grassroots project, activist writing and workshopping has facilitated the development and spread of anti-oppression principles throughout the radical Left, supplying practical tools to problem-solve privilege and oppression within social movements. Notably then, anti-oppression is a political project more often concerned with developing practice than theory, yet a project embedded in rich theoretical terrain. This section sketches the contours of what anarchists have come to call 'anti-oppression' referencing complimentary social movement research and the concept of intersectionality. I discuss scholarly work that politicizes oppression within social movements as both a compliment and a contrast to 'new' anarchist anti-oppression. In so doing, I argue 'new' anarchist anti-oppression is best theorized as a grassroots prefigurative project and a forum for experiments in interrupting oppressive power relationships.

Some of the most powerful and relevant academic precedents for theorizing anarchist anti-oppression as I do here comes from recent anti-racist feminist studies of social movement and community organizations. Deeply critical of conventional social science, these scholars employ theoretical frameworks informed by intersectionality to produce critiques of race, class,

gender and sexuality within movement settings. Importantly, while this work is written and published from the academy, Ward (2004) notes that intersectionality emerged as grassroots feminist and anti-racist critique from the margins of civil rights and feminist struggle in the late 20th century (see Combahee 1977). As I will discuss further below, 'new' anarchists draw from similar analytical roots, and are engaged in parallel analytical work producing theory, situated critiques of organizational norms, and resources for confronting a range of oppressions.

In a recent article naming the silences of mainstream social movement research, Correa (2010) notes the normalized operations of race and gender in state sanctioned repression and systemic social and economic violence against particular (racialized, feminized) groups of people and forms of activism. She finds that particular processes of oppression and violence experienced at community and inter-personal scales are submerged in broad discussions of context and 'political opportunity' (Correa 2010:84,5). Such targeting is only visible through reference to critical social theory emerging from feminist, queer, anti-racist and other social justice movements. Failing to account for social norms and material consequences of White, settler-colonial, hetero-patriarchal, ableist and capitalist contexts means failure to address the impact of some of the most powerful institutions structuring social movement activity. Zemlinskaya (2010) illustrates the impact of gender and context on social movement membership and dynamics. She notes that forms of organization and action may be differently accessible and hold different dangers to activists depending on normalized gender roles and relations (2010; for a class-based argument, see Piven and Cloward 1979; regarding race, see Ostrander 1999; on sexuality, see Ward 2004). Poster (1995) observes how multiple and sometimes conflicting critiques of power and feminist struggle have emerged from different experienced intersections of race, class and gender oppression. She argues that activists' experiences and perspectives in regards to race, class and gender regimes often delimit movements' organizational goals and structures. This in turn feeds into unhealthy and power-laden relationships within and between activist communities. Recognizing the historical and continued consequences of unaddressed privilege and oppression within movements is an important backdrop for anti-oppression politics. It is central to sustainable community and coalition building that we, as activists and academics, work towards responding effectively to the societal and interpersonal impact of racism, settler-colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, ableism and capitalism.

A lack of serious attention to social movements' internal politics can have significant consequences. This has been argued time and again by historians of anti-poverty activism (Piven and Cloward 1979), feminism and anti-racism/anti-colonialism (Davis 1983; Smith 2005), anarchism (Olson 2009) and others. These particular authors suggest that submerged histories within the radical Left are an important place to begin (re-)building coalition and affinity-based struggle. They also advocate studies of political dissent that trouble common-sense understandings of social movement strategy and organization. Their work shows that organizational practices can never be stabilized in struggles against multiple oppressions. Central to this argument is a conceptualization of intersectional analysis and practice as conscious, continuous, and often cumulative.

Such attention to the different facets of activism and organization is key to theorizing intersectionality and prefiguration as they inform 'new' anarchism. Ward (2004) provides an example of such an analysis sensitive to multiple oppressions at interpersonal and organizational scales. She demonstrates a nuanced interrogation of how organizational context, mission and goals, and interactions with external institutions produce distinct experiences of oppression. These personal and communal experiences are made visible in Ward's work through applying an intersectional framework of oppression onto internal social movement processes. Ostrander

(1999) similarly applies an intersectional analysis in her examination of negotiations of race and gender within a putatively nonhierarchical organization. She follows her subject, a People's Community Fund, as it attempts to challenge multiple forms of subordination in its internal political operations through "an organizational dynamic of cross-gender and cross-race solidarity" (Ostrander 1999:629). Ostrander deftly identifies the way many challenges faced by the group were raced and gendered: the marginalizing effects of consensus decision making, divisions of labour and responsibility, and perennial conflicts around structural reform within the Fund. Not only is her analysis sensitive to the implications of such contention across a number of different organizational practices, Ostrander makes clear these political struggles are not without a broader context: "organizational transformation toward a feminist and progressive vision is a process, a goal to be reached for, with its course perhaps best described as an ongoing and unstable project" (1999:641). This research is instructive for its combined sensitivity to multiple arenas of politics within the Fund, the struggle of actually transforming oppressive and marginalizing relationships within the organization, and the theorization of this work in relation to intersectional and process-centred understandings of anti-oppression practice. In so doing, Ostrander provides us with a polished form of the grassroots work central to anarchist anti-oppression.

Just as Ostrander and others adapt intersectional analysis to identify, analyze and reflect on particular conflicts and developments within movement organizations, so too do many activists in their day-to-day anti-oppressive work. The anti-racist and feminist scholars above are doing invaluable work to excavate the silences in mainstream social movement theory and fuse academic and activist resources toward anti-oppressive ends. Yet the affinities between such scholarship and grassroots anti-oppression should not obscure the primary political work of naming and responding to oppressive dynamics within activist spaces. This has never been primarily an academic pursuit. A range of writings and practice has emerged from and intervened within activist spaces, often complementary to academic analyses of intersectionality. Such work can be traced back even before Collins' (2000) and Crenshaw's (1989) seminal analytical works introducing intersectional and interlocking oppression as a tool for black feminist theory and legal critique. While their work solidified this framework in feminist and anti-racist discourse, it closely resembles the theoretical approach put forward in Combahee River Collective's *Black Feminist Statement* (1977). This latter document was a direct outgrowth of personal and political struggle against racism, hetero-sexism and economic exploitation (Combahee 1977:s2), and is representative of anti-oppression struggle more immediate and accessible to grassroots practice.

The history of social movement struggle in North America is peppered with such interventions. Increasingly this critical and prefigurative work disturbs unspoken White, hetero, middle-class, settler/citizen and cis-gendered norms within social justice organizing, and helps to clarify and present alternative and suppressed modes of political struggle. Spanning the continuum from historical to theoretical analysis, 'new' anarchist networks have worked diligently to expand the boundaries of the political to account for oppression in social justice struggle. Like *A Black Feminist Statement*, work by Unsettling Minnesota, Generation FIVE, INCITE!, Colors of Resistance and the Catalyst Project politicize and respond to the complex power dynamics faced by social movement organizations and networks. They have adapted an intersectional analysis of oppression to activist spaces to produce tools that empower and educate their communities. Activist projects such as these blur the boundaries between theory and practice, radicalizing their communities with insights drawn from feminist, anti-racist, queer, indigenous, disability and anarchist struggle. 'New' anarchists' renovation of organizing practices and reclamation of multiple histories of struggle has lent their work new potency for addressing

internal hierarchies. Radicals from a range of backgrounds are now actively innovating and implementing practical responses to marginalization and violence within movement organizations. It is this work, rarely represented in academic journals, but referenced in workshops and working groups, zines, web portals and other activist media, that has come to be called 'anti-oppression'.

Anarchists use 'anti-oppression' to refer to applied theory bent on identifying and eliminating violence within movement organizations, and building empowering forms of political community (see Khan et al. 2006; Love & Rage 2011; Collectif 2011). Anti-oppression frames these struggles as involving a multidimensional (personal, relational, organizational) and progressive subversion of normalized White and cis-/male supremacy, ableism, hetero-sexism and classism. It starts from a broad historical understanding of how these forms of domination operate at global and regional levels, and politicizes their infiltration into movement building (Crass 2002a; 2006).

As noted by scholars above, oppression and exploitation take many forms in social movement organizing. Anti-oppression similarly takes diverse shapes within 'new' anarchist communities across North America. The reflexive work of anti-oppression in anarchism is evident in critical interventions into every aspect of anarchist politics including decision making, organizational structure, division of labour, resource management, tactics, subcultural norms and security (see Walia 2006; Miriam & Ali n.d.; Threat n.d.). Such interventions are integral to a broader grassroots process of "becoming aware and naming the mechanisms of power that are active at the points of junction of different systems of oppression, to better combat them" (Collectif 2011:2). By working to understand the particular relations of power operating within anarchist organizing, anti-oppression entails pro-active development of norms and structures responsive to such critique, often by way of working groups and skill sharing. This critical and constructive process is documented and shared through activist media, producing resources for other activists in the form of how-to manuals, narratives and critical reflections.

The evolution of anti-oppression within anarchist politics is in many ways a product of evolving ideas about where and how oppression is (re-)produced and where and how it might be interrupted. Anti-oppression is not a stable or homogenous body of work. It is not drawn from a single theoretical framework for understanding inter/personal and systemic power dynamics, though this paper concentrates on intersectionality as particularly important. Anarchist anti-oppression theory and practice has been spurred on by multiple understandings of how oppression works. Often anti-oppression is approached by activists through anti-racist feminist scholarship theorizing interlocking or intersectional oppressions (Davis 1983; Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000; hooks 2000). These approaches to oppression redefine it as multiple and intersecting, and a product of multiple interdependent systems of domination, including imperialism, capitalism, White supremacy, heteronormativity and patriarchy. Further, this theoretical framework encourages multiple resistances, positing "a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility … continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination" (hooks 1990:153). This is an important facet of intersectionality – in its expanding work to expose the complexity of the particular 'matrix of domination' (Collins 2000:227) operative in North America, it does not rule out struggles across the differences it reveals. It rather provides theoretical tools with which to do so more effectively. In recent years academics have adapted intersectionality to analysis of particular clusters of privilege, including those adhering to white, middle-class and activist masculinities (Brittan 1989; Ross 1995; Yúdice 1995; Goldrick-Jones 2001; Connell

2005). Such work is relevant to analyzing anarchism as an historically White, cis-/male and middle-class dominated ideology. It might even be considered an academic equivalent of some analysis emerging from anarchist anti-oppression (*Said the Pot* n.d.; Crass 2002b).

 Concentrating on an intersectional analysis of oppression focuses but does not foreclose recognition of the varied ways anti-oppression has been operationalized and contested within 'new' anarchism. As illustrated in Brittan's (1989) or Connell's (2005) critical synthetical work, taking intersectionality as a starting point for thinking about oppression does not silence their analysis of performativity (Butler 1990) and discourse (Foucault 1990). Likewise, interventions that dovetail with poststructuralist and queer theoretical work are increasingly important to the process by which anti-oppression is developing within anarchism. Critical insights from a wide range of struggles take a central role in anarchists' discussions of direct action and organization. There have been a number of important interventions by activist/academics applying and expanding intersectionality and queer theory in particular to renovate anarchist practice. These adaptations include theoretical synthetical work (Ben-Moshe et al. 2009; Shannon and Willis 2010; Sheppard 2010; LA COiL n.d.; Shannon and Rogue n.d.), critiques of actions and organizational norms (Principle 1998; Hewitt-White 2001; Highleyman 2002; Martinez 2002; Nopper 2005; Walia 2006; Russell n.d.) and alternative building (Crass 2002b; Crass and Geoff 2002; INCITE! 2005; Gaarder 2009; Jeppesen 2010b). Not only do these writers openly contest problematic notions of autonomy and individualism historically embedded in anarchist praxis, they promote a kind of sustainable communal accountability central to building infrastructures of resistance across privilege and identification. Practical questions of accountability, decision-making process, divisions of labour and security culture are integral to the way these discussions have appeared and progressed.

 Anarchist work on anti-oppression targets a wide range of theoretical and practical problems. Much of the time anti-oppression critique and workshopping is met with resistance. One of the most contentious issues among anarchists concerned with alternative building is strategy. The classical anarchist pre-occupation with revolutionary anti-state and anti-capitalist struggle often inhibits the difficult work of building critical knowledge around colonialism, racism, cis and hetero-sexism and ableism. Such a focus often dismisses anti-oppression work as a distraction from the central programme of fomenting insurrection or building revolution (Dixon 2011; see Gelderloos 2010). Activists have argued likewise that the glorification of counter-culture lifestyles (punk, vegan, DIY) as a political strategy of 'opting out' is counterproductive to building sustainable and effective resistance against domination (Martinez 2002; Ervin 2008; Alchemy 2009; Olson 2009). Such critique is usually balanced by calls for community and coalition building attuned to the ways in which race, class, gender, ability and sexuality are interwoven with the power of the state, market, culture.

 The language of identification and oppression often present in texts and workshops concerned with anti-oppression practice has also been a point of struggle for anarchists (O'Brien 2003; Gelderloos 2010; Shannon and Rogue n.d.). Anarchist work drawing from existentialist, postmodern, or queer theory sometimes functions to simply obscure and dismiss the power dynamics revealed by anti-oppression. In many more cases, activists challenge received understandings of oppression, and in so doing help nuance and strengthen the project of confronting domination in anarchist spaces. Beyond these, contested conceptions of empowerment (Alchemy 2009; Gelderloos 2010; Ruby n.d. Anger), liberation (Crass and Geoff 2002; LA COiL n.d.; Clarke n.d.), community (Nomous 2007; Aguilar et al. 2008; Ben-Moshe et al. 2009; Clarke n.d.; Knoch n.d.), revolution (O'Brien 2003; Tov n.d.) accountability (Aguilar 2007; Crass 2006; Thomas n.d.), autonomy (Anti-Mass n.d.) and oppression (Anarchy n.d.), are

evident in theoretical work emerging from 'new' anarchist organizing. The differing content given these concepts functions to erase or engage with the struggle of bringing a political analysis of gender, class, race, sexuality and ability into political spaces often largely White, male and middle-class. Interwoven with this varied theoretical contention is concern with specific areas of practice: direct action tactics, consensus process, affinity. These will be examined in the next section with direct reference to 'new' anarchism.

I have argued above that anti-oppression constitutes a collaborative grassroots project of analyzing and confronting power within the anarchist movement. Anti-oppression as such is distinct from external scholarly work mapping oppression in relation to social movement organizations. It is not singular or static, but rather a cluster of reflexive theories and practices. The development of anti-oppression within anarchism is visible in the texts produced by activists theorizing and problem-solving their political experiments. This theoretical and reflexive work discursively and materially constructs anti-oppression politics. It also provides important feedback on the feasibility of different experiments across broad networks of anti-oppression practice. As will be discussed further below, anti-oppression is a key component to anarchist prefigurative praxis.

Prefiguration and the 'New' Anarchism

This section introduces 'new' anarchism, the setting within which this innovative grassroots project of anti-oppression is underway. Discussing the central ideas of direct action, affinity and consensus as they are theorized in 'new' anarchist politics, I argue that they are intimately related to prefiguration and are important to the practice of anti-oppression. Similar to the discussion of anti-oppression above, 'new' anarchism is best considered an activism emerging from multiple resistance struggles in North America. Its current form is rooted in "convergences of radical feminist, ecologist, anti-racist and queer struggles" (Gordon 2008:32). Yet it is painfully evident that relations of power and privilege as structured in the dominant settler societies of North America remain a problem for anarchist activists. Direct action tactics, consensus decision making and affinity-based organization – the building blocks of 'new' anarchism – do not by themselves dissemble White and cis-/male supremacist, ableist, hetero-sexist and classed power relations. As noted above, even anarchism's orientation towards anti-oppression is not automatic. Yet when transformed through anti-oppression, 'new' anarchism has powerful potential for dismantling power relations both at a societal level and within social movement organizations.

Recent developments in anarchist ideology and tactics have resulted in theorization around the development of a 'small-a' anarchism (Gordon 2008:24), the spread of 'anarchistic' politics across the radical Left (Day 2005), and the emergence of 'new anarchists' (Graeber 2002; Williams 2007). The evolution indicated here is argued to correspond to a cross-pollination of prefigurative ideas and practices on the radical Left. Day (2005) labels the resulting struggles the 'newest social movements', as they operate with an innovative understanding of politics informed by the interaction of feminist, indigenous, queer, anti-racist and anarchist struggles. In this characterization of contemporary alter-globalization struggle and the activist groups networked within it, Day takes a step beyond many postmarxist thinkers. Writers in the postmarxist tradition emphasize and encourage conceptualizations of revolution and social change as more process than event (Mouffe and Laclau 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004; Holloway 2002). Day (2005) shares this emphasis, but draws attention to an evolution of practice not fully expressed by the 'counter-hegemonic' struggles theorized by these writers (see also Adkin 2002). He notes a shift from working to build formal mass organizations to affinity-based networks of struggle, and from

totalizing critiques of bureaucracy or capitalism to political analysis responsive to multiple and overlapping systems of domination. It is the resulting activism that is discussed here as 'new' anarchism, for which the manifold oppressions faced today "are ever-present as possibilities, and therefore must be continuously acknowledged and warded off to the greatest extent possible" (Day 2005:155). Each of the authors engaging with this innovation of anarchist politics note that the label of 'anarchism' is neither a popular nor especially accurate descriptor of many social movement struggles they would place under these labels. Their continued usage of anarchist descriptors, like my own, stems rather from the reasoning that anarchist ideas and tactics have had a profound influence on this new activism (Graeber 2002:62; Day 2005:19-20; Gordon 2008:12-14; Williams 2007:298-299). At the same time, the modified descriptors are an imperfect attempt to recognize how the resurgence of anti-authoritarian ideas in North America has been influenced by indigenous, feminist, anti-racist, queer and socialist struggles over the past half century.

This shift in social movement practice has made possible both the evolution of anarchist anti-oppression practice and the theoretical work of this paper. The continued interactions of feminist, anarchist, anti-racist and other radical activist groups has produced and sustained the work of anti-oppression in diverse social movement settings. The particular sort of anarchistic and prefigurative activism emerging in this process connects reflection and resistance in a compelling way through "conscious attempts to alter, impede, destroy or construct alternatives to dominant structures, processes, practices and identities ... [and] not just the *content* of current modes of domination and exploitation, but also the *forms* that give rise to them" (Day 2005:4, italics original). These aims are embedded in the contents of 'new' anarchist texts (Crass and Geoff 2002; Knoch n.d.; LA COiL n.d) as well as the processes and networks through which theory is shared and implemented – as discussed earlier in this paper. But this critical and creative work is most compelling when it takes the form of anti-oppression work targeting the power relations that impede social movement struggle.

Central to 'new' anarchist approaches to anti-oppression is the idea of prefiguration. It has become a powerful force within many different streams of anarchist activism (such as syndicalist, prison abolitionist or ecologist). The push of prefiguration functions in each instance to re-organize movement struggles to create and seize opportunities for activists to build new relationships 'in the shell of the old' (such as in the workplace, with criminalized populations or with nonhuman life). At its most fundamental, it is a radical applied theory of social transformation that emphasizes building alternative political, economic and cultural infrastructures within existing oppressive contexts (Graeber 2009:203; Day 2005:37; Maeckelberg 2011). This transformative framework is a central means through which 'new' anarchist work on anti-oppression sets itself apart from more mainstream and bureaucratic variants of anti-oppression (see INCITE! 2005; Generation FIVE 2007; also LA COiL n.d.; Shannon and Rogue n.d.). Similar ends have informed a great range of progressive political work and were particularly central in the new social movements of the 60's and 70's. Recent decades have seen substantial innovation of prefigurative praxis in anti-authoritarian politics (Graeber 2002; Notes 2003; From Act Up 2002; Maeckelbergh 2011). While anarchists and many others have long been concerned with living their political critique, the focus of this lived practice in North America has been radicalized with the emergence of 'new' anarchism. The idea of prefiguration is, for the purposes of this paper, addressed below through the applied theories of direct action, consensus and affinity.

Direct action blending cultural and political activism including radical arts (theatre, music, poetry) and the claiming of space (social centres, schools, workplaces) have been central

to anarchist organizing in North America since at least the turn of the 20th century (Avrich and Pateman 1995; Ferguson 2011). The continued innovation of direct action in anarchist groups is closely related to the idea of prefiguration discussed above. Involving a 'dual strategy' of simultaneously challenging domination and enacting alternatives (Gordon 2008:18), direct action is concerned with implementing the idea of prefiguration at a very practical level. Its contemporary form emerged at the overlaps of anarchist, anti-racist and feminist struggles (Barrow 2002; Moynihan 2002; Graeber 2009). Direct action is significant for understanding prevailing notions of prefiguration in 'new' anarchism because of its requisite refusal to play by the rules governing state and corporate resource networks. Rather, through direct action individuals and communities work creatively and directly to meet their specific needs; the reclamation of state or market resources for these purposes is considered a subversive, but ultimately unreliable project (Jeppesen 2010a:13). In this melding of prefiguration and direct action, activists focus their energy primarily on building empowering political relationships and spaces in the process of confronting or subverting systems of oppression and exploitation. The practicality of direct action in turn informs contemporary applications of prefiguration, where "prefiguration is something that people *do*... the alternative 'world' is not predetermined: it is developed through practice and it is different everywhere" (Maeckelbergh 2011:3). There is a broad spectrum of direct action tactics that reflect this critical and prefigurative impulse and operationalize anarchist ideas at the intersections of varied social movement struggles (Day 2005:22-36; see also From Act Up 2002; Notes 2003; Jeppesen 2010b). Anti-oppression, the subject of this research, is among them.

As with direct action, the idea of 'affinity' is central to the innovation of prefigurative and anarchist activism. Direct action is often practiced through affinity group specialization and networked organization. This connectivity is "based on diverse, ad-hoc coalitions – giving rise to a pluralist orientation which deemphasizes unity of analysis and vision in favour of multiplicity and experimentation" (Gordon 2008:42). Affinity groups are thus a kind of working-group model developed around the practice of direct action: "consensus-driven and oriented to achieving maximum effectiveness with a minimum of bureaucracy, infighting and exposure to infiltration ... typically consisting of 5-20 individuals" (Day 2005:35). Affinity is important for the work of anarchist anti-oppression because it constitutes a space of intense inter-personal relationships and the launchpad for intervention into broader systems of domination. "[I]t has great potential and is immediately addressed towards action, basing itself not on the quantity of its adherents, but on the qualitative strength of a number of individuals working together in a projectuality that they develop together as they go along" (G.C. and O.V. n.d.:15). As they are directly relevant to the unique development of anti-oppression within 'new' anarchist politics, I unpack these constitutive elements of 'affinity' below.

At the most basic level, affinity groups' efficacy is made possible by concentrating activists' skills through specialization and networked communication. Jo Freeman (2002) famously speaks of the inefficiency of 'unstructured groups', a critique recycled many times by critics of anarchist, feminist, and other social justice activism engaged in anti-bureaucratic organizing practices. Yet despite these adaptations of her argument, a close reading of her argument reveals that what she considers 'exceptional' is actually the affinity-group norm: task oriented, small and relatively homogeneous and highly interactive groups of a dozen to two dozen people (Freeman 2002:58). Affinity groups are intentionally designed to "multiply the strength of each member. By working collectively in small numbers, the small group utilizes the various contributions of each person to their fullest, nurturing and developing individual input" (Levine 2002:63). These collectives mobilize around concrete and often complimentary projects:

"copwatching, communications, health care, street theatre" (Notes 2003:88). Coordination of these projects is organized through decentralized networking or 'spokes-councils' in which each 'spoke' (delegate) is primarily a conduit for dialogue: "they explain what their group is intending to do, bring proposals, and convey information and proposals back to the group for it to consider selectively" (Graeber 2009:37; see also Moynihan 2002:168; Gordon 2008:71). A similar division of labour was famously operationalized by anarchists during the Spanish civil war; in North America such flexible and networked systems of mutual aid have reemerged most visibly in summit protests and other large scale demonstrations (Juris 2005, 2008; St. John 2008). Affinity, as a form of organization and a theory of political practice, has thus become embedded within broader understandings of 'new' anarchism as networked and malleable. The gradual development of dense and large scale networking capabilities on the radical Left has allowed affinity to become a general organizing principle for anarchists.

Yet while activist communities are newly theorized as "*n*-dimensional networks of networks," this should only be done while explicitly acknowledging the diverse precedents of such an organizational framework (Day 2005:182-6; Olson 2009; Ervin 2008). Affinity (like direct action and consensus) has multiple histories, and can be traced back not only to Spanish, Argentinian and French anarchists, but radical feminists, Quakers (by way of Movement for a New Society), and the 50's Black Freedom movement in North America (Barrow 2002; Notes 2003; Graeber 2009; Dupuis-Déri 2010). The importance of these precedents cannot be overstated. State and inter-state political environments have been shaped violently through neo-/colonial power relationships in which the pressures to conform to particular liberal and capitalist norms are more often than not reinforced by threat of military intervention. The voluntary adaptation and innovation of radical political organizations across social movements and struggles constitutes a powerful contrast. The full potential of affinity-based politics has not (and perhaps by definition, cannot) be reached. Affinity within and between movements requires sustained work, and is preempted in no small way by the various systems of domination constitutive of North American society. The oppressive functions of White and cis-/male supremacy, hetero-sexism, ableism and capitalism can remain operative and naturalized in 'new' anarchist collectives; cultural and social histories do not magically disappear in 'interstices' (Holloway 2002) 'autonomous zones' (Bey 2003) or 'counterpublics' (Sheppard 2010). Addressing these residual forms of power and privilege as they manifest in 'alternative' and 'autonomous' spaces is a central goal of anti-oppression.

Also implicated in the notion of affinity and emergent in the spread of 'new' anarchism, is consensus decision making. While a perhaps straightforward concept, the actual operation of consensus can be quite complex; affinity groups' small scale and task-orientedness are important conditions in making this aspect of the 'new' anarchism possible (Dupuis-Déri 2010:49). Consensus "start[s] by assuming that a diversity of perspectives is a value in itself, that no one could really convert another completely to their point of view, and it's probably a bad idea to try. Debate turns not on questions of definition but on immediate questions of action in the present, and the emphasis on maintaining egalitarian structures follows directly from that" (Graeber 2009:321). The form of these 'egalitarian structures' varies, but often include a number of specialized facilitation roles, as well as a complex deliberation process which includes various hand signals and multiple ways to register dis/agreement or concerns with the group. Movements to 'block' a decision or move to modified consensus are available, but on the condition that they conform to a group's founding principles which delineate the purpose of the affinity group's existence and its perceived way/s forward. Because the focus of such work is on direct action and the cultivation of horizontal relationships, the sorts of contention that arise do so within an

already agreed upon political analysis and action plan. This means internal dialogue around anti-oppression analysis and practice may be rejected as superfluous to the groups' immediate aims. However, anarchists regularly invoke the prefigurative dimension of 'new' anarchism to frame affinity groups as political projects in themselves in addition to their putative goals. Through such work anti-oppression analysis and practice has become a key tenet of a range of 'new' anarchist political projects.

Consensus-based affinity groups are valued by a range of activists as sites for experimentation in prefiguration at a micro level. In addition to being an instrument of resistance to oppressive forces external to activists' communities, affinity groups also work intimately toward the realization of "alternative subjectivities and ways of being" (Day 2005:35). This is a function of the radical politics in which these groups are embedded and the intentional development of relationships that subvert naturalized hierarchies, bureaucratic or otherwise. One anarcha-feminist expresses this work in terms of bridging personal and political relationships, theorizing small groups as the primary space "[w]here psychological struggle intersects political involvement" (Levine 2002:65). Written in response to Freeman's (2002) now classic commentary on informal power dynamics in apparently 'structureless' feminist organizing, Levine draws attention to the role of small groups in addressing the perpetual need for 'consciousness-raising' around oppression in activist spaces. The emergence of anti-oppression practice in 'new' anarchist spaces is closely related to the work of 'consciousness-raising', which has been adapted and extended. Likewise, the work of radical feminists in developing practical skill sharing, consensus process and horizontal organization (Ferguson 1984:189) is important to current processes of anti-oppression. Complementary to the innovation of consciousness-raising as a political tool, the organizational and critical contributions of radical feminists have provided important resources for 'new' anarchists. The integration of this work into affinity groups' everyday operations "can build up the personal relationship of trust that facilitates the grieving, the sharing and the exorcisms of the psychological" (Ruby n.d. Anarcha). This sustained micro level work of reflection and relationship building is a core factor in taking anti-oppression and prefiguration efforts deeper than workshops and pedagogy. Anti-oppression is best viewed as emerging from a realization that it is not really 'performative' (Ahmed 2004: para. 11; see also Srivastava and Francis 2006:290), and requires much more than discursive and/or pedagogical intervention. Rather, in Ahmed's words: "race, like sex, [class, sexuality and ability] is sticky; it sticks to us, or we become 'us' as an effect of how it sticks, even when we think we are beyond it" (2004: para. 49). The communal wrestling with the effects of this stickiness and its impact on alternative building in 'new' anarchist spaces is the work of anti-oppression. As a 'new' anarchist project, it is filtered through affinity-group organization and direct action and consensus practices. Each of these have become important sites of anti-oppression struggle and through such struggle important sites for the intensification of the anti-authoritarian impulse central to 'new' anarchism.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced anti-oppression as a grassroots project through which 'new' anarchists are innovating social movement practice. Embedded in the political organization of 'new' anarchism these activists are working to identify and eliminate the mechanics of power reproducing white and male supremacy, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, racism and classism within their movements. Through collaborative and cumulative practice they are building radically inclusive and empowering forms of political community. I have argued that this work of anti-oppression is a prefigurative project that through its day-to-day operation

constructs alternative ways of organizing and resisting together.

      This paper began by theorizing the production and dissemination of anti-oppression through anti-authoritarian networks. It ends with the suggestion that the 'promise of prefiguration' so tantalizingly set forth in the title of this paper is right in front of us. It does not lie in some unrealized utopia marking the completion of anti-oppression or the realization of 'new' anarchism. While there is certainly a transformative and revolutionary element to the politics addressed above, it is the subversive and productive work of anti-oppression in the day-to-day that I wish to emphasize. The promise of prefiguration lies in the grassroots processes of building healthy and horizontal modes of resistance sensitive to oppression and exploitation. This is no small task. It requires ruthless and regular examinations of our personal and collective complicity with social structures of gender and race, sexuality, ability and class. It suggests a shift from vision to creation with the recognition that "social change is a process, and that our individual transformation and individual liberation is intimately interconnected with social transformation and social liberation" (Crass 2002b:97). Anti-oppression as articulated here is both critical and creative, and in its prefigurative work represents a powerful development in the struggle to analyze and resist domination.

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